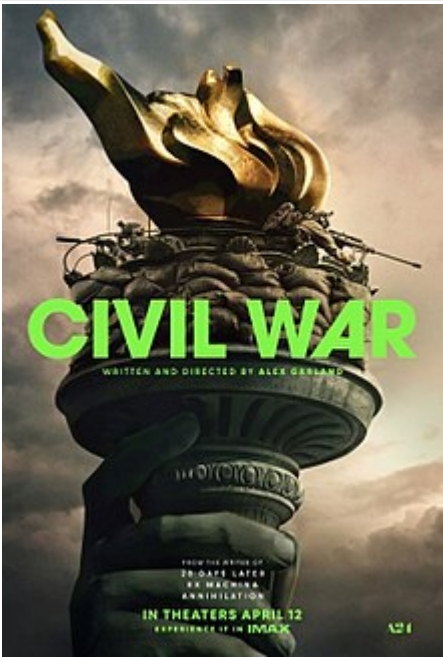


*Civil War* is a 2024 dystopian thriller film<sup>[6]</sup> written and directed by Alex Garland. It follows a team of journalists traveling from New York City to Washington, D.C. during a civil war fought across the United States between an authoritarian federal government and several regional factions. The cast includes Kirsten Dunst, Wagner Moura, Cailee Spaeny, Stephen McKinley Henderson, Sonoya Mizuno, and Nick Offerman.

Principal photography began in Atlanta, Georgia in 2022, with production moving to London later in the year. *Civil War* premiered at South by Southwest on March 14, 2024, and was theatrically released in the United States by A24 and in the United Kingdom by Entertainment Film Distributors on April 12, 2024. With a budget of \$50 million, *Civil War* is A24's most expensive film to date.<sup>[2]</sup> The film has grossed over \$112 million worldwide, becoming A24's second highest-grossing film, and received generally positive reviews from critics.

Plot

A civil war has engulfed the United States, fought between the federal government led by a third-term president and secessionist movements. Despite the president claiming that victory is close at hand, it is considered only a matter of time before Washington, D.C. is reached by the "Western Forces" (WF) led by Texas and California. After surviving a suicide bombing in New York City, veteran war photographer Lee Smith and journalist colleague Joel meet with their mentor Sammy to share their plan to interview the isolated president. While trying to dissuade them from heading to the capital, Sammy joins them so he can reach the frontline at Charlottesville, Virginia. The next morning Lee finds Joel has allowed a young aspiring photojournalist Lee encountered at the bombing, Jessie Cullen, to join them.

| Civil War   |  |
|---|--|
|  | Theatrical release poster  |
| <b>Directed by</b>  | <u><a href="#">Alex Garland</a></u>  |
| <b>Written by</b>   | <u><a href="#">Alex Garland</a></u>  |
| <b>Produced by</b>  | <u><a href="#">Andrew Macdonald</a></u><br><u><a href="#">Allon Reich</a></u><br><u><a href="#">Gregory Goodman</a></u>  |
| <b>Starring</b>   | <u><a href="#">Kirsten Dunst</a></u><br><u><a href="#">Wagner Moura</a></u><br><u><a href="#">Cailee Spaeny</a></u><br><u><a href="#">Stephen McKinley Henderson</a></u><br><u><a href="#">Sonoya Mizuno</a></u><br><u><a href="#">Nick Offerman</a></u> |
| <b>Cinematography</b>   | <u><a href="#">Rob Hardy</a></u>   |
| <b>Edited by</b>  | <u><a href="#">Jake Roberts</a></u>  |
| <b>Music by</b>   | <u><a href="#">Ben Salisbury</a></u><br><u><a href="#">Geoff Barrow</a></u>  |
| <b>Production companies</b>   | <u><a href="#">DNA Films</a></u><br><u><a href="#">IPR.VC</a></u>  |
| <b>Distributed by</b>   | <u><a href="#">A24</a></u> (United States)   |



Advancing though the largely-abandoned building, an abortive attempt by the few remaining Secret Service agents still guarding the president to negotiate his surrender and safe passage turns into a firefight. Jessie steps into the line of fire while taking photos, capturing Lee's death as she pushes Jessie to safety. Jessie unemotionally continues into the Oval Office, watching soldiers drag the president from under his desk and prepare to execute him summarily. Joel momentarily stops them to get a quote from the president, who replies, "Don't let them kill me." Satisfied, Joel stops delaying the soldiers, while Jessie photographs smiling WF soldiers posing with the president's corpse.

## Cast

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- Kirsten Dunst as Lee Smith, a renowned war photojournalist from Colorado.<sup>[7]</sup> She is said to be the youngest-ever member of the Magnum Photos cooperative. The character's first name is a reference to famed World War II photojournalist Lee Miller.<sup>[8]</sup>
- Wagner Moura as Joel, a Reuters journalist from Florida and Lee's colleague
- Cailee Spaeny as Jessie Cullen, an aspiring young photographer from Missouri who accompanies Lee and Joel on their journey
- Stephen McKinley Henderson as Sammy, a veteran journalist for *The New York Times* and Lee's mentor
- Nick Offerman as the President of the United States, a dictatorial president currently serving his third term<sup>[7]</sup>
- Sonoya Mizuno as Anya, a British reporter embedded with the Western Forces' advance on the capital
- Jefferson White as Dave, Anya's cameraman
- Nelson Lee as Tony, a Hongkonger reporter who is good friends with Lee and Joel
- Evan Lai as Bohai, a Hongkonger reporter who is a colleague of Tony
- Jesse Plemons as a racist<sup>[9]</sup> ultranationalist militant who holds the journalists at gunpoint. Plemons was not credited for the role.<sup>[10][11]</sup>
- Karl Glusman as a spotter
- Jin Ha as a sniper
- Juani Feliz as Secret Service Agent Joy Butler

## Production

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### Development and casting

In January 2022, *Deadline* reported that Alex Garland had signed on to write and direct the film for A24 with DNA Films co-producing. Kirsten Dunst, Wagner Moura, Stephen McKinley Henderson and Cailee Spaeny were confirmed to star.<sup>[12]</sup> In April, Karl Glusman was announced as part of the cast.<sup>[13]</sup> In a May interview with *The Daily Telegraph*, Garland described the film as a companion piece to his 2022 film *Men*, and said it is "set at an indeterminate point in the future—just far enough ahead for me to add a conceit—and serves as a sci-fi allegory for our currently polarized predicament". In the same interview, Sonoya Mizuno was revealed as part of the cast, having appeared in all of Garland's previous films.<sup>[14]</sup>

Jesse Plemons, Dunst's husband, was quickly cast in the uncredited role at Dunst's suggestion after the originally cast actor became unavailable a few days before shooting began. Garland called Plemons' availability "a stunning bit of good luck."<sup>[10][11]</sup>

## Filming

Principal photography began in Atlanta on March 15, 2022.<sup>[15][16]</sup> By May, production had moved to London.<sup>[17]</sup> The production budget for *Civil War* was \$50 million, making it A24's most expensive film.<sup>[2]</sup> The movie was shot partially on the prosumer DJI Ronin 4D camera.<sup>[18][19]</sup> The film's Washington D.C based finale required months of planning with Alex Garland and cinematographer Rob Hardy holding a series of roundtable discussions with production designer Caty Maxey, VFX supervisor David Simpson,<sup>[20]</sup> military supervisor Ray Mendoza and stunt coordinator Jeff Dashnaw.<sup>[21][22]</sup>

In a March 2024 interview with *The Guardian*, Garland stated that after *Civil War*, he intends to step back from directing and focus only on writing.<sup>[23]</sup>

## Post-production

Film editor Jake Roberts and sound editor Glenn Freemantle<sup>[24]</sup> re-team with Alex Garland, as does VFX supervisor David Simpson with Framestore.

## Release

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*Civil War* had its world premiere at South by Southwest on March 14, 2024, with favourable reactions from the audience and to positive reviews from the critics.<sup>[25][26]</sup>

The film was previously scheduled to be released on April 26, 2024.<sup>[27][28]</sup> It was screened at the BFI IMAX in London on April 11, 2024, and received a wide release on April 12, 2024, in the United States by A24 and in the United Kingdom by Entertainment Film, with engagements in IMAX and Dolby Cinema.<sup>[29][30][31]</sup>

It is set to be released through video on demand on May 24, 2024.<sup>[32]</sup>



The film's world premiere at South by Southwest

## Marketing and AI controversy

On April 17, 2024, A24 promoted the film on Instagram by posting five images created by artificial intelligence (AI), each showing a different American city in postapocalyptic disarray.

The images were criticized for inaccurately depicting certain cityscapes: The AI-generated image of Chicago wrongfully depicted the Marina City apartment complex, with the buildings depicted as being separated by a non-existent island on the Chicago River. In real life, the buildings are located directly next to each other.<sup>[33][34]</sup>

A source connected to the film confirmed to *The Hollywood Reporter* that they were "AI images inspired by the movie. The entire movie is a big 'what if' and so we wanted to continue that thought on social — powerful imagery of iconic landmarks with that dystopian realism."<sup>[35][36][37]</sup>

## Reception

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### Box office

As of May 21, 2024, *Civil War* has grossed \$67.3 million in the United States and Canada and \$44.8 million in other territories, for a worldwide total of \$112 million.<sup>[4][5]</sup>

In the United States and Canada, the film was projected to gross \$18–24 million from 3,838 theaters (the widest-ever R-rated release by an independent studio) in its opening weekend.<sup>[38]</sup> The film made \$10.8 million on its first day, including \$2.9 million from Thursday night previews (a record for an A24 release). It went on to debut to \$25.7 million, surpassing *Hereditary* as the biggest opening weekend in A24's history as well as the studio's first film to top the box office.<sup>[3]</sup> The opening weekend audience skewed male at 63%, while 57% of attendees were between ages 18–34. IMAX contributed over 16% of the opening weekend gross, with the main reasons given for seeing the film being its subject matter, the action, and a general interest in indie films (each grouping made up a third of the audience, with the former narrowly higher).<sup>[39]</sup>

In its sophomore weekend the film made \$11.1 million (a 56% drop), remaining in first place, before falling to fourth place in its third weekend with \$7 million.<sup>[40][41]</sup>

### Ideological composition of viewership

Regarding ideological composition of the audience in the United States, *The Hollywood Reporter* reported that ticket buyers were equally conservative and liberal according to exit poll data.<sup>[39]</sup> *Deadline Hollywood* wrote that 22% were liberal, 19% were Democrats, while 6% were Republicans, 6% Evangelical Christians, and 5% conservative. A further 11% consider themselves moderate.<sup>[3]</sup>

### Performance outside North America

Commentators noted that, despite the film's inherently U.S.-centric subject matter, *Civil War* performed well in several markets outside the United States. This includes the United Kingdom, where it grossed \$4.8 million as of April 23, as well as the Netherlands, where it reached ticket sales of \$750,000. The film additionally opened in first place at the box office in Brazil, Spain, Belgium, Finland, and Portugal.<sup>[42]</sup>

### Critical response

Following the SXSW premiere, review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes noted that critics called the film "a gorgeously shot cautionary tale full of big ideas and a fantastic performance by Kirsten Dunst, but it may surprise some viewers". Critics praised the "beauty and intensity of the dystopian drama", while noting its "potential for controversy and disappointment" due to the effectiveness of its messages.<sup>[43]</sup> On the site, 81% of 354 critics' reviews are positive, with an average rating of 7.6/10. The website's critical consensus reads: "Tough and unsettling by design, *Civil War* is a gripping close-up look at the violent uncertainty of life in a nation in crisis."<sup>[44]</sup> Metacritic, which uses a weighted average, assigned the film a score of 75 out of 100,

based on 64 critics, indicating "generally favorable" reviews.<sup>[45]</sup> Audiences polled by CinemaScore gave the film an average grade of "B—" on an A+ to F scale, while those polled by PostTrak gave it a 76% overall positive score, with 53% saying they would definitely recommend it.<sup>[3]</sup> *Screen Rant* attributed the film's depiction of warfare and Garland's directorial choices, such as the use of hand-held camera footage, as the reasons why its reception was positive.<sup>[46]</sup>

In a positive review, Peter Debruge of *Variety* wrote: "Garland's the last person to suggest a group hug. As statements go, his powerful vision leaves us shaken, effectively repeating the question that quelled the L.A. riots: Can we all get along?"<sup>[47]</sup> Matt Zoller Seitz, writing for *RogerEbert.com*, compared *Civil War* to films about "Western journalists covering the collapse of foreign countries", such as *The Year of Living Dangerously* and *Welcome to Sarajevo*, ultimately praising the film as "furiously convincing and disturbing".<sup>[48]</sup>

Lovia Gyarkye of *The Hollywood Reporter* also gave the film a positive review, writing: "With the precision and length of its violent battle sequences, it's clear *Civil War* operates as a clarion call. Garland wrote the film in 2020 as he watched cogs on America's self-mythologizing exceptionalist machine turn, propelling the nation into a nightmare. With this latest film, he sounds the alarm, wondering less about how a country walks blindly into its own destruction and more about what happens when it does."<sup>[6]</sup> Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times* echoed the sentiment, writing "rarely have I seen a movie that made me so acutely uncomfortable or watched an actor's face that, like Dunst's, expressed a nation's soul-sickness so vividly that it felt like an X-ray."<sup>[49]</sup>

Some critics had mixed reactions. *The Washington Post*'s Amy Nicholson described the film as "coldly, deliberately incurious about the combatants and the victims", but also said "the film feels poetically, deeply true, even when it's suggesting that humans are more apt to tear one another apart for petty grievances than over a sincere defense of some kind of principles."<sup>[50][51]</sup>

Valerie Complex of *Deadline Hollywood* offered negative comments, saying: "The script's utilization of characters of color as conduits for brutality needed to be explored further. ... Ultimately, *Civil War* feels like a missed opportunity. The director's vision of a fractured America, embroiled in conflict, holds the potential for introspection on our current societal divisions. However, the film's execution, hampered by thin characterization, a lackluster narrative and an overreliance on spectacle over substance, left me disengaged."<sup>[52]</sup>

Johnny Oleksinski of the *New York Post* observed: "*Civil War*'s shtick is that it's not specifically political. For instance, as the US devolves into enemy groups of secessionist states, Texas and California have banded together to form the Western Forces. That such an alliance could ever occur is about as likely as [a] Sweetgreen/Kentucky Fried Chicken combo restaurant."<sup>[53]</sup> Eisa Nefertari Ulen, writing for *The Hollywood Reporter*, also found that the film, despite being "otherwise solid," was partially missing its point, stating, "*Casablanca* endures because it spoke to a moment as 'crazy and mixed-up' as this one, and nudged the country away from its isolationist inaction. *Civil War* does not resonate like that classic, because it does not explicitly address this moment. We as a people cannot fix a problem we cannot name."<sup>[54]</sup>



Kirsten Dunst at the film's world premiere. Her performance was widely praised, even by the film's detractors.<sup>[43]</sup>



Stephanie Zacharek of *Time* observed: "*Civil War* has the vibe of your standard desolate zombie movie with a modern American backdrop, but it's far less effective than your average George A. Romero project: sometimes a B movie with a sense of humor about itself says more about a nation's despair than an overserious, breast-beating one. ... Do we really need a movie to invent, and rub our noses in, the possibility of a bleaker future?"<sup>[55]</sup>

## Political reception

The film received both praise and criticism for its approach to contemporary political themes, including concerns of democratic decline and increased political polarization.<sup>[56][57][58]</sup>

## See also

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- Secession in the United States

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- Official website (<https://a24films.com/films/civil-war>)
  - *Civil War* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt17279496/>) at IMDb
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