

# The canal treaty debate will be long and bitter

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DAY

RATIFICATION of the newly signed Panama Canal treaties by two-thirds of the Senate, as constitutionally required, will be hanging over the Carter Administration for at least three or four months.

Columnist Joseph Kraft believes that "the probability is the debate will stretch well into 1978, thus complicating a host of other foreign policy issues — notably arms control and the Middle East — that are truly pressing."

In Brief the two treaties provide for gradual transfer of the canal to Panamanian ownership by the year 2000, perpetual neutrality of the canal guaranteed by the right of U.S. military intervention if need be about \$60-\$70 million annually in tolls for Panama's treasury from rising transit fees plus about \$275 million in U.S. loans over the next five years.

At present, even the administration is only claiming that 58 senators, of the 67 needed for ratification, are firmly behind the treaties. But an ABC television news poll is far less comforting to treaty supporters.

That poll indicates 33 votes in favour, 27 votes opposed, and 40 senators undecided. If accurate, this poll means that if only seven of the 40 undecided senators eventually choose to oppose the treaties they will fail in the ratifica-

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tion process.

But there is considerable confusion in Washington about how the votes will actually line up in a few months time. Most commentators seem to agree that the treaties will eventually squeeze through the Senate. *U.S. News and World Report*, though, concludes that Carter is "waging an up-hill fight for the treaties."

Deviating from this view, however, is James Reston of the *New York Times*. He goes so far as to write that in the end "there will be no more than twenty votes against it."

Reston's view is that the treaties' opponents really "want the American people to decide, rather than the senate," and that this explains the vociferousness of some politicians at present.

American public opinion will play a major role in the ratification process. And so much depends on how the debate is conducted during the coming months.

How President Carter handles the issues in his forthcoming television address to the nation could prove crucial.

Carter's Senate opposition has already announced plans for so-called "truth squads" to follow the President wherever he goes campaigning for the treaties to present the opposition's views.

It is conceivable a group of senators could demand free equal television time to reply to the President, as well. And if they do not get it,

they might decide to purchase it. When the actual ratification process does begin, probably some time early in 1978, it is likely to be televised live as were the Nixon impeachment hearings.

The public might be substantially influenced by the course of the debate on the Senate floor. And since the Senate makes its own rules, it is quite possible many senators might want to expand the debate by allowing such figures as Henry Kissinger, Ronald Reagan, Gerald Ford and others to speak in the Senate chamber on this historic issue.

Reston's view seems highly questionable at this point. Carter, it seems, is definitely going to have serious difficulties with the treaties, his major foreign policy gambit so far, in achieving Senate ratification.

Only 19 times before in U.S. history has the Senate in effect vetoed a signed treaty. Probably the most important time was on March 19, 1920, when the Senate scuttled U.S. membership in Woodrow Wilson's dream, the League of Nations.

Only a few weeks ago there was some thought in Washington that the vote on the treaties might still come this year. But all hope for such a quick decision vanished when Senate majority leader Robert Byrd of West Virginia indicated that "anyone who thinks I'm going to call up the Panama Canal treaties before January or February is living in a dream world."

"From time to time," Byrd added, "matters of such far-reaching importance come to the Congress that they ought not to be rushed. The judgment should be based on the merits, not on jingoism or knee-jerk reactions."

The administration's game plan is now to wait until the time seems right, whenever that might be, and

then try to judge the treaty through the Senate.

Carter's negotiator, representative Sol Linowitz recently said that "what we are going to do is find the right moment to present the treaty when we can get it passed."

It almost seemed an ominous that passage is very uncertain.