

The Next Civil War: Dispatches from the American Future

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Reviews & Reactions

Is Civil War Coming to America?

By Ian Bassin

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a sobering vision of where we may be headed, and for that reason ... required reading for anyone invested in preserving our 246-year experiment in self-government. Because whether we're heading toward civil war, just instability and strife, or something different altogether, we've rarely been this divided as a nation.

Lozada, Carlos (6 January 2022). ["A new book imagines a looming civil war over the very meaning of America"](#). *The Washington Post*.

["The Next Civil War"](#). *Kirkus Reviews*. 2021-10-25.

O'Toole, Fintan (16 December 2021). ["Beware Prophecies of Civil War"](#). *the atlantic*.

At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reach us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and nisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.

—Abraham Lincoln

An Introduction to the Immediate Future of the United States

The United States is coming to an end. The question is how. Every government, every business, every person alive will be affected by the answer.

The unimaginable has become everyday in America. Buffoonish mobs desecrating the US Capitol building, tear gas and tanks on the streets of Washington, DC, running battles between protestors and militias, armed rebels attempting to kidnap sitting governors, uncertainty about the peaceful transition of power—reading about them in another country, you would think a civil war had already begun. The United States is descending into the kind of sectarian conflict usually found in poor countries with histories of violence, not the world's most enduring democracy and largest economy. The fall has been sudden. A decade ago, American stability and global supremacy were a given. The memory of September 11 led to regular mass demonstrations of national unity. The United States was synonymous with the glory of democracy. No longer. Solidarity has dissolved. The American system has become a case study of paralysis. Political violence is on the rise.

The next civil war in America won't look like a civil war in a smaller country. The United States is fragile but enormous. Its military might remains unparalleled. Its economy determines the health of the global economy. If the American Republic falls, democracy as the leading political system in the world falls. If democracy falls, the peace and security of the global order falls. No one will escape the consequences.

The Likelihood of a Civil War

Retired US Army colonel Peter Mansoor, professor of military history at The Ohio State University, is a veteran of the Iraq war who now studies the insurgencies of the past. He doesn't have any difficulty picturing a contemporary American equivalent to civil wars elsewhere. "It would not be like the first civil war, with armies maneuvering on the battlefield," he says. "I think it would very much be a free-for-all, neighbor on neighbor, based on beliefs and skin colors and religion. And it would be horrific."

In a poll taken in the aftermath of Trump's election, 31 percent of American voters predicted a second civil war would occur within five years. In *Foreign Policy*, a panel of national security experts assessed the chances of a civil war over the next ten to fifteen years. The answers ranged from 5 percent to 95 percent. The consensus stood at 35 percent. In the eyes of the expert class and ordinary Americans alike, the odds of a civil war in the near future are about the same as drawing ten or higher from a pack of cards.

That estimation was only “over the next ten to fifteen years” though. The pressure is mounting, and the forces fraying American unity—the hyper-partisan politics, the environmental degradation, the widening inequality—are growing. A 2019 poll from Georgetown University asked Americans how close to “the edge of a civil war” their country was, on a scale from 0 to 100. The aggregate of their answers was 67.23, so almost exactly two-thirds of the way.

The technical definition of a civil war, according to the Centre for the Study of Civil War at the Peace Research Institute Oslo, is a thousand combatant deaths within a year. The definition of civil strife starts at twenty-five deaths within a year. In the United States in 2019, domestic anti-government extremists killed forty-two people; in 2018 they killed fifty-three people; in 2017, thirty-seven; in 2016, seventy-two; and in 2015, seventy. By this definition, America is already in a state of civil strife, on the threshold of civil war.

The United States as a Complex, Cascading System

There is never a single cause to any civil war. A huge number of factors contribute to the slide of a peaceful prosperous society into violence. The interaction is turbulent, which is why stable scenarios seem to descend into chaos out of nowhere. The complex cascading nature of the system explains why the unimaginable keeps happening.

The unimaginable does not mean the unpredictable. The collapse will arrive sooner and more suddenly than anybody expects, but it won't come as a surprise. America is cracking apart at a moment when the ability to see the cracks spreading has attained unprecedented clarity. NASA recently reported that its climate change modeling has been accurate to within one-twentieth of a degree. The detailed precision of the models as much as the quality of the prediction is extraordinary. When—not if—a Category 1, 2, or 3 hurricane hits New York, the model makers know, to the street, which parts of the city will be rendered uninhabitable. The electoral models of political partisanship have become more effective than their creators can acknowledge: one group of political scientists refused to believe their own program when it told them that Trump would be elected. Such a forecast seemed too outlandish. The contours of economic inequality have never been so thoroughly drawn, their consequences on democracy never so fully understood. Scholars of civil war, used to analyzing conflicts abroad, now see their established patterns replicating themselves identically in the world's richest country, home to the most powerful military in human history.

History books on the subjects of civil wars usually open with chapters about the lead-up to conflict. In the case of the United States, that chapter could be written today. Economic and environmental instability worsens every year. The fruits of the country accrue only to those at the very top. The government, whose legitimacy is never established to the satisfaction of all parties, cannot be relied on. Faith in institutions of all kinds is declining. National purpose is withering. National solidarity is eroding. The government increasingly cannot, even when given

clear mandates, respond to its people's will. Political gamesmanship overrides any and all other governmental concerns. Of the last four presidents, two have faced extensive impeachment proceedings. Two elections of the past four have seen the popular winner defeated by an arcane system inherited from the eighteenth century. The judiciary is dogmatic and hardening to the point where the law barely holds meaning outside of the political context of the courts' application. Mass murders are nightly news. Ordinary Americans refuse to listen to authorities, even on questions as important to their survival as public health.

America has lived for 160 years with a half-settled myth of unity. All such myths are fragile. Even the most long-established national identities, the most ancient fusions of peoples and creeds, can dissolve with shocking speed. Before sectarian hatred consumed Iraq, before 2006, the country had a relatively high Shi'a-Sunni intermarriage rate. The supposedly permanent and intractable religious rift was a relic from antiquity. Then it wasn't.

Wherever government fails, whenever the peaceful transition of power breaks down, restoring an orderly democracy takes nothing short of a miracle. America won't be any different. When Democrats feel that they cannot find representation, when Republicans feel that they cannot find representation, the government becomes just another resource to control. Outrage feeds all-consuming cycles of revenge. People retreat into tribes. Once the stability of power goes, it's easy to come up with excuses to murder your neighbors.

The Inciting Incidents

The dispatches that follow are based on the best available models with established predictive capacities. They are more than educated guesses. But the inciting incidents are another matter. They are works of consciously thorough imagination.

Complex, cascading systems are abstract. They don't show human costs. In each of the dispatches that follow, I have imagined an inciting incident to show the human cost. My inspiration was *The Effects of Nuclear War*, a 1979 product of the Office of Technology Assessment, acting on a request from the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and arguably the most influential piece of fiction in history. *The Effects of Nuclear War* grew into the miniseries *The Day After*. *The Day After* converted "abstract measures of strategic power" into comprehensible terms, imagining the fallout from nuclear war based on the best available science. Ronald Reagan, in his diaries, cited *The Day After* as a main inspiration behind the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

Today's crisis requires prediction because so many people do not want to see what is unfolding in front of their eyes. At the same time, the future is inherently unpredictable. Nobody could have known that an employee at Cup Foods in Minneapolis would report a counterfeit \$20 bill and that when the police arrived to investigate the incident an officer named Derek Chauvin

would drag a Black man named George Floyd out of a car and, in the process of restraining him, kneel on his neck for seven minutes and forty-six seconds, ignoring more than twenty pleas to allow him to breathe. Nobody could have predicted that plainclothes officers would mistakenly enter the home of Breonna Taylor and kill her. Still less could anyone know that these particular incidents of police brutality, rather than the literally thousands of others, would spark massive protests across the United States. But anyone paying attention could easily have known that the militarization of America's police forces has been underway for decades, that the police in the United States shoot their own citizens at rates that vary between three and thirty times more than the police in other countries, that large swaths of the Black population do not regard the police as legitimate stewards of justice, and that protest movements against police brutality had been gaining momentum since the Obama administration. Breonna Taylor was one of forty-eight Black women shot by police in the United States since 2015. Her name, the particular circumstances of her death—these facts were unpredictable. But not the event itself and not its aftermath. It is entirely predictable now that another incident of police brutality will occur and just as predictable that there will be riots in its wake.

The Point of View of the Dispatches

My nationality gives me a specific advantage in describing an imminent American collapse. Civil conflict forces people to choose sides and their perspective is shaped by the side they've chosen. Confusion precedes any civil conflict. Being Canadian, I am outside that particular confusion.

Canada is the Horatio to America's Hamlet, a close and sympathetic and mostly irrelevant witness to the grand dramatics on the other side of the border. I am a foreigner who has lived in the United States, who works in the United States, who loves the United States. While I'm pretty much in the dead center on the political spectrum of my own country, I don't want to hide the fact that on policy questions my underlying assumptions would be considered liberal by most Americans. I live in a country where socialized medicine and gun control are taken for granted, even by conservatives.

Increasingly, though, being Democrat or Republican is a tribal identification rather than a commitment to particular policies. And I am not of either tribe. As I have crisscrossed the United States to see the conditions on the ground, meeting with white nationalists and Black Lives Matter protestors, with gun sellers and the mothers of mass shooting victims, it has all been equally foreign, the flyover states and the coastal elites, the North and the South. They're all other countries to me. The experts who have informed these dispatches—military leaders, law enforcement officials, agricultural specialists, environmentalists, historians, political scientists—inhabit a wide range on the political spectrum. Many are lifelong Republicans. Nearly half would describe themselves as conservative. I did not strive for a diversity of viewpoints. The people

who know what they're talking about come from both sides. They serve larger interests than partisan politics. This book reflects that knowledge and those interests.

The Trump Distraction

You already have feelings about Donald Trump, one way or the other. He is either the last defender of American greatness or a fundamental threat to US democracy. He is either a fighter for traditional American values or a criminal with nothing more than personal impunity for motivation. It doesn't particularly matter which you believe. Trump is far less meaningful than either side understands. The smartest thing he himself ever said about his political career was in a 2017 press conference: "I didn't come along and divide this country. This country was seriously divided before I got here." Trump is, at most, a symptom.

It is essential to recognize this hard fact: if Hillary Clinton had been elected in 2016, all the forces pointing toward the fall of the Republic would be no less powerful than they are right now. Those forces—the hyper-partisanship, the bifurcation of the country into blue and red, the violent loathing for the federal government, the economic unsustainability, the incipient crises in the food supply and urban environmental security, the rise of the hard-right anti-government patriot militias—are the subject of this book. The American experiment was never designed to face what the United States is about to face. No matter who is president, that reality will not change.

Joe Biden's victory speech in the 2020 election announced "a time to heal." It was wishful thinking. Even as the president-elect tried to gesture toward reconciliation, the sitting president wouldn't concede. American liberals in the major cities retain a kind of desperate faith in their country's institutions that amounts nearly to delusion. Americans have taught themselves for 250 years that their country, in its ideals and systems, is the solution to history. It is tough, under those conditions, to accept being just another of history's half perpetrators, half victims.

The hope of a Biden restoration is a faint hope indeed. Barack Obama's presidency was based on what we will, out of politeness, call an illusion of national purpose. He articulated the idea most passionately, most purely, during his keynote address at the 2004 Democratic Convention: "There is not a liberal America and a conservative America—there is the United States of America. There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America—there's the United States of America." It was a beautiful vision. It was also a fantasy. There is very much a red America and a blue America. They occupy different societies with different values, and their political parties are emissaries of that difference.

Unfortunately, America appears to have entered a self-defeating loop, in which the collapsing system prevents reforms to the system itself. Congress can't even agree to investigate violent

extremists who attacked its own place of business and threatened the members' own lives. After the Trump years, the Democrats have attempted to salve the wounds inflicted on American institutions, but they remain overwhelmingly committed to the old ways, to the United States they grew up in. One way of reading the current political situation is that Republicans have only come to realize the collapse of the institutions before Democrats. Meanwhile, the window to keep America democratic is closing.

Party politics is mostly a distraction at this point. That's not to excuse the anti-democratic actions of elected officials. In 2021, Oregon representative Mike Nearman was expelled from the state house of representatives because he opened a locked door for the rioters who stormed the Oregon State Capitol. The Republican Party now has an elected wing and an armed militant wing. The point is that the parties and the people in the parties no longer matter much one way or the other. Blaming one side offers a perverse species of hope: "If only more moderate Republicans were in office"... "If only bipartisanship could be restored to what it was." Such hopes are not only reckless but irresponsible. The problem is not who is in power but the structures of power. The US system is an archaic mode of government totally unsuited to the realities of the twenty-first century. It needs reforms to its foundational systems, not just new faces.

The United States has burned before. The Vietnam War, the civil rights protests, the assassination of JFK and MLK, Watergate—all were national catastrophes that remain in living memory. But the United States has never faced an institutional crisis quite like the one it is facing now. Trust in the institutions was much higher during the sixties and seventies. The Civil Rights Act had the broad support of both parties. JFK's murder was mourned collectively as a national tragedy. The Watergate scandal, in hindsight, was evidence of the system working. The press reported presidential crimes. Americans took the press seriously. The political parties felt they needed to respond to the reported corruption. You could not make one of those statements today with any confidence. The American political system has become so overwhelmed by anger that even the most basic tasks of government are increasingly impossible. The legal system grows less legitimate by the day. Trust in government at all levels is in free fall or, like Congress with approval ratings hovering around 10 percent, cannot fall any lower. None of this is a prediction, a thought experiment. All of it has already happened. Inside the ruins of the old order, bright flames of pure rage are blossoming.

The Stakes of the Conflict

This book is a warning. Civil wars are total wars laced with atrocities, fought not between professional soldiers but between populations. Insurgent conflicts are wars of meaning, conflicts in which the ideals and communal vision of a country have rotted away. The nature of war

against insurgents is so vicious exactly because meaning is at stake: When you are fighting for freedom and your soul, what won't you do?

America was founded with the motto "Out of Many One." If the One fails, a multitude of different factions will emerge out of it: the Black and the white, the North and the South, the coasts and the heartland, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Mormons, Scientologists, the Nation of Islam, fifty states, the Seminoles and the Sioux and the Blackfoot and the Comanche, immigrants from every other country on earth. You could, if you wanted, fracture America 327 million different ways.

The forces tearing America apart are both radically modern and as old as the country itself. All that is swelling to the surface now has been lurking underneath for decades, if not from the beginning. Bloody revolution and the threat of secession are essential to the American experiment. America has always been subject to quick, radical change. The question is not whether the United States' factions will descend into conflict, or even what that conflict will look like, but which America will emerge victorious from that conflict.

The Desire Not to See What's Coming

In a sense, the crisis has already arrived. Only the inciting incidents are pending. In America's first civil war, Buchanan's State of the Union address preceded the war itself by five months. But his declaration—that secession was unlawful but that he couldn't constitutionally do anything about it—marked the moment when America split and the war became inevitable. From then on, the country operated by two separate political systems, two legal systems. The country cracked before it divided.

On the eve of America's first civil war, the most intelligent, the most informed, the most dedicated people in the country could not foresee its arrival. Even when Confederate soldiers began their bombardment of Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, nobody believed that the first civil war was inevitable. The Confederate president, Jefferson Davis, declared the event, in which nobody died, "either the beginning of a fearful war, or the end of a political contest." It was both, and neither. The war had begun earlier. The political contest continued long after.

In Washington, in the winter of 1861, Henry Adams, the grandson of John Quincy Adams, declared that "not one man in America wanted the civil war, or expected or intended it." South Carolina senator James Chesnut Jr., who did more than most to bring on the advent of the catastrophe, promised to drink all the blood spilled in the entire conflict. The common wisdom at the time was that he would have to drink "not a thimble." The North was so unprepared for the war they had no weapons.

At what exact point did the first civil war become inevitable? That question is so tantalizing because it's so unanswerable. The presence of delegates from Georgia in South Carolina was necessary for the South to find its collective courage for secession, and the presence of the Georgian delegates was to celebrate the completion of a railroad between the two states. "If the Charleston and Savannah Railroad had happened to be completed a month earlier or later, might disunion have come at a different time, and/or in another form, or even not at all?" asks William W. Freehling in *The Road to Disunion*. Even a month's delay in a single railroad might have kept hundreds of thousands Americans from dying.

The closer to an event, the more avoidable everything seems. If Lincoln had not been elected, would there have been a war? George Custer, then a cadet at West Point, remembered seeing Southerners heading to the steamboat landing to join their states: "Too far off to exchange verbal adieux, even if military discipline had permitted it, they caught sight of me as step by step I reluctantly paid the penalty of offended regulations, and raised their hats in token of farewell," he remembered, "to which, first casting my eyes about to see that no watchful superior was in view, I responded by bringing my musket to a 'present.'" The sides, even then so joined by brotherhood, separated with salutes, leaving in sorrow. The men of West Point had been fighting and even dueling over the question of slavery for years. The idea that they were going to start killing each other seemed absurd.

But the farther back you look, the more inevitable events appear. How could there not be a civil war after bloody Kansas, after John Brown landed at Harpers Ferry? How could there not be a civil war after slaveholding congressman Preston Brooks beat the abolitionist Senator Charles Sumner past unconsciousness with a gold-tipped cane on the floor of the Senate? How could there not be a civil war after South Carolina ignored federal tariffs during the nullification crisis of 1832? After the battles over the gag order? In hindsight, America's policy of Manifest Destiny made the civil war impossible to avoid. As each territory opened—Missouri, Kansas, Texas—the question of whether America was a slave or free country had to be answered, and there was no answer. The opening of each new territory posed the impossible question: What is America?

Before the first civil war, nobody saw the catastrophe coming, but the moment it started, it was inevitable. Events today appear chaotic and confusing from close up, but if you look behind the fury, it's not hard to perceive their direction. Inertia and optimism are powerful forces. It's so easy to pretend it's all going to work out. It's easy to obsess over the immediate chaos, too, over what spark might engulf the whole country in sudden flames. Nobody wants what's coming, so nobody wants to see what's coming. At critical moments in history, the future stares us right in the face. We can never manage to look it in the eye.

The Preparations Already Underway

There will be those who say that the possibility of a new civil war is alarmist. All I can say is that reality has outpaced even the most alarmist predictions. Imagine going back just ten years and explaining that a Republican president would openly support the dictatorship of North Korea. No conspiracy theorist would have dared to dream it. Anyone who foresaw it foresaw it dimly. The trends were apparent; their ends were not.

Right now, elected sheriffs openly promote resistance to federal authority. Right now, militias train and arm themselves in preparation for the fall of the Republic. Right now, doctrines of a radical, unachievable, messianic freedom spread across the internet, on talk radio, on cable television, in the malls. Right now, radical Americanism craves violent resolution to its political fantasies. Right now, the faith in democracy has shattered. In the aftermath of Biden's election, a YouGov poll found that 88 percent of Republicans do not believe that Biden won legitimately.

The intelligence services of other countries are preparing dossiers on the possibilities of America's collapse. Foreign governments need to prepare for a post-democratic America, an authoritarian and hence much less stable superpower. They need to prepare for a broken America, one with many different centers of power. They need to prepare for a lost America, one so consumed by its crises that it cannot manage to conceive, much less to enact, domestic or foreign policies.

The purpose of this book is to give readers access to the same advance information. These dispatches are projections but not fantasies. The next civil war isn't science fiction anymore. The plans to the first battle have already been drawn up. And not by novelists. By colonels.