

Richard A. Bloom

FOREIGN POLICY REPORT

Solarz's Brash Style Tempers His Quest For Influence in the Foreign Policy Arena

He will probably never be a House insider because of his independent style, but that may not affect his influence in the broader foreign policy community.

BY CHRISTOPHER MADISON

Rep. Stephen J. Solarz of New York may be one of the Democratic Party's "comers," particularly as the party tries to develop a post-Vietnam foreign policy. But unless you are adventurous, you probably don't want to spend Christmas with him.

House colleague Robert G. Torricelli, D-N.Y., did last year. More specifically, he found himself on Christmas Eve in a van in Ho Chi Minh City—formerly Saigon—Vietnam, listening to midnight mass being piped over loudspeakers from Sacred Heart Church while an estimated 10,000 Vietnamese milled around in the surrounding square. Because the Vietnamese are not necessarily pro-American, Torricelli recalls it as a somewhat harrowing experience.

Not Solarz, who, not one to miss the action, left the safety of the van and made

his way through the crowd to the church and into the sacristy, where he met the priest who celebrated the mass. The priest not only spoke English but had also lived for several years in the New York City area.

In a newsletter to his constituents soon after, Solarz focused on the poignancy of Christmas being celebrated enthusiastically in a Communist country. He wrote, "These experiences have convinced me to do all that I can here in the Congress to protect our religious freedom and to support efforts to enhance the religious rights and freedom of men and women everywhere."

A different kind of Solarz Christmas story is told about a U.S. ambassador in the Middle East who was looking forward to spending the holiday with his family. But it was not to be, because Solarz came to town and the ambassador spent the day shepherding the peripatetic House Mem-

ber around the Jewish enclave in the Arab country.

Solarz's staff protests that such stories are "ancient history"—the incident with the ambassador occurred about six years ago. And, his aides said, he has gotten more sensitive. Last Thanksgiving, when he was traveling abroad, Solarz and his staff were careful not to ask for any services from the local embassy so that embassy staffers could celebrate the holiday.

Nevertheless, the holiday tales illustrate several important Solarz characteristics. His foreign policy interests are wide-ranging, and he routinely travels the far reaches of the globe, often during holidays when Congress is in recess, to talk to everyone about everything to satisfy his insatiable curiosity.

He is considered the most traveled Member of Congress, but he is almost never criticized for this because his trips

are anything but junkets—they consist of work, work and more work, with a little highly competitive tennis thrown in, according to staffers who travel with him.

"He covers more ground than any two or three people you ever saw," said Dante B. Fascell, D-Fla., chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, on which Solarz is the fourth-ranking Democrat.

"The most striking thing about him is his almost limitless supply of energy and his intellectual curiosity," said William J. Barnds, who served as staff director for the Asian and Pacific Affairs Subcommittee, which Solarz chairs, and who now is president of the Japan Economic Institute.

"Information and knowledge are the key to influence," Solarz said in an interview. "My knowledge has been enhanced by the trips I've taken abroad."

It's not just the trips that make Solarz different. During his 11-year House career, he has been involved—and has influenced policy on—most major foreign policy issues, from the Philippines and Central America to the Middle East, Turkey and South Africa.

And influence is clearly what he seeks. "I came here because I wanted to have an impact," he said. "I wanted to play a role in shaping the direction the country was going to go. I feel I have had an impact to the extent any single Member of Congress can."

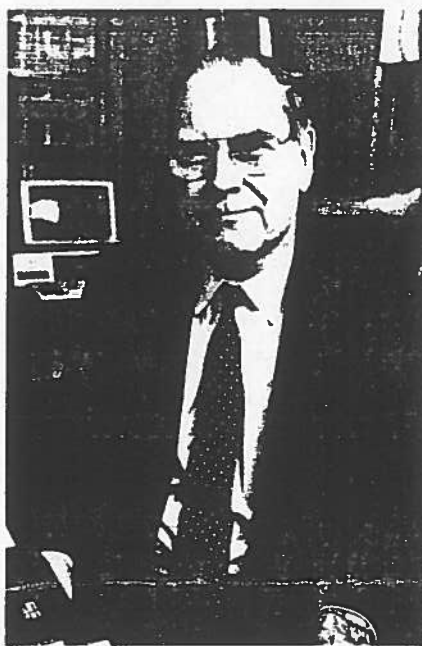
Solarz's close identification with refugees and oppressed peoples around the world, whether in South Africa, Cambodia, Vietnam or El Salvador, lends a humanitarian, populist quality to a subject that otherwise does not generate much political excitement. And the Democrats could use some excitement as they continue to rebuild from their 1984 defeat in the presidential election.

But Solarz's record is by no means unblemished. He has upset some in the Jewish community—including some Members of Congress—with his behind-the-scenes role in 1984 in quashing legislation to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and with his private questioning of ever-increasing levels of U.S. aid to Israel.

Moreover, some sources—and there is an honest difference of opinion on this—said he was uncharacteristically inactive in the congressional debate earlier this year over aid to the Nicaraguan antigovernment contras.

Some moderates in the Democratic Party who came out in a limited way for aid to the contras said Solarz stayed away from the subject because of the political risks and finally voted with the mainstream liberal Democrats against the aid because it was a safe vote. He denies this.

Most recently, his policy in favor of



Ex-Hill aide William J. Barnds

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cutting military aid and increasing economic aid to the Philippines was rejected by a House-Senate conference committee in favor of the Administration's approach.

Perhaps more than anything, Solarz, 45, is controversial because of his style and personality. None of his colleagues was willing to criticize him on the record, but it is clear from private conversations that at least in some House circles, he is considered too media-conscious and something of a showboat, albeit an intelligent and articulate one, and that this has made him somewhat unpopular among his colleagues.

As a result, while he has earned the respect of many of his fellow House Members because he is smart, works hard and has become a recognized expert on foreign policy, he is not universally liked because he is a loner in an institution that prefers team players.

"Steve thinks he's smarter than everyone," said a lobbyist who watches the House closely.

A House colleague said that as effective as Solarz was, his impact was limited by his less-than-perfect relations with fellow Members. "His approach is not always collegial," he said.

Several House sources cited Solarz's role on South Africa policy. The New Yorker is no longer chairman of the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, but when the crisis erupted in that country last summer and attention was focused on sanctions legislation, it was Solarz, not Howard Wolpe, D-Mich., the current subcommittee chairman, who was interviewed on television—he happened to be in South Africa the week

before a major policy speech by President P.W. Botha.

Sources said Wolpe was eclipsed by Solarz's visibility on the issue. A House colleague recalled: "I told Steve, 'Let go of the South Africa issue. Let Wolpe handle it. You don't need another issue.'"

SHOVE TO THE RIGHT

What's next for Solarz, who, after 11 years in the House, is beginning to accumulate seniority? He talks down a race for the Senate, saying that he loves the House and would like to be Foreign Affairs Committee chairman someday if the opportunity arises. But, he adds, he won't challenge Fascell or Lee H. Hamilton of Indiana, the committee's No. 2 Democrat who would be in line to succeed Fascell when the chairman leaves the House.

In Democratic Party circles, it is widely assumed that Solarz would like to be Secretary of State someday soon.

"Steve Solarz will be part of a foreign policy team in the next Democratic Administration," predicted a committee colleague. "The things we are doing in the committee will be adopted by a Democratic Administration."

To this notion, Solarz responds with care, his ambition clear but under control: "In the event the position were offered, and I doubt it would be, I can't imagine turning it down."

His detractors, however, predict that his high-profile style will eventually be his undoing.

One reason Solarz has attracted attention over the past year is that he seemed to be trying to push his fellow Democrats slightly to the right on foreign policy.

"It is very difficult to go against the reigning liberal consensus in the Democratic Party," a party insider said. "[Rep. Les] Aspin [of Wisconsin] has tried to do it on defense, and Solarz is trying to do it in some areas of foreign policy. If it wasn't for Aspin, Solarz and some others, the Democrats' foreign policy would be isolationism wrapped up with a lot of rhetorical trappings."

And former aide Barnds said of Solarz, "For someone who has a reputation as a liberal, he has a deeper appreciation of the role of military force in foreign affairs."

While reluctant to appear too critical of his party, Solarz said in an interview, "I do think there was a significant element of the Democratic Party that has been insufficiently sensitive to the need for a strong defense and that needed to show a greater willingness to resist the efforts of the Soviet expansion around the world."

In a widely noticed speech last spring before an Americans for Democratic Action conference on "The Future of Liber-

alism," Solarz aggressively sounded an anti-Communist theme:

"Today, the reality of Soviet repression and Communist tyranny represents not a distant memory but a living nightmare. . . . Yet we [Democrats] have sometimes refrained from expressing in a forthright fashion our view of the inherent immorality of the Soviet system. . . . We have enabled our opponents to contend that our proposals to reduce East-West tensions are based on illusions about the Soviet Union. By appearing to yield the moral high ground, we have lost political ground as well.

"It is worth recalling that American liberals have a long and honorable tradition of anti-Communism. The heroes and heroines of this organization, from Eleanor Roosevelt to Allard Lowenstein, would never hesitate to contrast our own values and vision with Communist assaults on the human spirit."

Later in the speech, Solarz returned to more conventional liberal Democratic territory on issues such as arms control (he wants to limit President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative), Central America (he opposed aid to the Nicaraguan contras) and South Africa (he was an early sponsor of economic sanctions).

But an element in Solarz's thinking that clearly sets him apart from other liberal Democrats is his championing of U.S. aid to those fighting Communism around the world.

A vivid example of this came last spring, when the Foreign Affairs Committee took up the foreign aid bill. Amid the dozens of amendments the committee considered over several days of drafting, a handful attracted attention, including one dealing with U.S. aid to Cambodia's anti-Communist rebels.

The Asian and Pacific Affairs Subcommittee had approved \$5 million in military aid to the rebels, who were fighting the Vietnamese forces that have occupied Cambodia since 1979. In the full committee, Jim Leach, a moderate Republican from Iowa, sponsored an amendment to transform the military aid to humanitarian aid.

For several reasons, the issue—eventually settled in Solarz's favor—took on an importance disproportionate to the \$5 million at stake. In a sense, Solarz was leading a revolt against established post-Vietnam Democratic policy—which eschewed U.S. involvement in fuzzy or risky military ventures around the world—and doing it in Southeast Asia, of all places.

The issue presented Solarz with something of a consistency problem. There were obvious parallels to Nicaragua, an issue on which Solarz held to established Democratic policy in opposing U.S. mili-



Rep. Robert G. Torricelli, D-N.J., is one of Solarz's boosters in Congress.

tary aid to the antigovernment rebels. Solarz's argument was that in Cambodia, the United States would be supporting those fighting an occupying force. But his effort gave him an unmistakably hawkish image compared with other Democrats.

Liberals in both parties opposed the military aid, expressing fear that the \$5 million was the beginning of U.S. intervention and that the rebel effort would eventually turn sour, with the United States receiving the blame.

"It appears that the committee is intending to open up the gates to more money in the future in such ways that I have some doubts the American people are willing to support," Leach said.

The most eloquent arguments in favor of Solarz's proposal came not from him but from Torricelli, who serves on the subcommittee and who had traveled to Cambodia and Vietnam with Solarz.

In rejecting the Leach amendment, 9-25, the committee upheld the Solarz military aid proposal. Many of the panel's younger Democrats joined Republicans to support Solarz, with more senior liberal Democrats, such as Hamilton, Ted Weiss of New York and Michael D. Barnes of Maryland, voting against him.

The Cambodian military aid provision became law when Reagan signed the 1986 foreign aid authorization. "Time has proved we were absolutely right," Torricelli said later; the Vietnamese have since pulled back from some of the border camps, received a delegation of Americans to discuss U.S. soldiers still missing from the Vietnam war and returned the remains of other missing soldiers.

"Steve Solarz is not only knowledgeable and informed but is willing to ask the hard questions," said Bernard Aronson, a

speech writer in the Carter White House and now a consultant. "On aid to Cambodia, he was the one who raised the question that the Democrats have to face up to—where, how and when to support authentic democratic resistance movements."

A footnote to the Cambodian aid debate makes it an even more telling illumination of Solarz's style: House sources suggest that the aid proposal originated with Torricelli but that Solarz gradually adopted it as his own idea.

Because the two are friends, Torricelli laughs off the incident. He also must have taken heart when Solarz, during the committee session, praised his speech in support of the aid as "one of the most eloquent statements I've heard on this committee in 11 years in the House of Representatives. I thought it was really magnificent."

DID HE DUCK?

Solarz has also been influential on policy toward El Salvador, which he has approached from the human rights perspective. In 1981, when the Reagan Administration was pressing Congress to increase military and economic aid to the then-shaky Central American country, Solarz, a member at the time of the Western Hemisphere Affairs Subcommittee, played a leading role in drafting language that required the Administration to certify twice a year that human rights progress had been made before aid could be appropriated.

"He was one of the guys who rolled up their sleeves and came up with the certification language," a Democratic House aide said.

A House Democratic colleague said Solarz was "ahead of the curve" in seeing

that the debate on Central America was changing midway through the Reagan Administration and has persuaded some of his fellow Democrats to back the government of President José Napoleón Duarte despite their misgivings.

"Steve has been a moderating influence on many issues," the colleague said. "He has shown a willingness to seek compromise when confrontation with the Administration was better politics."

As Duarte's hold on the country improved, Solarz has supported the Administration's request for increased aid and has even tangled with those in the human rights community over the degree of improvement in El Salvador.

Last January, human rights activists were arguing at a Western Hemisphere Affairs Subcommittee hearing that the human rights situation had not improved. Solarz, who is no longer a member of the subcommittee but doesn't hesitate to participate in any Foreign Affairs hearing, was on hand to dispute some of their conclusions. "I sometimes have the feeling that El Salvador is a political version of a Rorschach test," he said, "and what you see in the situation down there says more about you than it does of the realities itself."

Nicaragua is a different story. According to several congressional sources, Solarz "took a bye" during the fierce debate and jockeying in the House last spring over U.S. aid to the contras. Like most other liberal Democrats, he opposed the aid whenever it came up for a vote. But while Solarz is never hard to spot when the House takes up most hot foreign policy issues, he was relatively invisible and inactive when other House Democrats, including Barnes, Hamilton and Richard A. Gephardt of Missouri sought to craft a compromise with the Administration.

Solarz denies that his support for the liberal Democratic position was so lukewarm that he did not want to be too closely identified with it. He was not in the forefront, he said, because other Members had taken the lead.

He said he opposed U.S. aid to the contras because "what we're doing is not only wrong but counterproductive. I think the [ruling] Sandinistas have betrayed the democratic promises of the revolution. But I don't think it is appropriate for the United States to try to overthrow the government because of this." Instead, he said, the United States should have put more effort into making the peace talks initiated by Central American countries successful.

But some Democratic sources who broke with the liberal Democratic leadership on the contra issue and who unsuccessfully sought Solarz's help believe he



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Rep. Howard Wolpe, D-Mich., chairman of the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, was eclipsed by Solarz's visibility on South Africa last summer.

"ducked the hard issue" of how to support a resistance movement in Nicaragua because public opinion polls showed most Americans overwhelmingly opposed to aiding the contras.

They said he "hid" behind the distinction that in Cambodia and Afghanistan, the rebels were fighting foreign invaders while in Nicaragua, the contras were part of a civil war.

Other sources disagree, saying Solarz has always had a strong view that the United States should not aid those trying to overthrow a sovereign government.

ISRAEL AND THE PHILIPPINES

One of the more controversial—and little known—legislative moves Solarz has made in recent years came last year, when Congress was considering legislation that would have urged the Administration to move the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Solarz has long been a strong supporter of Israel, and he became a co-sponsor of the legislation, which Israel long has advocated. But after the bill started to move in the House—it was approved by the

Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East—Solarz, while publicly supporting it, played a key behind-the-scenes role in preventing it from coming up for a vote in the full committee.

Many in Congress, including supporters of Israel, viewed the bill as "bad foreign policy," and some praised Solarz's efforts as a sign of leadership on a tough foreign policy issue.

A House colleague who is a strong supporter of Israel cited Solarz's "independence and courage" on Middle East issues and added: "I have enormous respect for the role he has played in formulating American policy in the Middle East. His support for Israel is unwavering, but it is thoughtful support."

But Solarz has come in for some bitter private criticism by some of Israel's other strong supporters in Congress because of what they view as his "two-facedness"—publicly supporting those things that he has privately argued against.

Solarz is not eager to discuss the embassy legislation except to say that he co-sponsored the bill and would vote for it if it came up, which does not appear likely now. But he also acknowledged that he had privately pointed out to his colleagues the negative aspects of the bill—that because it gave the President discretion not to move the embassy, the result would be to upset the Arabs without bringing about the transfer of the embassy.

Solarz said he has upset some friends of Israel before. In 1982, for example, following allegations that Israel was indirectly responsible for the Sabra and Shatilla massacres in Lebanon, Solarz and others in Congress called for an independent Israeli commission to examine the government's role in the massacre.

"There were friends of Israel who were not happy with this initiative," he said. "But I felt it was in Israel's interest for such a commission to be established. I didn't come to Congress as a rubber stamp for anyone."

He added, "I use my information and influence for what I think is genuinely helpful to the state of Israel."

Morris J. Amitay, a consultant who formerly served as executive director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, said that "in general, Steve is regarded as being pro-Israel. Because of his preeminent role in the Foreign Affairs Committee, and because of his heavily Jewish district, he is under closer scrutiny than others."

An Israeli diplomat said that while Solarz doesn't always "toe the line" as religiously as some other Members of Congress, Israelis respect him as a friend of Israel. The diplomat said he believed Solarz sometimes argued against higher

aid levels for Israel because he thought it would eventually create anti-Israeli feelings in Congress and the nation.

Solarz, he said, "gets away" with an independent style because he is gaining seniority and because he is smart.

Solarz has gotten relatively high marks for his chairmanship of the Asian and Pacific Affairs Subcommittee. "He was able to unify a diverse subcommittee" on most issues, said a former committee staff aide.

Solarz's interest as subcommittee chairman in stressing the need for a human rights component in U.S. policy toward the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan was based on moral and philosophical grounds as well as on pragmatic ones, committee sources said.

"He believed that regimes that made human rights improvements, that moved toward democracy, had a better chance of strong American support" if they were challenged from within or by other countries in the region, said a former committee aide.

But on the Philippines, in seeking to develop a policy that encompassed both U.S. military interests—two key U.S. bases are located there—and human rights, Solarz has not been totally successful in his effort to use the lever of aid to force human rights reforms.

While Congress in 1983 went along with Solarz's plan to cut U.S. military aid to \$40 million and increase economic aid to \$140 million, this year, a House-Senate conference committee drafting the foreign aid authorization bill moved back toward the Administration's proposal when it approved \$75 million in military aid and \$105 million in economic aid.

Congressional aides said the Administration was able to persuade Members that military aid was needed to fight the Communist rebels who are beginning to threaten the Ferdinand Marcos regime.

But the situation could change by the time Congress takes up the foreign aid appropriations bill later this year. If Marcos does not move toward political and economic reforms, Congress could cut military aid, House sources say. But if he begins to institute reforms, Congress might increase the aid.

EFFECTIVENESS

But the conference action on Philippines aid was unquestionably a rare So-

larz defeat and raises the question of whether his effectiveness is hampered by the fact that many of his colleagues do not like him. Some critics argue that his effectiveness is on the decline.

A House leadership source said: "There is respect for his knowledge. But there also is a sense, not that he is arrogant, but that he doesn't always show good judgment on when not to speak. What works against him is that he's not all that interested in playing the political game."

But others disagree. Bruce Cameron, a longtime Democratic congressional aide who has worked with Solarz on many Central American and human rights issues, said Solarz's ability to take a pro-

Even if the criticism is valid, Solarz may have been saved, at this stage in his congressional career, by his intelligence and hard work.

A source close to House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr., D-Mass., said that although Solarz is not above grandstanding, more often than not he has "done his homework."

And while he will never be popular in the House and will probably never be a congressional insider because of his independent, maverick style, that may not affect his influence in the broader foreign policy community, where he has "substantial influence," according to the same source. "The House is an institution in which foreign policy is less central than other issues."

It is unclear how far beyond his present position Solarz's hard work, intelligence and ambition will get him. "What makes him different than most members of the [Foreign Affairs] Committee is that he has a real interest in influencing policy beyond the committee," Torricelli said. "He has developed the kind of relations with foreign leaders and Administration officials that give him much broader influence."

Torricelli added: "He has used his time in Congress to get a good education. This is not it for Steve Solarz."

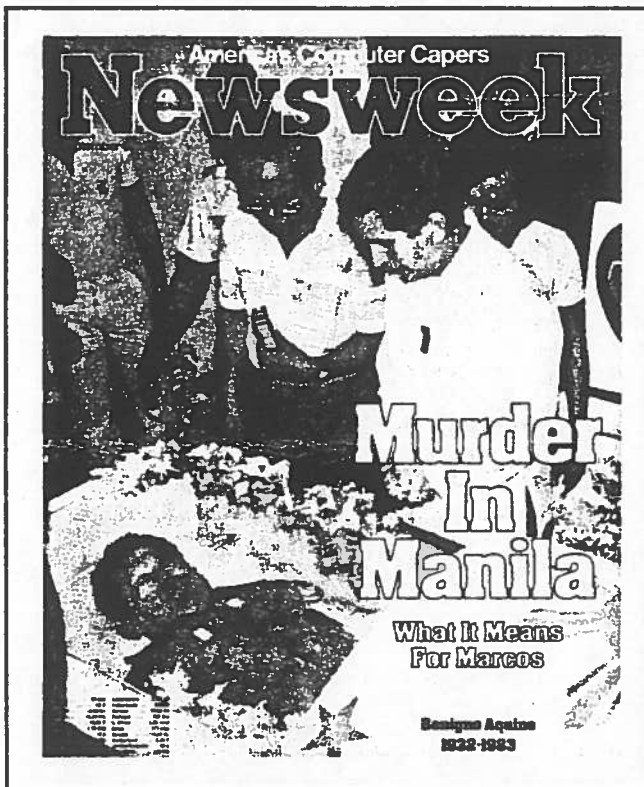
Not all are disposed to view Solarz so benevolently. While it is expected in Washington that to get to the top, you have to work hard, make your own breaks and be at the right place at the right time, there is a sense that Solarz may play the game too well.

Consider the almost legendary Solarz story surrounding the assassination of opposition

leader Benigno Aquino. Solarz was in the Philippines just before Aquino returned from exile in the United States but had left the country by the time Aquino's plane landed and he was assassinated at the Manila airport.

Hearing the news, Solarz rushed back to Manila and made his way to Aquino's home, where mourners were gathered. Solarz was recognized, and security guards cleared a path as he was ushered into the house. He then made his way to the open coffin to pay his respects. Cameras clicked and whirled.

The following week, on the cover of the international edition of *Newsweek*, there was a picture of the slain Aquino—and Solarz. □



Solarz on cover of Newsweek's international edition

posals and lobby for it makes him more effective than many in Congress. "He's his own best lobbyist," Cameron said. "He does it one on one."

Rep. Charles B. Rangel, D-N.Y., said: "He has a unique ability to find legislative solutions to problems—even to the extent of working them out on the House floor."

A foreign policy veteran who knows Solarz well and respects him conceded that many of the New Yorker's colleagues don't like him. But, he said, "Steve upsets people because he is not the type to go along with things. He has a lot of ideas, a lot of questions," and will raise them even if the issue already has been discussed and settled.