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The 'New Age' candidate for the Democratic nomination - An interview with Dennis Kucinich

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The 'New Age' candidate for the Democratic nomination

An interview with Dennis Kucinich

By DANIEL STURM

In a recent interview, Mother Jones magazine described Dennis Kucinich as a political animal who kept his personal life hidden from the public. But as I sat in the campaign van with the Democratic presidential candidate Thursday (Dec. 4) during his drive from Ann Arbor to East Lansing, where a fired-up crowd of 200 awaited him, I found this stereotype to be furthest from the truth. In addition to discussing his platform, Kucinich showed me the box of books he is reading, shared his thoughts on religion, and even shared his hummus lunch with me.

In his political life, the 57-year old politician told me he has never "conformed" to political or corporate pressures. Kucinich first gained national prominence in 1977 when he was elected mayor of Cleveland at 31, the youngest mayor ever elected in a major American city.

In his campaign platform, he promised to save the city's struggling Municipal Light Co. When the utility company's private competitor tried to force the city to sell, Mayor Kucinich refused. In response, the banks cut off the city's credit, and the City of Cleveland went into default. In 1979, Kucinich lost his bid for re-election.

During a 15-year departure from politics, Kucinich worked as a TV commentator, media consultant, college instructor and public utility consultant. He also lived for a while at actress Shirley MacLaine's retreat in Malibu (the actress is the godmother to his 2-year-old daughter, Jackie), where he says he learned to expand his horizons and developed a more "holistic" perspective of life.

Kucinich re-launched his political career in 1993 with the campaign symbol of a light bulb, and the slogan "Because he was right!" He won his seat in the Ohio state Senate in 1994, and two years later was elected to Congress. The Cleveland City Council later honored him for "having the courage and foresight to refuse to sell the city's municipal electric system," and saving ratepayers more than \$100 million.

As co-chairman of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, the Democratic candidate has opposed President George

W. Bush's request for an additional \$87 billion budget to spend on the occupation of Iraq. He has also criticized the administration's plans for reductions of civil liberties following 9/11. Kucinich is against the Bush administration's plans for further tax reductions for big business and its efforts to cut spending on health and the environment.

On Feb. 7, Kucinich is running in the Democratic primary in Michigan.

You have proposed a 90-day plan to end the occupation of Iraq. Can you give more details?

First, that the U.S. will turn over to the United Nations the handing of all oil assets to Iraq, until the Iraqi people become self-determining. No. 2 is that the U.S. will turn over the handing of the oil contracts, because we don't want to continue war-profiteering and sweetheart deals with contracts going to administration-favored firms. No. 3 is that the U.S. would give up its ambition to privatize the Iraqi economy. No. 4 is that the U.S. will put in the hands of the U.N. the power to develop a structure for governance in Iraq.

For five months, the president of Michigan State University, Peter McPherson, was financial coordinator for the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance in Iraq, helping to privatize the economy. What's your comment?

Perhaps he is unaware that no nation has the right to go into another nation, chop it up, and then sell it to the highest bidders. That action is a violation of international law. It's a violation of the Hague and Geneva conventions.

Of the nine people now running for Democratic Party nomination, you are the only one to have voted against the current war in Iraq. Why didn't you conform?

Conforming to a lie? I'm not bound to do this, just because there are many people who agree with something that's a lie. That's a matter of intellectual integrity!

Didn't you face pressure to authorize Bush's request for war?

You know what the real pressure is in life? The pressure you feel when going against your conscience. I have never felt that kind of pressure.

One of your ideas has been to create of a Department of Peace. Could you give more details?

We will work in our society to make non-violence an organizing principle. This is an aim derived from principles in the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, and others. We can do this by setting up programs in our schools, with our community groups, supporting non-governmental organizations, and working for peace in the community. The Department of Peace would also address serious challenges we have in our society relating to peace in our homes □ spouse abuse, child abuse □ and to come up with programs that help families deal with these difficulties. We'd also look at issues such as racial violence, violence against gays, and police/community relations.

Do you want to replace the Pentagon?

The Department of Peace would make it less likely that we need to employ armed forces, because peace has a force of its own. It would be not only a counterbalance, but also a diversion away from war, on an international level. It would create conditions for non-violent conflict resolutions, for mediation, and for the possibility of intervention before things percolate into violence. It would look at issues of scarcity, poverty, draught and famine, and all of those things that create preconditions for war. There is no function within our government like that right now.

After Sept. 11, U.S. residents suspected of sympathizing with terrorism have reported experiencing repressive government actions. Some people weren't allowed to fly □ others have been arrested, or even deported. How many people do you know of who've had such experiences?

My congressional office hears from people all the time who have been subject to the kind of treatment you describe. As president of the United States I will move immediately to send the Justice Department to Federal Court to nullify the USA Patriot Act as being inherently unconstitutional. I've already introduced legislation in the House of Representatives to overturn the Patriot Act, and I voted against it when it was first introduced.

Earlier this year, the 2000 Green Party candidate, Ralph Nader, said he wouldn't run for president if you or Howard Dean were nominated. Did you consult with Nader or the Green Party leadership about your candidacy?

In every city I go to, Greens come to my events. We talk about our mutual commitments to a sustainable environment, to a government that is responsive, and I'm very grateful to have the help of many Greens in my campaign. However, in some states the question of ballot access becomes critical. My ability to win the White House is in no small way connected to my ability to bring in to the voting booths Greens, Natural Law Party, Reform Party, and Libertarians, who ordinarily would not vote for the Democratic candidate. Any Democrat is good for 47 percent of the vote in the critical states. But none of the other candidates could help the party get the 3 percent that takes you over the top. If the Democrats really want to win the White House, they need to go with somebody who has the ability to inspire those who ordinarily would stay away from the picture. That's why I can win.

The historian Eric Hobsbawm recently wrote that the United States, in its public life, "is a country that is geared to operate with mediocrities, because it has been rich and powerful enough to do so." Do you agree?

I think we are at the threshold of a new era, where more people are aware of the importance of having an American leader who has the ability to reach to the community of nations — someone, who sets aside anger, aggression, and greed — and really looks to connect with the world community. I think Americans want someone who has a broad understanding of how institutions can be put into the service of humanity, instead of into the service of the economic interest of a few. Look at how our government now seems nothing less than a service station for wealthy interest groups. Look at how the international institutions, such as the IMF, WTO, NAFTA, and the proposed Free Trade Agreement of the Americas, facilitate the coalescing of economic power for a few. An American president who recognized the inequities that exist in the world, and who wasn't committed to those multinational interests who are based in this country, would find enormous good will in this country and around the world from a great mass of people.

Mother Jones recently characterized you as a political anima who does not share his personal life with the public "Ask him about the last book he's read, he'll draw a blank." Now I'd like to ask you exactly this.

I'm currently reading a book by George Monbiot about corporate dominance. I'm carrying sacks of books with me all the time. I've got a book by Gore Vidal about "Inventing A Nation," and Emery Reeves' "Anatomy of Peace." (Kucinich reaches to a suitcase behind him and pulls out half a dozen books, including a copy of Vidal's book, personally dedicated to him).

During the mid 1980s you lived in the desert in New Mexico, and for a while at the actress Shirley MacLaine's house in Malibu. What can a politician learn from New Age philosophies?

What some people call "New Age" is really a discovery of ancient principles of human awareness, of understanding the connection which all people have to one another. What's so new about a belief in arts and culture, and the unfolding of human potential? It's old.

In his recent book, "The Roaring Nineties: Seeds of Destruction," the Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz blames Bill Clinton as much for the economic misery as he blames George W. Bush. Have you read his book?

Of course, I have it. I also have the "Soul of Capitalism." Stiglitz is one of the first Nobel laureates who really understood the flaws of the global economy. Bill Clinton took his economic advice from Wall Street. Where do you go with that? You go to whatever facilitates growth of the markets. You don't look at the concentration of wealth issues, because the markets must grow. You don't look at the fact that there's vertical and horizontal integration occurring in the energy sector, that the agriculture sector is run by six different companies. You don't look at the fact that the decline of the manufacturing base is a long-term destructive economic effect on America's ability to have a viable middle class, and you don't look at the fact that a burgeoning trade deficit saps the long-term economic vitality of America. Bill Clinton was a remarkably skilled politician, and yet he made a wrong turn. He was able to create a surplus, but a surplus doesn't equal a basis for economic opportunity for all the people in the country. As a matter of fact, where was the emphasis? It was on cutting back welfare. That was his big mission.

During the last presidential election,

Gov. Jeb Bush ordered local elections supervisors to purge 57,700 voters from registries. Are you concerned about

the integrity of vote counts?

Kucinich: All Americans should be concerned. Florida was a wake-up call for what this administration is capable of. With the help of the Supreme Court they stole the election, after 9/11 they lied and attacked a nation which did not attack us. We're clearly occupying that nation, and what this administration has procured, it will chop the nation into pieces, for the highest bidder. They passed the Patriot Act, creating a climate of fear that evacuates our constitutional freedom. Would you trust these guys with an election? This group is unlike anything we've ever faced in American governance.

Any comment on your post-election plans?

One of the reasons why I've been successful in life in achieving things that other people thought were impossible is that I don't dissipate my emotional, mental or spiritual energies by countering conditions that are contrary to that which I aspire.

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