

Out of Kosovo?

One wonders how Texas Gov. George W. Bush feels about the move among Senate Republicans to curtail his foreign policy powers as of July 1, 2001 by blocking further American troop deployment in Kosovo beyond that date. This, of course, presupposes that Mr. Bush is elected president of the United States. Surely Mr. Bush must be less than thrilled at having his hands tied by his own party in a matter where Republicans have traditionally defended presidential prerogatives (even if this has become harder and harder in the Clinton years). If Mr. Bush is troubled, he ought to find his voice on the subject, and the sooner the better. Vice President Gore may not be too pleased about all of this either, but at least he will have another piece of ammunition to hurl against congressional Republicans next time he wants to accuse them of isolationism.

The problem is the Kosovo amendment, attached to the military spending bill, that last week cleared the Senate Appropriations Committee by a stunning 23-2 vote. The amendment was drafted by Sen. Robert Byrd and Armed Service Chairman John Warner, and would cut off funds for the continued deployment of the 5,900 American troops in Kosovo beyond July 1, next year — unless President Clinton or this successor obtains congressional approval for continued deployment. The president would also be required to present a plan to turn over to the Europeans full responsibility for supplying groundtroops in Kosovo, and condition funding on certification by the administration that NATO allies are paying their share of the Kosovo reconstruction aid. The amendment is scheduled for a vote in the Senate Tuesday afternoon.

Now, it is only too easy to sympathize with the frustration of the senators. The Clinton administration's policy in the Balkans has been a mess, and Kosovo more so than the rest. The facts on which Mr. Byrd and Mr. Warner have based their ill-considered proposal are absolutely correct: Peacekeeping operations have overtaxed the U.S. military severely in the Clinton years, particularly as defense budgets have declined at the same time as the number of missions have increased. The Europeans have been notoriously slow in producing their share of aid for Balkan reconstruction, as witness the constant stream of officials from the Balkan countries passing through Washington in the hope of increased U.S. aid or at least more American pressure on the Europeans to open the wallet.

That does not mean, however that the solution sought by Messrs. Byrd and Warner is the right one. The real challenge for the Senate is to rise above these sorry facts and consider the principle. The senators ought also consider what American withdrawal will do to transatlantic relations. Does anyone doubt that there will be much rejoicing in Belgrade? Supporters of an independent European defense will feel vindicated by such a display of American fickleness — particularly the French. And Russian President Vladimir Putin will receive much honor for getting the Americans out of the Balkans.

Sens. Joseph Biden and John McCain have led the battle against the Kosovo amendment, to their credit. Instead, the Senate ought to look for more constructive ways of getting U.S. troops out of the Balkans in cooperation with our allies. Getting rid of the eternal Slobodan Milosevic would undoubtedly help.