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Congress relieved Marcos finally gave up

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Once fearful a civil war was imminent in the Philippines, Congress breathed a sigh of relief yesterday and lauded President Ferdinand Marcos' decision to hand over the reins of power to Corazon Aquino.

During a day of rapidly unfolding events half way around the world that began with two presidents in the Philippines, congressional leaders last night said Mr. Marcos' decision was not only prudent but would likely avert widespread strife.

Vermont Democratic Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, vice chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence, said he was "very pleased" that Mr. Marcos left the Philippines on a U.S. military airlift.

"Had he stayed and toughed it out for a while, there would have been a real bloodbath," Mr. Leahy said, echoing the common response from both conservatives and liberals in Congress. "We came close to botching it by sticking with Marcos for so long, but the way it ended, I think we can work with Mrs. Aquino."

The Philippines, home of two of the largest U.S. military bases outside the United States, has been a close ally of the United States for decades. But in recent months, the country and Mr. Marcos have come under intense scrutiny that eased only after he was spirited from his home, presumably to exile in Guam.

Congressional pressures began mounting last fall when a Senate delegation reported that Mr. Marcos' control over the government was slipping and major reforms were a must. Those calls now have been replaced by pleas to boost economic aid to the Philippines, along with efforts to help Mrs. Aquino complete the transition to a new government.

The shifting sentiments grew last night on Capitol Hill as plaudits flowed freely. But just as quickly, the reactions were replaced by speculation on what lies in the future under the reign of Mrs. Aquino.

Missouri Democrat Rep. Richard Gephardt, chairman of the House Democratic Caucus, said there "were only winners in the Philippines. President Corazon Aquino won recognition for her victory in the national election. Ex-president Marcos won our respect for stepping down."

Mr. Gephardt, like other lawmakers, said numerous hurdles still must be overcome before the transition to a new government is complete.

"Although democratic rule has returned to the Philippines, we all realize that many economic and social problems remain," he said. "Finding solutions will not be easy, but the United States will be standing by the Philippines in the difficult days ahead."

Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole said with the end of the Marcos regime at hand, "We'll start looking over what the other candidate had to say in the campaign."

Critics of the Reagan administration, who in recent days spotlighted the problems to attack the Reagan administration's foreign policies, softened their responses yesterday.

Massachusetts Democrat Sen. Edward Kennedy said he thought the administration "held on too long to the Marcos regime," but peppered his remarks by congratulating Mr. Reagan for "reversing a failing policy. He discarded his own preconceptions and he acted on the basis of reality, not right-wing assumptions."

"The result is this day of pride... and it is a day whose peaceful dawn could not have come without the leadership of President Ronald Reagan," Mr. Kennedy said.

Looking ahead, lawmakers focused first on increased economic aid to the Philippines and what may happen to the two critical U.S. bases there. Initial congressional reaction to any increase in economic assistance "would be a small price to pay" for continued friendship with the

Philippines, a Democratic House staffer said.

New York Democratic Rep. Stephen Solarz, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on the Pacific, in past months has repeatedly denounced the Marcos regime and last week successfully moved to cut off all U.S. military aid to the Philippines. But after the Marcos regime ended, Mr. Solarz followed suit with most lawmakers in calling for renewed efforts to mend open wounds.

Mr. Solarz yesterday was commending the decision by Mr. Marcos to leave, along with key moves by the Reagan administration to arrange a peaceful transition. Mr. Solarz said he will fly to Manila next week to meet with Mrs. Aquino and would back a "substantial" increased aid to Philippines.

New York Democrat Rep. Samuel Stratton, chairman of another Foreign Affairs subcommittee, predicted the U.S. bases there were "very safe" because of the thousands of jobs they bring to the Philippines, which has a sagging economy.

"It's very important for us now to rapidly establish the contacts necessary to determine what kind of aid the new government needs to carry on most effectively in a new era for the Philippines," said Washington Republican Sen. Daniel Evans, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

"I believe this outcome is a definite plus for the democratic process," said Sen. Lawton Chiles, Florida Democrat. "The Filipino people demonstrated their love for democracy. When they took to the streets, laying down in front of tanks and facing down the Marcos troops they showed, in the most graphic way, their belief in democratic elections."