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Exclusive: Interview With Rep. Dennis Kucinich

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by: Maya Schenwar, Executive Director, t r u t h o u t | Interview

Almost nine years into longest war in US history, at a time when the US spends more on its military budget than the rest of the world combined and endless war seems a frighteningly realistic possibility, I spoke with Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio), a long-time advocate for peace. Kucinich reminds us that there is another way: that through unity, persistence and a deeply necessary change in mindset, we can move toward a world in which mutual respect and global connections shape foreign policy, and the self-fulfilling prophecy of war loses its tragic momentum. He challenges us to imagine a world in which "peace is inevitable."

Maya Schenwar: Since the end of formal combat operations in Iraq, you've been speaking out against the continuing presence of US troops and increasing presence of American mercenaries there. How do you respond to those who say the continued presence is necessary for security reasons?

Dennis Kucinich: America's invasion of Iraq has made us less secure. Before the entire world we invaded a country that did not attack us - that had no intention or capability of attacking us - and that, famously, did not have weapons of mass destruction. The subsequent occupation has fueled an insurgency, and as long as we have troops there, the insurgency will remain quite alive.

attack, and the insurgencies will continue to build, with the continued American presence, resulting in the death of more innocent civilians.

Every mythology about our presence in Iraq is being stripped away. The idea that we can afford it? We can't. That Iraq will pay for it? It shouldn't and couldn't. That somehow we'd be welcomed there? By whom? That there's some kind of security to be gained in the region? We have destabilized the region. That it would help us gain support from moderates in the Muslim world? We are undermined throughout the Muslim world. Every single assertion of this war, and every reason for this war, has been knocked down. And yet it keeps going.

MS: Then, is a complete, immediate withdrawal in order - right now?

DK: That's what we have to do. We should have done it a long time ago. Is it likely that there will be conflict when we leave? Yes. We set in motion forces that are irrevocable. You cannot simply launch a war against a country where there were already factions - Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds who were at odds with each other - and think that you can leave there without difficulties. That's going to happen no matter what.

But the fact that the conflict that we helped to create is still quite alive does not justify staying there. War becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of continued war, unless you break the headlong momentum by getting out.

MS: Do you view Afghanistan similarly? Should we be looking at a quick, complete withdrawal?

DK: Well, Afghanistan is a separate war; it needs to be separated. I believe we were right to strike at al Qaeda immediately after 9/11. And I think most Americans believed that was the right thing to do. But - it

At this point, Afghanistan has a kleptocracy. There's no remote possibility that it could sustain anything like a democratic system right now. And we have assured that by using US tax dollars to help prop up a bunch of crooks. When you think of the grotesque scene of Hamid Karzai being given the singular honor of a presence on the floor of United States Senate, and then you learn that some of the very people who are involved in corruption in Afghanistan were working with him on the CIA payroll, you know that what we've seen is a turn, not towards a realpolitik approach, but toward depravity masquerading as diplomacy.

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We have lost our way through our misadventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, and we have to come home. Not only do we have to come home from Iraq and Afghanistan, but we also have to take a different look at America's presence in the rest of the world. Unless we start to focus on a global position for the United States that is not hegemonic, but is cooperative with international institutions, we're looking at nothing but one nightmare after another.

MS: So, what do you think that new role in the world would look like for the United States? What would our position be if we made that shift?

DK: We would start supporting structures of international law. With friend and foe alike, we'd support compliance with the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. With friend and foe alike, we'd support compliance with the Biological Weapons Convention and the Chemical Weapons Convention. And we'd submit to the fullness of those treaties. We'd support the small arms treaty, the landmine treaty. We'd support the United Nations. We would participate fully in an international criminal court.

example, our policy on claiming the right to pursue assassination anywhere we please: that is against everything America should stand for. And we haven't worked to craft a climate change agreement that is truly mindful of the environmental challenges we see - an agreement that would phase out coal and nuclear. The US is missing a historic opportunity to chart a new path in the world.

Let it be said, we have a right to defend ourselves. But we do not have a right to take international law in our own hands. We do not have a right to be police, prosecutor, judge, jury and executioner all in one fell swoop.

MS: What can the American people - and Truthout's readers - do right now if they want to effect change on the issues we're discussing?

DK: Support the candidates that support the change you want. We have an election coming up, and those candidates who really are dedicated to America taking a new role in the world and taking care of things here at home deserve support.

And we need to ask candidates where they stand on these issues. If they voted to continue the war, will they go back to Congress and continue to support the war? People need to know that. Will they continue to vote for these appropriation funds? Will they continue to vote for resolutions that keep us at war? Will they continue to support the fiction that the "global war on terror" has trumped Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution, with respect to Congress's role of declaring war in any country where the US has a military presence?

We all have to start thinking of national defense in a broader way. National defense should also mean a full-employment economy. National defense should mean jobs for all, health care for all, education for all, retirement security for all. We spend more on the military than every other nation in the world put together.

produces an outcome which creates war. If we see the world only in terms of these dichotomies, that's a precursor of war. If we see a world where war is inevitable, that inevitability becomes a reality - we make it so.

But war is *not* inevitable. Peace is inevitable, if we are willing to explore the inherent truth of human unity - if we are willing to contemplate the undeniable fact that we're all one, that we are interdependent and interconnected. This compelling truth of human unity needs to be called upon at a time of division. It needs to be insisted upon. It needs to resound with the historical precedent of America's first motto, "e pluribus unum": out of many, we are one.

And so, I'm dedicated to continuing to work for an international policy where we work with the world community, where we use structures of international law and adhere to and participate in them, where we begin to understand that our role in the world cannot be as policeman of the world, and where we work with the nations of the world to achieve security for *all* people.

MS: What would funding for nonviolence look like?

DK: We need to support a cabinet-level department of peace, which would serve to make nonviolence an organizing principle of our society. The department would address issues of violence in our own society as well as head off war, through having somebody in the cabinet who could advise the president on nonviolent conflict resolution.

Funding would be pegged to 1 percent of the Department of Defense's budget. One percent! And that would be about \$7 billion a year.

Why wouldn't we want to explore peaceful means of conflict resolution? We've explored war and war doesn't work. This is a different world. It's not World War II anymore. There's a whole

message anywhere in the world in seconds, we're already experiencing the world as one! Why aren't our social structures keeping pace? Why don't we demand that we come into rhythm with what is really an impulse toward unity?

Peace, which is achieved only through painstaking effort, doesn't have to cost a lot of money. We know what war costs.

And it's not simply a matter of politicians doing it. Each one of us has to reflect on the way we look at the world and think about whether there's anything we do that contributes to violence, if there's anything we do that contributes to polarity. We really have to look at how the way we think is producing the particular kind of world we have. We could have the world any way we want it. We need to carefully analyze our own worldview to see if it's compatible with our survival.



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