

A Department Of Peace?

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King Features Syndicate

With this nation embroiled in what threatens to be an interminable "War on Terrorism," an idea put forward last year by Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich has, for me, considerable appeal. Kucinich, who was the one candidate in the Democratic primaries to unfailingly promote the party's traditional Franklin Roosevelt liberalism, proposed the establishment of a Department of Peace.

Now he has introduced in the House HR 1673, a bill that would establish a Peace Department, adding a new cabinet post to the executive branch of government. The Department of Peace would "advise the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State on all matters relating to national security, including the protection of human rights and the prevention of, amelioration of, and de-escalation of unarmed and armed international conflict."

The secretary of peace would serve as a delegate to the National Security Council and also would "provide training of all United States personnel who administer post-conflict reconstruction and demobilization in war-torn societies." In other words, the Department of Peace, with a highly trained and dedicated staff, would be a constant, working counterpoint to the Defense Department and its expenditure of billions of dollars to perfect the weapons of war.

The department would act not only in an international context, but also in those areas of domestic policy that endanger the nation's well-being: the proliferation of automatic weapons and the violence in our schools, our homes and in our streets, where the intolerant prey on those whose lifestyles they find offensive. It might well come up with some new strategies for turning around our losing war on drugs, and it might also lobby Congress to put an end to the cruel and unusual punishment of small-time drug offenders called "mandatory sentencing." It would also advise the attorney general on matters of civil rights and labor law. But its primary importance, it seems to me, would be in international affairs, demonstrating to the rest of the world, to borrow the old motto of the Strategic Air Command, that "peace is our profession."

Now, to some, this is going to sound terribly naive, given the current state of things and the very real, hard-edged dangers that face us. But the naivete just might lie on the other side with those who believe that military force and our policy of pre-emption are alone sufficient to make us safe. The fact is that there is nothing in this proposal that would weaken our military posture or our ability to strike terrorists and their havens and to do whatever is necessary for the defense of the United States.

But wouldn't it be an advantage to have a peer of the secretaries of defense and state whose primary responsibility it was to develop the methods and means of peaceful conflict resolution and to offer peaceful alternatives in the councils of war?

Wouldn't it have been an advantage in the run-up to the Iraq War to have had a cabinet officer whose department was responsible for training U.S. personnel in human rights, conflict resolution, reconstruction and the detailed planning necessary to restoring a

durable peace; in short, to do what was so disastrously absent when our forces rolled into Baghdad?

Kucinich's bill is more elaborate and specific than I can spell out here. Right now it is a long way from realization, with only a few dozen congressional sponsors. It needs a lot more to move another step along the legislative process.

Actually, there is an urgency to its adoption. In this dangerous world, where the strength of the United States is needed to keep the peace, we need a visible manifestation of our intention to play that role, without the arrogance that cost us friends and allies among the nations and peoples of the world.

But no matter how far off it might be, it is an idea that deserves our attention. We can hope that Kucinich and those who are pioneers in supporting his bill stay the course and redouble their efforts.