



The Peace Alliance

Campaigning for a U.S. Department of Peace

CITIZENSHIP PRIMER

by Marianne Williamson

"I am not an advocate for frequent changes in laws and constitutions, but laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors."

~ Thomas Jefferson

The primary function of a United States Department of Peace will be to research, articulate and facilitate nonviolent solutions to domestic and international conflict. In order to establish the Department of Peace, we must understand how an American law is passed and the role of the citizen in making it happen.

The Role of the Government

There are three equal branches of the U.S. Government: Legislative (the U.S. Congress); Executive (the President); and Judicial (the Supreme Court). Our Founders deliberately established the co-equality of all three branches, as a system of checks and balances.

Congress (made of up two co-equal branches: the Senate and the House of Representatives) makes the law. The President can veto a law if he or she has the Congressional support to do so; otherwise, his or her job is to propose new laws, as well as execute laws already established. The role of the Judiciary is to assure that all laws are both made and executed in accordance with the U.S. Constitution.

Every American is represented by one House member and two Senators. The make-up of the House of Representatives is determined by population, while each state regardless of its size is represented by two Senators. There are 440 members (435 voting) of the U.S. House of Representatives, and 100 members of the U.S. Senate.

In order for a bill to become law, it must ultimately be passed by both the House and Senate, then signed into law by the President. Bills are initially introduced by a member of Congress, either from the House or Senate. Should enough votes be present in both houses, the House and Senate versions of the bill are then put into Conference Committee. In committee, the two versions of the bill are revised and blended, then put before the entire Congress for a vote.

The Role of the People

Your Congressperson and Senators are well aware they're elected by their constituents. If we don't consistently express our opinions to them – through citizen activism such as constituent meetings, phone calls and letters, as well as membership in citizen lobbying groups – then we can't complain when our opinions aren't reflected in Congressional policy-making. Our role is to tell our Representatives how we think and what we feel; our right to do so is the Constitutional guarantee that sets a democracy apart from every other form of government. (*over...*)

Yet our freedom is like a muscle that must be exercised or else it atrophies. There are currently several paid corporate lobbyists for every Congressional Representative. If a corporate lobbyist is speaking to your representative practically every day, it is hardly enough for you to speak to them through the voting booth only every two or four years.

In the words of Congressman John Conyers (D-MI.), “Congress is a reactive body.” *The current crisis in our democracy has less to do with Congressional failure to express the will of the people, and more to do with the failure of the people to express their will in a meaningful way.* In order to establish a U.S. Department of Peace, we must present a compelling case for its existence both to our fellow citizens and our elected officials. A collective desire then becomes a political constituency, with both the will and the power to affect the laws of the United States.

The Power of Citizenship

In the U.S. Constitution, our Founders established a profound yet delicate relationship not only among the branches of government, but also between the government and the people. Through our electoral system, we ourselves are the ultimate check and balance on unfettered government power. Yet as patriots from Ben Franklin to Abraham Lincoln have pointed out, Americans must be *vigilant*. Vital citizenship is a demanding and active role, in which we are called to take individual responsibility for our function as ultimate keepers of the democratic flame. When Lincoln said that government “of the people, by the people and for the people” would not perish from the earth, he was well aware it is up to each of us to make sure of that. No generation can guarantee freedom for generations to come.

While laws do not change overnight – nor should they – it is equally true, as written by Thomas Jefferson, that, “as (the human mind) becomes more developed (and)... enlightened, institutions must advance to keep pace with the times.” Congressional Representatives have thousands of bills put before them for consideration during any Congressional session; it is only to be expected that it takes considerable effort to get their serious attention, much less their support for a particular bill. Yet surely the effort is worth it. For the Department of Peace legislation does reflect what Jefferson referred to as “progress of the human mind,” presenting a new model for the amelioration of violence and the waging of peace. As such, it represents both a philosophical as well as political advance for American society.

Citizenship is not a quick fix. The American anti-slavery society was established in 1833; the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1863. The women’s suffrage movement officially began in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848; women were granted the right to vote through the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920. Every serious political advance in America has taken years to achieve, and so might this one. But not *that* long, for advances in technology and communication provide extraordinary opportunities for the organization of a grass roots movement. Today, it is time for our own generation to respond to a great historical challenge: to interrupt the patterns of violence which threaten to destroy not only our own, but all human civilization. In the words of Albert Einstein, “I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones.”

The idea to establish a U.S. Dept. of Peace is not new, having been proposed in various forms throughout our history. It is an effort with personal as well as political, spiritual as well as social dimensions. The Department of Peace legislation addresses the political dimension of peace-creation in a crucial way, institutionalizing the interests of peace within the workings of the United States Government.

With the creation of a Department of Peace, an established voice for peace will be at the table of American power. This will be our generation’s gift, should we choose to give it: to our nation, to our children, and to the progress of the human mind.