

Ron Dellums

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*“Social workers are uniquely trained in a superior fashion
to be public advocates and to be politicians.”*

-- Congressperson Ronald V. Dellums

As the keynote speaker at the 50th Anniversary Celebration for the University of Connecticut School of Social Work, Congressperson Ronald V. Dellums illustrated how social workers are well-suited for holding positions of elected office. First, social workers are trained to *listen* with tremendous focus and to hear not only what is being said, but also what is not being said. Social workers possess a magnificent *understanding of human behavior* as it manifests itself through the individual, the dynamics of a group, and the dynamics of a community. Social workers know how to mobilize resources and know how to mobilize, organize, and unify people. Perhaps most importantly, social workers understand the necessity of *starting where people are, not where they ought to be*. Throughout his political career, Ron Dellums has utilized his skills as a social worker to provide a voice for his constituents in the legislature, to mobilize and unify coalitions among his colleagues, and to develop policy that reflects his magnificent understanding of human behavior. As a consistent advocate for peace, equality, and justice, Ron Dellums has had a significant impact on a broad range of issues that include the armed services, military defense policy, education, apartheid in South Africa, civil rights, civil liberties, progressive health care, and environmental protection.

In addition to Ron Dellums' keynote address at the 50th Anniversary Celebration, the main source for this paper is his recent book [Lying Down with the Lions: A Public Life from the Streets of Oakland to the Halls of Power](#), which was published in January of 2000. This paper will trace Ron Dellums' career as a social worker from his early life

to his experiences in Congress with a focus on how he employed his social work training to deal with challenges he faced in the political arena. Part I will provide an overview of his early influences, education, and entry into public life. Part II will discuss Ron Dellums' accomplishments and struggles in Congress as he advocated for peace and justice. Finally, Part III will discuss some of lessons that we as social workers can learn from his experiences in public life.

I. Background

A. *Early Life and Education*

Ron Dellums grew up in the 1940's and 50's in West Oakland, California, in a neighborhood that he has described as "its own small town – racially mixed and unified by its working-class character." During his youth, the neighborhood became less integrated due to urban flight in the 1950's and the arrival of large numbers of black migrants looking for work in the surrounding military bases and shipyards. Housing segregation became increasingly severe and his neighborhood soon took on the character of a small Southern town, with much power and authority lying in the hands of a largely white police force.

His parents placed tremendous value on education. Although financially difficult for a working-class family, they sent Ron and his sister to a private Catholic school to better prepare them for college than would the increasingly segregated public schools. They also strove to instill in their children pride in their African-American heritage by supplementing the homogenous school curriculum with cultural lessons at home. When his parents divorced and the private tuition became too burdensome, Ron attended a public junior high school in a neighborhood that was predominantly white and middle-

class by using his uncle's address. It was there that he first encountered blatant racism, which his mother utilized to teach her children to be proud of their race. She taught them to redefine the terms that were intended to be degrading in order to assert pride in their heritage. He went on to attend Oakland Technical High School ("Tech") which provided quality college preparatory classes.

After high school, when he did not receive a college scholarship, Ron enlisted in the United States Marine Corps much to his parents' dismay. Although he learned valuable lessons in discipline and self-confidence, his two years in the military were miserable and exposed him to pervasive racism in the military institution. Even in the military, Ron attempted to mobilize and to build coalitions among different groups to advocate for issues that affected the Corps as a unified group, such as unfair discipline practices. His personal experience also informed him later as Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. After the service, Ron earned an associate of arts degree from Oakland City College, a bachelor of arts degree from San Francisco State, and then a masters in social work, with an emphasis in psychiatry, from U.C. Berkeley.

Ron Dellums' social work career started as a psychiatric counselor for patients on leave from mental institutions. Embracing the concept of case to cause advocacy, he soon realized that he needed to address the *causes*, rather than the symptoms, of individual problems. He wanted to challenge the factors that were destabilizing people on a large scale, rather than work with individuals one-on-one. He left his position as a caseworker to be a program director of the Youth Opportunity Center (YOC) in San Francisco. Ron was apprehensive at first because he had not been specifically trained for this type of work, but learned quickly that his skills and principles as a social worker were valuable

and transferable to this position – just as he would experience later with his position in public office. Through the YOC, Ron was exposed to young activists and leaders who mobilized the community to influence municipal policy. Although others had recognized him as a leader long before, Ron Dellums began to see himself as a leader under the guidance of Dr. Louis Watts who had a Ph.D from Brandeis University and served as director of YOC. Significantly, Dr. Watts gave him a copy of the book Shoes of a Fisherman and asked him to read it. He later explained that he wanted Ron to read the book because “it’s about the loneliness of leadership . . . you need to prepare yourself for the isolation that leadership demands and learn how to avoid the loneliness that leadership often imposes.”

B. Entry into Public Life

Ron ended up forfeiting his own plans for a doctorate in social work from Brandeis when he was persuaded to accept the Democratic nomination for a seat on the Berkeley City Council. He agreed to run only if he could do so *on his own terms*, a condition that would underlie all of his future campaigns. In April of 1967, Ron was elected to the Berkeley City Council and was seated one month later. Reflecting his principles as a social worker, Ron strove to be the kind of council member who was “plugged into the community.” He recognized that his antipoverty program experience had given him an understanding that people and communities needed to have access to their government. As the only council member accessible to the Left for its political agenda, Ron was sought out by feminists, black liberationists, peace activist, and other community activists. The 1960’s was a time of tremendous social movements and

Berkeley was a nerve center for a multitude of those movements – in the midst of which Ron Dellums held public office. The social issues he had the opportunity to address were endless. One event was particularly significant in establishing Ron Dellums as a politician for the people. He joined with student and community activists to protest Governor Reagan’s placement of Berkeley under martial law and the invasion by the National Guard in response to demonstrations against the University’s acquisition of a small parcel of land by eminent domain. This unified struggle against the government resulted in the forging of a coalition between diverse groups – white, black, Latino, Asian American and Native American, young and old, female and male, gay and straight.

Holding a seat on the Berkeley City Council significantly influenced Ron Dellums as his entry into public life. He has described himself as transitioning from a “soft-spoken social worker to . . . the person with an open door to the Left, to militants, and to community activists.” He had become increasingly outspoken advocating for the ideals of his constituents – peace, justice, equality, and environmental preservation. He also had to endure severe criticism from dissenters and from the press, who labeled him a “dangerous leftist” among other things. There were times when he questioned whether holding elected office was the most effective approach to furthering his ideals. In times of doubt, he was always persuaded to stay in public office to provide advocates and activists with “voice” in the system.

C. The Road to Congress

In 1969, Ron Dellums was persuaded to attempt to unseat Jeffery Cohelan, the district’s representative in Congress, because Cohelan continued to support President Johnson’s war policies in Southeast Asia. Two previous challenges to his seat had been

unsuccessful, but many activists and political leaders thought Ron Dellums could do it. He agreed to run for the office, but again on his own terms – all of which reflect his sincere commitment to the principles of social work. First, he had to “have the freedom to stand on [his] own ground” – he would listen to others, but would ultimately decide his own position. Second, he refused to “take any funny money; the campaign [would] have to raise all its financial support from the people.” Third, “the campaign must be run as a coalition, because [he] believe[d] coalition politics are sophisticated and difficult but exciting – and it’s the only way to win.” In the social work tradition, he wanted to unify diverse groups. Finally, he wanted “to carefully document and study the campaign” so mistakes could be analyzed and avoided in the future. Again from a social work perspective, this last condition reflects his understanding of the need for evaluation if programs and strategies are to improve and develop.

In this first campaign for national office, Ron Dellums, as a left-wing black candidate, sought to unseat a liberal incumbent in a congressional district that was 72 percent white and only 17 percent black, and where the leftist voters comprised only 25 percent of the total vote. He responded to this challenge by employing coalition politics. He attended house meetings and neighborhood parties all across the district, reaching out to a wide range of constituents and striving to break down the barriers of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disability status. When President Nixon ordered military forces to invade Cambodia in April of 1970, Ron Dellums’ campaign drew tremendous support from peace activists as well. When he secured the Democratic nomination for the seat, the potential success of his campaign drew him national attention, as well as criticism from Nixon’s administration. Vice President Agnew characterized him as a

“radical extremist who should be purged from the body politic.” Just as his mother had taught him to be proud of his race by defining what it meant to be black, Ron Dellums embraced being called “radical” by redefining that term. He responded in the press by stating, “If it’s radical to oppose the insanity and the cruelty of the Vietnam War, if it’s radical to want to alleviate poverty, hunger, disease, homelessness, and other forms of human misery, than I’m proud to be called a radical.” In response to Vice President Agnew’s accusations that Dellums “advocated bringing walls down,” he responded,

If Vice President Agnew had been diligent in carrying out his duties, he would have determined that my statement was made in the following context: We have built walls very high and very thick in this country dividing the races, the classes, the sexes, the generations, and even the religions. I believe that if we bring down walls that divide us, what we will find are millions of people of all sizes, all shapes, and all colors leading desperate and miserable lives. Once we understand that fact, we can then bring all of those people together into a coalition to improve the quality of their lives. So yes, I do advocate bringing down the walls—the walls of racism, sexism, and all other ‘isms’ that represent the way we victimize and oppress people.

Asserting his position, rather than becoming defensive, was a powerful strategy to gaining respect and communicating a larger message when the entire nation was listening.

However, he experienced continued attacks and hostility from both dissenters and the press. It was difficult for him not to internalize and take personally these assaults even though he recognized that they were directed to the politics of the liberal movement.

It was in this political environment that Ron Dellums went to Washington D.C. in January of 1971 to represent California’s Seventh District in the House of Representatives. Bold and intent on shaking up the system, he was immediately faced with the question of strategy. On his first day, he was asked to nominate Michigan Representative John Conyers to be Speaker of the House during a meeting of the

Democratic Caucus, which would be a direct challenge to the proposed leadership of Carl Albert. This was the first of many occasions where Ron Dellums would have to strike a *balance* in order to change national priorities without alienating his colleagues whose support was essential to furthering his ideals. In that situation, he made an eloquent speech on behalf of John Conyers while expressing that he was not *opposing* other candidates, but simply did not know them. He was able to uphold his responsibility to Conyers without alienating anyone on his first day. Striking this balance was a valuable lesson that would serve Ron Dellums well throughout his political career.

II. Accomplishments and Struggles in Congress: His Commitment to Peace and Justice

In his writing and in speeches, Ron Dellums has often referred to the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as having greatly influenced him. It is clear from his many struggles and accomplishments in Congress that Dellums adhered to Dr. King's words. At the University of Connecticut School of Social Work 50th Anniversary Celebration, Ron Dellums shared several quotations by Dr. King, one of which shaped his views on war – "Peace is more than simply the absence of war; it is the presence of justice." He interpreted this quotation to mean that peace is the *absence of conditions that give rise to war* at the community, national or international level. Through the support of the Congressional Black Caucus, Ron Dellums challenged initial denial to the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) to become a committee member and ultimately Chairperson. From the time of his initial campaign, his struggle for peace at all levels was a consistent theme throughout his political career.

A. *The Vietnam War*

When Ron Dellums initially ran for Congress, one of the major issues on his platform was opposition to the Vietnam War. In fact, many criticized him for being *preoccupied* with ending the war, but he persevered and found many supporters among peace activists. He was able to mobilize a majority made up of many different groups based on their unifying interest in peace. Shortly after arriving in Congress, Ron Dellums joined the protests of thousands of demonstrators who had come to Washington to petition the government to end the war. He and several other Congresspersons agreed to speak to the group about their shared commitment and goal. The Capitol police cut the demonstration short and arrested those who refused to disperse. Although he was not arrested, he agreed to the American Civil Liberties Union's (ACLU) request to be a named plaintiff in litigation to enforce the First Amendment rights of those who had been arrested. That lawsuit, *Dellums v. Powell*, was victorious at both the trial and appellate levels.

B. *Aid to Israel*

Ron Dellums was unwavering in his position on peace even when it may have cost him his Congressional seat. On Yom Kippur in October of 1973, Egyptian tanks attacked Israeli forces in the Sinai Peninsula and Syrian tanks launched an attack against Israeli forces in Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. President Nixon immediately took action to provide resources to Israel to defend themselves, under a standing authorization of Congress.

In December of that year, although the military situation in Israel had stabilized, legislation moved to the House to authorize over two billion dollars' worth of military

equipment for Israel. Ron Dellums spoke with countless experts, advocates, and colleagues regarding the nuances of the military strategy so that he could make an informed decision. Ultimately, he decided that he would have to oppose the military aid because Israel was already a “powder keg.” So convinced that the vote he cast would end his political career, he informed his family that they would have to prepare to leave Washington soon.

The next day, he explained on the floor of the House that he had come to Congress committed to peace and he had to remain true to his commitment. He stated that “[a]s an American and a human being, I want this country to stand for the possibilities of life and freedom, not power and death. I also want Israel to survive, to flourish, and to live in security and peace with it’s neighbors . . . Israel’s only future lies in peace.” He made it clear that his vote was not *anti*-Israel, but rather *pro*-Israel and *pro*-peace. Taking this stand was an extraordinary act of courage, especially since he had a majority white constituency and one of the largest Jewish constituencies in the West – and it gained him the respect of many of his colleagues. After the vote, a white conservative Democratic approached him, remarked on the composition of his constituency, and said, “I just want to tell you that I admire your courage. And I have even more respect for you now than before because I realize you truly are a man of peace. I was over there with a bunch of guys, and I said, ‘Son of a gun, this guy’s for real.’”

C. *The Nuclear Arms Race*

The next major challenge to his ideals of peace and justice was the escalation of the nuclear arms race. The United States’ proposed solution to the threat of a Soviet attack was to develop MX missiles, which are large, mobile, land-based missiles that

could carry more warheads. Many saw the increases in warheads and the accuracy of the new MX missiles as critical to the prevention of nuclear war, but Ron Dellums viewed it as augmenting the threat of nuclear war. He attempted to eliminate these missiles from the military authorization bill, but his amendment originally failed with very few supporters. Realizing that without large-scale support of the *public*, he would not get the support of Congress.

Because Utah was the proposed missile site, Ron Dellums focused his energy and efforts on that state. At the invitation of state senator Frances Farley, a progressive woman in a conservative male-dominated state, he addressed the Utah state senate and met with Utah peace activists. He also met with Mormon elder Spencer Kimball, a conservative religious leader, in an attempt to appeal to his interest in global peace. He explained his view that the proposed missile system was unnecessary to U.S. defense, was potentially destabilizing to international security, and placed Utah at risk of being a nuclear target. Ultimately, two years later, the Mormon church formally opposed the deployment of the weapons system, which had a significant effect on public opinion.

Ron Dellums introduced his amendment to eliminate the MX missiles every year for six years. In 1983, the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign was gaining support worldwide and in Congress. As opposition to the proposed military policy increased, Ron Dellums' role changed – he had to keep up the pressure from the Left with the goal of keeping the ultimate compromise as leftist as possible. While others advocated *modifying* to policy, he had to insist on its *elimination*. He understood that “at the end of the day the deal would be made in the center, but defining that center was the key to victory.” In

these situations, he learned to appreciate the effect of his advocacy on the system, even if his ultimate goals were not attained.

D. Apartheid in South Africa

Ron Dellums activism in opposition to apartheid in South Africa played a decisive role in the United States employing economic sanctions against the country, as well as the ultimate dismantling of the oppressive system. After tireless advocacy efforts, he now considers his single most important legislative victory to be the imposition of sanctions against the racist apartheid regime of South Africa.

He initially became involved in the issue when a group of workers from a Poloroid plant came down from New England to meet with the Black Caucus. Due to their lack of appointment and a full meeting agenda, the CBC asked Ron Dellums to meet with them and report back on their concerns. The workers reported that Poloroid cameras were being used in South Africa to take ID photos for “pass books,” which were required of all Africans and used to restrict the travel of non-whites. The Poloroid workers were concerned that a product of their labor was being used by the oppressive South African regime to implement the pass laws.

The Black Caucus immediately began researching and drafting legislation, but hopes of early sanctions were dashed when President Reagan was elected in 1981. His administration took the position of “constructive engagement” which meant maintaining a working relationship with the South African government. As the 1980’s progressed, the situation in South Africa became increasingly severe, and activists and labor unions began to protest cooperation with the regime. Ron Dellums joined the protests and allowed himself to be arrested on the steps of the South African embassy. It was

spending the night in jail after this arrest that his trademark grey beard began – and he vowed not to shave it off until apartheid was dismantled.

In describing the advocacy efforts leading to his ultimate legislative effort, Ron Dellums wrote, “[w]hat would happen over the next four years is a political science story so compelling that every progressive should be heartened. Through patient adherence to principle, mastery of the process, and the mobilization of a constituency in favor of justice, a movement can contribute to events that change the world.” Two separate bills were introduced in the House – one by Dellums which advocated economic sanctions and an alternative bill by Representative Bill Gray that prohibited new investment. The Republican controlled Senate refused to accept the sanctions bill and, later that year, President Reagan signed an executive order to implement only some of the sanctions and threatened to veto any sanctions legislation that passed.

In 1986, in the following legislative session, Ron Dellums maintained pressure from the left and the Dellums passed in the House on a voice vote. The ayes were much louder than the nays and, out of respect for Dellums, the Republican side never called for a recorded vote – this was significant because a recorded vote would have undoubtedly ended in defeat. The United States House of Representatives passing a bill to impose a trade embargo and to force U.S. financial disinvestment from South Africa was a tremendous accomplishment and resonated around the world against apartheid. The Senate ended up passing a weaker version of the bill, which President Reagan vetoed. However, the Republican Senate and the Democratic House both overrode the veto, sending a clear message of intolerance for the oppressive regime in South Africa. Contributing to the international pressure, several other countries imposed similar

sanctions, which weakened the argument that U.S. sanctions would only harm our country and not affect the oppression imposed by apartheid. Ron Dellums and his coalition continued their efforts for legislation mandating disinvestment and a fuller embargo.

Again in 1988, he advocated for his version of the legislation, making an extraordinarily compelling argument that one conservative Southern Representative described as “the finest speech [she] ever heard in chambers.” Although the bill passed again in the House, it was defeated in the Senate. However, a foreign journalist who had covered South Africa later revealed to Ron Dellums that the legislative effort had significantly impacted the regime and that, in his opinion, “the Dellums bill had hung over South Africa like the Sword of Damocles.” His tireless and masterful effort to build a coalition in the House, his willingness to work diligently, and his steadfast commitment to the principles and to the struggle helped to ultimately bring change to South Africa.

E. The Budget and Increased Social Programs

Ron Dellums recognized the relationship between military spending in times of war and spending on social programs. To illustrate this relationship, he often cites the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.-- “we are dropping bombs in North Vietnam that are exploding in the ghettos and the barrios of America.” He interpreted this extraordinary quote to mean that “the extent to which we spend billions of dollars in the war, we are not able to address the human misery of people here.” Ron Dellums responded by working closely with the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) to develop a proposed budget that was incredibly detailed and that reallocated resources to fund more social programs. He has a keen awareness of the significance of government spending, often stating in

speeches, “If I were to travel to a nation and could read only one document to prepare myself, I would read the budget. The budget defines the values, the principles, and the priorities of a nation.” In challenging the United States budget, he strove to reshape the values, principles, and priorities of this nation.

Progressive health care was another issue in the forefront of Ron Dellums’ advocacy efforts. In his keynote address at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work, he emphasized that “a vibrant and healthy society and economy begins w/healthy people . . . [which] has tremendous implications for how the government spends its money – it must be spent on health instead of illness.” Early in his career, he connected with a group of progressive health care workers and was greatly influenced by their view that efforts must be directed toward maintaining wellness. Resources must be provided for education and prevention, rather than fighting sickness. He worked with this group and his staff to draft the National Health Service Act (NHSA) which was based on preventative medicine. It was highly criticized as “socialized medicine” and was ultimately unsuccessful. However, its significance lies in how it shaped the health care debate in this country. Once again, Ron Dellums’ advocacy efforts dragged the debate further left than it otherwise would have been. This effort is illustrative of view on the importance of the progressive voice in Congress:

[I]t is essential for a progressive to advocate from the left and to offer a principled alternative for debate and vote, and to work to shift the center of that debate. By being true to that advocacy, a progressive would, ipso facto, redefine the issue. Without our presence in the debate, the so-called liberal position becomes the left position, and the center of the debate slides to the right. With a progressive alternative on the table, some will be compelled to consider the new ideas and approaches it represents, others will be provided “cover”—they will be able to point to their rejection of the most “radical” position in defending their support of

a position that their constituents might otherwise have considered too far to the left.

The value and effect of the progressive voice, even upon seeming defeat, is not to be underestimated.

Although the Democratic leadership refused to place Ron Dellums on the House Committee on Education and Labor, he had significant influence in those policy areas. He was often invited to testify before House and Senate subcommittees that had jurisdiction over domestic policy initiatives. He also served as chair of the District of Columbia Committee's subcommittee on education, through which he addressed problems faced in urban education in the District. Later, as chair of the whole committee, he was able to address a full range of issues affecting the District, such as health care, transportation, housing and public safety.

These are only *some* examples of Ron Dellums' many, many accomplishments and struggles during his term in Congress over a period of 27 years. His advocacy encompassed myriad issues that affect people in his district, in the nation, and internationally. Whether Ron Dellums' was fighting against war or for the amelioration of conditions that give rise to war, peace and justice were a constant theme of advocacy in public life.

III. Lessons Learned from Ron Dellums

Ron Dellums went to Congress armed with the invaluable tools of a social worker. Throughout his political career, he masterfully wielded his social work skills to shape the debate on crucial issues in Congress and beyond. He relied heavily on the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who significantly shaped both his character and

his politics. As a principled “outsider” to the political arena, he also learned lessons that were, although sometimes painful, definitely crucial to his effectiveness as a public advocate. We as social workers should learn from and build upon Ron Dellums’ experiences and the lessons *he* learned in order to enter the political arena in greater numbers and amplify the progressive voice. Some crucial lessons we should remember are:

1. *Listen* to your constituents to understand in order to devise a plan to address their concerns.
2. Don’t accept “labels” from the opposition. Redefine the terms to get your message across.
3. Apply the social work principle to “start where the person is, not where they ought to be” in dealing with *dissenting colleagues*, as well as constituents.
4. Don’t internalize criticism. Remember that it’s directed at the politics of the movement, not at you personally.
5. Build political coalitions based on commonalities among seemingly diverse groups -- both constituents and colleagues.
6. Whenever possible, strike a *balance* in order to further your ideals without unnecessarily alienating colleagues and potential supporters.
7. Remember: Even when ultimate goals are not attained, appreciate your ability to *affect* the system by pulling the debate left of center.
8. Maintain appreciation for patience and humility.

IV. Conclusion

In serving 27 years in Congress, Ron Dellums had an extraordinary impact on national policy in the United States. He brought integrity and principles to an institution that is often perceived as lacking those traits – our political system. He tore down walls and built coalitions upon commonalities among diverse and sometimes opposing groups.

He worked tirelessly and masterfully to ensure that the oppressed had an unrelenting voice in our “halls of power.” Finally, he remained faithful to the values of social work, while at the same time, “lying down with the lions.”

Bibliography

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