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When he was the mayor of Cleveland, Dennis Kucinich stood up to the banks and refused to sell the city's electric utility. He paid for that decision with his political career, but after years in political exile, he's back ...

The New American Majority

Sarah Ruth van Gelder interviews Rep. Dennis Kucinich

Since winning election to Congress in 1996, US Representative Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio) has proposed such radical ideas as a Department of Peace, universal health care, and action on climate change. His speech, "Prayer for America," got one standing ovation after another at an Americans for Democratic Action event in Los Angeles in February. Now it is circulating on the Internet, drawing thousands of responses. *YES!* editor Sarah Ruth van Gelder asked him about his fall from political grace, and his startling comeback.

Sarah Ruth van Gelder: Your "Prayer for America" speech got quite an amazing response. What is it about your message that is resonating with so many people?

Dennis Kucinich: The events of September 11th exacted a searing, emotional toll on Americans. We have been wounded as a nation. But our heart remains open. It's a heart that is still full of love and is troubled by calls for revenge and retribution. And it's a heart that still believes that America

has a lot to offer to the world and questions whether our offerings should be in the form of bombs. And it's a heart that is loyal to democratic principles, and questions whether the Patriot Act is real patriotism.

The response came because, for a brief moment, I was able to provide a voice for those feelings, and the email responses have not stopped. We received about 18,000 just in one month.

Sarah: What potential is there now to redefine the political mainstream?

Dennis: It's happening, it's happening right now. What I found out from the people I'm hearing from all over the country is that there's an America out there that has not yet been defined, but it's emerging. It's an America of people who are neither left nor right, who care about the quality of life, who are optimistic about the possibilities of our country and the world, who want to make a difference. This is an America made up of people who are creative and nurturing and builders and conservers, who want for their families and themselves a more peace-

ful and prosperous world. These are people who have a sense of the importance of integrating spiritual principles with the material world.

Sarah: How might this America find political expression? Could it happen through the two-party system?

Dennis: I would say in order to remain relevant, the two-party system is going to have to become more in tune with the issues of peace, the environment, education, economic equality, opportunity—a whole range of concerns that embody a more nurturing and pacific approach to life.

Sarah: Shortly after you were elected mayor of Cleveland in 1977, you took a stand against the city's banks and refused to sell the city-owned utility. As a result, you lost your re-election bid in 1979 and were out of public life for some time.

Dennis: I campaigned for mayor on a promise to save the municipal electric system. There had been a long effort to privatize our electric system,

and for years I had led an effort to withstand that pressure. Finally, the council and the mayor prior to myself agreed to sell. I campaigned to save the system, got elected, and my first act in office was to cancel the sale.

The private electric company had very close business relations with the banks. The banks let me know that if I didn't go along with the sale, they would not renew the city's credit. I had reduced the city's spending by 10 percent, but without access to credit—at a time when I was still paying off bills from the previous administration—I knew the city could go into default. So I was being blackmailed.

I knew when I refused to sell, that I would be ending my political career. I made the decision to save the electric system, a decision that turned out to be a pivotal moment in my life.

The credit was cut, the city defaulted, and I lost my bid for re-election; I was out of public life, something that I had dedicated my life to. For years, I couldn't get a job in the city where I had challenged the banks. My marriage fell apart, and I spent a lot of time walking streets in a lot of major cities trying to figure out how to put a career back together again.

Eventually, it was understood that the decision was the right thing for the people of Cleveland, because that electric system that I saved now provides savings of 25 to 30 percent.

Sarah: I understand the Cleveland City Council honored you for “having the courage and foresight to refuse to sell the city's municipal electric system.” But during the time when you were essentially in exile, what did you think about what you had done?

Dennis: I grew up believing that if you did the right thing, it always works out. I hadn't ever thought about what happens if you do the right thing and then you get blasted. But I never doubted it was the right decision.

Sarah: So many people in political life might have said, politics is about compromise. You have to give in on some things in order to remain a player so as to fight another day.

Dennis: I had a meeting on the morning of December 15th with the head of the city council and the head of the largest bank, and that was exactly the discussion we had. The president of the bank told me that only if I agreed to sell the municipal electric system would he renew the city's credit, and if I did agree to the sale, he would give the city an additional \$50 million worth of credit.

I said, “Look, I can't do that. The utility belongs to the people, it's not mine to sell.”

So why did I choose to do that? I guess for me it was a test. Was it more important to advance politically? I was 32 years old, and I was the youngest mayor of any big city in the country. There were people talking about me being on a fast track for governor or senator. There were even stories circulating that I would do a test visit to New Hampshire. At the same time I'm thinking, that's all illusion. The reality is in front of me; the reality is I have an obligation to the people who put me in office to defend their interests and not to sell them out.

I didn't realize it then, but I was really being asked to submit to a view of the world that holds that corporate values must triumph over the public good. That's the decision I had to take a stand on, and I tell you, it was a time in America when it was considered unseemly, in poor taste, to even raise the issue. “This is what corporations say you ought to do, well, just do it!”

People are now starting to look at the overwhelming influence of corporations in public life and how the public good can be undermined. People are now more sensitive to how the public pays an exorbitant cost for electricity, for fuel, for defense, because of undue

corporate influence, and there's an increasing awareness of the heavy cost of privatization of public resources.

Sarah: You won election to Congress taking a seat that had been occupied by a Republican who had been part of Newt Gingrich's team. Then you were re-elected twice by a landslide each time. So there is something about your message that is resonating and not only within a liberal fringe.

Dennis: The last time I ran for re-election, I distributed cards saying: “Congressman Dennis Kucinich, working for a Department of Peace, nuclear disarmament, food safety, hu-



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man rights, universal health care, educational opportunities for all, new policies on global warming.” That was my platform, and I'm in middle America; you don't get any more middle America than Cleveland, Ohio.

Sarah: The first item you mentioned on that list is a proposal for a Department of Peace. How did you get so interested in this question of peace?

Dennis: My interest started when I saw how quickly our nation slipped into the bombing attacks on Belgrade a few years ago. I saw in my own Democratic Party individuals who

US Rep. Dennis Kucinich marches with steelworkers and their supporters. Kucinich helped save over 1,000 jobs by rallying the community when LTV Steel threatened to close its plant

were otherwise people of good will suddenly getting swept up in this furor to bomb Belgrade. It was almost like a virus worked its way through the consciousness of people.

I began what was for me a political as well as a spiritual journey to look at the question. I've had my own personal journey, as a lot of us have, on how to bring peace into my own life. I came to understand the relationship between conditions within oneself and conditions that are created in the world. I began to think that perhaps war is not inevitable; perhaps war is an extension of conditions within ourselves, conditions that might lend themselves to healing, reconciliation, dialogue, meditation, and prayer.

So the Department of Peace is to make nonviolence an organizing principle in our society for domestic as well as international policy—in other words, to quicken the impulse that is in the world to create more peace.

The referee has walked off the field, and the game is lost to the most brutal and the most powerful

Sarah: Do you think there is a consensus in the US that peace is desirable?

Dennis: Of course there is. It's just that some people think you bring about peace through war. I would submit that if you want peace, work for peace.

We don't always think about the fact that the context of our society is established through spending close to half of our nation's discretionary income on defense. And the current administration is hoping to take it beyond 50 percent! We have to make choices about how we want our society structured.

Sarah: In your "Prayer for America" speech, you set forth the idea of America being "an axis of hope" instead of pursuing "an axis of evil." What do you mean by an axis of hope?

Dennis: I meant that America could become a nation that lightens the burdens of people in this country and around the world, that can help transform our understanding of the material world through helping create abundance, that can help transform the understanding of the political world through creating opportunities for cooperation between nations, and transform our understanding of the spiritual world through recognizing that nations and people exist on a number of different levels, one of which is spiritual, and that spiritual existence connects to the possibilities of this world.

Sarah: Why is it that the rest of the Democratic Party has taken so few courageous stands lately, like the ones you've been describing?

Dennis: It's both parties. Politics is not adequately responding to the needs of our times, nor to the requirements of the future. One reason is that money in the political process has become an end in itself, and when money equals policy, the public interest is shut out. Where money equals policy, you have an auction, you don't have a democracy. The democratic system has been hijacked by special interest groups.

How else can you explain 46 million Americans without health care? Or senior citizens having to cut their pills in half in order to extend the life of their medication? How can you explain widespread pollution despite the fact that there's technology available to control it? How can you explain things like cars that aren't fuel efficient? How can you explain things like reliance on non-renewable sources of energy?

The political system has broken down and is failing people. It's failing

to prevent monopolization and the concentration of wealth. Government is supposed to be at least a referee. Well, in this case the referee has walked off the field, and the game is lost to the most brutal and the most powerful.

Sarah: Where do you plan to go in terms of your own political career?

Dennis: In the last six weeks, ever since I gave that speech, my life has changed. I am suddenly getting invitations to speak all over the country from Democratic organizations as well as environmentalists, peace activists, colleges, and community groups. There is clearly a hunger for a point of view that may not be regularly expressed in the councils of power.

I have made it a point to personally go through thousands of the email responses, because I want to know what people think. Over and over, I hear people saying, "You said what I feel." There are a lot of us who feel this way. I've been given an opportunity to speak out, and I'm going to continue to be a voice for a world of cooperation, of peace, of hope, of sustainability.

Sarah: Do you see yourself involved in a national campaign of some sort?

Dennis: I learned a long time ago that you can't plan everything. You can only be out there and do what it is that you do. And I think it was Emerson who once wrote, "Live and work, and all unawares the advancing tide creates for itself a condition of its own. And the question and the answer are one." So I'm going to keep doing what I'm doing and where it leads—I'm open to all possibilities. I feel very fortunate to be doing what I'm doing; I begin every day with a heart full of gratitude.

See www.thespiritoffreedom.com for Dennis Kucinich's "Prayer for America" and a link to Studs Terkle's call for Kucinich to run for president.