

Waging Peace

By Marianne Williamson

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THE FBI recently reported that the United States is facing a wave of murders and gun violence. Cities across the country are seeing significant increases in violent crime. In Boston, the number of homicides is threatening to eclipse last year's numbers, which were already the worst in a decade. These statistics prove that the current approach to reducing violence isn't working.

In the United States, 12 children each day die from gun violence. Homicide was the second leading cause of death for people ages 10 to 24 in 2001, with rates 10 times that of other leading industrialized nations. In 2005, there were more than 190,000 reported victims of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assaults. Acts of terrorism worldwide are up since the start of the Iraq war. War itself has killed more than half a million Americans since World War II.

A bill before Congress would establish a US Department of Peace. This measure would provide practical, nonviolent solutions for the problems of domestic and international conflict. It would apply the institutional heft of the US government to a serious effort not merely at avoiding war or waging war more effectively. It would take America to the next evolutionary step: It would proactively wage peace.

The problem of violence is a many layered one, and its solution needs to be as well. . . . While no one action -- governmental or otherwise -- will provide a single solution to such an entrenched and deeply rooted problem, the problem must be treated as an all-systems breakdown that requires an all-systems response.

A Department of Peace would address the causal issues of violence -- from human disenfranchisement to societal dysfunction -- thus saving money and human heartache.

Domestically, the department would develop policies and allocate resources to reduce the levels of domestic and gang violence, child abuse, and various other forms of societal discord. The secretary of peace would work with the secretary of education to develop curriculums to teach students alternative conflict resolution techniques and strategies.

Internationally, the Department of Peace would advise the president and Congress on the most

innovative techniques and ideas for peace-creation among nations. A peace academy, on par with the military service academies, would train civilian peacekeepers and work with the military in the latest nonviolent conflict resolution strategies and approaches. In short, a Department of Peace would work hand in hand with existing government agencies and structures to help ensure that conflict, when it occurs, does not boil over into life-destroying behavior.

Last month, President George W. Bush said at a conference of school officials, police officers, and youth advocates that communities need a list of "best practices" to prevent and respond to the kinds of school attacks that have occurred in recent weeks. "It seems to me, a lot of our attention should be on preventing" such incidents, Bush said. That would require, he said, "a mosaic of programs." The Department of Peace would give structure and design to the mosaic, providing much-needed assistance to city, county, and state governments in coordinating existing programs as well as developing new programs based on best practices nationally.

Throughout America, there are countless peace-builders and peace-building projects. Those skilled in ameliorating the effects of violence -- from conflict resolution experts to nonviolent communicators -- have proven their effectiveness at treating root causes of violence. Yet these programs receive only pennies in comparison to the tremendous costs of violence.

A 2004 World Health Report estimated the cost of interpersonal violence in the United States (excluding war-related costs) at \$300 billion per year. We currently allocate more than \$400 billion per year to the Department of Defense, not including the cost of the war in Iraq. The financial cost alone is enough to motivate many to support this bill, but the human carnage is simply a cost that should never be permitted in a civilized society.

Marianne Williamson is founder of The Peace Alliance.