

Government:

A Voice for the People

The Hon. G. William Whitehurst, M.C.

The Hon. G. William Whitehurst, M.C. represents the second Congressional District of Virginia, which includes his birthplace, Norfolk. Majoring in history, he earned a B.A. cum laude from Washington and Lee University, an M.A. from the University of Virginia, and his Ph.D. from West Virginia University, with a dissertation on American Far Eastern policy.

Congressman Whitehurst is a member of the House Armed Services Committee, and serves on the Board of Visitors to the Naval Academy, the Antisubmarine Warfare Subcommittee and the Seapower Subcommittee. He was a member of the special subcommittees investigating the seizure of the USS PUEBLO, and the Air Defense of the South-eastern United States. He was also appointed to the Presidential committee which visited Vietnam during the Cambodian missions.

This is an impatient age. Anyone in public office will readily verify this statement, and those who have served for a generation or longer will tell you that impatience has intensified in recent years. It shows no sign of abating. The old say the young are too impatient. The whites say the blacks are too impatient. The men say the women are too impatient. But the truth is, the nation is impatient. The factors that have led to this impatience are manifold—social, economic, and technological—and need not be explored here. The major ones are known to all of us. The point is that the system by which we govern ourselves is under an unparalleled challenge for change, and for the first time in more than a century, serious question exists about its ability to survive this stress.

It was an Englishman, William Gladstone, who paid our Constitution its highest compliment, calling it the most remarkable instrument ever struck off by the hand of man. Before the 20th Century has run its course, most Americans now living will probably have the opportunity to see whether or not Gladstone was overly optimistic. But before we cast it aside as someone recently suggested and draw up a more "relevant" instrument of government, we might well consider the

progress we have made under the Constitution and the changes we can still effect in an orderly way within its framework.

The growth of government, in terms of both size and power, has inevitably produced a feeling of remoteness on the part of the average citizen. One Congressman now represents nearly a half million people, so the ordinary American has a feeling of helplessness when he is confronted with one or several of the national problems which now beset us. Because solutions seem to come slowly from Washington, he believes that no one really would listen to him if he tried to make direct personal contact, or would respond if he did. He is wise enough to know the volume of mail his elected representatives receive, and he may understand that his Congressman or Senator reads only a portion of it. In view of this he wonders if his voice or opinion counts for anything. As a matter of fact, his opinion, if given intelligently and in sufficient numbers, is the most powerful influence upon any legislator.

The House has responded to public pressure for change or to national priorities. In 1969 there were three excellent examples. The Congress made the first significant overhaul in the tax structure since the income tax was instituted over 50 years ago. Why? Because the American



taxpayer was on the verge of revolt. The inequities in the tax system had become so obvious that it was impossible to damp down the frustration. The final bill did not eliminate all of these inequities, but it equalized the tax burden more. The House passed an amendment to the Constitution providing for the direct election of the President and Vice President. The House took this action because of the public awareness of the potential complications which could have resulted from the 1968 Presidential election. That amendment is now before the Senate. It may die there, but passage in the House nevertheless reflects a response to the national will. Finally, the House and Senate passed a draft reform act, creating a lottery. Again, it was the result of the widespread and legitimate dissent, not over selective service, but the uncertainty a young man was subjected to between 19 and 26. I have chosen these examples because of their significance, but countless other measures were introduced and some passed because of the national consensus. The House is really a mirror of national will. The drive to clean up our environment, which came of age last year, resulted in a spate of anti-pollution bills. Every Member wanted to be "Mr. Clean." Furthermore, it was the one national issue on which all Americans were united.

What about less important items, those of more limited scope? If John Doe will take the trouble, he can make a lot of ripples. The My Lai Massacre probe resulted from one ex-soldier who bothered to send letters to selected Members of the House

and Senate. It may surprise readers of this article to know that those Members generally considered to be "Hawks" were the ones who responded to his allegations and forced an investigation of the affair.

In my own District, I had a constituent who wrote a letter to me, based on an editorial from the *Norfolk Ledger-Star*, regarding the disappearance of oil drums in the Far East and their subsequent reappearance and resale in the United States. We undertook an investigation through the General Accounting Office and exactly a year later got a report supporting the charges of carelessness in accounting for thousands of oil drums. As a result, changes were made in the procedures for handling them and the government was saved nearly a million dollars, all because one man cared enough to write about it.

In substance, then, legislation and government responsibility depend upon an alert electorate. A thoughtful letter, sincerely composed, has an excellent chance of catching a Member's eye and will often produce serious reflection on his own part. Most of us have reached a point where marches and demonstrations have lost their effectiveness. In some cases, they are even counter-productive. But the ordinary citizen with something on his mind will always be listened to and there are usually two positive results. He gets it off his chest and lessens his own frustration. His Representative or Senator knows that all of his electorate is not indifferent and that his own actions are accountable. In the final analysis, that's what the system is all about.