# The US Institute of Peace:
# A Critical History

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A CRITICAL HISTORY

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# The US Institute of Peace in Crisis

Just off the National Mall and across from the Department of State in Washington, D.C., stands one of the federal government's newest office buildings, the $183 million headquarters of the United States Institute of Peace. The US Institute of Peace, also known in D.C. jargon by its acronym, USIP, has long been a source of contention and ambiguity in Washington. Some see the peace institute as a vital part of the US national security apparatus. Others argue that it exists as a counter to the influence of militarism over US policymaking. And for some within Congress, the institute is a vivid example of fiscal irresponsibility and bureaucratic redundancy, and its headquarters, described by the *Washington Post* as the "Valhalla of Think Tank Architecture," the embodiment of this waste.[1] These drastically different understandings of the institute became evident when members of the House of Representatives voted to defund the organization in 2011.

On February 16, 2011, Representative Jason Chaffetz (Republican–Utah) and Representative Anthony Weiner (Democrat–New York) published an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* explaining a bipartisan initiative that sought to strip all funding from the US Institute of Peace.[2] The men identified the organization as a trivial, government-sponsored think tank and its mission to provide "analysis, training and tools that prevent and end conflicts, promotes stability and professionalizes the field of peacebuilding" redundant, given that these services were already managed by the nation's primary and longstanding instruments of peace, the Departments of State and Defense.[3] Representatives Chaffetz and Weiner concluded their assessment by ridiculing USIP's new headquarters on the National Mall as "a case study in how government waste thrives."[4] By cutting funding for USIP, Congress could demonstrate to

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the US public its ability to compromise across party lines on budget expenditures that misused taxpayer dollars. The House voted in favor of the amendment 268 to 163.

In response to the amendment's passage, the peace institute's leadership and supporters launched a public campaign aimed at saving the organization. Overall, these defenders of USIP framed their arguments as negations of the points raised by Chaffetz and Weiner, attacking the two representatives' lack of specific knowledge about the institute's history, mission, and goals. They charged that the representatives had grossly mischaracterized USIP in both their op-ed piece and their speeches to Congress. Yet, while all of the institute's supporters argued in its favor, their responses often presented contradictory images of the organization's history and purpose within the federal system. This range of interpretations variously described USIP as a government-sponsored think tank, a national security agency, and a nonviolence and conflict-prevention institute.

The coalition of USIP supporters split into two distinct camps, each offering its own interpretation of the institute. The first group portrayed USIP as a vital component of the US national security apparatus. Richard Solomon, then the institute's president, and J. Robinson West, then its chairman of the board of directors, issued their own op-eds and took issue with Chaffetz and Weiner's portrayal of USIP as a mere think tank. West maintained, "We are not a think tank. USIP operates on the ground in conflict zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan, where we train military and civilian personnel to meet the challenges of deadly conflict."[5] Solomon corroborated West's assessment of this operational work by concluding, "Americans understand that our security is inextricably linked to what happens overseas. National security is personal security. We must get ahead of international conflicts before they break out—and we can. We must manage, in a more cost-effective way, how we train civilians to work with our military."[6] In Solomon and West's view, USIP was a unique government agency; it provided the kind of analysis that one would expect of a think tank, but also intervened directly in conflict zones to support US policy objectives and military operations.

To further strengthen this first group's appeal, statements of support were collected and presented by notable political figures who attested to USIP's vital role as part of the national security apparatus. These statements were posted on USIP's website and submitted at various points in congressional testimony. Prominent among these voices were General David Petraeus, commander of the International Security Assistance Force and responsible for US operations in Afghanistan and

Iraq; former secretary of state George P. Shultz; Admiral Gary Roughead, the Department of the Navy's chief of naval operations; and Robert L. Caslen, Jr., commanding lieutenant general of the US Army. An accompanying press release issued by USIP highlighted quotes from members of Congress and former presidents Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. In a piece featured in the *New York Times,* political commentator and retired general Anthony Zinni noted that USIP played a crucial behind the scenes role in "practically every American success in Iraq and Afghanistan," as well as supporting US efforts in democracy promotion and conflict mediation in places such as the Balkans, the Philippines, Somalia, and Sudan.[7] Reflecting on the current situations in Iraq and Afghanistan, we might speculate as to how Zinni determined his criteria for success in these countries. Still, his words were typical of the lofty praise offered by distinguished figures within Washington's foreign-policy elite.

Joining these high-profile figures were also scholars and practitioners from the field of peace and conflict studies. The Alliance for Peacebuilding, a nonprofit organization that promotes issues related to peacebuilding and conflict resolution, voiced their objection to the funding cut. They helped organize an online campaign, complete with talking points, in an effort to rally the field to the institute's defense.[8] A petition was started on the popular website Change.org to encourage supporters to demonstrate solidarity with USIP.[9] The petition and the text of the Alliance's letter to its members mirrored the language and examples articulated by Solomon and West. Again, USIP was branded a critical element of national security. But in addition, it was argued that its dissolution stood to undermine ongoing democracy promotion initiatives in regions affected by the Arab Spring.

Alongside this first group of supporters emerged a second group that sought to defend the peace institute. But rather than bolstering the arguments depicting USIP as a dynamic component of the national security state, this second group of supporters presented the institute as an alternative to the current war efforts, particularly stressing its function as a counter to the Department of Defense. The institute, according to this group, existed to reduce the US global military footprint and to challenge the dominance of military interests in policymaking. Instead of stressing an association with national security, these supporters emphasized the term *peace*. They claimed that the institute's mission was to promote nonviolent alternatives to war.

Representative Dennis Kucinich (Democrat–Ohio) epitomized this second group of supporters. The congressman described USIP as one

of the only federal programs devoted to the promotion of nonviolence and conflict prevention. Kucinich argued that the funding cut was "a wake-up call for all Americans who believe in the cause of peace. We must not permit the forces of war to annihilate any hope for peace in our society."[10] He contrasted the amount of funding for the institute, an estimated $54 million for the fiscal year 2011, with the $1.1 trillion spent by the United States on Iraq and Afghanistan over the past decade.[11] Chaffetz and Weiner were not only misguided in their facts, according to Kucinich; their aim was something more disquieting. Their effort was not about disciplining Congress over the misuse of taxpayer dollars, but rather an assault on a symbolic target—an assault that sought to destroy an institution that disputed the effectiveness and superiority of US militarism. Kucinich threatened to reintroduce legislation calling for the creation of a Department of Peace if the institute was defunded. This was an old idea that stressed the need for a cabinet-level office within the executive branch that would be responsible for all of the US government's peace instruments, including the Peace Corps, the delegation to the United Nations, the Agency for International Development (USAID), and USIP. Kucinich was joined by Representative Mike Honda (Democrat–California). Honda labored to generate the support of liberals on the Huffington Post website by publicly challenging his colleagues to restore USIP's funding.[12]

Echoing the representatives' analysis, *Politico*, a journal and website focused on insider perspectives of Washington, D.C., politics, published a political cartoon by one of their artists, Matt Wuerker, illustrating the funding disparity between the US Institute of Peace and the Department of Defense.[13] The image features USIP and the Pentagon side-by-side, but with the Pentagon taking up the majority of the frame. Tanks, planes, satellite dishes, rockets, and assorted military hardware are piled on top of the Pentagon, filling the D.C. skyline. Uncle Sam, the top-hatted and bearded personification of the US government, leans down from the roof of the Pentagon toward a small building labeled the US Institute of Peace, proclaiming, "Sorry, but with all the wars we just can't afford you." Wuerker's visualization placed the institute outside the national security conversation and, tellingly, did not conceive of it as a supporting organization in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

A final perspective emerged during this period that took issue with all of the above interpretations. Colman McCarthy, a former columnist at the *Washington Post* and longtime peace educator, argued that both supporters and critics were deficient in their presentations. Misperceptions

were rife. McCarthy disregarded Chaffetz and Weiner's argument as lit-
tle more than a guise for the promotion of neoliberal austerity measures.
Nevertheless, he praised the representatives for dragging the institute
back into the public eye. Though their reasons for wanting to defund
USIP were wrongheaded, the funding cut might in actuality be a victory
for those interested in the promotion of peace.

McCarthy's account offered a distinctive view of the institute's
history and role within the federal structure, one at odds with claims
made by its supporters. He started by disputing the portrayal of Pres-
ident Reagan as a sympathetic proponent of the institute. Institute sup-
porters typically lauded Reagan for his foresight—it was his signature
that ultimately established USIP as part of the Defense Authorization
Act in 1984. In contrast, McCarthy painted Reagan as a menacing
character who forced the new agency to adopt his mantra of peace
through strength. Further, McCarthy contended that since its founding
USIP had "obediently followed those orders and avoided examination
of the military policies of the U.S. government."[14] McCarthy also
rebuked Congress for its lack of commitment to peace, highlighting its
failure to guarantee proper funding for USIP once it was signed into
law. McCarthy praised the organization's staff as well-intentioned and
talented professionals, but described their talent as squandered and
their insights as marginalized. Rather than speak truth to power, those
affiliated with the institute were reduced to whispers in backrooms so
as not to upset the Washington consensus, and the funding crisis was
a reminder of Washington's reluctance to take a public stand against
militarism.

In the end, the institute's stay of execution came not as the result of
the campaign organized on its behalf, but rather the political implosion
of Anthony Weiner. Weiner found himself at the center of a growing
political scandal, which soon engulfed and incinerated his career. His
prominence as a rising star within the Democratic Party was abruptly
halted due to allegations of sexual misconduct. The congressman's tar-
nished image led to his resignation from Congress. Without Weiner to
spearhead the effort, other Democrats withdrew their support for the
bipartisan amendment, and Republicans were left without enough votes
to permanently defund the institute.[15]

The funding crisis thrust USIP back into the public spotlight for the
first time since the contentious debates surrounding its establishment in
the early 1980s. The controversy raised crucial questions not only about
the institute itself—just what exactly is it?—but also about how it was
possible that such widely differing interpretations of a federal agency

existed, especially among a group of policymakers, government officials, and public intellectuals. As presented above, there are multiple interpretations of the US Institute of Peace. It is represented as a government-funded think tank, a national security agency assisting in war operations, a peace institute dedicated to nonviolence and conflict prevention, and, as McCarthy scathingly described it, an innocuous dumping ground for presidential appointments and apologists for US wars.

This lack of consensus is significant. First, it reveals that the peace institute suffers from what can best be described as a branding problem. Labels matter. A powerful and expressive name such as the United States Institute of Peace should come with instant recognition. An organization, particularly one backed by the power of the state, is in trouble when its supporters cannot agree on the same basic story concerning its history and function. Second, the crisis exposes tensions that still remain over the promotion of nonviolent alternatives as part of US foreign policy. While USIP showcases its interventions in conflict zones as proof of its importance to the national security mission, this appears to reveal more about the seemingly futile efforts of the United States to win the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan than it does about the organization's legacy as a champion of nonviolence and conflict prevention. It remains unclear what USIP actually does to promote peace as something distinct from military interventions. To untangle these contradictory, yet intertwined perspectives, requires an exploration not only of the development of the institute, but also of the ideas and historical circumstances that gave rise to the demand for a national peace agency in the first place.

Thus, this book is driven by a set of questions about the US Institute of Peace. First, how did this institution come to exist? Why did the United States need a peace agency? And then, what is USIP's mission, especially as understood within the context of the public law that established it, and how has that mission changed over time? To answer these questions, I undertook a critical historical analysis of USIP, as reflected in the chapters that follow.

## Defining Terms

In this book, I use a particular set of criteria for evaluating USIP's commitment to peace, based on shared assumptions by those in the field of peace and conflict studies. Peace, for instance, is understood as a more comprehensive state than simply not being engaged in war. Two sides

may cease hostilities, but unless this termination leads the parties involved to address the causes that initiated the violence, the situation is likely to reflect what Carolyn Nordstrom describes as a state of "not-war-not-peace."[16] In these situations, there remains a high probability of a return to violence. Informed by the pioneering work of peace researcher Johan Galtung, the field generally describes peace as a situation beyond the mere cessation of fighting. Thus, a state of peace is characterized by efforts that underscore the necessity of justice, collaboration, and the development of alternatives to violence for resolving factors that cause or lead to the reemergence of hostilities.[17]

My work revolves around what I term the *elite peace reform movement*. This movement is composed of members of Congress and academia, policymakers, and other influential actors who prioritize the legislative process as fundamental to any successful strategy for achieving peace and changing attitudes and policies regarding the conduct of war. When I speak of elite peace reformers, I am referring to actors that stress the need to work within the existing political and economic systems to address social and political problems. Reformers rarely look to replace systems, and this is a central point of distinction between reformers and radicals. Reformers emphasize the gradual nature of change and are often willing to compromise with adversaries if the agreement offers incremental gains on a particular issue. Radicals, in their analysis, tend to find that the system itself is responsible for generating the problem. They argue that the system requires transformation for the underlying conditions to be fully resolved, and they critique their reform-minded allies by arguing that the gradual approach only strengthens the existing system.

The tension between radicals and reformers divides those on both the political left and political right. It cannot be reduced to membership in either the Democratic or Republican party, though party membership in the United States does tend to reflect reformist orientation. I highlight this distinction to make clear that the group of actors covered in this study is made up of those seeking to work within the existing system. For the elite peace reform movement, Congress was the central site of activity, and the movement's strategy involved building a wide coalition of supporters to encourage change within Washington. While radical antiwar and antinuclear activists struggled in the streets to demand an immediate end to the Vietnam War and nuclear proliferation, reformers in Congress and among the policy elite grappled to manufacture legislation capable of replacing the use of force as the preferred solution to all US foreign policy problems. This division

between radical activism and democratic reform plays a critical part in understanding the composition, location, and strategy of the elite peace reform movement. Peace radicals and reformers supported aspects of each other's practice, but the paths that they took to pursue their end goals ultimately varied, and they had differing, and at times opposing, views of what constituted success.

Unlike their radical allies in the antiwar movement, the core of the peace reform movement was predominantly made up of influential actors with access to the realm of policymaking. I use the term *elite*, following in the scholarship of C. Wright Mills, as a way to distinguish those people whose position in society gives them access and influence in the policymaking sphere beyond that of the average citizen.[18] In this instance we have members of Congress, but we also have those who represent business lobbies, think tanks, academia, the media, armed forces, and other government officials. The policy elite are those whose voices carry disproportionately more weight in crafting policy due to their specialized knowledge and proximity to the decisionmaking process. This distinction is made in part to argue that the campaign for a national peace academy was an elite-led movement, not one built from the grassroots. Though supported by sections of the public, the campaign was organized and led from above with its personnel drawn from the network of the policy elite. Thus, I focus in this book on members of the policy elite, not on radical antiwar or antinuclear activists, even though the efforts of those activists were essential in bringing public attention to these issues. Throughout the book, I use the terms *elite peace reformers* and *peace reformers* interchangeably.

Those involved with the creation of the US Institute of Peace were of the belief that humanity was capable of and desired peace in the deeper sense of the term. When they began their work, clashes over the struggle for civil rights and the legitimacy of the Vietnam War divided the country. Elite peace reformers were profoundly unsettled by US policies, both at home and abroad. Many of them had witnessed firsthand the destruction wreaked by World War II. Their experiences left them with a permanent reminder of what the failure of diplomacy looked like. Inspired by the peace movement and by advances in the social sciences for understanding conflict behavior, they sought the creation of a federal institution to produce research and teach alternative strategies for addressing violence and waging peace.[19] They believed that the United States had the talent to lead the world in diplomacy, and they placed tremendous weight on education as the tool for overcoming militarism.

**The Structure of the Book**

One of the more fascinating discoveries for me as I worked on this project was the length of time that the United States has wrestled with the issues of peace and militarism. The demand for a federal peace office dates back to the founding of the country and is preceded by contentious disputes over the place of pacifism in the British colonies of North America. Proponents of the creation of a national peace academy, the legislative precursor to the US Institute of Peace, rooted their campaign in the period of the American Revolution, and even today, USIP echoes this framing, presenting itself as the fulfillment of the wishes of the country's founders. Thus, the next two chapters, Chapters 2 and 3, revisit the colonial period of US history to reexamine claims about the origins of a national peace office.

Then, in Chapter 4, I examine peace legislation efforts that materialized during the Cold War. These efforts, driven largely by the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union and by the growing discontent over the US-led war in Vietnam, laid the foundation for the legislation that eventually resulted in the US Institute of Peace Act.

Chapter 5 traces the development of the National Peace Academy Campaign (N-PAC), considering debates internal to the campaign, the structure of the institution that advocates hoped to create, and how the N-PAC proponents hoped to ultimately change US behavior regarding the conduct of war.

In Chapter 6 I follow the development of USIP from its creation as part of the Defense Authorization Act of 1985 to the end of the Cold War. An important aspect of this period is the rift that emerged between the National Peace Academy Campaign and USIP's leadership, as peace reformers gradually recognized that their vision for the academy was no longer shared by those running the institute.

Chapter 7 explores the evolution of USIP since 1993, particularly as the institute morphed into a think tank and intervention agency under the presidency of Richard Solomon. Here I consider how the end of the Cold War and the rise of new wars forced the institute to reorient and redefine its mission and place within Washington. While the legislation regulating the institute remains largely unchanged, USIP has grown beyond its original mandate, controversially establishing two of its primary functions as policy analysis and intervention (notably, in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq), both of which were once considered outside its original scope.

Chapter 8 returns the reader to the controversy with which I opened the book. For advocates of peace interested in working with the US

government, the experience of the elite peace reform movement reveals the complications that arise with efforts that seek to transform policy from within the boundaries of state agencies. My own conclusion is that the institute's name and its position within the federal system are unfortunate given the work the organization currently undertakes. The name reflects the aspirations of one particular group (the elite peace reformers), while the practices reflect that of a distinctly different group (war hawks and international relations scholars). The vision of the United States as the global hegemon contrasts significantly with the original vision of the peace reformers and with those today who feel that there is a pressing need for greater examination of how US policy contributes to violent conflict and global instability. The current organization is a reflection of the expansion of the national security state and the pervasive influence of militarism within many sectors of government. To evaluate the institute as such is not the same as concluding that the services it renders offer no value. USIP does provide funding to scholars and organizations working on matters of peacebuilding and conflict management. It also takes on important tasks that the military considers itself unable to perform, and it provides interagency coordination and policy analysis on matters related to international conflict and violent extremism. The problem is that many of these services fall far outside the institute's original mandate, and some blatantly contradict it. The United States invests billions of dollars each year in warfare. At issue is the degree to which the organization charged with teaching peace and advocating for nonviolent alternatives should be held accountable to faithfully fulfilling that aim.

## Notes

1. Philip Kennicott, "Not at Peace with Building's Style," *Washington Post*, May 20, 2011.

2. Jason Chaffetz and Anthony Weiner, "Small Budget Cuts Add Up," *Wall Street Journal*, February 16, 2011.

3. The authors cite the US Institute of Peace's website as the source for this mission statement. Ibid.

4. Chaffetz and Weiner also link USIP to Senator Ted Stevens (Republican–Alaska). Stevens, one of the longest-serving Republicans in congressional history, lost his bid for reelection in part due to a corruption investigation and trial that embroiled his campaign. The institute is positioned as guilty by association, since it received the senator's support.

5. J. Robinson West, "We Are Actively Engaged in Promoting Peace at USIP," *Wall Street Journal*, February 18, 2011.

6. Solomon's framing is interesting if only because he spent roughly two decades emphasizing that USIP was a think tank, more specifically a "think and do tank." For

an example, see Solomon, "The U.S. Institute of Peace: A Hands-On Approach to Resolving Conflict," 26–28. Solomon's comment on the budget amendment can be found in Richard Solomon, "Opinion: No Compromises on National Security," *Politico*, February 17, 2011, http://www.politico.com.

  7. Anthony Zinni, "Peace-Building That Pays Off," *New York Times*, March 8, 2011, 27.

  8. "Funding for Peacebuilding," Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2011, accessed July 16, 2012, http://www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org.

  9. "Petition: Save the United States Institute of Peace—House Voted to Cut All Funding!" Change.org, April 9, 2011, accessed September 1, 2015, https://www.change.org.

  10. "Kucinich: Trillions for War and Now ZERO for Peace!" Common Dreams, February 17, 2011, accessed July 16, 2012, http://www.commondreams.org.

  11. Chaffetz and Weiner present the $54 million sum in their analysis. For Kucinich's remarks, see, Eric W. Dolan, "House Votes to Cut All Funding for US Institute of Peace," The Raw Story, http://www.rawstory.com.

  12. Mike Honda, "Republicans Keen to Kill America's Only Peace Agency—Forever," Huffington Post, May 25, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com.

  13. Matt Wuerker, "Sorry, but with All the Wars We Just Can't Afford You," *Politico*, March 29, 2011; accessed July 16, 2012, http://www.politico.com.

  14. Colman McCarthy, "A Peacemaker's Case Against the U.S. Institute of Peace," *Washington Post*, March 18, 2011.

  15. Josh Rogin, "Weiner's Resignation Is Good for USIP," *Foreign Policy Blogs*, June 16, 2011, http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com.

  16. Nordstrom, *Shadows of War*, 166–167.

  17. Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," 167–191.

  18. Mills, *The Power Elite*.

  19. My usage of the term *elite peace reformers* is meant to distinguish these actors from the peace reformers of the nineteenth century. There are certainly commonalities between the two groups, but earlier peace reformers were far more radical in their orientation and ultimate objective. See, for instance, DeBenedetti, *The Peace Reform in American History*.