

Statement before the House Select Committee on the Modernization of
Congress

**Rethinking Congressional Culture:
Lessons from the Fields of Organizational Psychology
and Conflict Resolution**

Amanda Ripley
Journalist & Author of *High Conflict*

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Chair Kilmer, Vice-Chair Timmons and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today—and for holding this hearing. I cannot think of anything more important to be discussing right now.

On one level, I should say, I know very little about this particular place. Congress is a vast, intricate body, and you and the other experts you've invited understand the specific mechanisms for reform far better.

On a deeper level, though, I understand your predicament. I understand it viscerally. Because I have been stuck in a neighboring quagmire for quite some time.

I've been a journalist for two decades, starting out at *Congressional Quarterly* and moving to *Time Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, *Politico* and other places. But over the past five years, I've had to admit that something is broken in my profession. The traditions of journalism are not functioning the way they are supposed to. Our work is distrusted by many millions of Americans--and actively avoided by even more.

What I've come to understand is that journalists—like politicians—are trapped. We have been captured by a very specific kind of conflict, sometimes called “high conflict.”¹ This kind of conflict operates differently from normal conflict. The original facts that led to the dispute fade into the background. The us-versus-them dynamic takes over, and the conflict becomes its own reality.

Like gravity, high conflict exerts a pull on everything else. Our brains behave differently. We make a lot of mistakes. High conflict incentivizes journalists (like politicians) to act as conflict entrepreneurs, to exploit conflict for power, meaning or profit. And any common-sense thing we do to try to end high conflict...usually makes it worse.

I am trying to get myself and my colleagues out of this quagmire, and like you, I understand that doubling down on the usual strategies will not work.²

So I've spent the past four years following people who have gotten out of other high conflicts—in politics, street gangs, even civil wars—and I have identified a few surprising patterns that might be useful to you. Because it turns out that the way people behave in conflict is not that different--whether it's in divorce court or a picket line or in the halls of Congress. So there's a lot we can learn from the research and stories of high conflict.

¹ Traditionally, in family therapy, the phrase “high conflict” has been used as an adjective, to describe particularly difficult people or divorces. Here, I'm referring to any system in which conflict becomes self-perpetuating and paralyzing. In academia, many high conflicts (but not all) can fall under the category of “intractable conflict.”

² For more on what I've learned to do differently as a journalist covering conflict, see [Complicating the Narratives](#), a 2018 essay published with support from the Solutions Journalism Network.

First, before anything else, learn to recognize this distinction. *High conflict* is the problem; not conflict. We don't need unity or even bipartisanship as much as we need what might be called *good conflict*.

Good conflict is an homage to what your late colleague John Lewis called "good trouble." Good conflict is necessary. It can be stressful and heated. Anger does flare up. But so does curiosity.

Questions get asked. People defend themselves and their beliefs without dehumanizing their adversaries, without corrupting what they hold dear. There is movement. The conflict is going somewhere interesting.

Most remarkably, everyone I know who has experienced good conflict finds it strangely exhilarating. You feel open, alive, able to be surprised. It is the kind of feeling you want to experience more, once you've tried it.

In high conflict, by contrast, the feud is stuck on rotation. High conflict *is* the destination. There is a kind of misery that sets in, and most people feel a deep, internal hunger for something else.

Second, cultivate good conflict in your reforms, on purpose, to help shift out of high conflict. There are people and communities who have done this. I have seen it happen up close—in schools, synagogues, churches, town councils, all kinds of places, all over the world.

Here are a few examples of practices and rituals that tend to lead to "good conflict" and to high conflict, generally speaking.

Good Conflict	High Conflict
Nonaggression Pacts	Humiliation
Collaboration	Competition
Trusted Third-Party Mediators	Conflict Entrepreneurs
Cross-Cutting Group Identities	Binary Group Identities
Complexity	Zero-Sum Thinking

In global conflict zones, one of the most proven ways to interrupt high conflict is to **revive other group identities**, the ones that transcend the conflict. Often, this means reviving people's identities as citizens of a state or country, as parents—or as sports fans or athletes. These three identities are powerful ways to pull us out of high conflict.

In post-ISIS Iraq, Christians assigned to compete on a soccer team alongside Muslim teammates were more tolerant towards the other side up to six months later, according to a study published last year.³ In Colombia, one of the most effective interventions in that country's civil war was a simple public-service announcement that aired during major national-team soccer games, inviting rebel fighters to come home and watch the next game with their families.⁴ (In that case, the messaging managed to invoke all three non-conflict identities—as citizens, family members and sports fans—which may have been why it was so effective.)

Viewed in light of this research, having members of Congress play softball or basketball on mixed, bipartisan teams—and inviting family members to bipartisan retreats—is more than just a nicety. It is an evidence-based intervention that should reduce intergroup anxiety and boost the odds of good conflict. It is low-hanging fruit, relatively speaking.

Some of the other proposals you've already discussed could also cultivate good conflict, including nonpartisan gathering spaces, round table conversations like this one, and meeting spaces without cameras. Anything that scrambles up the groups (including ranked-choice voting and other electoral reforms), blurring the oversimplified lines between us, can help provoke human instincts for good conflict.

Another proven way to reduce high conflict is through **nonaggression pacts**. In Chicago, one of the most effective ways to reduce gang violence today is through establishing social-media rules of engagement. Gang violence interrupters like Chicago CRED nudge rival gang members to agree to nonaggression pacts, vowing that they will not disrespect or humiliate one another's groups on social media, for example. When those pacts get violated (and they always do, like most peace treaties in history), there is a process in place to attempt to rectify the violation—without escalating the conflict through revenge. Usually, this means quite literally removing a demeaning YouTube or Facebook post before anyone gets shot. It is a way to slow down high conflict, and it can work wonders.

Humans need to have a **“magic ratio”** of positive to negative encounters with one another in order to keep conflict healthy, generally speaking. For strangers who disagree profoundly, that ratio seems to be about 3:1 (positive to negative);⁵ for married couples, it's more like 5:1.⁶ What

³ For more details on this research, see Salma Mousa's *Science* article [“Building social cohesion between Christians and Muslims through soccer in post-ISIS Iraq.”](#)

⁴ This finding comes from forthcoming research by Juan Pablo Aparicio, Michael Jetter and Christopher Parsons, shared with me in 2020.

⁵ This finding on the magic ratio in conflict conversations between strangers comes from my interviews with Columbia University researcher and conflict expert Peter T. Coleman.

⁶ The magic ratio in marital research comes from psychologists John and Julie Gottman. For more details, see *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail* by John Gottman with Nan Silver.

do you think is the average ratio now for members of Congress? What are the easiest ways to boost that ratio in everyday spaces and interactions?

Third, always be on the lookout for **saturation points**. These are moments in a high conflict when the losses start to seem heavier than the gains. Usually, saturation points happen after a shock—or some unexpected shift in the dynamics.⁷

The great weakness of high conflict is that it makes the people involved kind of miserable. Most of us want it to stop, on some level. But we can't figure out how.

This misery creates opportunities. Sort of like hitting bottom for an alcoholic. And a saturation point can be a golden opening to interrupt the conflict. To turn it upside down.

With a couple in a bitter custody dispute, a saturation point might happen if a child gets sick, all of a sudden. The priorities can realign, the identities can shift. With gang members, it might happen during a snowstorm. Or in the hospital, after someone's been shot—especially if none of the other gang members come to visit. In politics, it can happen after a loss—or a riot.

But the saturation point must be recognized and seized, or it will pass. Prepare now for these moments. Build relationships across the aisle, collect ideas for nonaggression pacts, identify trusted, third-party mediators who could facilitate deeper conversations across your divides--and then, when the moment is ripe, you will be ready.

People in high conflict often feel like they have no options. It feels like the other side or person is so insane and dangerous and malicious that there is just no way forward, no way to co-exist. This is the same feeling people have had in South Africa, in Northern Ireland, in Rwanda, in Colombia. This is part of the universal human struggle to figure out: How do we co-exist?

I've mentioned a few examples of changes that gang members in Chicago and combatants in Colombia voluntarily made to get themselves out of high conflict. These ideas would of course have to be adapted to work in Congress. But if we can ask warring factions to take such courageous, risky leaps of faith, then surely we can ask it of our members of Congress.

It may feel hard to imagine doing any of these things right now. But based on everything I've seen in other high conflicts, it can get much, much harder, the longer we wait.

⁷ This discussion of saturation points is an abbreviated version of a case made in my recent book *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped—and How We Get Out*.

I thank you, and the members and staff of the committee, for daring to have these hard conversations and for giving me this opportunity to contribute to your deliberations. We have to get better at fighting. Our future, something all Americans still share, depends on good conflict.