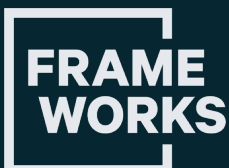# Understanding the Conversation About Peacebuilding

An Analysis of Organizational Communications

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Understanding the Conversation About Peacebuilding

Introduction

This report maps the frames and narratives that organizations in the peacebuilding field use to communicate about peace and peacebuilding. It identifies the framing strategies used by influential organizations, analyzes their effects on public thinking, and makes recommendations for how communications can better drive productive public understanding and engagement.

The research presented here is part of a multimethod framing project. This project, done in partnership with **Partners**Global and the Alliance for Peacebuilding and sponsored by Humanity United and the Open Society Foundations, is designed to build the American public's understanding of what peacebuilding is and why it matters and to increase support for international peacebuilding efforts. In the first stage of the project, FrameWorks explored public perceptions of peace and peacebuilding and the challenges and opportunities they pose for communicators.[i] In this stage, we examine how the peacebuilding field—nonprofits, advocacy organizations, and think tanks—communicates with members of the public about their work. Understanding existing framing and storytelling strategies makes it possible to reflect on what is working and what warrants reconsideration and lays the groundwork for upcoming work to develop new, more effective frames.

The report is organized around a set of preliminary recommendations for communications— how to build on or adjust existing strategies. In presenting these recommendations, we describe the field's existing framing and storytelling strategies and explain how these strategies are likely to be received by the public—where they are likely to cue productive thinking, and where they allow unproductive patterns of public thinking to go unchecked or inadvertently reinforce them. We then explain how these recommendations would help build understanding of and support for peacebuilding. While the recommendations are grounded in general knowledge about framing and our research on public perceptions of peacebuilding, peace, and conflict, further research is needed to identify a comprehensive strategy for reframing peacebuilding. Developing an overall strategy for reframing peacebuilding will be the focus of the next phase of this project.

Research Goals and Approach

This research identifies the storytelling and framing strategies that organizations in the field use to communicate about peace, peacebuilding, and US foreign policy. It explored three questions:

1. How does the field frame peace and peacebuilding?

2. How are these frames likely to shape public thinking and understanding?

3. How can the field reframe this issue in order to expand public understanding?

FrameWorks answered these questions via a multistage process. First, in collaboration with project partners, researchers generated a list of nonprofits, advocacy organizations, and think tanks working on and communicating about peace and peacebuilding (in particular, organizations with a focus on US foreign policy). This process identified eight relevant organizations.[ii] Researchers then sampled public-facing communications materials from each organization's website. These materials, which included press releases, "about us" pages, mission statements, and other communications collateral, were selected because they described the organization's work and orientation toward relevant topics. The final sample consisted of 77 materials across the eight organizations.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, researchers performed quantitative coding that enumerated important narrative components of each document, such as the type of conflict that was referenced, the terminology that was used, the actors involved in peacebuilding, and so on. Next, researchers used qualitative analysis to identify themes, trends, and patterns of meaning in the data. Finally, the findings from the first two steps were interpreted against the backdrop of the public's deep assumptions and implicit understandings about peace and peacebuilding identified in prior stages of research.[iii]

This three-step process was used to develop a set of communications recommendations: ways in which the field can cue and reinforce productive ways of thinking, amplify the effective frames already in use, and fill in the public's gaps in understanding.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Explain what peacebuilding involves in clear and accessible terms.

What the field is doing

Organizational materials often fail to explain what peacebuilding is, who is involved in it, and what effects it produces. The following quote is typical—it speaks about the need for diplomacy, mediation, and dialogue, but without clear explanation of what these activities mean or how they work:

> *"Since the [Afghanistan] war's inception in 2001, [our organization] has repeatedly called for peace and promoted alternative approaches to end the war, including engagement and dialogue with armed actors—without preconditions. The agreement [between the US government and the Taliban in March 2020] would not have been possible without the use of these peacebuilding strategies. This is not the case in other armed conflicts, where pursuing political—instead of military—solutions is stymied by U.S. 'war on terror' policies and practices, which hinder mediation, negotiation, dialogue, and quiet diplomacy."*

The excerpt above, and the broader article it is taken from, leave a number of core questions unanswered: What specific actors or institutions are responsible for brokering these dialogues? What is "quiet" diplomacy and why is it important? What goals are these activities hoping to achieve? Without clear answers to these questions, readers are left without a full understanding of what a peacebuilding approach involves in practice.

Relatedly, field communications are often steeped in jargon and use verbiage clearly designed for fellow insiders in foreign policy and international relations but that will likely not be accessible for a general public audience. For example, terms like "securitized approaches," "human security," "clientelism," "engagement," and "multilateralism" appear often, but without providing readers with a clear sense of their meaning.

How this is likely to affect public thinking

As our research on public perceptions of peacebuilding has shown, people generally have a sparse understanding of what peacebuilding efforts entail. They have a vague sense that personal relationship-building between conflicted parties is important, but they tend not to think about the ways in which peace arises from a more complex set of systems and processes. They also tend to focus exclusively on national political leaders and do not think about other

actors such as community leaders, grassroots activists, NGOs, and private funders. When organizations don't "fill in" these gaps in people's understanding, they perpetuate the public's inability to see the value of a peacebuilding approach and to fully appreciate the skills it requires.

In using jargon, the field not only fails to fill in gaps in understanding, but actively mystifies the work of peacebuilding. If lay audiences aren't able to understand the key ideas, concepts and terminology used by the field and get the impression that peacebuilding is a technical enterprise for experts only, they are unlikely to see peacebuilding as something the public can and should think about and engage with.

What helps

Communications should explain what peacebuilding involves in clear and concrete terms. To do so, they should use the following strategies:

— **Provide specific examples of how peace can be built.** Ground discussions of peacebuilding by talking concretely about specific programs, interventions, and actions. When speaking about these examples, explain what is involved and what they will achieve.

— **Explain how peacebuilding works in a step-by-step fashion.** Rather than just naming specific examples of peacebuilding programs and initiatives, explain how they work. One way to do this is by using explanatory chains to explicitly lay out "what affects what" to give people a fuller understanding of how programs work and lead to positive effects.

— **Talk about who is involved in peacebuilding.** When speaking about peacebuilding initiatives, always explain who is involved and who will be responsible for implementing them. Vague references to "regional actors" or "local stakeholders" are unlikely to provide the level of specificity that public audiences need to understand the complex set of individuals, organizations, and institutions involved, and the expertise required.

Recommendation #2: Always make the case for peacebuilding, not just against military action.

What the field is doing

Peacebuilding organizations tend to be highly critical of militarized approaches to foreign policy, and make the case that the US should scale back military presence and spending. In some cases, these arguments advocate for the absence of US intervention rather than the presence of any specific peacebuilding effort.

The field advances a couple of different arguments against militarism. One version of the anti-militarism narrative criticizes US militarism on the grounds that it is ineffective or actually undermines the United States' long-term strategic interests. According to this narrative, militarism at best serves no useful purpose, and at worst actually *drives* international conflict

by provoking adversaries and making the use of deadly force more likely—an argument made clearly in the below excerpts:

> *"The U.S. has launched airstrikes, two land invasions, and drone strikes around the world since 9/11 under the auspices of the 'war on terror.' Have they worked? Have they made any country safer in [sic] since 2001?"*
>
> *"Violence and the threat of violence often appear to be short-cuts to reaching the goal. However, as A.J. Muste observed, they are short cuts that become blind alleys."*
>
> *"The 'War on Terror' policies and the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq have inflicted large-scale violence and unleashed sectarian tensions wreaking havoc on the Middle East today."*

As in the above excerpts, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq feature prominently in this narrative, serving as exemplars of misguided foreign policy and failed leadership. Notably, in making this case, organizations do not make a moral argument against military intervention, but rather criticize it on the grounds that it all-too-often fails to achieve its stated ends.

A second version of this anti-militarism narrative argues that military action is motivated not by legitimate foreign policy concerns, but rather by greed and profit-seeking. In this narrative, military engagement abroad is understood to be motivated by a desire for power, wealth, and foreign resources. The narrative highlights the Pentagon's and defense contractors' vested interest in increasing military spending and prolonging conflict. In this narrative, the US military apparatus is portrayed as a "machine" that produces "endless war"—a phrase echoed throughout 20 percent of the articles in our sample. The tone of these articles is often sharply critical, as demonstrated by the following quotations:

> *"What do we have to show for this astronomical bill? A sprawling global military apparatus that creates, rather than prevents, instability, all to the profit of a few giant corporations. Further inflating the Pentagon's already-overstuffed coffers while slashing diplomacy and domestic investments will do nothing to advance human security."*
>
> *"Trump chooses to perpetuate the status quo of waging endless war and lining the pockets of defense contractors, while actively cutting non-military investments at home and abroad."*

As in the second excerpt, organizations often blame the Trump Administration and other policymakers for weakening diplomatic institutions while simultaneously strengthening the military-industrial complex.

How this is likely to affect public thinking

The field's focus on America's military dominance—even to criticize it—is likely to bring to mind unproductive beliefs around American exceptionalism and the nation's need to maintain global supremacy. As FrameWorks' research on public perceptions has documented, the public tends to assume that the US is entitled to be the most powerful nation on earth and that its military might is critical to its identity and place among nations. Focusing on the military is likely to bring to mind these perceptions, which are the most dominant and easily accessible understandings of the military that people hold. As a result, focusing on the problems with military action is likely—at least some of the time—to backfire.

This is especially true if organizations do not provide a clear and understandable alternative to militarism. Criticizing military force without *also* explaining the role of peacebuilding or diplomacy is likely to leave people uncertain about how to accomplish legitimate foreign policy goals and to maintain America's presence on the world stage. If no alternative is offered, people will assume that military action is necessary, even if, perhaps, it is undesirable.

There are also dangers in highlighting the role of greed and corporate and organizational self-interest in motivating military action. This is likely to foster cynicism about the United States' conduct abroad, which may undermine the idea that it can play a more productive peacebuilding role.

What helps

Peacebuilding communications obviously need to challenge the idea that the widespread use of military force is necessary or effective. But they should do so in a way that foregrounds peacebuilding as an alternative. To do so, communicators should use the following strategies:

— **Strive for balance.** While criticism of US military actions and policies are frequently appropriate, it should always be situated within a broader discussion about the value of a peacebuilding approach. Order matters: when possible, lead with a discussion of the importance of peacebuilding before introducing a criticism of US militarism. Leading with a critique of militarism might cue unproductive understandings of the military early on, in which case these ways of thinking may well make the audience less receptive to the rest of the communication.

— **If appropriate, clarify what the military should, and should not, do.** Specify the role that the military should play, if any, in post-conflict stabilization. For example, be clear that while military forces may be needed to establish the minimal conditions of physical security required for long-term peacebuilding work, they should not serve a policing function as an occupying force. Emphasize that any military presence should be in service of efforts to create sustainable peace.

While critiques of US militarism are likely necessary, further research is needed to determine how best to frame them. This will be a key task for upcoming research, which will test different ways of making the case *against* militarism and the best ways of balancing this critique with the positive case for peacebuilding.

Recommendation #3: Tell a consistent story about why peacebuilding matters.

What the field is doing

Organizations in the field differ widely in their arguments for why peacebuilding matters and what its value is. Each organization in our sample often (but not exclusively) adheres to one of three narratives in their public-facing communications:

Narrative #1: Peacebuilding reflects American ideals and a desire for a more just world.

Some organizations portray peacebuilding abroad as an extension of foundational American values like freedom, human dignity, and social justice, and suggest a peacebuilding approach follows from a commitment to the United States being a force for stability and goodness in the world. For example:

> *"Managing uncertainty behoves [sic] all of us in leadership positions that, going forward, we redouble our political commitment to building a safer, more just, and equitable future."*
>
> *"We must build the United States' credibility in the world by consistently upholding our values and these principles in every instance, not only when convenient. We must implement our foreign policy based in our belief in human rights, accountable governance, economic, racial, gender, and environmental justice for all."*
>
> *"It is not about promoting self-interest but about advancing government policy to move toward a more powerful, just and whole world."*

As shown by the last excerpt, the argument is that United States foreign policy should not be motivated by self-interest, but rather by a commitment to creating a more just world. This narrative makes a moral case for peacebuilding.

These organizations often draw explicit connections between the country's actions at home and its actions on the world stage. As the organization below suggests, a principled approach to foreign policy requires similar values of justice to be "lived out" domestically:

> *"Our values do not stop at the water's edge. Our foreign policy is intimately interlinked with our domestic policy, so we must apply our shared values to the United States' engagement abroad just as we do at home. The militarization of our foreign policy is intertwined with the militarization of our own society, whether in policing, incarceration*

and deportation, mass surveillance, or the rise of hateful ideologies like anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and racism. At home and abroad, we must commit to advance policies of liberation and work to dismantle policies that subjugate Black, brown, and other disenfranchised communities. Our foreign policy must fulfill the same values of human rights, justice, and self-determination we seek at home by reinforcing intersectional grassroots movements to win real change."

Here, peacebuilding abroad and at home are depicted as grounded in and linked by our foundational moral commitments.

Narrative #2: Peacebuilding is a pragmatic, evidence-based approach to solving global challenges.

At other times, organizations frame peacebuilding as a sophisticated, evidence-based practice that is valuable because it *works*—and it works better than other approaches to resolving violent conflict. In this narrative, organizations describe peacebuilding as "evidence-based," "relying on facts, science, and public health expertise," and "using data and conflict analytics" to emphasize the skills and insights that peacebuilders gain through education, training, and experience. For example:

"Peacebuilding is a pragmatic tool rooted in decades of research and practice."

"We have the tools, resources, and knowledge we need to get ahead of the greatest global challenges we face."

"Peacebuilding is an essential tool for addressing today's interrelated crises of violence, war and polarization."

In these excerpts, peacebuilding is framed as a "tool" that provides sensible, practical solutions to challenges facing both the United States and the world. It is less about advancing a vision of human rights and social justice and more about solving intractable problems. The lack of explicit values-based language appears to be an intentional attempt to shed the reputation that peacebuilders worry they have—that they are hopelessly utopian, out-of-touch activists rather than serious, skilled professionals.

Narrative #3: Peacebuilding and non-militarism serve the domestic interests of the American people.

A final organizational narrative argues that peacebuilding and demilitarized approaches to foreign policy are important because they benefit Americans domestically. When employing

this narrative, organizations make the case that military spending is a costly endeavor that detracts from domestic policy initiatives. They advocate for realigning American spending and policy priorities away from achieving military hegemony and toward addressing problems closer to home:

> *"Trump and the establishment are locking arms to chase an illusion of dominance, detached from any defensible conception of the interests of the American people or the world."*
>
> *"As we wrestle increasingly with fiscal priorities in the interest of greater security for distressed citizens, residents, and ecologies, military spending can no longer be sacrosanct. It must be targeted for significant reductions. Exorbitant military activities, and the budget that sustains them, contribute to environmental decay and constrain domestic spending that might otherwise be directed to collective flourishing and toward mitigating growing economic inequality within our society."*
>
> *"Who will feel the impact of Trump's budget? In addition to the soldiers and civilians killed and wounded in our wars, and those made refugees, we all do. Think about the lack of affordable housing, crushing student debt, immigrants rounded up and detained in military-style raids, people who go hungry in our land of plenty."*

The implication here is that the United States' interests are better served by attending to the needs of the American public rather than being entangled in conflicts abroad. This articulation of the United States' approach to foreign policy is less about explicitly defining a vision of either "peace" or "peacebuilding," and more about advancing an isolationist agenda. Whereas the first two narratives can be understood as different ways of framing similar activities, this third narrative is making a case for different policies and actions than the first two. In other words, there is not simply a difference in framing between this narrative and the other two, but a difference in the end goal being advocated for.

How this is likely to affect public thinking

The public is not being told a consistent story about peacebuilding, and people are therefore unlikely to walk away with a clear understanding of why it matters. As FrameWorks research and the work of other social scientists have shown, to be effective in shifting the public's basic understandings of an issue, a communications strategy must harness the full power of a field's many voices and converge on a unified story.[iv] The only way to shift deeply ingrained ideas about peace, conflict, and foreign policy is through the repetition of an alternative vision. When people hear different, conflicting narratives, these tend to cancel each other out, creating nothing more than static and noise.

More research is needed to determine the efficacy of the three narratives identified here. This research will provide critical guidance about which narrative the field should unify around. Our

research on public perceptions does, however, provide some indication of how people are likely to respond to these narratives. The first narrative, which is centered on core American values, may tap into aspirational visions of America's identity and role. There is, though, a danger of cuing American exceptionalism, as this is closely linked in public thinking with the idea of America's exceptional might. Whether it's possible to disentangle what's productive here from what is less productive is an open question.

The second narrative, which depicts peacebuilding as a pragmatic, evidence-based practice, may also be productive. While our research on public perceptions of peacebuilding suggests that the peace movement of the 1960s and hippies may not be as top of mind for the public as members of the field assume, positioning peacebuilding as a type of expertise may help people see it as a credible and critical approach to take seriously in foreign policy. Because people frequently think about foreign policy in terms of national security, tying peacebuilding to security might help people recognize its importance, though there is a danger that foregrounding security will lead to militaristic thinking, since people widely assume that security is achieved through the military. As with the first narrative, more research is needed to determine which of these suppositions is correct.

We strongly suspect that the third narrative, which focuses narrowly on military disengagement and isolationism, is likely to undermine support for peacebuilding. This narrative is likely to undermine foreign engagement generally, not simply military engagement. While it may be effective in undermining foreign militarism, it may do so at the cost of undercutting peacebuilding as well.

Next steps

The lack of a consistent narrative within the field about why peacebuilding matters and uncertainty about which narrative is most effective point toward clear next steps:

— **Use future research to determine what works.** Further research is needed to determine which narrative is most effective at building the public's support for peacebuilding. In the next stages of this project, we will be conducting empirical, mixed-methods research to test narratives and determine how they affect public thinking. We will explore, for example, whether it is most effective to lead with an aspirational appeal to ideals like social justice or freedom (and, if so, which value is best) or to emphasize peacebuilding's practical utility.

— **Come together around a shared story.** FrameWorks' research, as well as a rich body of scholarship on social movements, shows that when movements coalesce around a unified framing strategy, they are better able to shift public thinking and mobilize the public to take action. In addition to using the frames that emerge from upcoming research, organizations should encourage others in the peacebuilding field (including allies in academia, the media, and the private sector) to engage in similar framing practices and amplify their productive effects. Research to identify an effective narrative will be useless unless the field rallies around this narrative and consistently tells versions of a common story.

Conclusion

The need to put peace on the nation's policy agenda is more important now than ever. Amid the rising tides of racism, xenophobia, and nationalism, there is a pressing need to build support for initiatives to strengthen and promote peace at home and abroad. But as recent FrameWorks research has shown, the American public lacks a clear understanding of how peace is built through multisectoral and multilateral action, and American exceptionalism and militaristic thinking impede recognition of the value of peacebuilding.

Shifting how the public thinks about peace and peacebuilding requires first understanding the field's existing communications practices. In documenting the field's framing and storytelling practices, this report takes an important step toward this goal.

This report identifies several recommendations to expand and shift public thinking and understanding. Communicators need to explain in concrete terms how peacebuilding happens. They must make a positive case for peacebuilding alongside criticisms of military action. And they should identify and tell a common story about why peacebuilding matters.

More work is needed to identify the most effective ways of explaining how peacebuilding works, the best ways of critiquing militarism, and the most effective narrative about why peacebuilding matters. In later stages of the project, FrameWorks will develop frames and narrative strategies that the field can use to move the public conversation about peace, conflict, and foreign policy in productive directions.

Endnotes

1   Lindland, E., Volmert, A., Conklin, L., & Down, L. (2020). *Communicating about peace and peacebuilding: Challenges, opportunities, and emerging recommendations*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

2   The organizations included were +Peace, Friends Committee on National Legislation, Alliance for Peacebuilding, the American Friends Service Committee, Win Without War, Search for Common Ground, Rotarian Action Group, and the Quincy Institute.

3   See Lindland, E., Volmert, A., Conklin, L., & Down, L. (2020). *Communicating about peace and peacebuilding: Challenges, opportunities, and emerging recommendations*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

4   Lorick-Wilmot, Y. (2011). Speaking a common language: Building a community of effective framers in Alberta, Canada. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

5   See for example: Benford, R. D. & Snow, D.A. (2000). Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26:611–639; Iyengar, S. (1991.) *Is anyone responsible? How television frames political issues*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; and Snow, D.A., Rochford, E.B. Jr., Worden, S.K., & Benford, R.D. (1986.) Frame alignment processes, micromobilization, and movement participation. *American Sociological Review* 51:464–481.

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