

War a Challenge For Peace Caucus

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Roll Call

BYLINE: By Ethan Wallison

In another world, one that might have existed before Sept. 11, the U.S. government would have had an assistant secretary for peaceful coexistence and nonviolent conflict resolution, and there would have been a Peace Academy, modeled on the military service academies, complete with a mandatory five-year period of service after graduation.

That world was the dream of Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio) and 40 other Democrats who sought to create a U.S. Department of Peace.

There would still be tension and conflict in the world, of course. But in this other universe, America would be making a proactive effort, through its Peace Department, to understand the sources of discord and foster harmony. "Does it occur to anybody that all of this [defense and intelligence] machinery has failed totally to prepare us for the way the world is now?" asked Rep. Neil Abercrombie (D-Hawaii), a co-sponsor of the Peace

Department legislation, which was introduced in July.

"Only now are we trying to figure out what is Islam. Maybe if there was a Department of Peace, they would be able to say, 'Uh-oh, we've got some problems with these people,'" Abercrombie continued. "I truly believe that if we had a Department of Peace, we would have seen this coming."

"This," the world knows, was the hijackings and terrorist attacks that brought down the World Trade Center and destroyed part of the Pentagon, killing thousands in the process.

How much the world has changed since the attacks was evident in the House's Sept. 14 vote authorizing President Bush to use force in retaliation. Virtually every Peace Department co-sponsor cast a ballot in favor of the resolution, with only Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.) voting no. (Another co-sponsor, Michigan Democratic Rep. John Conyers, missed the vote.)

But can the peace coalition be mobilized for war?

Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), a member of what she calls the "peace community," voted in favor of the war resolution, but suggested her support is highly conditional.

For one thing, Schakowsky wants to make sure "only" those who are complicit in the attacks are targeted for retaliation. She also insists that the United States "work with the international

community" on the response, and indicated that she has an expansive vision of what that "work" would entail.

"This was not a slam-dunk vote for me," Schakowsky said of the war resolution. "I said [at the time of the vote,], 'I hope I don't live to regret this.'"

Rep. Mike Honda (D-Calif.), who is Japanese-American and spent the early years of his childhood in a Colorado internment camp during World War II, explained that he didn't vote for "war" - he voted for "military action."

"Have you ever been in a war?" he asked a reporter. Unlike in war, Honda suggested, in the current conflict preserving the rights and liberties cherished by most Americans is one of the government's foremost priorities.

"Isn't that what peace is?" Honda asked.

Several Peace Department supporters stressed that the resolution for which they voted laid out in specific terms that Congress would not be abandoning the War Powers Act, which forces the President to seek Congress' approval for extended military deployments.

However, none of these Members were willing to suggest the limits of their support for military action.

"The question we have to ask after every act we take is, 'Will this make us safer?'" Schakowsky said.

Kucinich, the prime mover behind the Department of Peace, could not be reached for comment last week.

However, the lawmaker's "Action and Information Center," which doubles as his Congressional Web site, provides a snapshot of the quandary the Sept. 11 attacks have presented to anti-war Members.

In the press release Kucinich issued to introduce the Peace Department bill, he lamented that "too often" this country has "overlooked the long-term solution of peace for the instant gratification of war."

In the release he added, "It's time to recognize that traditional, militant objectives for peace are not working, and the only solution is to make peace the goal of a Cabinet-level agency."

In fact, many of the Peace Department's functions would seem to overlap those of other agencies already in place.

For instance, developing "policy alternatives for the treatment of drug and alcohol abuse" - a task that would be assigned to the assistant secretary for domestic peace activities - would seem to be part of the current mission for the Department of Health and Human Services.

Likewise, it would seem the purpose of the Department of State is to foster world harmony, as far as that is possible.

However, supporters of a Peace Department believe that the U.S. government, in its efforts to promote American interests in the world, often overlooks the important dynamics and nuances of societies and cultures around the globe, making it incapable of preventing crises before they occur.

One thing about which they all appear to agree is that if U.S. intelligence is studying these issues, it's not looking hard enough.

"I think we need to redetermine the conditions that ultimately create war," Rep. Brian Baird (D-Wash.) said, suggesting that the Peace Department would, among other things, explore the "causes" of conflict "while recognizing there are some [who hate the U.S.] who can't be changed."

Baird, a self-described "realist" who considers military retaliation for the terrorist attacks to be its own form of "peace activism," believes that too much of the focus of U.S. foreign policy right now is on trouble spots in the world and bypasses societies - his example is Costa Rica - that try to nurture peace and democracy.

"The message seems to be that if you have a war or drug trafficking, then you get U.S. aid from it, but if you're doing things right, then forget about you," Baird said.

At a closed-door briefing for Members last Tuesday, Abercrombie presented Secretary of State Colin Powell and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld with copies of "Shooting an Elephant," a short story by George Orwell.

Abercrombie noted that Orwell had been an officer in the British Civil Service in

Burma, which was then a British colony, and the story lays out the author's mystification at the local practice of shooting elephants. Abercrombie said he sees the story as a parable suggesting that bringing Western concepts to the East will lead to failure.

"I'm just saying [to Powell and Rumsfeld] that before charging off on missions, we should think about what it means to be 'shooting an elephant,'" he said.