



Recommendations to President Biden on Creating a Comprehensive Framework to Address the Causes of Violent Extremism, Declining Democracy, Worsening Social Cohesion and Violence Throughout the United States

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The United States' Democracy is at a serious turning point. American democracy is on a path of decline and increasing conflict dynamics are driving instability. Stepping back from the brink of widespread violence and preventing and reducing conflict dynamics requires an acknowledgment of escalating violent conflict, an increasingly flawed democracy, and the degradation of the bonds that hold us together as a nation. It will require holding perpetrators and enablers of violence and violent extremism accountable to the rule of law while also addressing the root causes of racial and economic inequality throughout the United States including rural regions.

America, the most [heavily armed nation](#) in the world, has seen its rankings steadily declining in the [Global Peace Index](#). Additionally, [the Fund for Peace, Fragile States \(FSI\) Index 2021 found](#) "The country which saw the largest year-on-year worsening in their total score in the 2021 FSI is the United States. Over the past year, the US saw the largest protests in the country's history in response to police violence which was often met by a heavy-handed state reaction along with sustained efforts to delegitimize the election process, which escalated violently in early 2021."

A significant driver of conflict is the fear by many of their [status loss](#), influence, and power and this grievance, which is fueled opportunistically by politicians to regain power and Christian nationalists, is [fostering anti-democratic sentiments](#). [Toxic polarization](#), surges in violent hate crimes and membership in [extremist groups](#), [proliferation of dis/misinformation](#), and [increasing urban and rural divide](#), [dangerous rhetoric](#) by elected leaders that incite violence, continued police brutality and systemic racial injustice, [diminishing trust in government institutions](#), and the recent deadly attack in the U.S. Capitol are symptoms of a rapid deterioration in the health of U.S. democracy. A [Statement of Concern](#) by more than 100 scholars warned that "our entire democracy is now at risk" due to new voting restrictions passed by some state legislatures. While the economic prosperity of the US has been the measure of success in the past, the [relational health of the country is significantly declining](#). More importantly as the FSI points out "Despite the country's abundant material wealth and an advanced health system, political polarization, a lack of social cohesion, Congressional gridlock, and misinformation contributed to a failed response" to the pandemic. In the U.S. more than half a million have died due to the pandemic, which contributed to the [growing economic inequality](#) and a ["steeper contraction in GDP than any time in the past 60 years."](#)

President Biden [campaigned](#) on the promise of restoring "dignified leadership at home" and renewing our democracy. It is now time to deliver on that promise. President Biden, [in remarks at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Memorial Day](#), said that "democracy itself is in peril, here at home and around the world." **The Biden administration must urgently develop a robust evidence based multi-sector, whole-of-government plan to prevent violence, address the root causes and drivers of race-based violent conflict, rebuild democratic institutions, and repair fragmented relationships between individuals and groups by building social cohesion.**

Recommendations for Executive Action

1. *Elevate and strengthen the Domestic Policy Council within the White House.* Reshape, strengthen, and enlarge the Domestic Policy Council (DPC) under the Executive Office of the President to mimic the form and function of the National Security Council. The DPC's budget and staffing must be significantly increased to effectively develop and coordinate policy across many different federal agencies.

Additionally, establish an office of Conflict and Violence Prevention within the DPC led by a Senior Director with responsibility for interagency coordination and engagement with federal, state, and municipal governments, and civil society on efforts to counter the threats of domestic violent extremism, reduce violent crime and gun deaths, and eradicate polarization and build social cohesion.

2. *Commit to building and securing American democracy.* Ahead of the Summit of Democracies, propose a bold new initiative that supports civic engagement and democracy building/strengthening efforts from the bottom-up. The new initiative could be called The Center to Secure American Democracy and should be modeled after the National Endowment for Democracy, which promotes and strengthens democracy abroad and counters authoritarianism. One of the reasons for the crisis facing American democracy is the lack of national institutions with a clear mandate and responsibility for preparing citizens for effective participation in our multi-ethnic democracy. This Center should begin to fill that gap. The new Center should be governed by an independent board of directors and mandated to work with the broad spectrum of civil society organizations across the U.S. – such as non-profit and civic organizations that build bridges across political, racial, religious, and regional divisions; reform and increase opportunities for civic education; break down information silos; and increase literacy and awareness of misinformation. It should also include a network of offices in all 50 states, providing state-based resource hubs for this work, and demonstrating a tangible federal government commitment to these efforts.

When proposing the Center to Secure American Democracy, the President must request robust funding from Congress to establish the Center and ensure that annual appropriations from Congress will continue to support its programs.

3. *Commit to investments in rural infrastructure and revitalization efforts.* Appoint a Special Presidential Envoy for rural investment and revitalization. Rural communities across the United States [never fully recovered](#) in the aftermath of the 2008 economic recession and are particularly [hard hit](#) by the COVID-19 pandemic. A special envoy for rural America should be responsible for coordinating interagency efforts to revitalize rural areas and small towns across the country with a particular focus on access to broadband internet, increasing private-sector investments, equitable access to healthcare, investing in rural community colleges, and promoting equity across the urban-rural divide.
4. *Address systemic racism by promoting truth, racial healing, and transformation.* Establish a U.S. Commission on Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT). Representative Barbara Lee and Senator Cory Booker have introduced concurrent resolutions proposing such a commission that aims to “properly acknowledge, memorialize, and be a catalyst for progress, including toward permanently eliminating persistent racial inequities.” A national commission on truth and racial healing will not only complement President Biden's efforts to reform policing and the criminal justice system, but will open the avenues of deep healing and begin the process of changing the structures, systems, policies and practices that divide us. The establishment of a U.S. Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation Commission would be an important step in the journey toward racial healing and the social transformation needed for Americans to honor each other's humanity and begin to envision a country that is just for all.

The protests over the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in the summer of 2020 reminded many Americans of the deep need to address systemic racial inequalities. The virulence against a mere theory – Critical Race Theory – and the violent attack on the Capitol are reminders that not enough Americans have woken up to the deep need in this country for racial justice and healing.

5. *Commit to reforming core curriculum in the education system.* The Biden administration should use its leverage through funding mechanisms and policy directives to shape a new, innovative, and accurate history and civics curriculum. The inability of Americans to agree on a true shared history is fueling the current conflict in the US. Through innovative rethinking of the delivery of history curricula to convey new, more accurate narratives of the past can positively influence citizens' national identity. The foundation to build peace throughout society can be built in the one place nearly all Americans have in common as they approach adulthood—school, and specifically, U.S. history class.

Work with Congress to pass the Civics Secures Democracy Act into law. This bipartisan and bicameral legislation will authorize the Department of Education to provide grants to support educational programs in history and civics.

6. *Invest in programs that build social cohesion.* Work with Congress to secure funding for a radical expansion of U.S. national service programs, targeting young adults. This could include participation in AmeriCorps, Peace Corps and structured volunteer opportunities in the panoply of federal government agencies. Beyond providing participants with meaningful job skills and life experience, the program should have three additional goals. 1) Orientation and training provided through the program should emphasize the patriotic yet accurate vision of American history envisioned in the Civics Secures Democracy Act. 2) The program should be explicitly designed to mitigate conflict between Americans. Americans of differing racial/ethnic, class, and regional backgrounds should be grouped together for shared, positive experiences, to help strengthen social cohesion among younger Americans. 3) Use the program to place these youth as volunteers in the federal government. Seeing government in operation, filling its mandate to help fellow citizens, should help ameliorate anti-government sentiment in the U.S. and perhaps help rebuild trust in government.

Additionally, invest in civil society-led programming that builds social cohesion, addresses the root causes of violent extremism, and mitigates conflict between Americans, i.e. through facilitation of dialogue between identity groups, cross-cultural and inter-religious exchanges, promotion of positive, peaceful identities, dissemination of counter-narratives and resources, disengagement and rehabilitation from violent extremist groups, and local peace education.

7. *Tackle the dissemination of disinformation, hate, and violence incitement.* Establish a commission to determine a comprehensive set of policy recommendations, strategies, and principles to tackle disinformation, which includes non-violent counter-narratives that promote a culture of peace, resilience, equality, and pluralism. Disinformation campaigns pose a threat to U.S. democracy and can lead to violent conflict. The U.S. government must take urgent action to stem the flow of disinformation while ensuring that public policy creates a balance between free speech rights and ensuring the accurate dissemination of information related to public health, free and fair elections, and the exchange of ideas and democratic deliberations. Partnering with and supporting local civil society organizations will be critical to this effort due to their status as trusted interlocutors in their communities.