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Junketeering or Fact-Finding:
A Congressional View.

With unflinching repetition, the media have created the image of the travelling legislator, wining and dining his way across the world at the taxpayer's expense. On the premise that exceptions are news, single aberrations are covered, and an impression is created which is inadvertently detrimental to lawmakers who conscientiously seek to learn from working trips. Such one-sided characterizations in the press tend to inhibit legislators from accepting such assignments and, subsequently, from discussing them.

One of my very first impressions after arriving on the Senate floor some eighteen months ago was the realization that no matter how well prepared and intentioned a newcomer is, his services will be inadequate unless he accepts all educative opportunities to match the level of his responsibilities. In view of the enormous expansion of federal activities at home and abroad, the mere acquisition of pertinent information as a basis for legislative decision-making has become a staggering task. While the experience of most legislators, and the constant flow of information from their constituents, provides a basis for consideration of domestic legislation, the same cannot be said for legislation dealing with foreign affairs.

Most legislators have very little knowledge of foreign affairs when they take office. Yet they are constantly required to decide policy questions which have a bearing on this area. The Constitution, of course, requires that Congress ratify treaties made by the Executive. Congress must also give its approval, under the War Powers Act, to certain agreements of the Executive with foreign countries, and, under the recent Hughes-Ryan Amendment, it may have to decide whether funds should be appropriated for certain covert actions of the United States. Add to this Congress' routine responsibility to appropriate funds for the armed forces, for military installations, for weapon systems, for defense and national security, for economic and military aid, its responsibility to confirm ambassadors to foreign countries, to set tariffs, import and export controls, and currency regulations, and one can easily see what a substantial portion of the legislative diet is comprised of questions with foreign policy implications.

Congress is expected to act with all deliberate speed and competence in these matters, but detailed knowledge and objective appraisal are woefully lacking. We are forced to arrive at policy conclusions on the basis of information provided by individuals over whom we have little or no control. Senators are fully aware that they can only discharge their duties responsibly if all requisite information is made available to them. In foreign affairs, this means an almost exclusive dependence upon the Executive for the facts and an interpretation

of them. Surely, it is clear by now that Congress must inform itself enough to offset that dependence.

The foreign fact-finding tour thus becomes indispensable for fulfilling congressional obligations -- just as much as it is for satisfying Executive responsibilities.

There is no State Department report, no CIA briefing, no article in National Geographic, that can take the place of seeing a country for oneself. There is nothing that can take the place of seeing how its people live, how its economy functions, how its leaders think. It is the only effective means of developing understanding, without "filtration" by an Executive liable to have a foreign-policy axe to grind.

For the media, then, to demean this legislative function as a "junket" or "vacation" does not fairly describe its purpose or its effect. Yes, trips are often taken during regular holiday periods, but usually this is done to coincide with periods of legislative adjournment, when our presence for voting purposes is not required. And, yes, they are made at the taxpayer's expense. But their cost is relatively small when compared to their value for legislative decisionmaking. What better way is there to learn the needs of foreign governments or to obtain an understanding as to how U.S. programs and policies are working? Occasionally, visiting legislators are even able to assist U.S. diplomats with problems they have with the host government. As one of our ambassadors in Asia

told me, freely-elected representatives of the people are often more warmly received by foreign governments than are functionaries of the Executive Branch. Perhaps it is time for a similar change of attitude here at home. If the President or a cabinet member travels, is a "state visit" or a "diplomatic mission." If a bureaucrat travels for information, it is part of his job and not even newsworthy. Why should it so automatically be a "junket" when a Member of Congress performs like functions?

But, to return to the point I made earlier, the portrayal of legislative visits in a consistently derogatory way in the press has the unfortunate effect of discouraging legislators from accepting these assignments since they feel it may subject them to criticism. Certainly we need the press to keep an eye on how the taxpayer's money is being spent. Certainly we need the press to insure that the public's business is, indeed, being done. But what we also need is a greater appreciation on the part of the press and the public for this type of legislative function. It is an easy target for criticism, especially when the media do very little to cover the work that goes on. But its rewards to the taxpayer lie in something intangible--the improved understanding of his elected representatives. How can we underestimate the value of such understanding in a world of such explosive possibilities?