WASHINGTON, DC – The March Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum (CPRF) was held at the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) on March 9th, 2010. The CPRF is organized by the non-profit organization Search for Common Ground, and is co-sponsored by the Alliance for Peacebuilding, American University, 3D Security, George Mason University, Johns Hopkins University, Partners for Democratic Change, United States Institute of Peace and Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

The forum was structured differently from usual forums. David Campt began the session by introducing his Audience Response System and asking the audience some key questions to set the tone for the rest of the forum. Then each panelist discussed his or her particular views. The audience then broke up into groups and produced questions for the speakers and questions for the rest of the audience that were asked and answered using audience response system utilized at the beginning of the Forum.

DAVID CAMPT (Audience Response System Presentation): David Campt began the audience response system presentation with a quick introduction to the TurningPoint Audience response devices, which he regularly uses in his work to “get to the core more quickly and more inclusively.” The devices allow members of the audience to respond to multiple choice questions anonymously by pressing one of ten buttons on a small hand-held keypad. He asked a series of demographic and opinion questions, emphasizing that “It is important to remember who is in the room when we have a discussion.” He explained that knowing the starting point of the members of a discussion allows genuine progress to be
made and that the anonymity of the audience response devices allowed responses to be more accurate. Campt easily demonstrated his point in the difference in responses between people of color and white people in the audience.

“It would appear to me that the people of color are a bit more pessimistic about where we are in relation to racial reconciliation and that informs the kind of conversation we can have. We are all intelligent people looking at slightly different universes based on who we are.”

ROB CORCORAN - (Presentation): Rob Corcoran focused primarily on his work in Richmond and the importance of healing community members together as a cooperative process for a whole society. He spoke about the importance of history, myth and memory and the ‘walk through history’ he helped to build.

“For the very first time some of the sights and events and places in history were publicly marked for the, the slave market downtown, the dock where the slave ships landed. These have never ever been acknowledged, let alone marked, before and the entire community came together to do this. The important thing about this is that it was not just a group of what you might call liberal activists. This was the business community, the government, and people of different faith movements. It created an agenda for healing by allowing the conscience of a larger number of people to be activated in a very positive sense and helped liberate people from issues of guilt, avoidance and resentment. It created a shared narrative and helped people take ownership of our joint history. We came to the conclusion that we cannot heal separately, we actually need each other to do that.”

JANA CARTER - (Presentation): Jana Carter started her speech with a description of the 10th Congressional Civil Rights Pilgrimage to Alabama she attended over the previous weekend. During the Pilgrimage she heard speeches and services at the First Baptist chapel in Montgomery, Brown Chapel and marched across Edmond Pettus Bridge. She expressed how moving the experience had been and how it had reminded her of the importance of the spiritual aspect of the struggle for social justice, contrasting it with her own experiences in law school and in her career as a trial lawyer working in civil rights.

“I was struck what a challenge it was to prove in a court of law that my clients experienced discrimination. Sometimes we’d win and sometimes we’d lose but my clients were never empowered by that experience. Reverend CT Vivian said on Sunday that the struggle for civil rights, the struggle for racial justice, and the struggle for social justice was never a political struggle. It was a spiritual struggle. That really spoke to me because I can look back and see my own path and work as an organizer, as an activist, as an attorney and it lacked that spiritual aspect. It was a legal struggle or a political struggle, but it wasn’t a spiritual struggle.”

She also spoke about the One America project and Search for Common Ground’s philosophy of conflict. “We believe that conflict is normal, conflict is natural. As long as we are human we will be in conflict. We believe that conflict provides opportunity for connection and coming together”

DAVID CAMPT (Presentation) David Campt used his presentation to focus in greater detail on the structure of racial conflict in the United States. He opened by addressing the question of whether techniques used to address racial conflict in the US are useful abroad and vice versa.

“I think that we have made a lot of progress over the last 30 40 years. We are not likely to see the same kind of outbreaks of mob violence by majority groups against minority groups that we see around the world, in Europe and other places. I think we are in a whole different level. On some level we have to
own the fact that we have caused a values shift in the US. . . We have to keep pushing and struggling but I think that the value shift means that things like David Duke getting the majority of white votes in Louisiana are not likely to happen again.”

He then moved on to explore the negative systems that had been created by the shift in the dynamic, pointing out that the value shift that has made racism unacceptable has led to a situation where “The residual prejudice has decreased but to some level has also gone underground . . . since we have won the value shift our internal prejudice has become almost verboten to talk about, to admit.”

**Group Discussion & Questions**

**First Round of Panel Questions:** The first question for the panel was how to get through the black/white dichotomy in race relations. There was consensus that it had to be worked through with time and effort. David Campt also pointed out the dichotomy leaves other racial issues out but that resolving this key aspect of racism in the United States would help all racial issues in the US because of how emotionally deep seated it is. The next question was about how to engage young people, and the panel agreed that a balance of fostering leadership and allowing them freedom to make their own choices. Jana also brought up that the shifted demographics of younger generations could lead them to find their own way. The panel was then asked how to get more truth-telling into the academic curriculum. David Campt pointed out that “as a profession we are horribly inarticulate about all the research that demonstrates the role of implicit bias. We need to be able to rattle off studies and findings to show that just because a person doesn’t think they have a bias doesn’t mean they don’t.” The panel also emphasized the importance of programs in schools and universities that deal with the issues of multiple legitimate perspectives on history and cultural training. In response to a question about how to introduce complexity into the media the panelists offered diverse suggestions. Jana Carter cited the example of Search creating its own program, “The Team”, while Rob Corcoran stressed positive engagement with journalists and David Campt discussed the importance of staying entertaining and not being “too preachy”.

**Audience Response Questions:** The questions then switched to the audience response system. The group found that the name of the One America project was favorable although a small minority felt isolated by it. There was general agreement that underfunding public schools is racial violence and there is a long way to go with gender discrimination. There was an interesting response to the question “How big of a problem are racially segregated neighborhoods that reflect peoples’ choices not forced segregation?” the responses generally supported the idea that this was a problem but were somewhat mixed, while no one was willing to openly defend the idea that they aren’t a problem. David Campt responded, saying “there are a lot of people who feel like that [it is not all right to segregate by choice]. Now we can interrogate that, we can question that, and it’s interesting that not only did many of us not vote for that but those who did didn’t want to admit it. As a community of practice we need to be open to the fact that there are various different perspectives around that.” Campt went on to point out that some middle-class black communities create important spaces for the people who choose to live in them, questioning the assumption that self-segregation is a white decision.

**Final Questions:** The final two questions were about how best to facilitate dialogue and how good each of the panelists’ organization is at promoting internal diversity. Rob Corcoran stressed the importance of being aware of one’s own biases while David Campt spoke about overcoming resistance to dialogue advising that, “We have to remember that dialogue is to some level an unnatural thing and we have to
find a better way of inviting people to take little pieces of it and to try to seduce them into signing up for more.” The panel generally agreed that their organizations could do better at encouraging internal diversity, while Rob Corcoran brought up the ideal of male/female mixed race pairs from Initiatives of Change. Marvin Johnson described how in his experience people avoid the issue asserting that, “you have to keep putting it in front of people to make them deal with it. This is a thing that people don’t want to deal with. Until you get leaders who are really passionate, who really want to do it, it keeps moving down from being a top priority.”