

# [***'Civil War' might be the year's most explosive movie. Alex Garland thinks it's just reporting***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BTP-5271-JC5B-G14C-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

NEW YORK — Alex Garland’s films have vividly conjured a virus-caused pandemic , an uncontrollable artificial intelligence and, in his latest, [*“Civil War,”*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDyQxtg0V2w) a near-future America in the throes of all-out warfare.

Most filmmakers with such a record might claim some knack for tapping into the zeitgeist. But Garland doesn’t see it that way. He’s dealing, he says, with omnipresent realities that demand no great leaps of vision. He wrote “Civil War" in 2020, when societies around the world were unraveling over [*COVID-19*](https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic) and the prospect of societal breakdown was on everyone’s minds.

“That was pretty deafening back then,” Garland says. “So in a way, it’s slightly past zeitgeist. It’s actually oppressive.”

“Civil War” is an ominous attempt to turn widely held American anxieties into a violent, unsettling big-screen reality. Garland’s film opens Friday — the anniversary, to the day, of when the Civil War began in 1861. And it's landing in movie theaters just months ahead of [*a momentous presidential election*](https://apnews.com/article/democracy-threats-trump-2024-election-lies-biden-716360db82a28a023bbee0d99f607a76), making it potentially Hollywood’s most explosive movie of the year.

For months, the arrival of “Civil War” has been closely tracked as numerous trailers have drummed up intrigue. Texas and California aligned? “Science fiction,” wrote one commentor. Another said: “This single movie had the best 8 year marketing campaign of all time.”

Yet “Civil War” is something far more oblique than its matter-of-fact title. The film, which Garland wrote and directed, isn’t mapped directly against today’s polarization. In a war that’s already ravaged the country, California and Texas have joined forces against a fascist president (Nick Offerman) who’s seized a third term and disbanded the FBI.

A band of journalists (Kirsten Dunst, Cailee Spaeny, Wagner Moura) makes its way toward Washington, D.C. Much of the film’s disquiet comes from seeing visceral encounters of war — bombings, fire fights and executions — on contemporary American soil. ("Civil War," to take advantage of tax breaks, was mostly shot in Georgia.) For everyone who has in recent years wondered “How bad can it get?” — here is a sobering answer.

“When things collapse, the speed at which they collapse tends to surprise people — including people like intelligence officers whose job is to watch and predict when these things will happen,” Garland said in a recent interview. “Things are always in a slightly more dangerous state than they might appear.”

The rapidity with which society can disintegrate has long fascinated Garland, the 53-year-old British born filmmaker who emerged with the screenplay to the zombie apocalypse thriller “28 Days Later.” Western democracies, he says, can lean too much on their sense of exceptionalism. To him, “Civil War” isn’t an act of cynicism. It’s a warning shot.

“The consequences of it are so serious that to not take the threat seriously would, itself, be another kind of insanity,” says Garland. “It would just be complacent.”

In past election seasons, Hollywood has sometimes looked to channel, reflect or capitalize or political discord. Ahead of the 2020 election, Universal Pictures and Blumhouse Productions released “The Hunt,” a “Most Dangerous Game” riff in which liberals kidnap “rednecks” and “deplorables” to hunt on a private preserve. After the film became engulfed in right-wing criticism (then-President Trump said it was “made in order to inflame and cause chaos”), [*it was postponed.*](https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-us-news-ap-top-news-movies-entertainment-1127a10f09586fdb4ee08ec379f6bbed) When “The Hunt” eventually hit theaters in March 2020, it revealed [*a more balanced satire of left and right than some feared.*](https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-us-news-ap-top-news-ar-state-wire-movies-e6fff40021439fcf5283056675abac0b)

While there have been [*online murmurings*](https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/civil-war-movie-timing-maga-violence-1235831454/) questioning the appropriateness of the timing for “Civil War,” controversy hasn’t yet clung to it. That might be owed to Garland’s approach. There are few direct allusions to the deepest fissures of American ***politics*** today in the film. Joining Texas and California together removes any “blue state” vs. “red state” dichotomy. Neither race nor income inequality appear as issues of division. The president's political party is unspecified.

“I had never read a script like this,” said Dunst at [*the film’s SXSW premiere*](https://apnews.com/article/civil-war-sxsw-alex-garland-596e127d073c9f85dd23fb28e1a8ea61). “And I had never seen a film like this.”

“Civil War,” set in a near-future, instead plays out with more subtle connections to today's fractured ***politics*** and cultural splits. Jesse Plemons plays a heinous militant who interrogates the main characters, asking them: “What kind of American are you?” Though it's never seen, Charlottesville, Virginia — site of [*the 2017 white supremacist rally*](https://apnews.com/article/charlottesville-torch-rally-unite-right-06a9aa15d23d96f2474a476cfefa4eb9) — is referred to as a battle front.

Asked about that choice, Garland replies: “The film is just reporting."

But the director acknowledges finding the right balance was a challenge.

“Yes, it was a (expletive) delicate balance,” Garland says. “We thought about it, we discussed it, we talked about what was appropriate. Look, the plan is to make a compelling and engaging film, and the product of the compelling and engaging film is a conversation. So the questions are: How do you make sure that you’re not dismantling a conversation in the first part of that equation?”

That led to Garland foregrounding “Civil War” with journalists. As much as anything, Garland's film is about the central role reporters play in capturing critical events in lethal conditions. Unbiased reporting, Garland says, has been eroded. In “Civil War,” it's literally under attack.

“What I wanted to do was present journalists as reporters," Garland says. “They may be conflicted, they may be compromised as individuals, but they’re holding on to an idea of journalism.”

“Civil War,” which cost $50 million to make, is the largest budgeted film yet from A24. The indie studio is pushing to expand its reach beyond arthouses ("Civil War" will play on IMAX screens) and expand the reach of its critical acclaimed films. “Civil War” is, ironically, a bid to draw wider audiences.

“A lot of the boldness is not actually mine,” says Garland. “I think it belongs to A24. You would find there are always people attempting to make these films. The question is whether they’ve been given the support to make them.”

“Civil War” is just a possibility, the director stresses, not a prediction. Still, months after he finished writing it, Garland watched an insurrection play out on live television when [*a mob storm the Capitol on January 6, 2021*](https://apnews.com/hub/2021-united-states-capitol-riot). At the time, his thoughts weren't on his script.

“What I had was this incredibly intense feeling that this is a disgrace,” says Garland. “Later, as time went by, some of that anger fed into the project. Not so much in terms of rewriting scenes or dialogue or anything. But more to do with an internal sense of motivation. Something that felt more distant felt less distant.”

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This story first moved April 9, 2024, and was updated on April 16, 2024, to remove a reference to a poll.

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