

CONFIRMATION VOTE FOR REP. SIKES TESTS HOUSE ETHICS

Last week, members of Congress faced a crucial vote which would reflect upon their commitment to Congressional reform. That test was the confirmation vote of Rep. Robert Sikes of Florida, a powerful Appropriations Committee member who last year was reprimanded by his colleagues for violations of the House Standards of Official Conduct due to his misuse of power as Military Construction Subcommittee Chairman. Fortunately, the Congress passed the test of ethics by a margin of two to one. The vote in the House to deny his reappointment to the Appropriations Subcommittee Chairmanship for Military Construction was a commendable 189-93. Members of Congress would have been rightly discredited if they failed to acknowledge the Sikes record of abuse and confirm his Chairmanship reappointment.

LEADERSHIP STAND DISAPPOINTING

It is unfortunate, however, that the Democratic Leadership failed to take a stand on the side of reform and oppose the Sikes appointment. This issue has raised the question of Congressional reform in the 95th Congress and how serious the House leadership, the Ethics Committee, and the ranks of the Congress are about enforcing a strict code of ethics. A brief summary of the Sikes transgressions makes clear how crucial last week's vote was to the successful enactment of Congressional reform.

Last April, I was one of 44 Members of the House who co-signed a formal complaint to the House Ethics Committee prepared and submitted by Common Cause against Rep. Robert Sikes. After an investigation of the charges in the complaint, the Ethics Committee voted 10-2 in favor of a report which concluded that Sikes' actions had "violated standards of conduct applicable to all Members of Congress" and recommended that the House reprimand Rep. Sikes. In July, the full House voted 381-3 to approve the Ethics Committee report and formally reprimanded Congressman Sikes. This was the first time since the Committee was created in 1968 that the House had imposed any sanction on one of its Members.

SIKES VIOLATIONS

The Ethics Committee cited three major violations of the House Code of Conduct. In 1961 and 1962, Sikes sponsored legislation to remove restrictions on the commercial development of Florida land in which he had a financial interest. Sikes did not then disclose to the Congress that he could benefit financially from this bill and was cited last year by the Ethics Committee for "an obvious and significant conflict of interest."

In 1974, Sikes voted for a defense appropriation bill that funded a 73-million-dollar contract with Fairchild Industries, a company in which he owned 1,000 shares of stock. From 1965 to 1973, Sikes used his official position on a number of occasions to urge state and federal officials to establish the First Navy Bank at the Pensacola Naval Air Station in his Congressional district. Throughout this period, Sikes served as Chairman of the Appropriations Military Construction Subcommittee. He subsequently was allowed by the bank founders to purchase 2500 shares of the bank's privately held stock, a purchase which made him the third largest shareholder when the bank opened October, 1973.

Upon investigation, the Ethics Committee learned that Sikes failed to report both the Fairchild Industries stock and the First Navy Bank stock in his annual financial disclosure statements. He was reprimanded for this Conduct violation as well as for his involvement in the First Navy Bank with the Ethics Committee concluding that he had wrongly accepted benefits which might be construed as influencing the performance of his governmental duties.

SIKES REAPPOINTMENT VOTE

Given Sikes' record of violations, it seems inconceivable that fellow Members of Congress outwardly committed to reform would favor his reappointment to his powerful Appropriations Subcommittee Chairmanship. However, 93 Members did support his reappointment and among them were House Democratic leaders and the Chairman of the House Ethics Committee, Rep. John Flynt. During debate in the Democratic Caucus Rep. Flynt stated "How many times does a man have to stand in judgement and answer the same charges brought against him?" It is clear that if we are to rely upon the Ethics Committee for further reform leadership, it will be necessary to change the membership of that committee. Otherwise, it will probably be best to establish an agency apart from the Congress whose function it would be to guard against abuse. This agency might be charged with establishing rules of conduct which might include limiting Congressional and staff travel, restricting Members to their House salaries only and forbidding outside professional income or speakers' fees, all of this governed by a strict full financial disclosure code. I introduced an amendment to the Financial Disclosure Act of 1976 last year to require that those covered by the law shall release copies of their income tax returns from the previous calendar year. Such a law would leave the record open for public inspection and discourage candidates for public office and elected officials who would rank their financial interests above public service. I intend to reintroduce this bill in the 95th Congress.

Members of Congress cannot expect to restore public confidence in their leadership, if they are not willing to put their personal gains aside and abide by a strict code of ethics. Last week's vote on Rep. Sikes should be a signal to the leadership that the ranks of Congress can stand alone and continue to successfully press for reform. It is a signal that the mainstream of Congress is ready for reform and will act to enforce that reform internally.