

**Opinion Paper**  
**Asking Congressional members to provide their perspective on H.R. 3760 & S. 1756**

by  
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Developing a non-threatening impartial “questionnaire” that solicits the perspectives of Congressional members on the proposed Department of Peace and Nonviolence legislation is going to be a challenge.

At this point in the campaign, our objective is to get a legislator’s uninhibited opinion about the proposed legislation. Based on the fact that no committee has even scheduled a hearing to discuss the bill, it is probable that the legislator or his staff has not even read the contents of the bill or is well informed of its merits. Rather than put the legislator on the spot to “endorse” or co-sponsor the legislation, it seems we first want them to understand the potential this Department has to assist them, complement existing Departments and provide value to the American people. For those legislators who have studied the bill and have rejected it, we would like to understand their concerns and reasons for opposition.

It must be made clear up front that the Campaign plans to assemble all these responses and make the information available on the local campaign web site.

For example see <http://www.codopcampaign.org/Opinions/ColoradoCongressionalReps.htm>

The DoP Campaign could use the League of Women Voters approach to disseminating information about an issue. The League has a reputation for conscientiously providing balanced information on different sides of an issue thereby allowing voters to formulate their own conclusions.

We could use a generic response form that provides space for and encourages differing perspectives. For example there could be a section of the questionnaire that solicits comments considered to be “for the bill” – features of the bill the legislator finds to be of value. Another section of the questionnaire could solicit comments that indicate opposition to the bill - features of the bill the legislator considers unworkable, ineffective, unnecessary, etc. A third section of the questionnaire could ask the question “How does this new Department help my state or congressional district?”

If the legislator provides only “Cons” or says this new Department won’t help their constituents, then we respect their current perspective. It would be appropriate to assemble additional materials that inform and identify values and benefits of the Department, as well as ways the Department will help their state or local district. Based on subsequent discussions, it may be appropriate to consider adjusting the bill to accommodate the legislators concerns.

Concerning the length or brevity of their response to the questionnaire, we can offer a degree of flexibility for publication on the local Campaign web site. Our current approach is to provide a scanned copy of their complete unedited response on their official letterhead as a “pdf” file. This will prevent any misinterpretations by our Campaign editors. In addition, for consistency, we will extract comments that are “Pro” and “Con” and edit each of these sections to say 100 words or less with reference to the complete response for details. We will also extract comments that identify specific ways the Department of Peace and Nonviolence can be of value to the Legislators state or congressional district.

Dot Maver's proposed questions are good, but there are alternatives as well. Let's try out some typical responses to her questions:

**Q. What is your plan to reduce violence domestically?**

**Typical Answer:** As you know I am a strong supporter of our local law enforcement, our brave men and women who put their lives on the line everyday to keep us safe and reduce violence. If you are referring to Domestic Violence e.g. spousal and child abuse, we just need to enforce our existing laws. By giving our police and sheriff's office the support they deserve, we can win this war on violence and return family values to this country.

**Q. What is your stance on legislation presently in the House and Senate calling for a U.S. Department of Peace and Nonviolence"?**

**Typical Answer.** As you know this legislation has been referred to committee for further study as is normal for the over 3000? bills that are proposed each year. When there is more detailed information available about this bill as a result of committee and subcommittee hearings, I will certainly take it under advisement. At this point, I'm inclined to say that taxpayers don't need or want another layer of big government that duplicates what is already being done by the Department of Defense, Department of State, Department of Justice, and our newly formed Department of Homeland Security – we just can't afford more bureaucracy.

As far as terrorism is concerned, we don't negotiate with terrorists. These fundamentalist Islamic extremists are out to kill us. There is nothing a Department of Peace and Nonviolence can do to assist our war on terrorism. We need to support our troops.

What did we learn from the responses to these questions? Not much.

Did our questions move the legislator in a constructive direction? Probably not. Now they are on record for a "position" **against** the bill.

Without having any meaningful information about the bill, a Conservative will generally tell us how to apply their "stricter" father model of government as the solution to all problems. Without any meaningful understanding of the bill, a Progressive will tell us we just need to provide more social services, more aid and comfort to the poor and under privileged. Neither of these generalized "party lines" is helpful in moving this legislation forward.

At this point, we don't want legislators to "posture." Asking "What is your stance?" forces them to take a side, a position. If we ask them to take a stance before any hearings have even taken place, we've lost because they will probably vote along party lines rather than on the merit of the bill. Current co-sponsors are Democrats only. That's not what we want at this point in the campaign.

If fact, we don't ever want a legislator to feel they are being backed into a corner at any point in the campaign. We just want to learn about their current opinion / perspective – assuming they have even had time to read the legislation. If they have not read the bill, then we are willing to meet with their staff and explain what we know, describe how the various DoPN Offices will function and the services they will offer the local community, etc. We can offer to respectfully discuss the bill and learn their reasons why they cannot support the bill.

Basically we apply the principles of nonviolence as the implementation plan for this campaign endeavor. "Nonviolent Communication" is one way to articulation these principles. This is not a war – we must treat each legislator with the utmost respect and attempt to walk in their shoes. We must understand their frame and the political pressure they are feeling (from the Administration, from their own party leadership, from their constituents, from their own values, etc.)

H.R. 3760 and S. 1756 comprise legislation that is good for all individual Americans and good for the United States as a country. We should not be trying to get a 51% vote on this bill, but rather at least a 2/3 affirmation. When all the facts are out on the table, this governmental function has merit and is good for all Americans.

The Department of Peace and Nonviolence is an important element we need for 21<sup>st</sup> century competitiveness. **If the only tool we have is a hammer, all we can do effectively is pound nails.** We have untapped National resources in the area of constructive conflict management. Our Democratic political system and legislative processes are shining examples of peacemaking in practice. Ideally, a politician is the ultimate peacemaker – someone who learns about all facets of an issue, respects the diversity of opinion, determines the perspectives of all involved, and then develops a meaningful resolution that respects individual freedom, up-holds the constitution, does no harm, and ideally provides new opportunities for individual as well as collective growth. There is no nobler cause than being a politician in its purest form. However, when politicians are only concerned about winning for their party, and are no longer concerned about the needs of all Americans – including minorities among us, and abuse their power as elected officials, politics becomes another form of structural violence. The presence of a Department of Peace and Nonviolence would be a constant reminder and an ever present conscience for our civil society.

At this point in the campaign, we would like legislators to:

- a) Ask their staff to take a few hours to read and study the contents of the bill – ***Campaign workers can volunteer to be available to meet with the staff and discuss the pros and cons in a non-threatening way***
- b) Ask their staff if the Department of Peace and Nonviolence can benefit their District directly – ***Campaign volunteers within each district can compile statistics on violence in their local region and address areas involving violence in their local region. Campaign volunteers can provide that information to the legislative staffers. Campaign volunteers can help identify opportunities for their state or local district to benefit from the Department of Peace and Nonviolence –***  
***See Opinion Paper 062406 ( <http://www.codopcampaign.org/files/OpinionPaper062406.pdf> )***
- c) .
- d) Identify areas of concern about the legislation as written. Offer suggestions on how to make the bill better from their perspective. Identify related issues that are not being addressed by the proposed legislation. ***Campaign volunteers can address these objectives by posing questions: “Can you tell us your areas of concern about this legislation? Etc.***