
Is the United States Headed for Civil War?

Description

via [Washington Post](#)

Fighting words and extremism are on the rise. We are not yet in ‘Turner Diaries’ territory, but that doesn’t mean the country will avoid violent conflict.

It’s easy and logical to conclude that the United States today stands as close to the edge of civil war as it has since 1861. A broad variety of voices — including Republican and Democratic politicians, academics who study civil strife, and extremists on both ends of the spectrum — now accept the idea that civil war is either imminent or necessary. They point to evidence that can seem persuasive: a blizzard of threats against FBI agents, judges, elected officials, school board members and elections supervisors; training camps where heavily armed radicals practice to confront their own government; and polls [showing](#) that many Americans expect violent conflict.

But it’s also easy and logical to conclude that the florid rhetoric from right-wing extremists, the worried warnings in mainstream media, and [the hail of threats](#) and individual attacks after this month’s surprise [FBI search](#) of Donald Trump’s South Florida mansion add up to something well short of the frightening prospect of civil war.

People who track such threats say this summer’s violent outbursts against federal officials and government institutions amount to one more concerning surge of rage in a pattern that has persisted throughout the pandemic, spiking after the murder of [George Floyd](#) two summers ago. But the Anti-Defamation League and other watchdog groups are not seeing the kind of specific planning by private militias and online assemblages of radicals that was evident before last year’s [Jan. 6 insurrection](#) and the [white-supremacist march](#) in Charlottesville in 2017.

“We are living in a country where disinformation, conspiracy thinking and lies have resulted in deadly attacks,” said Oren Segal, vice president of the ADL’s Center on Extremism. “It’s not exactly kumbaya in this society. But we have been going through this for a long time now, and I don’t see people coming together in the more coherent organizing we saw prior to Jan. 6.”

Contrast that perspective with that of Stephen Marche, author of [“The Next Civil War: Dispatches From the American Future,”](#) who posits that as extremists’ threats have become more lurid and specific, their rhetoric has leached into the mainstream — leading, for example, the Texas state government to spell out instances in which it would [defy federal authority](#) and the Texas Republican Party to [declare](#) President Biden the “acting president” and [seek](#) a voter referendum on seceding from the United States.

When he sees small groups of armed men training for combat against government agents, Marche, a

Canadian novelist, wants to [ring warning bells](#). “The alarm is getting much more serious, and it’s accelerating very quickly,” he said. “The kind of chaos I’m describing is like internet rage: You could take it as playacting or it could be deadly serious. It could be weekend fun or actual military preparation.” He, along with some other analysts on the left, right and in between, thinks the current noise is a strong indicator that a hot civil war — one likely to feature bombings, assassinations and other assaults on federal institutions and officials — may be imminent.

This split over how seriously to take the threat of civil war is not just another example of America’s deep divisions: It has the great benefit of existing on a foundation of shared facts. Both sets of analysts — those who say we’re heading toward civil strife and those who say the threat matrix is largely limited to lone rangers and small, disorganized groups whose dangerous but scattered acts don’t constitute a civil war — agree there is little chance of an organized, violent attack on the government, or of local or state authorities taking up arms against their federal counterparts. But there remains a sharp divide over whether a mounting series of individual and small-group attacks could add up to a warlike conflict that destabilizes the country.

What both sides in the civil war debate do agree on is that a more disturbing trend — at this point more dangerous than the sporadic bursts of violence in recent years — is the pervasive loss of trust, hope and sense of belonging in a severely damaged society.

And both sides agree we have been here before.

A quarter-century ago, after the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building, I interviewed William Pierce, the physics professor turned neo-Nazi organizer whose novel “[The Turner Diaries](#)” had been taken by the bomber, Timothy McVeigh, as a planning document for launching civil war. In the book, white supremacists conspire to bomb FBI headquarters and spark a wider war against the government. McVeigh had excerpts from the book in his getaway car when he killed 168 people and injured hundreds more.

Pierce, a provocateur who took great pride in his book’s popularity among white supremacists and other extremists, told me that his aim — and that of those he hoped would read his book — was to overthrow the government and rid the country of Jews and Blacks.

“People [don’t use the book as a blueprint, but as inspiration](#),” Pierce told me. “I don’t have the time to write just for entertainment. It’s to explain things to people. I’d like to see North America become a white continent.” He wrote that “if we don’t destroy the System before it destroys us — if we don’t cut this cancer out of our living flesh — our whole race will die.”

Pierce, who died in 2002, told me he expected individual violent acts inspired by his book to become more frequent. “Terrorism only makes sense if it can be sustained,” he said. “One day, there will be real, organized terrorism done according to plan, aimed at bringing down the government.”

For several decades, “The Turner Diaries” has remained a go-to text for violent extremists, [showing up frequently in online chatter](#) by participants in and supporters of the Jan. 6 attack. In the meantime, the internet has blossomed into a far more insidiously efficient tool for those who seek to foment discord and terrorism. Yet although Pierce’s work still inspires single actors and small groups, his wider war has never come close to fruition.

[Jan. 6 wasn't an insurrection. It was vigilantism. And more is coming.](#)

Today, “civil war” is a rallying cry that some Americans [wear on T-shirts](#) and others [openly train for](#) with assault weapons. Since the Mar-a-Lago search on Aug. 8, “lock and load” and “civil war” have trended on [pro-Trump social media](#) such as Gab and Telegram.

Belligerent rhetoric has also become part of everyday campaigning among some Republicans. A GOP candidate in Florida’s 11th House District, Laura Loomer, who narrowly lost her primary Tuesday, wrote on Telegram on Aug. 8 that it’s “time to take the gloves off. ... If you’re a freedom loving American, you must remove the Words decorum and civility from your vocabulary. [This is a WAR!](#)” Conservative YouTuber and podcaster [Steven Crowder tweeted](#) on the day of the FBI’s descent on Mar-a-Lago that “tomorrow is war.” “It’s time to [fight for every square inch](#),” he reiterated the next day. “It’s time to fight fire with fire.” The pro-Trump Gateway Pundit site wrote “This. Means. War.” On various pro-Trump social media platforms, people talked about buying ammunition and drilling for confrontation with federal agents. [“Civil war! Pick up arms, people,”](#) one agitated person tweeted.

Such talk has been a mainstay of the Trump years. Last summer, Rep. [Madison Cawthorn](#) (R-N.C.), an election denier, [alleged](#) that U.S. election systems are “rigged,” which he said would “lead to one place, and that’s bloodshed.”

In a new book, [“We’ll Be Back: The Fall and Rise of America,”](#) conservative writer [Kurt Schlichter](#) games out a civil war and concludes that blue states face a challenge. “It’s nice to hold cities, but if you do not also hold all the rural territory between the cities, as well as the routes to the places where you are getting your food and fuel,” he wrote, “you have a real problem.”

Trump himself, speaking against the teaching of critical race theory at a South Carolina rally this spring, said America’s fate “ultimately depends upon the willingness of its citizens to lay down — and they must do this — lay down their very lives to defend their country.”

One of Trump’s leading critics in his own party, Rep. Adam Kinzinger (Ill.), said early this year on ABC’s “The View” that civil war could erupt. “We have to warn and talk about it so that we can recognize that and fight hard against it,” [said Kinzinger](#), one of two Republicans on the House committee investigating the Jan. 6 attacks.

But Kinzinger has also warned against embracing civil war rhetoric, tweeting in May: “How bout we [stop the ‘civil war’ lust](#). Buy some GI Joes or something.”

In a nation where firearms purchases have [almost doubled since the start of the pandemic](#) — driven mainly by fears of [rising crime, political unrest and the insecurity of life](#) in the age of covid-19 — appeals like Kinzinger’s have fallen all too flat.

When the Rev. Sun Myung Moon sought to win Americans to his political and spiritual cause, the Unification Church, in the 1970s, he recruited people to sell flowers and ginseng door-to-door. Now, his son Hyung Jin Moon seeks to win followers for his Rod of Iron Ministries by sponsoring [training sessions at his compounds](#) in Texas and Pennsylvania — practice, he says, for a coming “patriots” war against the “deep state.”

The Moons’ churches are both fringe groups, but Hyung Jin’s organization has hosted Trump’s former chief strategist Steve Bannon and current Pennsylvania Republican gubernatorial candidate Doug Mastriano at its “Freedom Festival” events.

Moon’s group is one of the many radical organizations that are increasingly open about their plans. A [Brookings Institution study](#) tracked several hundred private militia groups that use anti-government rhetoric to attract Americans worried “about changing demographics, stagnating wages, and how the shift to a multi-racial and multi-ethnic America will affect them.”

But such groups remain disparate and disjointed.

Many activists who have called for confrontation with the government now claim they meant no such thing; they have flipped the accusation, saying leftists or government agents are out to smash conservative opposition by kindling fear of a civil war launched by right-wingers. Crowder, the YouTube host, called media reports about his tweets an [intentional smear](#).

“Decrying the weaponization of a once-professional FBI, and the scandals among its wayward Washington hierarchy is not insurrectionary,” Victor Davis Hanson, a fellow at Stanford’s Hoover Institution, [wrote in American Greatness](#), an online journal generally supportive of Trump. “Those who warn most of some mythical civil war are those most likely to incite one.”

Does all the noise add up only to vigorous opposition to the government, or is it evidence of concerted preparation for open warfare? The answer depends in part on what you think modern civil war would look like: Would large militias attack government institutions, or would a war be limited to haphazard acts by individuals and small guerrilla factions?

[A new book imagines a looming civil war over the very meaning of America](#)

Some say a war of sorts has begun: “The second American civil war is already occurring,” Robert Reich, labor secretary under President Bill Clinton, [declared in the Guardian](#). “But it is less of a war than a kind of benign separation analogous to unhappily married people who don’t want to go through the trauma of a formal divorce.”

Reich foresees not a violent division of the country but rather something “analogous to Brexit — a lumbering, mutual decision to go separate ways on most things but remain connected on a few big things (such as national defense, monetary policy and civil and political rights).”

Still, many Americans believe that a true, violent civil war is coming. About half of those surveyed this spring [by the University of California at Davis’s Violence Prevention Research Program](#) said they expected civil war in the next few years. Another poll, by the Survey Center on American Life, a nonpartisan project affiliated with the conservative American Enterprise Institute, found [more than one-third of Americans agreeing](#)

that “the traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it.”

Groups seeking to battle the government have popped up regularly throughout American history.

To determine when such movements around the world have exploded into real civil wars, Barbara Walter, a political scientist at the University of California at San Diego and the author of [“How Civil Wars Start: And How to Stop Them,”](#) points to two predictive factors: Countries stuck in an unstable zone between democracy and autocracy are more susceptible to armed conflict. And countries with weakened governments and a population deeply divided by identity — by race, ethnicity or religion — can fall into civil war. Walter [sees](#) the Republican Party embracing an “almost white supremacist strategy” that attracts far-right activists eager to fight the federal government.

But other scholars look at the same evidence and see the potential for violence stabilizing or diminishing. Juliette Kayyem, who heads the homeland security program at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, argues that violent movements either grow or shrink. As Trump increasingly looks to his supporters like a loser, she sees them wandering away. The “ideology is not defeated; it simply stops motivating people to action,” she [wrote in the Atlantic this month](#).

The rhetoric of war is vastly more common than war itself. Violent and dark language has been at the core of Trump’s appeal for many years. Trump’s choice for governor of Arizona, former TV news anchor Kari Lake, for instance, tells crowds that the government is “rotten to the core,” meaning “America is dead.”

That kind of end-times speech strikes some disturbed or radicalized people as an invitation to uprising. But historians and security analysts who’ve studied the latest evidence of civil war planning mainly foresee the kinds of scattered terrorism that the country experienced in the late 1960s and early 1970s, not anything like the buildup to 1860.

Marche has dug into prepper conferences, far-right gatherings and the darkest of online rabbit holes, trying to discern whether their war plans are “weekend fun or actual military preparations. It’s hard to distinguish the fantasists from the people who actually are going to do it,” he said in an interview. In the end, he pronounces himself “really scared.”

No one would call the strife of the 1960s civil war, but “there was enormous violence in that time,” Marche said. “One hundred and forty cities burned, and that’s in a time when you still had a level of institutional trust that could mitigate the violence.”

Now, however, collapsed trust in institutions such as the police, news media, churches and government makes the country more vulnerable to internal attack, he argues. Add this year’s Supreme Court [decision](#) on abortion rights, and “you now have another situation like in 1860 where you have two legal statuses of people in different parts of the country, and it just can’t hold,” he said.

Still, Marche notes that “America changes all the time. Reinvention is in the absolute DNA of the country.”

Segal, who tracks extremism for the ADL, sees this month’s burst of war threats as one more sign that

“the system is ripe for targeting,” with the FBI now the focus of violent rhetoric and attacks, like school boards, election workers and medical professionals before it. This may not trigger a wider rash of violence, but the danger has not passed. “Based on what happens in the November elections, extremists will adjust and find a boogeyman,” he said.

Segal retains hope that holding the Jan. 6 perpetrators to account and investigating Trump’s role in fomenting that attack “will somehow round the edges of the situation.”

It’s hard to see a civil war emerging from the current mess, but as Segal said, “I’m more concerned about what we can’t see.”