

Transforming the Colour of US Peacebuilding: Types of Dialogue to Protect and Advance Multi-racial Democracy

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Abstract

Strategies to advance democracy in the US are fragmented with white peacebuilders mainly focusing on using dialogue to reduce political polarisation, and black and brown social justice activists mainly emphasizing the need for shifting power to ensure democratic representation and basic rights already enjoyed by most white people. This article begins with a race- and gender- sensitive analysis of the history of US polarisation and changemaking methods. It interrogates the ideas of “civility” and “impartiality” within the US context. This article asserts that the Movement for Black Lives should be understood as a peacebuilding strategy, and that bridgebuilding dialogue is relevant for building coalitions and support for racial justice. A model visualising four types of bridgebuilding dialogue offers a strategic peacebuilding vision for the US.

Introduction

The movement to protect and advance multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multicultural democracy for all requires a variety of change strategies. The colour of changemaker’s skin seems to shape our changemaking strategies and priorities. Strategic peacebuilding in the US requires a race and gender sensitive analysis of the drivers of polarisation and extremism, and improved coordination.

US organisations that use the term “peacebuilding” or “bridgebuilding” are primarily white-led and emphasise dialogue to address *toxic polarisation* across Republican and Democrat political divides. This approach focuses on how both political groups perceive that the other group dislikes, dehumanises and distrusts them twice as much as they actually do.¹ Social, religious, and political divisions increasingly reinforce each other. This approach highlights common ground, and points to research on perception gaps which reveal that US Americans have more in common than we think we do.² This approach focuses on dialogue skills such as active listening, polarity management, finding common ground, and building social cohesion and trust. Bridgebuilders often emphasise terms like civility and value political impartiality so as to appeal to both Republican and Democratic narratives.

Social justice movement leaders are primarily black, indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC). In general, black- and brown-led social justice activists focus on historic systemic inequities; truth, reconciliation, and reparation processes; and gaining political power to ensure equity in public decision-making. This approach highlights the legacy of slavery, systemic racism, and past and present violence against people with black and brown skin, along with widespread sexism, classism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, xenophobia, and migrant phobia. Activists point to the forces aligned against multicultural democracy that work to disenfranchise voters, to repress social movements, and to maintain control over resources and decision-making. This approach centres on community organising, building coalitions and alliances, campaigning on political goals to ensure voting rights, and building equity into policies and institutions.

Both bridgebuilding dialogue and social justice activism are necessary peacebuilding strategies. This policy brief begins with a race-sensitive historical view of polarisation and changemaking in the US to offer insight into the colour of peacebuilding today. Next, the article compares diverse notions of “civility,” a term popular with white changemakers and often critiqued by BIPOC scholars advocating resistance to oppression. The article then presents strategic peacebuilding frameworks that illustrate the complementarity of dialogue and people-powered social movements. The brief then describes the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) as an essential part of strategic US peacebuilding. This leads to a section presenting a visual map of four different types of bridgebuilding dialogue between diverse groups in the US. The brief concludes with key recommendations for funders and civil society leaders to improve coordination in protecting and advancing nonviolent, democratic decision-making in a country that is racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse.

¹ [“America’s Divided Mind: Understanding the Psychology that Drives Us Apart.”](#) *Beyond Conflict*. June 2020. This report is a summary of Moore-Berg, S.L., Ankori-Karlinsky, L., Hameiri, B., & Bruneau, E. (2020). [“Exaggerated Meta-Perceptions Predict Intergroup Hostility Between American Political Partisans.”](#) *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. 117(26) 14864-14872. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2001263117>

² Yudkin, Daniel; Hawkins, Stephen; Dixon, Tim. [“The Perception Gap: How False Impressions are Pulling Americans Apart”](#) More in Common. June 2019.

A Colour-Sensitive History of US Changemaking and Peacebuilding

Black, brown, and white people have worked side by side in many movements to build a more inclusive democracy since the birth of the US. The black-led US Civil Rights Movement gave birth to the US government's [Community Relations Service](#) (CRS), which refers to itself as "America's Peacemaker" for communities facing conflict based on actual or perceived race, colour, national origin, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, or disability.³ Today, CRS facilitates "dialogue, mediation, training, and consultation to assist these communities to come together, develop solutions to the conflict, and enhance their capacity to independently prevent and resolve future conflict." In the international community, this is known as "peacebuilding." But the CRS website uses the word peacebuilding only to refer to similar efforts in other countries, suggesting that there is some type of distinction between changemaking to support democracy in the US and abroad.

Early US conflict resolution experts like Jim Laue worked directly with Martin Luther King in the 1960s as part of the civil rights movement that combined social justice activism with bridgebuilding dialogue. For Laue, taking sides with racial justice advocates and using dialogue with people across the political spectrum were both essential to what he called "conflict resolution." Laue worked with the Community Relations Service, and later taught at [George Mason University's Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution](#), where other faculty also focused primarily on US-based conflicts. For Laue, supporting social justice was essential and more important than appearing strictly nonpartisan. Laue went on to help establish the government-funded US Institute of Peace (USIP) in the 1980s.

Today, USIP focuses on peacebuilding outside of the US. The term "peacebuilding" built its popularity in countries like the Philippines, Kenya, Colombia, and Afghanistan, where civil society leaders developed skills in conflict transformation and social movements in the 1980s and 1990s. US organisations and universities that used the term "peacebuilding" became focused primarily on using these skills outside of the US.

International organisations like the World Bank and the UN fund peacebuilding efforts primarily in "Fragile and Conflict Affected Situations" (FCS). The US is not on the [official list of FCS](#) even though many note that the [fragility of US elections](#), justice systems and economic inequality illustrate the similarity between the US and countries on the list like Kosovo and Nigeria. The UN and World Bank programmes on Fragility, Conflict, and Violence assume that fragility is linked to poverty. Yet many wealthy countries offer inadequate public services toward minority groups with black and brown skin. In the US, Canada and much of Europe, people with black and brown skin continue to suffer from the legacy of colonialism, slavery, and systematic violence, repression, and discrimination. But white-led peacebuilding organisations often did not characterise the US or European countries as "conflict-affected." There may be a variety of explanations for this. Perhaps daily police violence and structural inequities did not receive adequate media attention or affect white US peacebuilders' lives. Perhaps the largely white-led private foundations

³ Levine, Bertram; Lum, Grande. (2020). *America's Peacemakers: The Community Relations Service and Civil Rights*. University of Missouri Press.

primarily fund peacebuilding abroad, leading many white US peacebuilders to make a living working in other countries.

While the skill sets advocated by the King Center for Nonviolent Change, CRS, the USIP, and dozens of US university programmes related to the peacebuilding field are similar, the programmes tend to use different terminology. Like the Community Relations Service (CRS), prominent US civil society institutions like the [King Center](#) did not embrace the term “peacebuilding.” Organisations led by the BIPOC community (black, Indigenous, and people of colour) largely used changemaking terms related to social justice, restorative justice, or community organising.

Around the world, the peacebuilding field in general does not have a colour. The [UN peacebuilding infrastructure](#) and local civil society peacebuilding initiatives are led by people with diverse skin tones. US peacebuilding is distinct. There is a racial gap in terminology, and in the focus of US changemaking. [Strategic peacebuilding](#) requires multiple stakeholders and strategies.⁴ Strategic peacebuilding cannot succeed with a change strategy that separates bridgebuilding from racial justice or denounces legitimate protest and truth telling as “uncivil.”

A historical analysis of polarisation in the US also provides insight into changemaking strategies.

Three Historical Elements of US Polarisation

US polarisation is not simply a matter of differing views on policy between Democrats and Republicans. Three main drivers of US polarisation stymy dialogue between political parties: 1) the legacy of “us vs them” violence in US history; 2) media fragmentation and the weaponisation of disinformation on social media; and 3) an intentional Republican strategy to further polarise the US population.

Analysing US polarisation begins with an historical excavation of “us against them” exclusion and persecution layered underneath our current politics. Migrants from divided and oppressive European countries carried [generational trauma](#) and inter-ethnic distrust to the “New World.” White migrants from different countries fought each other for territory, but bonded as they came into conflict with and committed genocide against hundreds of different Indigenous nations, many of whom were also already in conflict with one another.⁵ The next layer of US polarisation came when white landowners and merchants organised the kidnapping and enslavement of people from West African coastal regions to work on US plantations. The founding of the US emerged from cooperation between people from different European nations, and the exclusion and persecution of people from Indigenous nations in the Americas and Africa. The US Constitution reflected these layers of exclusion by giving rights only to white male property owners. This legacy continues. Some white US

⁴ Schirch, Lisa. (2005). *Little Book of Strategic Peacebuilding*. New York: Skyhorse Books.

⁵ Menakem, Resmaa. (2017). *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press.

political leaders exclude from that promise [people with black and brown skin](#) and all women.⁶ On January 6 2021, [white extremists attempted to overthrow the US election](#)⁷ which was [largely won by black and brown people](#),⁸ and now right-wing leaders are attempting to redistrict and restrict voting rights in states across the country to lessen the power of their black and brown votes and to [criminalize protesting](#)⁹ or [teaching in schools about systemic racial discrimination](#)¹⁰ (also known as “critical race theory”). Political polarisation today echoes this history of white supremacy which pits the interests of white men over those of everyone else.

Second, media plays a significant role in political polarisation. While the news media has always been dominated by white men, until the last twenty years, nonpartisan news media played an important role in presenting relatively politically unbiased information on key issues regarding public health and other policy and political issues. With the [elimination in 1988 of the “Fairness Doctrine.”](#) news media was no longer required to present fair and balanced coverage to avoid polarisation. There was a proliferation of news media stations tailored to specific audiences on both the left and the right, and some offered highly partisan commentary and disinformation framed as news. The advent of social media exacerbated this problem.¹¹ Today, political actors drive polarisation online through vast networks of disinformation that now shape the political opinions of large numbers of US Americans.

Third, rightwing media and political leaders adopted an explicit goal to undermine social cohesion and public trust in government, academia, science, and media – what [Limbaugh referred to as “the Four Corners of Deceit”](#). Unique within media polarisation, Fox News and Rush Limbaugh-style rightwing radio shows make deliberate attempts at undermining social cohesion. These media outlets amplify polarisation over the science of Covid masks and vaccines, and undermine public trust in government related to regulation, public services, and elections. At least some Republican leaders have been explicit that their aim is to further polarise US Americans with the goal of undermining democracy and eliminating Constitutional checks and balances on executive power. In August 2021, Republican media personality [Tucker Carlson praised Hungarian authoritarian leader Viktor Orban](#) who came to power through a deliberate strategy of divide and conquer, whipping up public fear of immigrants, and a steady media control to disseminate disinformation. Leaders intent on authoritarian rule view polarising the public as necessary as part of a deliberate strategy to [undermine democracy](#) and consolidate power.

⁶ McElwee, Sean. (2015). [“Racism Is Destroying the Right to Vote.”](#) *Demos*. May 18.

⁷ Nevius, Marcus P. (2021). [“The Legacy of Racial Hatred in the January 6 Insurrection.”](#) *JSTOR Daily*. February 24.

⁸ Ross, Janell. (2020). [“How Black voters in key cities helped deliver the election for Joe Biden.”](#) *NBC News*. November 7.

⁹ Rowland, Lee; Eidelman, Vera. (2017). [“Where Protests Flourish, Anti-Protest Laws Follow”](#) American Civil Liberties Union. February 17; Waldron, Travis. (2021). [“Republicans Are Criminalizing The Democratic Process For People Of Color.”](#) *Huffpost*. June 16.

¹⁰ Kingkade, Tyler; Brandy Zadrozny, Brandy; Collins, Ben. (2021). “Critical race theory battle invades school boards — with help from conservative groups.” *NBC News*. June 15.

¹¹ Schirch, Lisa. (2021). *Social Media Impacts on Conflict and Democracy: The Tectonic Shift*. Sydney: Routledge Press.

Today, researchers distinguish between different types of polarisation. *Issue polarisation* refers to people holding different points of view on public issues.¹² *Affect polarisation* occurs when people actively dehumanise or demean the dignity of people who hold different opinions.¹³ Political polarisation today reflects both a disagreement on policy views, as well as dehumanisation of human dignity.

Both issue and affect polarisation in the US are a result of historical oppression and a deliberate political strategy. Right-wing political forces now and in the past use political power, policymaking, and the media to increase social divisions and undermine social cohesion.

Attempts at dialogue must take place with this analysis in mind. Dialogue skills enable clear communication about conflictual topics relevant to *issue polarisation* without name-calling or other communication tactics. But it is not yet clear that dialogue alone can transform *affect polarisation* that dehumanises or denigrates others' identity.

A deeper exploration of the dilemmas of the concepts of civility and impartiality is an important element in this discussion.

The Dilemmas of “Civility”

Peacebuilding in the US is complicated by conflicting ideas of what civility and impartiality mean in this context. Human dignity is a central concept in both approaches.

Bridgebuilders promote “civility,” often referring to talking calmly and respectfully to people with different viewpoints and trusting the institutions of democracy to bring change. The [Institute for Civility in Government](#) defines the term as “*claiming and caring for one’s identity, needs and beliefs without degrading someone else’s in the process.*” [Decades of research](#) attest to the positive impact of experiencing or even witnessing respectful intergroup contact. [“Civil” intergroup contact can improve inter-group relationships and sense of wellbeing.](#)¹⁴ Being “nice” is an effective change strategy. Communicating with another group in ways that respect their fundamental human dignity can help achieve one’s own group’s goals. Stephen Carter notes that “civil listening” is a necessary complement to civil disobedience and is essential “etiquette of democracy.”¹⁵ Peacebuilding communication skills enable more productive and effective communication between people to build trust and protect dignity. Bridgebuilding groups like [Braver Angels](#) facilitate civil debates,

¹² Mason, L. (2015). ‘I Disrespectfully Agree’: The Differential Effects of Partisan Sorting on Social and Issue Polarization. *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 59(1), 2015, pp. 128-145.

¹³ Iyengar, Shanto, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes. “Affect, not ideology a social identity perspective on polarization.” *Public Opinion Quarterly*. Vol. 76 (3), 2012. pp. 405–431.

¹⁴ Dovidio, John F.; Gaertner, Samuel L.; Kawakami, Kerry. “Intergroup Contact: The Past, Present, and the Future.” *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*. January 1, 2003. 6(1):5-21.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430203006001009>

¹⁵ Carter, Stephan. (1996). *The Dissent of the Governed: A Meditation on Law, Religion, and Loyalty*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

conversations, and dialogue across political divides in brave spaces to have difficult conversations.

On the right, some hear calls for civility as “political correctness” and as attempts to censor white Americans’ fears related to the loss of a white majority with the [US demographic shift](#).¹⁶ The Institute for Civility critiques the conflation of civility with political correctness, which they see as a superficial effort to not offend another group with speech or action by enforcing censorship or suppression of actual beliefs. Political correctness simply masks the incivility of prejudice or dehumanisation that does exist.¹⁷

Yet at the same time, [right wing media denounces Black Lives Matter activists as “uncivil”](#) because they name injustices and provoke discomfort in their calls to disrupt the status quo.¹⁸ Researchers explore the history of the term civility during colonial times when white Europeans viewed their culture and own extreme violence as “civil” while viewing local cultures and resistance to colonialism as “barbaric” and in need of “civilising.”¹⁹ Activists ask why naming and protesting racism is considered “uncivil” when the term civility is not applied to everyday violence against people with black and brown bodies.

Across the political spectrum, many white people feel uncomfortable talking about racism, as if it is uncivil to name racism, or to confront racist attitudes, actions, or policies. White people may protest that such “name calling” is uncivil, disrespectful, or even dehumanising. But white discomfort at naming racial injustices is not dehumanising. While naming racism may be uncomfortable, it does not compare to the dehumanising daily experiences facing black and brown people.

Some on the left perceive calls for “civility” as an attempt to silence opposition and resistance to human rights violations or as a [“cudgel against people of colour.”](#)²⁰ For some, the goal of [civility places unity above justice](#), focusing on harmony between white people instead of working for racial justice.²¹ Some argue dialogue and listening demand too much time, patience, and bravery from the communities of colour already exhausted from social change efforts. Journalists have pointed out that the call for “civility” benefits those with privilege and punishes those who express legitimate anger at individual or systemic oppression.²²

¹⁶ Krogstad, Jens Manuel. (2019). [“Reflecting a demographic shift, 109 U.S. counties have become majority nonwhite since 2000.”](#) Pew Research Center. August 19.

¹⁷ Zolkover, Adam. [“Political Correctness is a Red Herring; Civility is the Issue.”](#) *The Institute for Civility in Government*. January 7, 2016.

¹⁸ Hagle, Courtney. (2020). [“Right-wing media vilify Black Lives Matter as the movement grows.”](#) Media Matters. June 24.

¹⁹ Jordheim, Helge, et al. (2012). [Civility, Virtue and Emotions in Europe and Asia](#). University of Oslo, Norway. January. <https://www.hf.uio.no/ilos/english/research/projects/civility/>

²⁰ Bates, Karen Grigsby. [“When Civility Is Used As A Cudgel Against People Of Color.”](#) *National Public Radio*. March 14, 2019.

²¹ Zamalin, Alex. (2021). [“Civility Won’t End Racism.”](#) *YES! Magazine*. March 2.

²² Anyangwe, Eliza. (2019). [“The case against civility: who is your niceness really helping?”](#) *The Correspondent*. 26 November 2019.

For both social justice activists and their opponents, “protest isn’t civil.”²³ The widespread connotation of civility as “niceness” does not sit well with either the left or the right. The competing definitions and interpretations of the term civility are problematic. If ‘civility’ means speaking about conflict in ways that do not dehumanise or assault the inherent human dignity of others, the term “effective communication” may be a more accurate and acceptable term less burdened by colonial history, assumptions about silencing dissent, or racist connotations.

The Dilemmas of “Impartiality”

Like the term civility, the concept of impartiality is also problematic. Impartiality is used in several different ways. First, it can simply mean not declaring overt support for either political party. In this sense, it is political neutrality or not taking a stand on issues or sides of an issue. Many mediators assume they are “third party neutrals” and view their credibility as stemming from their refusal to be explicit on their values or beliefs. Second, impartiality can mean making deliberate efforts to humanise and treat all people with dignity. This approach may also be called “multi-partiality” or an attempt to see different points of view. In this view, cofacilitators from different polarised groups may work together, or the facilitator or mediator makes their values explicit while taking steps to recognise the dignity of all people. Third, impartiality can mean avoiding even the terminology associated with a political party. Peacebuilding in the US reflects the dilemmas inherent in these different definitions.

Bridgebuilders across the political spectrum usually emphasise political impartiality because they want to facilitate a dialogue where all Republicans and Democrats will feel safe. They believe impartiality will assist in identifying common ground, which they perceive to be protecting US democracy. Yet while some white Democrats and Republicans may share a goal of multicultural democracy, there seems to be [declining support for democratic governance](#).²⁴

To protect their impartial stance, some bridgebuilders may avoid terms associated with social justice, since Republican media and leaders [define the term as economic socialism](#) or wealth distribution.²⁵ Some white Americans in both parties may be hesitant to fully embrace the M4BL movement that would build a more inclusive democracy. Widespread disinformation about the Black Lives Matter movement among right wing media has led to false and [dangerous impressions of its goals](#). Right wing media and white supremacist organisations like the KKK falsely assert that Black Lives Matter urges the killing of white people.²⁶ Some Republicans assert the term “social justice” refers to “identity politics” and what they see as illegitimate grievances. Recent Republican efforts to push public schools

²³ Newkirk II, Vann R. (2018). “[Protest Isn’t Civil](#)” *The Atlantic*. 28 June.

²⁴ Entman, Liz. (2019). “[Support for democracy in a slump across Americas, according to new survey](#).” Vanderbilt University. October 14.

²⁵ Gordon, John Steele. (2013). “Social Justice: A Solution in Search of a Problem.” *Commentary*. April 2.

²⁶ Antidefamation League. (2020). “[Disinformation: Propaganda advocating for violence against white people using hashtags associated with Black Lives Matter and antifa](#).”

and institutions to ban “Critical Race Theory” include [lists of all words viewed as partisan](#), including terms like cultural awareness, racial healing, diversity, and multiculturalism.²⁷ Prominent rightwing media personalities deny the legacy of slavery impacts society today.²⁸

What does it mean to be impartial when terms like cultural awareness and racial healing are viewed as partisan ideas? Is it possible to protect multicultural democracy while delicately avoiding such terms? What does it sound like to a person of colour to hear about a peacebuilding initiative that does not use the term social justice or racial healing for fear of offending Republicans? Is a dialogue that excludes these terms safe or productive for BIPOC people? Attempts at impartiality may end up crossing the line toward ignoring the legacy of slavery or avoiding the urgency to prevent violence toward black and brown people. Where is the line between acceptable attempts at impartiality?

Some social justice activists remain politically impartial by critiquing both Republicans and Democrats for attempting to maintain the status quo white rule which limits the full freedoms and rights of black and brown people. Yet social justice activists assert there is no valid multi-partial stance toward systemic racism. They take a firm partial view that “social justice” means quite simply a society that works for everyone, where there is equity in delivery of public services. Black and brown activists and their white allies point out that listening to racist attitudes itself is harmful and traumatic. Attempting to “understand” another person’s racist attitudes can appear to be giving space to or reinforcing those beliefs. Citing the Nazis, as many often do, some ask the rhetorical question of whether dialogue between Nazis and Jews would have done anything to stop the Holocaust.

These discussions of the meaning of civility and impartiality provoke important questions for peacebuilders. Is bridgebuilding to support multicultural democracy possible when Republican leaders attempt to undermine multicultural democracy? Does a focus on US political polarisation between Democrats and Republicans distract from a larger historical story of who is considered a human being and who is not in the US? How do we view political polarisation alongside a lens of racial and gender oppression? If one political party is attempting to increase polarisation to usher in the end of democracy, where does dialogue fit into this strategy?

Comparing and Contrasting Dialogue and Movement Building

There are some distinct differences between bridgebuilding dialogue and social justice movements. The table below summarises how the two strategies have a distinct analysis of the problem, unique strategies, different understandings of civility, and a different view on impartial stance.

²⁷ Center for Renewing America. “Critical Race Theory Terms.” May 25, 2021 found at https://americarenewing.com/issues/list-critical-race-theory-buzzwords/?fbclid=IwAR2YfbPMijInufd7mZvMqdQ9c0704F0_UD-NHviHpEI0R0008xaprQdGXZE

²⁸ Rothman, Noah. (2019). *Unjust: Social Justice and the Unmaking of America*. Washington DC: Regnery Gateway.

Bridgebuilding dialogue emphasises toxic political polarisation between Democrats and Republicans as the main issue. Their strategy aims to bring people together across political divides through civility, which they view as talking respectfully and trusting democratic processes of reform and change that require patience and time. Bridgebuilders emphasise impartiality to political parties, usually attempt to use impartial language avoiding terms like racial or social justice and assume a shared goal of multicultural democracy.

Social justice movement builders emphasise systemic racism and oppression as the main issue. Their strategy is to shift power to find greater equity in US democracy. They view the concept of “civility” as largely an attempt to silence those who name or protest injustice. Social justice movements in the US often lean toward the Democratic party, though they criticise both parties for slow progress toward equity.

	Bridgebuilding Dialogue	Social Justice Movement Building
Analysis of the Problem	Toxic polarisation	Systemic racism and oppression
Strategies	Dialogue across political divides	Shifting power to end systemic racism
Notion of Civility	Talking respectfully and trusting institutional democratic processes	Silencing those who name or protest injustice
Impartiality Stance	Impartial to political parties; Partial to multicultural democracy	Leans toward Democratic party but also critical of the left; Partial to justice

This chart highlights the distinctions between these two approaches. But both bridgebuilding and movement building are necessary and can be complementary. Strategic peacebuilding requires rethinking terms like civility and impartiality to imagine a positive role for dialogue and movement building across the political spectrum.

Strategic Peacebuilding Requires Prophetic Truth Telling and Dialogue

Social change happens through an alchemy of truth telling, justice, mercy for offenders, and peaceful dialogue. Citing Psalm 84, [John Paul Lederach describes strategic peacebuilding as](#)

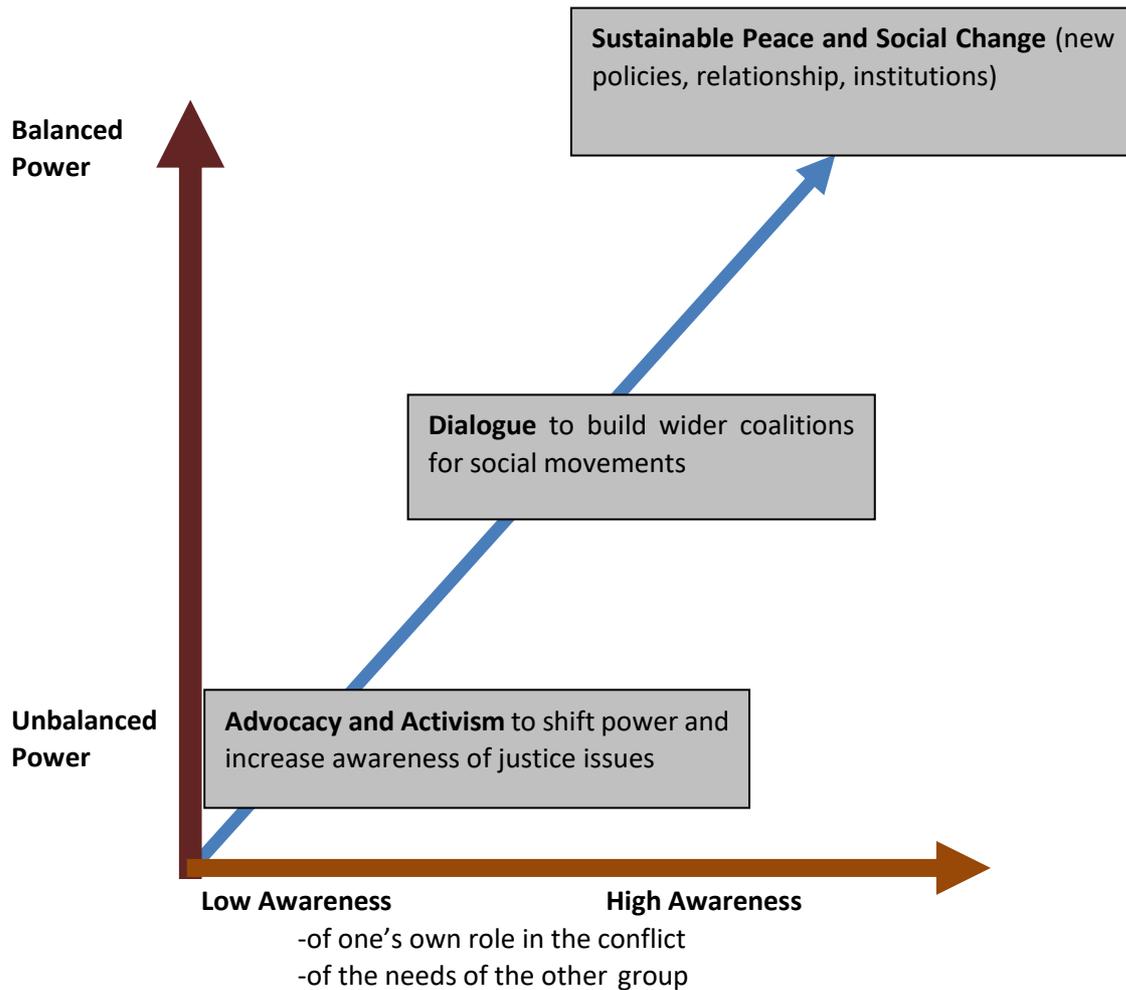
a “[meeting place](#)” where “truth and mercy meet, and peace and justice kiss.” These are not contradictory values or approaches. They are each necessary for sustainable peace.²⁹

Communication about conflict can be painful and harmful. Some avoid all conflict and view it as disruption of harmony. Some peacebuilders believe “If you don’t have anything positive to say, don’t say anything at all.” But throughout history, prophets have spoken uncomfortable truths and have brought about change. Within the US context, this means historic truth telling about the arrival of white European refugees and settlers, the genocide of First Nations peoples, the brutal violence of slavery, the politics of the Civil War, and the legacy of these events in today’s social justice movements, which is necessary alongside dialogue aimed at fostering a sense of mercy and peace between people.

Communicating about conflict is a natural and necessary part of any society. Conflict is an opportunity for growth and positive change. Truth telling is a strategy to heighten public awareness of injustices. Truth telling requires effective communication to ensure that people can talk about history and their experience of injustice is heard and provokes change. The peacebuilding challenge is to communicate about conflict issues in ways that protect and affirm the humanity and dignity of all people. Peacebuilding cannot shy away from using terms like social justice or racial healing when these are central values of a sustainable peace.

Strategic peacebuilding requires both shifting power (truth telling and justice) and building relationships (mercy and peace) across the lines of conflict. [Adam Curle’s classic diagram](#) mapping the complementarity of social movements and dialogue or negotiation illustrates the alchemy of strategic peacebuilding.

²⁹ Lederach, John Paul. (1998). “The Meeting Place” from Chapter 8, *Journey Towards Reconciliation*, Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press.



Adapted from Adam Curle by Schirch for Camp and Schirch, *Little book of Dialogue*, 2005

The Movement for Black Lives is Essential to Strategic US Peacebuilding

Social movements like the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) use advocacy and activism to shift power and increase public awareness related to public grievances. Social movements are essential peacebuilding processes when power is unbalanced.

The US is not the only country where one “side” of a conflict wants multicultural democracy and equal rights, while others openly support the dominance of one group over others. In most of these cases, nonviolent social movements with goals similar to M4BL created much of the momentum toward significant political change. The Filipino people’s social movement against President Marcos’s brutal regime created the momentum for the peace process. In Guatemala, the human rights movement also ripened the movement toward a peace process. South Africa successfully managed a political transition away from apartheid

and toward democracy, but it required the world and many white Afrikaners to support the anti-apartheid movement that had been previously labeled as terrorist and socialist. In each of these cases there were also armed insurgent groups. But nonviolent social movements pressing for multicultural democracy led the way to peace.

M4BL does not call itself a “peacebuilding” movement. But neither have many of the other groups around the world now credited with effective peacebuilding. The US peacebuilding field needs to embrace M4BL as a peacebuilding intervention. The M4BL movement meets all the basic criteria of peacebuilding.

1. Peacebuilding recognises that conflict is normal and can be productive.

The goals of M4BL are to foster multiracial democracy in the US, with access to social goods and protections for rights of people of all ethnic and racial backgrounds. M4BL protests are a healthy, mostly nonviolent expression of conflict with the goal of improving US democracy. In 2020, there were over 10,000 public demonstrations against the police killing of George Floyd. Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement may be the *[largest social justice movement in US history](#)* with up to 26 million people participating.

2. Peacebuilding requires addressing root causes.

M4BL addresses the underlying economic, political, justice, and cultural systems that sustain ongoing violence and injustice. M4BL works on a platform that seeks to “end state-sponsored surveillance, criminalisation, incarceration, detention, deportation, and killing of our people.” M4BL advances public understanding of the systemic nature of racism and how institutions work to protect white supremacy while punishing and repressing the freedoms, self-determination, and rights of black and brown people.

3. Peacebuilding requires both shifting power and building relational bridges.

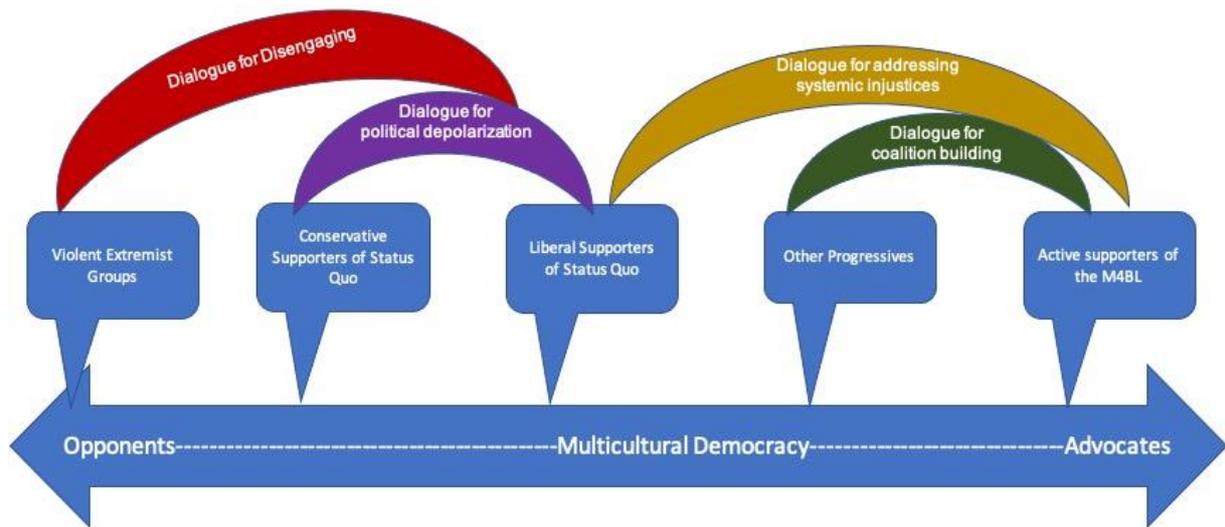
Shifting power toward politically, economically, and socially marginalised groups is necessary to realise multicultural democracy. Peacebuilding also requires dialogue to build coalitions to support the movement, and dialogue to lessen the fears of the opposition who resist racial justice or multicultural democracy because of false or distorted information. The next section identifies how different types of bridgebuilding dialogue may contribute to social justice movement goals.

Type of Bridgebuilding Dialogue

Dialogue is a cornerstone of the peacebuilding field of peacebuilding. But who dialogues with whom? On what topics? For what purpose?

The diagram below illustrates the relevance of bridgebuilding dialogue across the entire US political spectrum of opponents and advocates to multicultural democracy. Bridgebuilding dialogue can contribute in four ways:

- Build social justice coalitions between groups critical of the status quo
- Gain new white allies for the M4BL movement by reducing fear and addressing false or distorted information about M4BL
- Address toxic polarisation between moderate Republicans and Democrats who share the goal of multicultural democracy and racial equity and healing
- Foster disengagement from violent extremist groups



The **green bridge** illustrates that dialogue is useful for building coalitions among groups already working toward the goal of racial justice and a more robust multicultural democracy. Social movements begin with community organising dialogues on porches, around kitchen tables, and in digital communities as people learn about each other’s interests and experiences and move toward collective action. The 170+ black-led organisations working together for the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) represent decades of dialogue to build coalitions and alliances, and to prioritise goals and strategies such as protecting voting rights, rethinking public safety and policing, and mobilising public action against systemic discrimination.

The **yellow bridge** illustrates dialogue between the relatively “neutral” liberal Democrats who are less aware or motivated to support movements like M4BL. Groups like David Camp’s *The Dialogue Company* and adrienne maree brown’s *Emergent Strategy* reflect the need for these types of bridgebuilding efforts.

The **purple bridge** includes hundreds of new nonpartisan dialogue and bridgebuilding efforts around the US, growing out of both left and right political groups to depolarise and build awareness on shared values. These efforts generally assume a shared goal in multicultural democracy.

The **red bridge** represents the dialogue to invite people who belong to violent extremist groups to disengage. On the far right, a small but significant percent of Americans hold a

worldview similar to ISIS and Al Qaeda. Caught up in a web of disinformation and fear mongering, this group believes that people of colour pose an existential threat to white people. This theory of change opposes multicultural democracy, and instead supports police and militia violence, criminalising nonviolent protest, and voting restrictions. Influential political leaders on right-wing news outlets like Fox News spread baseless fears of voting fraud and “migrant invasions” and demonize activist groups. White violent extremist groups like those that attacked the US Capital on January 6 chant slogans about “taking back our country” through violent force. Former white extremists in groups like *Life After Hate* use dialogue with current white extremists to disengage from violence and reintegrate them into other communities.

Each of these types of bridgebuilding may attract people at different points in their lives. No one should feel like they are forced to take part in a dialogue that undermines their inherent human dignity. Yet each of these types of bridgebuilding can be an effective path toward personal change. It can humanise people who hold different views, and it can defuse anger and tension creating an opportunity for greater learning and movement away from dehumanisation.

Policy Recommendations

Multicultural democracy requires black, brown, and white changemakers to work in ways that create synergy. Transforming the colour of US peacebuilding will require special attention from funders and civil society.

To Funders

US funders are pouring millions of dollars into new bridgebuilding initiatives aimed at depolarisation, many with no connection to the field of peacebuilding and its decades of lessons on using dialogue for social change.

Fund both movements and inter-group dialogue: Recognise that both strategies make important contributions to change. Funders should invest not only in “purple” bridgebuilding dialogue between Democrats and Republicans, but also “green” bridgebuilding to support coalition building in social justice movements, “blue” bridgebuilding to build white support for racial justice, and “red” bridgebuilding to support people leaving white extremist organisations.

Fund training in strategic peacebuilding: Training could help ensure that any new dialogue efforts learn lessons from decades of strategic peacebuilding, including how to link dialogue with social movements to build broader coalitions for change.

To Civil Society

Recognize the political forces aiming to polarize the US public and undermine democracy: There are powerful political forces deliberately spreading disinformation aimed at dividing the US public and undermining public trust in government, the news media,

science, and academia. These same forces aim to restrict public protest and voting rights. Intergroup political dialogue is unlikely to influence these powerful political interests.

Support efforts to build power to support multicultural democracy: Social movement strategies are necessary to confront the political strategies fueling polarisation and undermining social cohesion.

Choose terms carefully: US peacebuilders should take note of the dangers of terms like “civility” and “impartiality” when these terms are used to prevent truth telling and protests against the status quo.

Use dialogue skills within movements to build broader coalitions: Movements are more likely to succeed if they have broad support. Dialogue is a useful tool to build coalitions between groups that may find common ground and shared goals.

Dialogue to address political polarisation should foster brave spaces for difficult conversations. Dialogue skills are necessary to explore the experiences that shaped their beliefs, and to gain an understanding and compassion for others. But any form of bridgebuilding dialogue requires participants to sit with the discomfort of hearing painful experiences, an honest power analysis of who wins and who loses in the status quo, and a level of truth telling that may be perceived as “uncivil” and “partial.”

Coordinate dialogue and movement strategies for change to transform the current colour of US peacebuilding. A handful of new initiatives attempts to address the issues outlined in this policy brief. The [Horizon's Project](#) led by Maria Stephan and hosted by Partner's Global and Humanity United is one of the newest initiatives bringing together black and white peacebuilders and movement builders. More efforts are needed to create shared opportunities for learning, dialogue, strategizing, and coordination between black and white changemakers in the US.

The Author

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