

Why is 'Peace' a Dirty Word?

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HOW IS that people — most of whom grow up with parents admonishing them daily to behave with peace and civility — can embrace messages that snicker at the notion of peace on a wider scale? Most people will live their entire lives without engaging in murder or acts of war and be happy for it. Yet when someone comes along and suggests more vigorous pursuit of this thing called “peace,” they are pilloried for it.

Not by everyone, I should hasten to add. But in this polarized and partisan world we live in, the ones yelling from the fringes are doing a good job of capturing our ear through the mainstream media. So when someone like Ohio Rep. Dennis Kucinich — who’s on his second go-around running for president — proposes a “Department of Peace” for the U.S., he is subject to the snarky attacks of those who believe the only way to demonstrate patriotism (or, at least, the best way) is to kill people, blow things up.

And when someone like Colorado Rep. Mark Udall — who is running for the U.S. Senate — is attacked (actually, the term now is “Swiftboated”) by a so-called 527 group for once supporting said Department of Peace, he is also ridiculed, painted as a pacifist who’s now willing to hold open the door for terrorists. (Sad to note here that Udall has withdrawn his support of the idea, no doubt a political calculation to fend off wussy-branding from his GOP rival.)

The notion of creating another Cabinet department has its own baggage. I wouldn’t want to see such a department perform at the level of our current Defense Department — a much-diminished version of the organization that emerged victorious from World War II. But if executed properly, the potential is there to create something that would replace our war-driven country with a new model based on something else, something better. It would present a way to project American power and influence in a more positive way, and ultimately, I believe, diminish the need for a Defense Department that sucks half-a-trillion dollars out of our economy every year.

Does that mean no DOD at all? That we allow every drug lord, jihadist or rogue nation to march across our borders and murder us all in our sleep? Of course not. But war should always be a last resort, carrots tend to work better than sticks, and if our underlying goal in having a DOD is that we want peace at home, we need to do a better job sowing it abroad. In fact, many U.S. troops spend a good part of their time in peaceful work; many identify it as the thing that gives them the most satisfaction. Imagine, then, what it would look like if we had peace brigades working in the world’s hot spots, helping rebuild economies and infrastructure, giving people jobs, clean water, health care.

I can hear some of you grinding your teeth onto the floor. Why, you ask, should we give “those people who attacked us” any help? Well, for one, the people who attacked us are long dead. For another, it always makes sense to address problems at their cause rather than on the other end. If a 15-year-old boy in Sudan ends up working on a collective farm and learning a trade and a living rather than being hopeless, unemployed and seeking identity within radical Islam, ultimately that U.S.-sponsored farm is going to be cheaper than trying to prevent him from pursuing jihad against the West.

It’s human nature to want revenge, to retaliate after we’ve been wronged. It may also seem easier to whack someone on the head than invite him in for dinner. The Department of Peace proposal is a more difficult path — one that would work America back into what it was always meant to be: a benevolent nation the world admires and respects — not fears. Whether Kucinich has a chance or not, the Department of Peace idea ought to be picked up by the ultimate winner and embraced as a way to effect real change. It will take tremendous political courage — not something I’m seeing on either side of the aisle at the moment.

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