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VanDeerlin Outburst

On January 8, we wrote an editorial commending our congressman, Lionel Van Deerlin, for his drive to unseat Rep. Adam Clayton Powell. We said at the time that we thought it reprehensible to have in Congress a man who cannot even return to his home district without going to jail.

At the same time, we urged that white Americans try to understand the attitude of Negroes about this case — an attitude, we said, that "is deeply rooted in white America's failure to provide equal justice to all Americans."

REP. VAN DEERLIN sent us a telegram warmly thanking us for the editorial. But if his recent actions are any indication, he apparently read only those paragraphs in the editorial that praised him.

Not only has he failed to understand the attitude of his Negro constituency in this case, but his behavior has aggravated these attitudes, and now he has stooped to trying to get the job of a Negro anti-poverty worker, Harold Brown, because Mr. Brown tried to criticize him about the Powell case at a public meeting.

Negroes represent about 11% of Mr. Van Deerlin's constituency, and provided the margin that first enabled him to get elected to Congress. This does not mean he should owe Negroes —or anyone else, for that matter— his vote on a public matter, nor that he should be deterred by this from exercising his own best judgment.

But he does owe Negroes, or any other constituent, the courtesy of discussion and explanation on any matter of concern to them.

Rep. Van Deerlin has not done this. He never discussed the Powell case with his Negro constituents before he raised the issue. Since making this a national cause celebre, and despite repeated trips to San Diego, he has failed to meet even once with the Negro leadership on the Powell case. His only meeting, on the subject, a highly secret affair, was with a handful of Negro ministers, after which he announced that the Negro community supported him. Interestingly, last week the Southeast (Negro) Ministerial Assn. issued a statement deploring his actions.

NOW we are convinced that Mr. Van Deerlin's actions against Mr. Powell were not racially motivated. However, it is obvious that a not-inconsiderable part of his support has racial undertones.

But, while Mr. Van Deerlin was taking national bows on this issue, never once did he issue a statement firmly disavowing racist support. Never did he use his newly found national platform as an opportunity to speak out against racism, to point out that the very opposition he has had from Negroes on what should be a clear-cut issue of governmental integrity is sad testimony to the failure of the white majority to erase the blot of bigotry and prejudice from America.

No wonder his Negro constituents felt alienated and betrayed by the man they had supported steadfastly through three elections. No wonder this resentment finally boiled over last week at a Community Action Council meeting attended by Mr. Van Deerlin.

The details on what actually transpired are unclear. Mr. Brown says that he and several others attempted to speak to their congressman on the Powell issue and, when denied the opportunity, they merely left the hall, followed by two-thirds of the audience. Mr. Van Deerlin says they tried to incite a riot.

In any event, he left under police guard, although whether this was necessary because of the facts of the case or his own groundless fears is hard to determine.

WE DO NOT condone the behavior of participants in this affair; interrupting public meetings is discourteous and deplorable. But a United States Congressman should be able to rise above this.

Instead, Mr. Van Deerlin began running off at the mouth—particularly against Mr. Brown, the director of an anti-poverty neighborhood leadership program. Because of the ruckus, Mr. Van Deerlin claimed the anti-poverty program was "underwriting a course in riot and insurrection." In a letter to Sergeant Shriver, he demanded Mr. Brown be fired under the Hatch Act.

Now Mr. Brown was there as an individual, not a government employe. From reports, he was only one of numerous protestors, and hardly a ringleader. There is also a question whether the Hatch Act, which forbids partisan political activity, also forbids the right to express one's opinion, however mistaken.

But the issue here really isn't legal—it is whether a congressman should behave like a child and further alienate a sensitive constituency over an incident for which his own behavior was largely responsible.

We can understand Mr. Van Deerlin's own sensitivity on the Powell issue, which reportedly has cost him considerable influence in Washington, where many congressmen feel he has placed them in an embarrassing position on a delicate matter.

But salving his own wounds by trying to get a critic's job was cheap, petty and vindictive. It hardly becomes a congressman from whom we've come to expect more meaningful action.