

The U.S. Institute of Peace Is Politicized and Unaccountable

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The United States Institute of Peace is entirely taxpayer funded but lacks transparency and has no mechanisms in place to ensure accountability to taxpayers.

The USIP's employees donate overwhelmingly to only one party, and its Republican board members have little connection to recent Republican Presidents.

The Biden Administration has used appointment to the USIP board as a form of political patronage.

The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) was founded by Congress in 1984 as a “peace academy” to conduct and support research and training “to promote international peace and the resolution of conflicts among the nations and peoples of the world.”¹ In its start-up year, the USIP had a budget of \$4 million, with a requirement that it disburse at least one-fourth of its annual appropriation for grants or contracts to support peace research and education within nonprofit and governmental institutions.

USIP: Formation and Growth

Whatever the merits of the institute at its founding, with the end of the Cold War, the USIP broadened its mission beyond interstate conflict to include intrastate (i.e., internal) conflicts as well. Around 1995, the USIP began a shift from just the study of

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peace processes to a more operational role conducting peace training and supporting peace processes in hot spots around the world. In 2012 the USIP broadened its mission again to include interpersonal violence, with programs to end sexual violence during wars and internal conflicts, and in 2013 conducted a symposium on Men, Peace and Security that sought to encourage “non-violent notions of masculinity in societies affected by violent conflict.”²

In 2015 Nancy Lindborg, former president of Mercy Corps and assistant administrator for the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance at the U.S. Agency for International Development under the administration of President Barack Obama, became the first president of the USIP drawn from the development (rather than defense or academic) community. She began to broaden the USIP’s mission again to include development objectives. The stated rationale for this shift was that

the absence of violent conflict alone is not sufficient to ensure peace; rather we must work within a transformation framework that recognizes the conditions necessary for sustainable peace: inclusive societies and political processes, economic opportunities, citizen security, and access to justice.³

With all its funding provided by American taxpayers, the USIP is a de facto agency of the U.S. government. Currently, the USIP has an annual budget of \$56 million, maintains offices in 16 countries, and implements about 300 programs in a total of 87 different countries.⁴ It has come a long way from the little “peace academy” envisioned by its founders.

The Intent of the United States Institute of Peace Act of 1984

The rapid evolution of the USIP from a small center for research and education to an operational agency embedded in the national security, diplomacy, and international development space has taken the institute far from its original mandate. The clear intent of the USIP Act,⁵ as illustrated in the excerpts below, is the establishment of an institution to conduct research on peace and to provide education to diplomats and soldiers and others on best practices in avoiding or resolving violent conflict and promoting peace.

Below are selected excerpts from § 4601, the congressional declaration of findings and purposes of the USIP:

- “[P]eacemaking activities of people in such institutions, government, private enterprise, and voluntary associations can be strengthened by

a national institution devoted to international peace research, education and training, and information services”;⁶

- “[T]o develop new comprehensive peace education and training programs, basic and applied research projects, and programs providing peace information”;⁷ and
- “It is the purpose of this chapter to establish an independent, nonprofit, national institute to serve the people and the Government through the widest possible range of education and training, basic and applied research opportunities, and peace information services on the means to promote international peace and the resolution of conflicts among the nations and peoples of the world without recourse to violence.”⁸

This understanding of the original intent of the act is evident throughout the document, including, in particular, in § 4604 on Powers and Duties of the USIP. Nowhere in the law is the assumption or expectation that the USIP would ever conduct programs unrelated to these objectives.

USIP’s Program Areas Today

Since 1984, the USIP has expanded its remit far beyond the intent of the USIP Act—and to such an extent that the mandated activities and lawful purposes of the institute are hardly reflected in its current portfolio. Rather than serving the peacemaking community by conducting research on the causes of conflict and means to avoid or resolve conflicts and then providing that information to universities, diplomats, and soldiers serving abroad, the USIP has morphed into an operational organization that duplicates functions and capabilities of existing government agencies, including development functions of the U.S. Agency for International Development and diplomatic functions of the U.S. Department of State.

A look at the USIP’s current issue areas (twenty in total) effectively illustrates the potential for overlap and duplication of effort.

Below are the issue areas listed on the USIP website.⁹

USIP Budget

In the past five years, the USIP’s budget has grown from \$39 million in fiscal year (FY) 2017 to \$55 million in FY 2024. How that budget is spent is not entirely clear. While there is some vague language about “priorities”

TABLE 1

Issue Areas Listed on the U.S. Institute for Peace Website

- Civilian–Military Relations
- Conflict Analysis & Prevention
- Democracy & Governance
- Economics
- Education & Training
- Environment
- Fragility & Resilience
- Gender
- Global Elections & Conflict
- Global Health
- Global Policy
- Human Rights
- Justice, Security & Rule of Law
- Mediation, Negotiation & Dialogue
- Nonviolent Action
- Peace Processes
- Reconciliation
- Religion
- Violent Extremism
- Youth

SOURCE: U.S. Institute of Peace, “Issue Areas,” <https://www.usip.org/issue-areas> (accessed December 1, 2023).

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in the 2024 Congressional Budget Justification, no information is available that breaks down the USIP’s spending based on purpose and activities. Unlike nonprofit organizations that must publish annual reports and submit a publicly available Form 990 to the Internal Revenue Service, or formal government agencies that have to publish detailed budgets, the USIP’s budget is opaque to the taxpayers who are funding it, not to mention the Members of Congress who represent them.

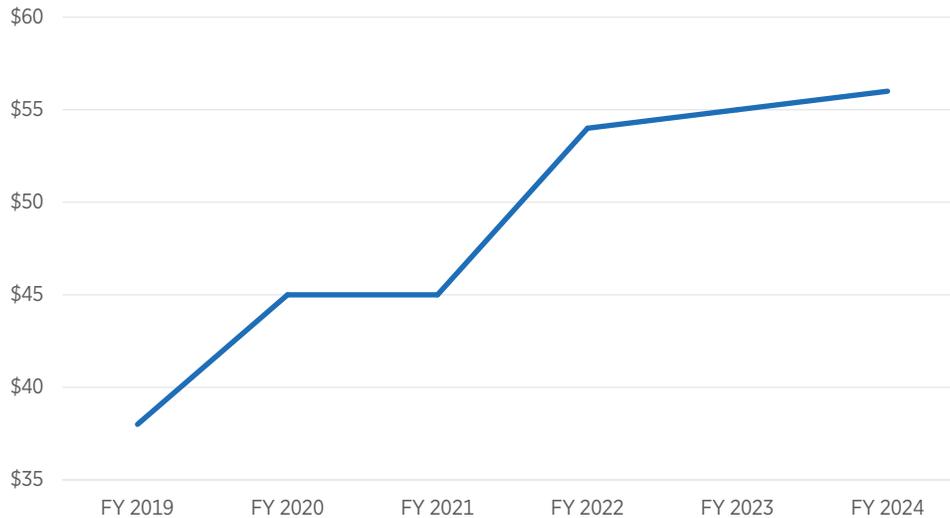
According to the law that established and regulates the USIP,¹⁰ the organization must spend one-fourth of its annual budget (about \$12,000,000) on grants and contracts to support peace research and education by nonprofits and official public institutions. Given publicly available information, it is not possible to determine if this requirement is being met or if the grantees reflect any kind of bipartisan or nonpartisan rubric. According to the grants currently listed on its website,¹¹ the USIP made just one grant in 2023 for \$150,602; six grants in 2022 totaling \$811,770; and four grants in 2021 totaling \$597,385.

The USIP was originally required to produce an annual audit for Congress and the President (with copies for the public) and to produce a biennial program report for the President and Congress,¹² but they now argue that, based on an obscure paperwork reduction act passed in 2000, they no longer have to produce any reports. Whether the drafters of this legislation intended to include the USIP is questionable, but if that was their intention, it was a mistake, as it has created a taxpayer-funded organization that is neither transparent nor accountable in any meaningful way.

CHART 1

U.S. Institute for Peace Funding

IN MILLIONS OF DOLLARS



SOURCE: U.S. Department of State, “International Affairs Budgets,” FY 2019 to FY 2024, <https://www.state.gov/plans-performance-budget/international-affairs-budgets/> (accessed September 3, 2024).

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Political Orientation of the USIP

The USIP is meant to be nonpartisan and superficially meets that criterion through a “balanced” board of directors and by sponsoring “bipartisan” activities. Digging deeper reveals an organization that is, in fact, far from politically balanced.

Qualifications and Political Bias of the USIP Board of Directors.

From the USIP webpage:

By law, the United States Institute of Peace is governed by a bipartisan Board of Directors. The board is composed of twelve members from outside federal service appointed by the President of the United States and confirmed by the Senate, and four ex-officio members: the secretary of state (who may designate another Senate-confirmed State Department official), the secretary of defense (who may designate another Senate-confirmed Defense Department official), the president of the National Defense University (who may designate the vice president of the National Defense University), and the president of the

Institute (nonvoting). The board is prohibited by law from having more than eight voting members of the same political party.¹³

There are nominally six Republicans and six Democrats on the board. While the political orientation of the members is not included on the website, they can be identified by party based on political donations or previous political-appointed positions. The other four ex-officio members are not identified by party and have no record of political donations. Among the Republican members, none donated to President Donald Trump in 2020 and some donated to explicitly anti-Trump candidates and PACs in the 2020 and 2022 cycles.

Only one of the Republican members of the board served in the Trump Administration, and she resigned amid loyalty concerns expressed by some White House staffers.¹⁴ In total, Republican members donated \$61,450¹⁵ to political candidates and causes, with \$1,000 of that going to a Democrat candidate, and at least \$32,200 of the remainder going to anti-Trump candidates or causes. Most of the Democrat members of the board seem to have been appointed based on their political contributions, with four of the six contributing a total of \$780,000 to Democrat candidates and causes—including \$500 from board member Kerry Kennedy.

Section § 4605 of the USIP Act, entitled “Board of Directors, (d) Qualifications,” reads: “(1) Each individual appointed to the Board under subsection (b)(4) shall have appropriate practical or academic experience in peace and conflict resolution efforts of the United States.”¹⁶ Several of the board members do not obviously meet this requirement and, instead, seem to have been selected for their fundraising ability for the Democrat party, or for their corporate or political connections, or both. For example:

- Joseph L. Falk is a board member of the national LGBTQ Victory Fund, is one of Miami’s best-known gay political activists, and between 2019 and 2022 donated \$610,971 to Democrat candidates and causes. He has no apparent peace or conflict resolution experience.
- Edward M. Gabriel is a former lobbyist and was a politically appointed ambassador during the Clinton Administration. He donated \$67,800 to Democrat candidates and causes during the 2019–2022 period, but he has no apparent peace or conflict resolution experience.
- Nathalie Rayes is the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Latino Victory Project and donated \$33,450 to Democrat candidates

and causes in the 2020 and 2022 election cycles. She has no apparent peace or conflict resolution experience. (In December 2023, Rayes stepped down from the Board when she was appointed Ambassador to Croatia by the Biden Administration. She has not yet been replaced.)

- Mary Green Swig is the founder and president of Mary Green Lingerie, and donated \$67,000 to 2019–2022 election cycles, while her husband donated \$672,000 to Democrat candidates and causes during the same period (including \$136,000 to congresswomen and former Democrat Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi’s campaign). Swig has no apparent peace or conflict resolution experience.

USIP Employee Political Orientation

To determine the predominant political orientation of the USIP as an institution, the author reviewed political contribution data from the Federal Election Commission for USIP employees from the beginning of 2019 through the end of 2022 (i.e., the presidential and mid-term election cycles). More than *98 percent* of the 124 individual USIP employee donors listed in the data contributed to Democrat candidates and causes. Just two of the donors contributed exclusively to Republicans while two Democrat donors also contributed to a Republican candidate or cause.¹⁷

While the USIP Act of 1984 mandates that the USIP’s board be bipartisan, there is no formal requirement that its staff be bipartisan. There is, however, a stipulation in § 1709(b) that states:

No political test or political qualification may be used in selecting, appointing, promoting, or taking any other personnel action with respect to any officer, employee, agent, or recipient of Institute funds or services or in selecting or monitoring any grantee, contractor, person, or entity receiving financial assistance under this title.

The political contribution data raises the specter of political discrimination.

Conclusions

The U.S. Institute of Peace has grown from a modest \$4 million research and education institute with a limited and well-defined mandate to a sprawling \$55 million conglomerate that sees itself as an important player in peacemaking, national security, international development, and diplomacy,

TABLE 2

Summary of U.S. Institute for Peace Employee Political Contributions

Figures are based on data from 949 records for 2019–2022.

	Total	To Democrats	To Republicans
Donors	124	122 (98%)	2 (2%)
Total Donations	\$90,710	\$87,610 (97%)	\$3,100 (3%)
Average Donation	\$732	\$718	\$775

SOURCE: Author’s research based on data from the Federal Election Commission, <https://www.fec.gov/> (accessed September 3, 2024).

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with programs in almost half the countries in the world. This has created overlapping mandates with federal agencies and departments conducting similar programs overseas and has sown confusion among U.S. diplomats and international development officers.

The USIP’s taxpayer-funded appropriation has expanded dramatically in recent years, but its spending has remained completely opaque. For example, the USIP is legally required to spend one-quarter of its appropriation on grants and contracts with research and education institutions, but it is impossible to know from published sources if this requirement is met. Without complete funding data linked to activities, assessment of effectiveness and accountability are not possible.

In a functional sense, the USIP is neither nonpartisan nor bipartisan. Political contribution analysis suggests that its staff are almost entirely Democrat, indicating political discrimination (i.e., a “political testing”) in its hiring decisions. The USIP’s Republican board members lack significant connection to the most recent Republican President and current nominee for President.

The Biden Administration may have violated the USIP Act by appointing unqualified individuals to the board and by using those appointments as a form of political patronage. Congress should withhold further funding for the USIP until it receives satisfactory evidence of the qualifications of these individuals, or the individuals are replaced with qualified individuals (preferably from the currently unrepresented conservative wing of the Republican Party).

Recommendations

- **Congress should clarify the USIP’s mandate to eliminate duplication of effort with other federal agencies.** Refocusing the USIP to its original mandate and statute will address the issue of duplication of effort and the confusion it sows while making it more effective in achieving its original core mission. This will, however, require a corresponding reduction in its budget allocation.
- **Congress should reimpose reporting requirements on the USIP.** As a taxpayer-funded institution, the USIP’s lack of transparency and accountability of its activities and spending decisions is unacceptable. Should Congress continue to fund the USIP, it should reimpose the reporting requirements that are routinely asked of other governmental and nongovernmental institutions funded by the U.S. taxpayer.
- **Congress should withhold future appropriations from USIP until hearings can be held to examine political bias.** The American taxpayers should not be asked to finance one political party at the expense of the other. The failure of the USIP to adhere to this basic requirement should lead to its defunding.
- **Congress should require the President of the United States to appoint qualified board members to the USIP.** The USIP board must not be reduced to crass political patronage and should see appointments for the board go to individuals that bring expertise to the institute’s work. Should the USIP’s board fail to meet this legal requirement, Congress should withhold further funding to this institution.

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Endnotes

1. The United States Institute of Peace Act, Public Law No. 98-525.
2. U.S. Institute of Peace, "USIP Timeline," <https://www.usip.org/about-us/usip-timeline> (accessed October 24, 2023).
3. U.S. Institute of Peace, "Strategic Plan 2020-2022," https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/USIP-Strategic-Plan-2020-2022.pdf?utm_source=usip.org (accessed August 29, 2024).
4. U.S. Institute of Peace, "Regions and Countries," <https://www.usip.org/regions-countries> (accessed October 24, 2023).
5. The United States Institute of Peace Act.
6. *Ibid.*, § 4601(a)(5).
7. *Ibid.*, § 4601(a)(6).
8. *Ibid.*, § 4601(b).
9. U.S. Institute of Peace, "Issue Areas," <https://www.usip.org/issue-areas> (accessed September 4, 2024).
10. The United States Institute of Peace Act, § 1705(d).
11. U.S. Institute of Peace, "Search Funded Grants," <https://www.usip.org/issue-areas>, (accessed December 1, 2023).
12. 22 U.S. Code, Ch. 56, § 4607(g) and (h), and § 4611.
13. U.S. Institute of Peace, "About," <https://www.usip.org/about/leadership/board-directors> (accessed December 1, 2023).
14. Aaron Mehta, "Kathryn Wheelbarger, Pentagon's Top Foreign Policy Official, Resigns," *Defense News*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2020/06/18/kathryn-wheelbarger-top-foreign-policy-defense-official-resigns/> (accessed October 24, 2023).
15. All of the information on contributions in this *Backgrounders* is based on author analysis of publicly available data collected and maintained by the Federal Election Commission.
16. 22 U.S. Code, Ch. 56, §4605.
17. Republican Ryan White contributed \$1750, and Republican Scott Smith contributed \$100, while Democrat Thomas Hill gave \$7140 to Democrat candidates and causes and \$750 to Liz Cheney's anti-Trump PAC ("The Great Cause"), while Democrat Nancy Lindborg gave \$26,150 to Democrat candidates and causes and \$500 to Team Graham.