

Standing up for a Department of Peace

A Message given by

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When I was first confronted with the idea of a Department of Peace — in a serious way, I mean: what’s your opinion on this, Bob? — I felt an inner uneasiness similar to that inspired by a limp handshake. Oh, why not a Department of Love as well, or a Department of Happiness? Too much idealism, not enough ground glass, you might say. Not enough reality. To complicate matters, my skepticism was constrained by politeness, since the person who confronted me, a retired Canadian diplomat named Bill Bhaneja, was a friend, a person I respected a great deal, with whom I’d been corresponding for several years on issues of war and peace — who had, with a colleague, written a proposal for a Canadian Department of Peace modeled after the legislation introduced in the U.S. by Dennis Kucinich.

Uh, Bill, I wanted to say — before I had examined his proposal with any kind of care — this is too feel-good. I don’t think this has a chance of serious consideration among the cynics in Congress and the media, except, almost jokingly, as a placebo for Age of Aquarius types. Bill, Bill, we need stronger remedies for the virulent wrong-headedness of the Bush administration, like impeachment.

This was a little less than two years ago. What happened that changed my mind, broke the back of my skepticism, a few days after I received his proposal — a copy of which was printed out and sitting on my desk — was avian in nature. It wasn’t a visit from the dove of peace — not exactly. It was a news story about bird flu.

The story quoted George Bush’s thoughts about this new enemy, which he saw as another form of terror, apparently, and which he talked about combating with ... are you ready? National Guard troops. That is, by implementing marital law to enforce quarantines. This was the guy who had, in the past five years, “degraded” the nation’s public health system — in the words of a high-level official at the Centers for Disease Control — to the point of ineffectiveness, and underfunded and politicized every branch of government created to deal with national emergencies. And all he could think about was to start shooting. I think it may be a myth that Native Americans, infected with smallpox from tainted blankets, donned war paint

and battle regalia to fight it off, but here was an American president proposing pretty much the same thing.

And it hit me with a jolt: The level of public awareness is deteriorating. We're now producing leaders who haven't got a clue how to deal with complex social issues except to start shooting at them. And there's no adequate challenge to this in the media or from the opposition party, and apparently no public context big enough even to allow for debate.

This is when I started to see the value of institutional change: the conception and establishment of a permanent structure that studies, explores, defines, and most of all sheerly acknowledges that there is something called peace that isn't in actual fact war, or the threat of war, in the spirit of the Strategic Air Command, whose motto is: "Peace is our profession." Suddenly we're at a point where this is all we know — that "peace" is nothing but keeping a blindly malevolent enemy at bay, and these enemies who confront us are all essentially the same. How can it be that nowhere in the corridors of power — in the corridors of the world's only superpower — is there the least acknowledgement or even, seemingly, the least awareness of, for instance, this: "We recognize that the world is interconnected and that everything influences the whole. As a consequence, there is no 'them and us.' There is only us, and the welfare of others, indeed of all life, is our own welfare." So it reads on the website of a group called the Peace Alliance, about which I'll have more to say in a moment.

But first I want to address an appalling situation that is far bigger, far more entrenched than George Bush's wild musings about bird flu. It is simply this: The opportunity for peace has been draining through our fingers for decades. And it's not going to happen — it's simply not going to happen — unless there's a shift in consciousness at the level of politics and government.

We've already heard from Dwight D. Eisenhower, who in his famous address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, on April 16, 1953, pointed out the futility and horrific cost of the Cold War ... and remember, that war ended in 1991, after four and a half tense, fearful, duck-and-cover decades, and then, after the tearing down of the Berlin wall, the final collapse of the Soviet system, Gorbachev's implementation of glasnost and perestroika, people talked excitedly about a peace dividend: the diversion of Cold War arms-race money to peaceful purposes, the rebuilding of the social safety net, funding for education, perhaps even energy independence.

Yeah, sure ...

I would like to quote further from Eisenhower's speech ... what is known as his Cross of Iron speech ... not simply because it is eerily timely in 2007, but because it shows a consciousness that we as a nation have given up, and must reclaim:

“In that spring of victory (1945) the soldiers of the Western Allies met the soldiers of Russia in the center of Europe. They were triumphant comrades in arms. Their peoples shared the joyous prospect of building, in honor of their dead, the only fitting monument — an age of just peace. All these war-weary peoples shared too this concrete, decent purpose: to guard vigilantly against the domination ever again of any part of the world by a single, unbridled aggressive power.

“ ... The way chosen by the United States was plainly marked by a few clear precepts, which govern its conduct in world affairs.

“First: No people on earth can be held, as a people, to be enemy, for all humanity shares the common hunger for peace and fellowship and justice.

“Second: No nation’s security and well-being can be lastingly achieved in isolation but only in effective cooperation with fellow-nations.

“Third: Any nation’s right to form of government and an economic system of its own choosing is inalienable.

“Fourth: Any nation’s attempt to dictate to other nations their form of government is indefensible.

“And fifth: A nation’s hope of lasting peace cannot be firmly based upon any race in armaments but rather upon just relations and honest understanding with all other nations.”

Consider how marginalized such language is today! This is why it’s stunning — not because Ike “saw 50 years into the future” and divined our problems and needs, but because he spoke to his contemporaries in 1953 in language that still applies to the state of the world, because the world hasn’t changed — the worst of geopolitics and the relationships among nations haven’t changed — but rather have grown more desperate and more urgent.

I quote Ike a little further: “These plain and cruel truths define the peril and point the hope that come with this spring of 1953. This is one of those times in the affairs of nations when the gravest choices must be made, if there is to be a turning toward a just and lasting peace.”

I repeat: “THIS!” Today, midsummer 2007. “THIS is one of those times ... when the gravest choices must be made, if there is to be a turning toward a just and lasting peace.”

This is a time, said Ike, that calls upon the nations of the world “to answer the questions that stirs the hearts of all sane men: IS THERE NO OTHER WAY THE WORLD MAY LIVE?”

Let me let that question sink in: Is there no other way the world may live? This is not a question to be asked except with a fullness of heart and a readiness to commit one's life to an answer.

The war in which we are now engaged — this subset of the war on terror that we are waging in Iraq — could wind up costing, according to Nobel-Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, as much as \$2 trillion, when all the hidden costs, such as lifetime care for brain-injured vets, are factored in. Frankly, I think this estimate is extremely conservative, if one factors in the cost to the Iraqis — not just of the obvious and visible damage to that country but the invisible damage in the form of depleted uranium and other toxic consequences of the way we wage war, and the horrific health consequences these wreak in the form of birth defects, widespread cancer and other neurological diseases, and will wreak for years ... decades ... to come.

Railing against the waste just won't do. Not anymore. It hasn't accomplished anything in 60 years. While men and women of good will talked earnestly about how to spend the peace dividend of the '90s, the denizens of neoconservative think-tanks brainstormed about how to make sure the levels of defense spending did not drop. Who was more successful?

In my opinion, the time has come for us to do more than stand our ground. The time has come to commit to a building process that changes how we govern ourselves. The time has come to insist on structural change and a recognition in the corridors of power that peace is a complex undertaking with roots in a just society, not merely a ceasefire.

And so this brings me, finally, to what is currently known as HR 808, the legislation Dennis Kucinich first introduced on July 11, 2001, to establish a Cabinet-level Department of Peace and Nonviolence, and has reintroduced every session of Congress since. The legislation, Kucinich explains on his website, "would serve to promote non-violence as an organizing principle in our society, and help to create the conditions for a more peaceful world."

OK, great. So what does that mean? Well, a couple key provisions: The funding would be pegged at 2 percent of the Defense Budget. What a Department of Peace would do is tie together, fund, be a resource and clearinghouse for programs that work on such matters as nonviolent conflict resolution both domestically and internationally. It would link, in effect, schoolyard bullies with international bullying. Domestically, the website tells us, the department would develop policies addressing such issues as: domestic violence, child abuse, and mistreatment of the elderly. Internationally, it would analyze foreign policy and make recommendations to the president on matters pertaining to national security, including the protection of human rights and the prevention and de-escalation of unarmed and armed international conflict.

A Department of Peace has been compared to the Environmental Protection Agency, the establishment of which — even with an unsympathetic administration in power — permanently legitimizes environmental awareness.

The department would also have an Office of Peace Education, which would work with educators in elementary and secondary schools and universities in the development and implementation of curricula on peaceful conflict resolution. In addition, a Peace Academy would be established to provide instruction in peace education and offer opportunities for graduates to serve in programs dedicated to domestic or international nonviolent conflict resolution — in other words, turning out peace professionals.

Programs such as this are frequently called “the technology of peace” — for me an absolutely fascinating concept, which I am in the process of learning more about. For instance:

“We live in a culture where people are very much disconnected from each other. I think that’s incredibly dangerous,” Lauren Abramson told me. “The more connected we are, the safer we’ll be.”

Abramson is executive director of Baltimore’s Community Conferencing Center, a 10-year-old organization that is quietly part of what you might call the global healing network, the emerging culture of peace.

“What we do is build connections,” she said. Specifically, the organization makes it possible for both victims and perpetrators of crimes to have a conversation with each other — a system of “restorative justice,” as opposed to retributive justice, based on a similar program in Australia and originally adapted from the Maori of New Zealand. It allows actual healing to occur. “We tend to put a lot of systems between people,” she said. “When you give people a chance to talk to each other, how powerful it can be.”

Programs such as this are barely known to the media, their transformative power undiscovered by pop culture, their value a secret from most politicians. Yet I couldn’t be more certain that our safety and security lie in the direction of opening the blocked passages of connection we have to each other, and forging new ones — particularly into the hearts of bitter, despairing young men such as Virginia Tech killer Seung-Hui Cho. It can be done. Most conflict can be defused well before it explodes.

Here’s what Walter Cronkite, in a conversation with Kucinich, had to say:

“What is quite clear ... is that you are trying, and I consider myself with you on this in every way ... to (create) not only a massive but a basic change in our culture, in our entire approach to our relationships with other human beings. ... It’s not a

matter of simply getting another department of government. You're speaking of an entire philosophical revolution."

So ... if this is resonating for some of you, the question is, what can you do? As luck would have it — plenty. It just so happens that an organization called the Peace Alliance, a group independent of Kucinich founded by author and inspirational speaker Marianne Williamson, perhaps best known as the creator of *A Course in Miracles*. Her belief is that inner peace and outer peace must at some point converge, and when she personally felt the need to step beyond her inner journey, she looked around for a way to do so and became enamored of Kucinich's vision. The result is the Peace Alliance, which at this point has a national structure in place to promote and lobby for the legislation. It seems to me that Williamson, by linking our inner and outer journeys — by refusing to believe that politics belongs in one corner, and religion, spirituality and God belong in another — embodies the "philosophical revolution" that Cronkite spoke of: the paradigm shift.

This national structure includes coordinators in nearly every state. There may be one or two that don't have one yet, but Wisconsin does. Her name is Deki Smith, and I have contact information for her that I can give you afterwards. She lives in Milwaukee and regrets not being able to be here today.

She told me that she recognizes many types, degrees and levels of involvement on this issue and is supportive of all of them. She does coaching based on individual interests, and said, "There's something happening in Wisconsin and if *you* want to make something happen you will be totally supported."

The sort of things that one can do range from national lobbying to many sorts of local initiatives — including getting one's local governmental body to pass a resolution urging Congress to implement a cabinet-level Department of Peace. Communities large and small have already done so. They include Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Atlanta, Minneapolis and Oakland, along with Silver City, N.M., Sebastopol, Calif., Hamtramck, Mich. and Fairmont, Minn.

Could Appleton, Wisconsin be next?

"There are new ideas on the world's horizon, as different from the twentieth-century worldview as the twentieth century was from the nineteenth century," Williamson writes in *Healing the Soul of America*.

And Mahatma Gandhi said, "Nonviolence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man."

I say, maybe the time has come to learn how to use it.