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Spooked

Lately, the House has been at some pains to show how red-blooded it is. Last week, however, it was bluenose time. The House stood up and forbade the Library of Congress to use taxpayers' money for a Braille edition of Playboy.

Rep. Chalmers P. Wylie (R-Ohio) led the crusade to save the blind from what he called "talk about wanton idleness or wanted and illicit sex and so forth."

Those who opposed him on grounds of censorship, free speech and common sense pointed out that the centerfolds and raunchy cartoons—which they all rushed forward to see when Wylie made copies available on the floor—could not possibly corrupt the sightless, since they can hardly be rendered into Braille. But they said wanly that they realized that a vote against Wylie might be hard to explain back home. So the tally went 206 to 103, for keeping the library from bringing to the sightless Playboy's reflections, including the occasional musings of such right-wing gods as William F. Buckley Jr. and the Rev. Jerry Falwell.

It was pretty silly, but it really isn't half as daffy as some of the things the House has done lately. And interestingly, it was the one thing the House did that Rambo, its new role model, might not have approved of.

In the film by the same name, Rambo is so busy wasting Commies and wiping out bridges and jails that he doesn't have much time for reading. But it seems safe to say that he's the kind who might pick up Playboy in one of those rare moments when he didn't have a grenade in his hand.

The House is trying to tell us that it doesn't like the way the world is going. President Reagan, after the Flight 847 hostages were home from Beirut, jocosely expressed the legislators' mood: "After seeing Rambo last night, I'll know how to do it next time."

The House once had a mind of its own and stood up against nerve gas, aid to the Nicaraguan contras, military intervention in Nicaragua and other dubious ideas from the White House. But in the interest of being macho, they have surrendered.

Now the House is haunted. The members jump when a leaf drops. They see ghosts of future opponents pointing a bony finger and shrieking, "Wimp," "Pinko" or, it seems, in the Playboy case, "porn-freak."

They can't storm Red prison camps as Rambo does, but they are going to help anyone, anywhere, who can. And so they have voted to help the

resistance in Cambodia, even though they can't be sure the money won't fall into the hands of Pol Pot, the Hitler-class butcher who for present purposes becomes a freedom fighter.

Of all the daffy things the House has done lately, none matches lifting the ban on covert aid to the rebels in Angola. It was no surprise that Rep. Robert K. Dornan (R-Calif.) was leading the charge. But by his side was, of all people, Rep. Claude Pepper (D-Fla.), an octogenarian who usually fights for Social Security recipients. The presence of Cuban troops in Angola is said to have fired him up.

Dornan cried out that a vote to end the prohibition—which has been in place since 1977 when then-Sen. Dick Clark (D-Iowa) put over an amendment to end CIA dirty tricks—would show that we have licked "the Vietnam syndrome," which the right regards as dreadful affliction that curbs the normal impulses to get into wars against Marxist governments in small countries.

Rep. Howard E. Wolpe (D-Mich.) noted that Jonas Savimbi, leader of the antigovernment forces in Angola, isn't the genuine article as a warrior for democracy, since he told Wolpe that he is not at home with Soviet Communism—he prefers the stricter Chinese model.

But the House meekly went along. Never mind that they torpedoed the one set of faintly promising diplomatic negotiations being conducted by the Reagan administration. Angola has promised to send the Cubans home if South Africa withdraws from Namibia. Two days after the House vote, Angola walked out of the talks.

Never mind that the House gave a pat on the back to the government of South Africa, an ally of Savimbi.

The funny thing about the members' panic, says Rep. Patrick Williams (D-Mont.), is that it is not shared by the public. The country is in a composed frame of mind and doesn't want to get into a war, even against Playboy in Braille. "There's a political full moon out there someplace," muses Williams, "but only we in the House see it. We are certainly the only ones out there howling."

Williams thinks there's an unusual role reversal: The frantic members go home and are calmed by their constituents. "When that tide starts to roll, whether liberal or conservative, it washes members in front of it," he says—about the best explanation he can give of the current madness.