

Senator's assessment:

Congressional prestige dips despite reforms

By TIM RICHARD

There are fewer abuses of power in Congress by elderly, arbitrary committee chairmen, says a Michigan Senator famous for criticizing his colleagues by name.

But Donald W. Riegle says polls reveal that people are becoming more "alienated" from government at a time when "government is centrally involved" indeed, sometimes the controlling influence — over our country.

The 42-year-old Democrat was in Livonia last weekend to receive an honorary degree and speak at graduation ceremonies at Schoolcraft College. His tone was somber as he warned that the United States "is poised on the edge of

possible military confrontation with the Soviet Union" over Iran.

Riegle was a 34-year-old Republican U.S. Representative in 1972 when he wrote "O Congress," a candid and sometimes devastating look at the institution and the people in it.

In it he complained that in the foreign operations subcommittee, he had only five minutes in the course of a year to question Secretary of State William P. Rogers, who was well protected by Chairman Otto Passman, D-Louisiana.

Riegle also wrote that Congress was dominated by "old men" who had to have emergency equipment and doctors available whenever the House was in session.

"There are still occasions where abuse of power happens, but there has been a change in the House," Riegle said in an interview after the ceremony.

"THE HOUSE now elects its committee chairmen, and some have been voted out. Chairmen have started to behave."

"Some of the committee work has been broken up into subcommittees, and that diffuses power."

"But the Senate has not moved as quickly," said Riegle, who was elected to the upper chamber in 1976 after switching parties.

"Most Senate committee chairmen get some negative votes, but none have been toppled. But they are less remote now, and they tend to share power."

Riegle was still naming names on abuses of power. He cited Sen. William Proxmire, D-Wisconsin, chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, who Riegle said had almost single-handedly killed the Chrysler Corp. aid bill through use of Senate staff and scheduling of witnesses.

WOULD IT HELP to limit the terms



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of senators to (say) two terms and of representatives to five or six?

"I've thought a lot about that," said Riegle.

"But it was the committee system which reinforced that (abuse of power by elderly chairmen). You had to stay in Congress to get seniority so you could head a committee."

"Because of our changes (in electing chairmen), a lot of retirements have been prompted," Riegle added that limiting terms congressmen would also run contrary to laws against age discrimination passed by Congress.

"It would like to limit the length of time someone can serve as chairman. The problem is not how long someone

is there (in Congress). The problem is entrenched power."

"I would like to rotate the chairmanships — even rotate committee assignments."

Riegle told the 187 degree recipients and their families in his address:

"If we just concentrate on pursuing our respective careers, we would defeat ourselves. But if we care enough to nominate and elect the best candidates and work with them, then we would have a fighting chance."

He urged citizens to be well informed on local, state and national issues. "Otherwise, we will be manipulated by those who know more," he said.

Referring to the unsuccessful attempt to rescue 50 American hostages in Iran, Riegle said:

"This is not a time for national self-doubt. Our national disappointment must not become national disillusionment."

"If we are steady, measured and thoughtful, we can work our way through these problems."

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