



Establishing a US Department of Peace

... Matthew Albracht
... The Peace Alliance

I cannot tell you with what weapons mankind would fight WW3, but I can assure you that WW4 would be fought with sticks and stones.”
— Albert Einstein

At the center of the human spirit there is a great longing for peace. During this moment in our history, it is becoming imperative that we invest and prioritize in the work that can help bring about more of the peace we all desire. The possibilities of manifesting it, in contrast to the consequences of continuing down the current course of rampant violence, are both enormous. Thankfully, the heroic work and practices of the growing field of peacebuilding offer a prescription for our times, one that could make the great dream a reality.

The creation of a Department of Peace will augment our current problem-solving options, providing practical, nonviolent solutions to the problems of domestic and international conflict.

The Challenge We Face

From the personal to the collective, violence, in all its forms, has been the greatest and most devastating struggle we have ever faced. Current levels of violence in our nation and around the world are fiscally, environmentally and ethically unsustainable. There are a myriad of great challenges around the issue of violence in our homes, communities and world.

From the growing rate of domestic incarceration, to the crippling problems of community, school and gang violence, to conflict in our homes, relationships and at work, to the ravages of international conflict and war there is much to be addressed. Consider just a few sobering statistics:

- A World Health Organization report estimates the cost of interpersonal violence in the US at \$300 billion per year, excluding war-related costs.¹
- US youth homicide and suicide rates are more than ten times that of other leading industrial nations. Homicide is the second leading cause of death

for youth ages 12 to 24, and the number one cause for African American youth.²

- During the 20th century, more than 100 million people lost their lives to war—most were non-combatants.³

We can longer continue down this unsustainable path.

The Possibility

Hope is not only on the horizon, it's here now. Over the last few decades, we have begun to see the field and work of peacebuilding more strongly materialize. Its impact is helping to foster more peaceful solutions in many arenas of challenge we face. We are seeing a sophisticated, pragmatic, proven-effective, economically sustainable set of practices and models emerge that already are and can more greatly make a profound difference toward a more sustainable peace.

And yet the gap between what is possible and what is actually our collective priority is wide. We need to am-

What would the Department of Peace do?

Domestically:



Develop policies and allocate resources to reduce the levels of domestic and gang violence, child abuse and various other forms of societal discord.

Internationally:



Advise the president and Congress on the most sophisticated ideas and techniques regarding peace-creation among nations.



Photo courtesy Guðmundur Jónsdóttir

A memorial to John Lennon from Yoko Ono, the Imagine Peace Tower is a beam of light projected from stone structure bearing the words “imagine peace” in 24 languages. Located near Reykjavik, Iceland, the tower shines for two months every year—October 9 through December 8, the dates of John Lennon’s birth and death.

plify the already growing choir that is leading the charge to make this work a national and international priority. We must make solutions to violence a part of our collective everyday understanding and to help take programs to scale. If this burgeoning field of peacebuilding is to become what it needs to be, we must help catalyze and galvanize a movement behind it and create much stronger systems and infrastructure to support it.

**Federal Infrastructure:
Department of Peace**

We currently do not have within the US government structures or priorities to make the kind of impact we desire. As a country, we have yet to place institutional

heft behind efforts to address the underlying issues of violence, diminishing their psychological force before they erupt into material conflict.

One solution to addressing the challenges we face would be through the establishment of the US Department of Peace. Whether it is a federal department, or other large-scale structure that will work to organize and prioritize the work of peacebuilding, we must seriously invest in peace infrastructure if we are to make the changes necessary to turn the tide. Along with reinforcing nonviolence as an ongoing value in our society, the creation of a Department of Peace would augment our current problem-solving options, providing practical, nonviolent solutions to the problems of domestic and international conflict.



Photo courtesy Seeds of Peace, Flickr

By avoiding the contentious politics of official international cooperation, private citizens can often accomplish more than diplomats.

Citizen Diplomacy: Everyday People are Building Peace Across Borders

Foreign diplomacy has long been among the most elaborate, formal and inaccessible functions of government.

In an increasingly globalized world, however, politically active citizens are throwing this historical model of international relations out the window, often with full approval of the Departments of State and Defense. By avoiding the contentious politics of official international cooperation, private citizens can often accomplish more than diplomats.

Journalist John Wallach gathered together 45 Israeli, Palestinian and Egyptian teenagers in 1993 and sent them to a youth leadership camp in Maine. Away from the conflict and constantly interacting with their peers, the young people quickly came to make friends with “the enemy.” Wallach named the camp Seeds for Peace, and his project made headlines when all the campers attended the signing of the Oslo Accords later that same year. Today Seeds of Peace has empowered over 4000 more young people from the Balkans, Cyprus, Afghanistan and numerous other conflict zones to lead the reconciliation process in their home countries.

Others go straight to the conflict zones themselves. In 2003, California dentist James Rolfe traveled to Afghanistan to provide a rural village with care. But Afghanistan had just 137 trained dentists in a population of 27 million, and Rolfe quickly discovered that peoples’ needs far outpaced the amount of care he could provide. Shocked by this inadequacy, Rolfe started the Afghanistan Dental Relief Project, which has provided the Afghani people with over 120,000 pounds of dental supplies and a mobile training center to build capacity in rural villages.

The Fellowship of Reconciliation has used this approach since the 1920s, sending delegations to Europe in WWII to rescue Jews fleeing Nazism, to China, Vietnam, and the former Soviet Union during the Cold War, and to the Middle East today. Currently the Fellowship is focused on protecting protestors and non-violent revolutionaries in Iran. With small delegations of American citizens in the crowd, the Iranian military will be less likely to suppress peaceful protests with violence.

Most importantly citizen diplomacy promotes a global understanding that people around the world may have different values and ways of life, but will happily cooperate to build a better world when political tensions are pushed to the side.

from the editor

Peace Is a Strategy

Domestically, the Department of Peace will develop policies and allocate resources to reduce the levels of domestic and gang violence, child abuse and various other forms of societal discord. Internationally, the Department will advise the president and Congress on the most sophisticated ideas and techniques regarding peace-creation among nations.

A Department of Peace will be led by a secretary of peace, who will advise the president on peacebuilding needs, strategies and tactics for use domestically and internationally. The Department will create and expand upon proven domestic peacebuilding programs in our communities, such as nonviolent communication programs in public schools and mediation training for police, firefighters and other emergency services personnel. In partnership with our military service academies, the Department will train a faculty of peacebuilding experts who will analyze peacebuilding strategies, advise government and facilitate the training of peacebuilding for domestic and international service.

If we can avoid one war, end any war even one month sooner or reduce our need for criminal adjudication, investing in a Department of Peace or other large-scale infrastructure, will ultimately save the nation and the taxpayers money. A study by the Institute for Economics and Peace estimates that if the US had the same

levels of peacefulness as Canada, then over 2.7 million additional jobs could be created while reducing state and federal government expenditures. This improved state of peacefulness would have a positive economic effect of around \$361 billion per year.⁴ Additionally programs that reduce juvenile delinquency and prison recidivism rates are expected to save us more than the entire Department will cost. Much greater investment in the work of prevention and intervention is an economic stimulus and a taxpayer savings measure.

The sole focus of a US Department of Peace will be to reduce and prevent violence. Thus it will augment and support other efforts such as the US Institute of Peace (USIP) by working proactively to provide nonviolent strategies and solutions to the many complex issues we face.

The USIP is doing powerful work internationally to expand the effective application of nonviolent conflict resolution. Unlike the plan for a Department of Peace, USIP has no mandate to do violence prevention work domestically. Although funded by the government, it operates much like any other nongovernmental organization and thus has no voice in policy creation. For the US to truly master nonviolent alternatives to dealing with conflict and crises, we need structures directly within our government’s highest offices and agencies, as well as independent bodies, all working together to make peace a priority.



People gather in Maryland to show their support for the establishment of a Department of Peace.

Photo courtesy Maryland Campaign for a US Department of Peace

“It isn’t enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn’t enough to believe in it. One must work at it.”

➤ Eleanor Roosevelt

The idea for a cabinet-level Department of Peace is not a new one. Carrie Chapman Catt, the founder of the League of Women Voters, first publically suggested it in 1925. Senator Matthew M. Neely (D-West Virginia) introduced the first official legislation in 1935. Since then, legislation proposing the creation of a US Department of peace has been introduced nearly 100 times.

The ongoing movement is supported by several members of Congress, the late former *CBS Evening News* anchor Walter Cronkite and author Marianne Williamson. This movement has a list of bipartisan endorsements from city councils in California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, New Mexico and Ohio.

Internationally, campaigns for peace-oriented government departments are underway in 32 countries, including the United States, but only Costa Rica, Nepal and the Solomon Islands have been successful.⁵

Costa Rica’s tradition of peace dates back to 1877, when the president abolished the death penalty. In 1948, Costa Rica became the first country to formally abolish its armed forces; its constitution still forbids a standing military. By law, peace education is offered in every school and the legal system encourages peaceful conflict resolution, such as mediation.⁶

Conflict Is Inevitable, Violence Is Not

Violence is one way to respond to conflict, and like virtually all behavior, is learned. Just as we learn to be violent, we are equally able to learn to use nonviolent tools and techniques. We do not lack the ability,

but the systems and structures to teach those tools. A Department of Peace will help fill this void. Over the last decade we have spent trillions in developing our capacity to fight by developing new weapons and the strategic plans for using them. It is time for us to invest attention and resources to cultivate a Department of Peace, save lives and reduce human suffering at every level of society.

While addressing the federal government’s responsibility to adequately meet our national security needs in today’s world, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said, “[n]ew institutions are needed for the 21st century, new organizations with a 21st century mind-set.” A Department of Peace is part of this new mind-set.

Peace is far from a utopian ideal. It is a possibility that becomes ever more likely as we invest time, energy and resources into its strategic use. Experts consider “peace” a concrete strategy that provides measurable results rather than an unattainable ideal.

We have no illusion that having a Department of Peace, or something of its stature, will be the panacea that brings forth a violence-free society. What is certain is that if we don’t try, we will never even get close.

It isn’t enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn’t enough to believe in it. One must work at it.

➤ Eleanor Roosevelt

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Matthew Albracht is on the board and staff of The Peace Alliance. (www.thepeacealliance.org) The Peace Alliance empowers civic engagement toward a culture of peace. We are an alliance of organizers and advocates throughout the United States taking the work of peace-building from the margins of society into the centers of national discourse and policy priorities. Our network includes volunteer grassroots teams in hundreds of cities, towns, colleges and high school campuses.

