

# [***'Civil War,' an election-year provocation, premieres at SXSW film festival***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BJK-3RH1-JC5B-G0HH-00000-00&context=1516831)

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AUSTIN, Texas — [*“Civil War,”*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDyQxtg0V2w) Alex Garland’s election-year provocation, debuted Thursday at the SXSW Film and TV Festival, unveiling a violent vision of a near-future America at war with itself.

“Civil War,” reportedly A24’s biggest budget release yet, is a bold gamble to capitalize on some of the anxieties that have grown in highly partisan times and ahead of a potentially momentous [*November presidential election*](https://apnews.com/hub/election-2024).

The film, written and directed by the British filmmaker Garland (“Ex Machina,” “Annihilation”), imagines a U.S. in all-out warfare, with California and Texas joining to form the “Western Forces.” That insurrection, along with the “Florida Alliance,” is seeking to topple a government led by a three-term president, played by Nick Offerman.

In drawing battle lines across states blue and red, “Civil War” sidesteps much of the ***politics*** that might be expected in such a movie. And the story, too, largely omits surrounding context for the conflict, focusing on the day-to-day adventures of a group of journalists played by Kirsten Dunst, Cailee Spaeny, Wagner Moura and Stephen McKinley Henderson, who are attempting to document the fighting.

“The film is intended as a conversation. It is not asserting things — I mean I guess it’s asserting some things,” Garland told the crowd after the screening. “But it’s a conversation, and that means it’s not a lecture.”

“A lot of the times,” he added, “I was thinking about what can I avoid, what can I miss out and make it a sort of two-way exchange.”

The movie year has showed signs of turning combustible as the nation girds for an election where some believe democracy is at stake. At [*the Academy Awards on Sunday*](https://apnews.com/article/2024-oscars-academy-awards-show-e72ce0ad9d9fbb77cb43770766b2042d), host Jimmy Kimmel largely avoided talking ***politics*** before reading a critical social media post from former President Donald Trump.

“Isn’t it past your jail time?” prodded Kimmel.

There are more films on the way with potential to add talking points. “The Apprentice,” in which Sebastian Stan plays Trump, was shot in the fall, though no release date has yet been announced. But nothing has had quite the anticipation of “Civil War." Some even debated [*whether its timing was inappropriate*](https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/civil-war-movie-timing-maga-violence-1235831454/).

Yet “Civil War,” which will open in U.S. theaters on April 12, isn’t as incendiary as some hoped, or feared. There are some chilling moments, including one where a gun-wielding militant played by Jesse Plemons asks the journalists, “What kind of American are you?” But much of the film’s visceral power comes through its scenes of the U.S. as a battleground populated by refugee camps and mass graves.

The idea for the film came to Garland almost exactly four years ago, he said.

“I wrote it back then and sent it to A24 and they just said, ‘Yup, we’ll make it,’ which was surprising,” said Garland, who shot the film in Georgia. “This is a brave film to finance, it really is.”

“I had never read a script like this," said Dunst, who plays a veteran combat photographer.

In the film, Dunst’s character, Lee, heads to Washington, D.C., to capture potentially the final, blood-letting moments of the war. The group is joined by a young, aspiring photographer, played by Spaeny. Though “Civil War” culminates with the White House under siege, it’s in many ways a film about journalism.

“This is a sort of love letter to journalism and how it important it is,” said Garland, who said his father was a newspaper cartoonist. “Newspaper people \u2026 I wanted to make them heroes.”

Initial reaction out of SXSW for “Civil War” spanned both masterpiece and mess. Some were unsure of how to immediately respond, including Spaeny, who moments after seeing it for the first time said, “I need a second.”

Garland, for his part, demurred from making any grand political statement.

“I just want to say: I always try to make sort of funny movies. I thought ‘Ex Machina’ was funny,” Garland said. “If people laughed, I'm glad, partly because some of it is so (expletive) stupid. It should be funny. It's crazy. It's messed up.”

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