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# Both Congress and Reagan Erred in Sanctions Debacle

By Philip Geyelin

WASHINGTON — Much has been made by the Reagan administration of the awful blow that President Reagan's power and prestige would suffer if a Republican Senate overrode his veto of congressional sanctions against South Africa. The New York Times was not alone in its analysis: "The action was a major rebuff to the president, one he sought to avert as he prepared to meet ... Mikhail Gorbachev."

Now it is true that the overwhelming House and Senate majorities to override (and the breadth of Republican defections) would be a big rebuff to any president, the more so to one with so little time left in his second term. Even a president as popular as Ronald Reagan

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may be hard put to recover his balance and his command over Congress. But the non sequiturs in the rest of the reading of this event are staggering.

Leave aside the question of whether Mr. Gorbachev can make heads or tails of the shambles that the administration, and Congress, have made of U.S. policy in South Africa. The impressions Mr. Gorbachev has taken away from Iceland are much more likely to be based on the president's handling of different and more immediate U.S.-Soviet concerns: arms control, human rights, regional disputes — and on whatever he may have deduced from the outcome of the Daniloff-Zakharov affair.

The administration must know that the heavy significance of the sanctions debacle lies not in how it played in Iceland but in how it plays in South Africa — in what the black majority as well as their white repressors will now make of American policy. When Senators Edward Kennedy, a Democrat, and Lowell Weicker, a Republican, pronounced that "America stood tall" in the override votes, could it have escaped the notice of South Africa and neighboring states that the president of the United States, with all his constitutional responsibilities for conducting foreign policy, was left standing very small?

When the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Richard Lugar, hails the crushing, bipartisan congressional defeat of the president of the United States as a way of saying that there is "only one foreign policy for our country," where does that leave the president who vetoed the legislation?

When the Senate majority leader, Robert Dole, scornfully dismisses the

override as a "feel-good" vote and Senator Lugar himself supports the override largely as a symbolic signal to "put the United States on the right side of history," the South African foreign minister has at least some ground for complaining that "no reason or argument could have stemmed this emotional tide."

The issue here is not whether any set of sanctions will further the aim proclaimed by Senator Kennedy and other supporters of sanctions: "Apartheid must end." Perhaps universal punitive sanctions would force South Africa's white supremacists to change their ways. But laggard allies are unlikely to take their lead from a U.S. Congress bitterly at odds with a U.S. president. And the circle-the-wagon mentality of the Afrikaners does not lend itself to punishment by outsiders. Stiffened resistance could polarize and inflame the opposing forces and hasten the terrible end that both sides in the American debate insist they are seeking to avoid.

There are, then, sound (as well as self-serving) arguments for the competing policies. There is no argument for a U.S. non-policy conveyed to South Africa and the rest of the world via a congressional override of a presidential veto.

Congress is hardly blameless. Senator Dole is not wrong about the part played by domestic political imperatives. But the suggestion that the administration "sought to avert" the override ignores the little it did to head off a showdown months earlier when Mr. Lugar and other responsible Republican senators were working hard for an accommodation to save the president from himself.

Last July, Mr. Lugar and Senate intermediaries were shown the draft of what struck them as a reasonable speech by the president the day before it was to be delivered. The next day they were dismayed to find that White House aides had loaded it with anti-sanctions declamations and scare talk about Communists and terrorists in the South African black opposition movement.

With the White House and the State Department at odds and the president incapable of achieving a stable administration position, mediation between the two branches became impossible, even after the House and Senate reconciled their differences in favor of relatively milder Senate sanctions. The president still vetoed the measure.

Right then, a clear U.S. government signal to South Africa was scrambled. The override may have done damage to the president's prestige at home. It may inflict marginally more damage on the South African economy. But it does even greater damage to the prospect, in the Reagan years, of anything resembling a responsible bipartisan U.S. policy for South Africa.

Washington Post Writers Group.