

How to Promote Peace;  
Do's and Don'ts,  
based on political psychology research.

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Introduction: Call to action.

This essay was inspired by several experiences and requests from associates about what we can do to address issues of peace and war based on by my insights into the psychology of human political behavior from several years of research on human attitudes related to war and peace.\*

A peace activist recently asked list-serve members for a new vision, bemoaning his belief that decades of traditional peace activism have had virtually no noticeable and lasting impact on war. A psychologist at a national convention listened to some of my research findings and asked what national organizations of concerned psychologists should do in light of such findings to improve their efforts.

An English professor on a list-serve read my comments about a devout Republican friend of my wife who avoided my Political Psychology Research business card when we were introduced this week at the county fair, implicitly threatened by information that might challenge her current worldview. The professor asked what can we hope to accomplish with education, given the human tendency to seek information that simply confirms our current worldviews?

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A clinical psychologist spoke up at a national convention meeting, voicing his assumption that humans are basically competitive and that understanding of this was central to planning effective widespread peace promotion efforts.

In response to my presentation on the psychology of eco-psychology at a national convention recently, research professors asked what logically comes next from research data supporting apparent evolutionary origins of conservative and liberal worldviews as promoting group protection from threats involving disease phobia, xenophobia and war in the case of the conservative worldview, and peaceful, trusting promotion of trade and cooperation with neighbors in the case of the liberal worldview.

### Classic peace promotion approaches and their limitations.

Before I present my suggestions about practical data-driven things professionals can do to promote peace and discourage war, I will briefly review traditional approaches.

There have been many efforts to promote peace over many decades. One effort especially espoused by educators is to teach citizens in public schools, colleges and universities about history, cultures, psychology, sociology, literature, biology, literature, etc. in the hopes that this will promote more peaceful citizens. Peaceful citizens tend to support their arguments for peace with information gleaned from education, and assume that anyone that knows what they know would believe as they do that peace is better than war. Research data, however shows that the correlation between years of a general education and endorsement of warmongering, when controlling for age and gender, is virtually zero. It also shows that the majority of citizens, as many as 90%, *already* endorse peaceful coexistence with others.

Some educators and scientists believe that peace starts within the individual and that if we teach individuals to be peaceful, they will carry this into their social relationships and eventually into nations. However,

psychological traits related to antisocial behavior, such as agreeableness and conscientiousness, authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism, do not change easily.

Also, there are 6 billion human beings. Public education systems in the United States are presently under considerable financial stress, posing severe challenges to them accomplishing even their most basic educational goals, let alone getting exotic goals such as teaching peaceful behaviors.

Some education is conducted in religious schools. To the extent that these teachings reflect fundamentalist religious thinking, they are likely to promote warmongering attitudes, directly or indirectly, as the correlation between endorsing fundamentalism and warmongering is quite substantial.

While it is certainly desirable that individual citizens understand issues related to peace and war, we present ourselves with a huge task to try to promote peace via the classroom, considering the above. It only takes one charismatic and persistent warmonger, such as Hitler, to launch a very destructive course of action. Can we expect education to somehow disarm all individuals with warmongering dispositions?

An individual approach to promoting peace has also been advocated by clinicians. They encourage introducing peace promotion into psychotherapy sessions. However, if such therapy is not covered under an insurance policy, it would be unethical to bill for it. And it is hard to imagine that insurance policies will cover "peace therapy". Many do not even cover marriage counseling. Clients typically present problems with depression, anxiety or social relationship difficulties and spend an average of 5 sessions seeking help. It would seem unethical to substitute a therapist's agenda (peace promotions) for the client's agenda in such sessions. And people change slowly in psychotherapy. And the numbers are daunting. There are 6 billion people in the world. Reaching them all with one-to-one counseling would require an impossibly large number of therapists. Many nations do not have any professional therapists. And who would pay for such counseling?

Another classic approach to promoting peace is through social activism. But not all social activists are peaceful. Some are dangerous. The difference between constructive and destructive activism has not been a careful focus of scientific study. But reflection shows that some activists

present their ideas, missions and efforts as pro-social initially but once in power turn into very destructive leaders. For example, Hitler himself thought his personal mission was "the work of the Lord". Other dictators have rallied followers under the flag of social justice and freedom from previously oppressive leaders, only to become hyper-oppressive leaders in their own right once in power.

Activist organizations may have difficulty maintaining constructive structure within their own organizations, which are not infrequently fraught with conflicts as to goals and authority. Some of these organizations are led by authoritarian leaders who do not practice democratic respect sufficiently to keep the organizations vibrant and constructive. Negative social activism may be defined as activism initially against some perceived oppressive source, such as a corporation or government. The goal of such activism initially is the elimination of something perceived to be undesirable. Once the negative has been eliminated, unless the activist organization has a clear positive goal, it may lose momentum. And, regarding positive goals, who should decide what are appropriate and desirable goals for society? Unless there is a well-functioning democratic decision-making process, an activist organization led by a charismatic leader or leaders can make these decisions for themselves as they evolve into a dictatorship. Many dictatorships deteriorate into very destructive governments.

Another emphasis of many peace-promoting organizations, such as peace studies programs at colleges and universities, is the conflict mediation model. The focus is on teaching skills for guiding conflicting organizations to find constructive, peaceful solutions. This may be considered another form of negative activism, as the focus is on eliminating something undesirable: conflict. It is a noble effort to the extent that conflicting parties can be trusted to find compromises that enable both and parties to conduct constructive programs.

However, if the conflicting parties simply agree to divvy up their arenas of evil activity, the common good, the welfare of citizens, is not assured. For example if national allies in time of war resolve their conflicts by divvying up territories to oppress, then the welfare of the oppressed nations is ignored.

Another limitation of the conflict resolution model is that the most serious conflicts, those promoted by warmongering leaders of national

factions or nations, are unlikely to be approachable by conflict resolution meetings. Warmongering leaders on the rise are unlikely to participate in meaningful conflict resolution negotiations, which they can expect will attempt to challenge or limit their personal ambitions for power and conquest. For example, it is hard to imagine getting Hitler and Churchill to a successful conflict resolution meeting, or Osama bin Laden and President Obama. Efforts to resolve conflicts in the Middle East via such approaches, as between Palestinian and Israeli leaders, have been attempted for 50 years without lasting success.

Peace organizations are another approach to promoting peace. But even nationally and internationally sanctioned institutions can be hamstrung. For example, the U.S. Institute of Peace, funded by the US government, has in its charter the requirement that it focus only on foreign affairs, not on the warmongering-prone dispositions of United States government leaders or institutions, such as the military-industrial complex against which President Eisenhower warned his nation. Many programs in the United Nations are ineffective because giving power to citizens in nations tends to threaten sitting governments. These governments can sabotage U.N. programs by vetoing their proposals, failing to fund proposed programs, or diverting funds earmarked for aid to citizens. Instead, the funds go to the leaders of those citizens' nations.

Another approach to peace and war issues is to debate them, hoping to convince opponents that one's own opinions are more valid and reasonable than theirs are. This can be expressed in writings of all sorts: journal articles, textbooks, letters to the editor, op-ed pieces, news weekly essays, and class and public lectures, news releases, expert testimony and consulting advice.

However, one could argue that the principle drivers of war at the day-to-day level are greed and fundamentalist religious beliefs and that both of these drivers are indifferent to debates. Some war is promoted by very powerful organizations and individuals with much financial backing and financial interest in the business of war. Some war is promoted by religious beliefs and motives that are rigidly held. For example, one belief associated with fundamentalism is that if information conflicts with one's religion, the believer expects his/her leaders to explain why the information is false. Greed and religious beliefs are unlikely to be reversed by logical argument.

Another approach to peace is through current political parties and their candidates. A major drawback of this approach is that in many governments money can flow to candidates for office to support their election campaigns in return for favors, such as legislative decisions that promote special interests rather than the common good. There is much money to be made via government/military contracts and via financial and business activities that are minimally regulated. Government systems that require much campaign money and that permit easy flow of money to elected officials from special interest groups are subject to corruption of elected officials.

Psychological research data that suggests new approaches to peace promotion.

I have been a practicing psychologist since 1965, working with juvenile delinquents, as a school psychologist, professor, clinician, industrial and organizational psychologist and, for the past 7 1/2 years as a political psychologist measuring human traits related to political behavior, especially as relates to war and peace attitudes. I have conducted many studies and read of other's studies. I have listened to and given research papers at national and international conventions for the past five years. I have participated in discussions with research psychologists and others in professional organizations interested in understanding war and peace to promote a better world.

Here are highlights of my own studies, most of which are presented in publications on my web site, [Politicalpsychologyresearch.com](http://Politicalpsychologyresearch.com). The three most recent are one on 64 psychological traits that differentiate liberal from conservative worldviews, one on social and political activism, and one on leadership ethics.

There are dozens of psychological traits that can be reliably measured with questionnaires that are related to war and peace. Some are "anti-social" in flavor and cluster together statistically, including warmongering endorsement, violence-proneness, authoritarianism, social dominance, fundamentalist religious beliefs, preferences for dictatorship and special interest group democracy, financial stinginess, xenophobia, endorsement of political lying and conniving, fear of diseases, seeing humans as naturally competitive, disinterest in environmental protection and disrespect for

minority groups, including ethnic groups different from one's own, women and foreigners.

Other traits are pro-social and cluster together statistically, including human rights endorsement, peace endorsement, financial generosity, kindly religious beliefs, endorsing a positive and helpful foreign policy, endorsing meta-religion concepts, enjoying travel, feeling comfortable with people different than oneself, endorsing protection of the environment and concern for future generations, and seeing humans as basically cooperative with each other.

The first of these clusters is statistically associated with endorsing conservative political attitudes, the second with liberal political attitudes.

Proportionally, the number of persons who endorse the attitudes in the first cluster is much smaller than the number of persons who endorse the pro-social cluster, perhaps by as little as 1 to 10 or 1 to 13. The relatively equal voting of citizens for both groups in political elections seems explained in part by the endorsement and use of lying and conniving by the antisocial group, specifically to preach fear and danger as a rallying cry.

There is biological and psychological theory and data that supports the notion that these two worldviews and trait clusters evolved in the human species to serve two in-group functions. The first cluster apparently serves to protect in-groups from threats, including exposure to disease pathogens in neighboring groups against which the local group does not yet have immunity. The second cluster serves to promote gradual cooperative interaction with neighboring groups to benefit from trade.

Both groups can eventually promote exchange of genetic material that will bring immunity to neighboring diseases. Warmongering has typically promoted exchange of genetic material with neighboring groups by killing their adult males and taking their females captive. Pro-social activities can exchange genetic material by trusting and cooperative interactions with neighboring groups, including intermarriage between adults of both groups.

Current theory holds that even very small groups, such as clans and families, are likely to have representatives of both of these worldviews, the liberal and conservative ones, assuring that every small group will be prepared with some members that are willing to lead either saber-rattling or

warring defense against threatening neighbors or peaceful cooperation with neighboring groups, depending on current circumstances. This theory also holds that the persons who represent these two orientations will be unlikely to give up their orientation or to endorse the other orientation. Each will see their orientation has the most reasonable one to promote. They will justify their position with what appear to them to be relevant facts that any reasonable person would believe support their argument. Their orientations are programmed by genetics and experiences more than by rational facts. The orientations select the "facts" that are used to justify them rather than the facts leading to the orientations.

### What to do.

One implication of these findings is that it is important to reduce threats to individuals and groups. Groups under threat are more vulnerable to warmongering leadership, which emphasizes dangers and recruits citizens to compete against other groups. Warmongering-prone persons will be present in every group, so the greater the perceived threats to citizens, the more likely warmongering leaders will try to capitalize on this to promote conflict.

Another implication is that persons who represent the liberal and conservative worldviews are "programmed" by genetics and other forces to be who they are. Trying to change them is not practical. Helping them understand themselves as political beings and channeling their energies in constructive, cooperative activities for the good of all concerned will be important to reduce wasteful in-fighting and conserve energy and resources for constructive use. For example, the Rotary International effort to eradicate polio, marshalling the energies of persons of all political persuasion, has been remarkably effective, perhaps because it taps the conservative fear of diseases and the liberal concern for the well-being of all groups of humans of great diversity.

Another implication is that one productive way to promote peace is to more consistently politically empower citizens of the liberal worldview. Persons of this worldview tend to trust and accept people different from themselves and want to cooperate with them.

One way to politically empower liberal citizens is to design political parties to be independent of special interest group money, have platforms



based on well-designed polls of well-informed citizens and party members, select and groom candidates for office that are low on warmongering-proneness and high on constructive leadership attitudes and require that their campaigns be funded exclusively from party funds, no special interest group money. The author has designed 50-item questionnaires that can be used to measure the warmongering-proneness and constructive leadership attitudes of potential leaders.

Another way to politically empower liberal citizens is to promote the design and development of sustainable communities, as via institutes with multidisciplinary staffing. Research, information, polling of local citizens and professional guidance would all be key aspects of such designed communities. The designs would be comprehensive, including attention to the environment, affordable housing, health care and education, meaningful jobs for all who want them, zero population growth, protection of agricultural, water, forest and ocean resources, and development of civil and fair government serving the common good over the long perspective versus special interest groups over the short run. Local citizens would carry out the designs, modify them periodically and negotiate with related governments, corporations, etc. to promote their interests.

There are several roles specifically for psychologists in the above proposals, especially in focus group interviewing, designing and administering sophisticated polls to define the common good and specific policies and programs for sustainable communities, and designing and overseeing the use of questionnaire instruments for identifying dangerous and safe leaders from a distance (a job also for journalists).

There are roles for researchers to replicate studies that underlie the above suggestions, to check, challenge, confirm, modify, clarify and extend the initial findings. Researchers would also have roles in doing polling research to measure the common good in various communities.

Educators would have important roles in teaching citizens the information that underlies the above insights and programs, informs citizens of specific facets of sustainable communities and options for action prior to completing polls, etc.

Researchers from many professions would have roles in studying issues and providing data and options for action to present citizens with poll

choices about what general principles they endorse and specific policies and programs they want to realize and promote in their communities as sustainable ones. For example, chemical, electrical and engineering research clarifies options for replacing fossil fuel with non-polluting fuels for powering vehicles, electrical energy generating plants and for heating buildings.

This model does not provide quick fixes, as there are many threats to many groups and nations around the world, including threats promoted by very rapid population growth worldwide, limited arable land and water resources, degradation of life support features of the environment, such as forests and oceans, and highly destructive military weapons. Global warming, depletion of honey bees by insecticides and other forces, difficulties of nations to provide sufficient jobs for their citizens, rapid transmission of disease pathogens by modern transportation, and rapid and efficient communications, all pose significant treats to humans.

Politically empowering liberal, peaceful citizens is also an interesting challenge, in part because persons of the conservative worldview typically have much wealth and political power in nations. Persons of the conservative worldview also tend to endorse authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism, which facilitate organizing them politically. They tend to think alike, use religion similarly to organize their whole lives and they bow rather reflexively and obediently to authority.

In contrast, persons of the liberal orientation tend to use religion in very diverse ways to guide their personal lives. They tend to eschew authoritarian leadership. They tend to be very tolerant of differences and think differently from one another on specific topics. Therefore, they are more difficult to organize politically. Organizing them depends heavily on democratic decision-making processes. This can be both a weakness and a strength. It is a weakness because democratic decision-making processes are more tedious than authoritarian processes. It is a strength in that decisions made can be very carefully designed and informed by the opinions of many citizens with many different valuable perspectives.

Summary.

In summary, research on the psychological nature of human political attitudes and beliefs tends to narrow action options somewhat but does not provide magical, simple solutions.

The present author welcomes opportunities to dialogue further with interested parties and welcomes opportunities to replicate his studies and do new ones that clarify and follow the leads provided by research to date. Internet questionnaire studies have proved to be a very convenient and efficient way to gather data to this end. The author can be contacted via e-mail: [Bill@Politicalpsychologyresearch.com](mailto:Bill@Politicalpsychologyresearch.com). For further detail his research publications appear on his non-profit corporation web site: [Politicalpsychologyresearch.com](http://Politicalpsychologyresearch.com).