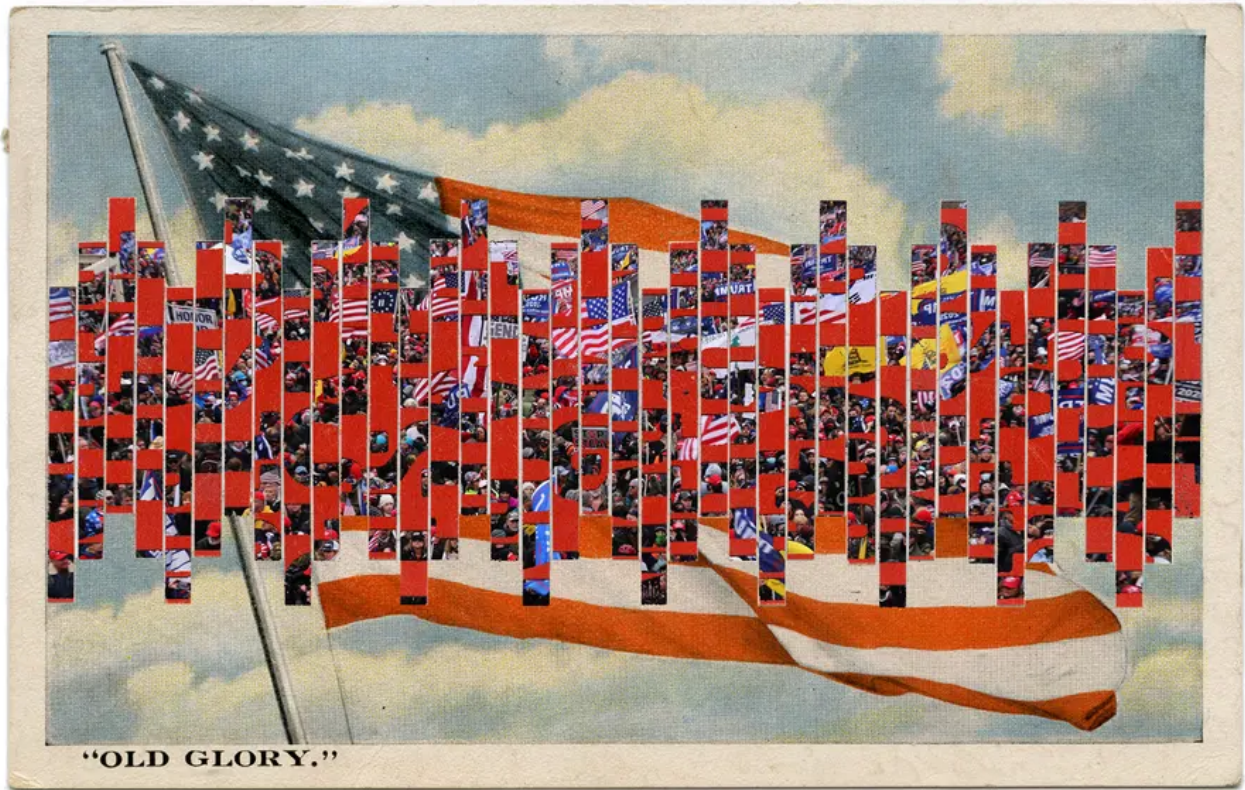


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**The far right**  
**The next US civil war is already here – we just refuse to see it**

The right has recognized that the system is in collapse, and it has a plan: violence and solidarity with treasonous far-right factions

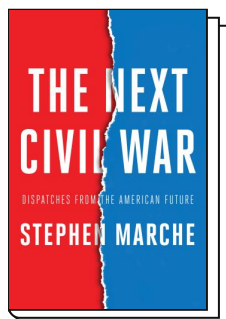
**Stephen Marche**

Tue 4 Jan 2022 10.00 GMT

Nobody wants what’s coming, so nobody wants to see what’s coming.

On the eve of the first civil war, the most intelligent, the most informed, the most dedicated people in the United States could not see it coming. Even when Confederate soldiers began their bombardment of Fort Sumter, nobody believed that conflict was inevitable. The north was so unprepared for the war they had no weapons.

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 Chestnut, 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 Next Civil War**  
by Stephane Marche

Simon & Schuster

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The United States today is, once again, headed for civil war, and, once again, it cannot bear to face it. The political problems are both structural and immediate, the crisis both longstanding and accelerating. 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 freefall, or, like Congress, with approval ratings hovering around **20%**, cannot fall any lower. 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.

The consequences of the breakdown of the American system is only now beginning to be felt. January 6 wasn't a wake-up call; it was a rallying cry. The Capitol police have seen threats against members of Congress **increase by 107%**. Fred Upton, Republican representative from Michigan, recently shared a message he had received: “I hope you die. I hope everybody in your family dies.” And it's not just politicians but anyone involved in the running of the electoral system. Death threats have become a standard aspect of the work life of election supervisors and school board members. A third of poll workers, in the aftermath of 2020, **said** they felt unsafe.

## ▲▲ The problem is not who is in power, but the structures of power.

Under such conditions, party politics have become mostly a distraction. The parties and the people in the parties no longer matter much, one way or the other. Blaming one side or the other 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 United States has burned before. The Vietnam war, civil rights protests, the assassination of JFK and MLK, Watergate - all were national catastrophes which 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 1960s. 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.

**T**wo things are happening at the same time. Most of the American right have abandoned faith in government as such. Their politics is, increasingly, the politics of the gun. The American left is slower on the uptake, but they are starting to figure out that the system which they give the name of democracy is less deserving of the name every year.

An incipient illegitimacy crisis is under way, whoever is elected in 2022, or in 2024. According to a University of Virginia **analysis** of census projections, by 2040, 30% of the population will control 68% of the Senate. Eight states will contain half the population. The Senate malapportionment gives advantages overwhelmingly to white, non- college educated voters. In the near future, a Democratic candidate could win the popular vote by many millions of votes and still lose. Do the math: the federal system no longer represents the will of the American people.

The right is preparing for a breakdown of law and order, but they are also overtaking the forces of law and order. Hard right organization have now **infiltrated** so many police forces - the connections number **in the hundreds** - that they have become unreliable allies in the struggle against domestic terrorism.

## **▲▲ The white supremacists in the United States are not a marginal force; they are inside its institutions**

Michael German, a former FBI agent who worked undercover against domestic terrorists during the 1990s, knows that the white power sympathies within police departments hamper domestic terrorism cases. “The 2015 FBI counter-terrorism guide instructs FBI agents, on white supremacist cases, to not put them on the terrorist watch list as agents normally would do,” he says.

“Because the police could then look at the watchlist and determine that they are their friends.” The watchlists are among the most effective techniques of counter-terrorism, but the FBI cannot use them. The white supremacists in the United States are not a marginal force; they are inside its institutions.

Recent calls to reform or to defund the police have focused on officers’ implicit bias or policing techniques. The protesters are, in a sense, too hopeful. Activist white supremacists in positions of authority are the real threat to American order and security. “If you look at how authoritarian regimes come into power, they tacitly authorize a group of political thugs to use violence against their political enemies,” German says. “That ends up with a lot of street violence, and the general public gets upset about the street violence and says, ‘Government, you have to do something about this street violence,’ and the government says, ‘Oh my hands are tied, give me a broad enabling power and I will go after these thugs.’ And of course once that broad power is granted, it isn’t used to target the thugs. They either become a part of the official security apparatus or an auxiliary force.”

Anti-government patriots have used the reaction against Black Lives Matter effectively to build a base of support with law enforcement. “One of the best tactics was adopting the blue lives matter patch. I’m flabbergasted that police fell for that, that they actually support these groups,” German says. “It would be one thing if [anti-government patriots] had uniformly decided not to target police any more. But they haven’t. They’re still killing police. The police don’t seem to get it, that the people you’re coddling, you’re taking photographs with, are the same people who elsewhere kill.” The current state of American law enforcement reveals an extreme contradiction: the order it imposes is rife with the forces that provoke domestic terrorism.

Just consider: in 2019, 36% of active duty soldiers claimed to have witnessed “white supremacist and racist ideologies in the military”, according to the Military Times.

t this supreme moment of crisis, the left has divided into warring factions completely incapable of confronting the seriousness of the moment. There are

**A** liberals who retain an unjustifiable faith that their institutions can save them when it is utterly clear that they cannot. Then there are the woke, educational and political elites dedicated to a discourse of willed impotence. Any institution founded by the woke simply eats itself - see TimesUp, the Women's March, etc - becoming irrelevant to any but a diminishing cadre of insiders who spend most of their time figuring out how to shred whoever's left. They render themselves powerless faster than their enemies can.

What the American left needs now is allegiance, not allyship. It must abandon any imagined fantasies about the sanctity of governmental institutions that long ago gave up any claim to legitimacy. Stack the supreme court, end the filibuster, make Washington DC a state, and let the dogs howl, and now, before it is too late. The moment the right takes control of institutions, they will use them to overthrow democracy in its most basic forms; they are already rushing to dissolve whatever norms stand in the way of their full empowerment.

The right has recognized what the left has not: that the system is in collapse. The right has a plan: it involves violence and solidarity. They have not abjured even the Oath Keepers. The left, meanwhile, has chosen infighting as their sport.

There will be those who say that warnings 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 10 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, foresaw dimly. The trends were apparent; their ends were not.

It would be entirely possible for the United States to implement a modern electoral system, to restore the legitimacy of the courts, to reform its police forces, to root out domestic terrorism, to alter its tax code to address inequality, to prepare its cities and its agriculture for the effects of climate change, to regulate and to control the mechanisms of violence. All of these futures are possible. There is one hope, however, that must be rejected outright: the hope that everything will work out by itself, that America will bumble along into better times. It won't. Americans have believed their country is an exception, a necessary nation. If history has shown us anything it's that the world doesn't have any necessary nations.

**/// The crises the US now faces in its basic governmental functions are so profound that they require starting over**

The United States needs to recover its revolutionary spirit, and I don't mean that as some kind of inspirational quote. I mean that, if it is to survive, the United States will have to recover its revolutionary spirit. The crises the United States now faces in its basic governmental functions are so profound that they require starting over.

The founders understood that government is supposed to work for living people, rather than for a bunch of old ghosts. And now their ghostly constitution, worshipped like a religious document, is strangling the spirit that animated their enterprise, the idea that you mold politics to suit people, not the other way around.

Does the country have the humility to acknowledge that its old orders no longer work? Does it have the courage to begin again? As it managed so spectacularly at the birth of its nationhood, the United States requires the boldness to invent a new politics for a new era. It is entirely possible that it might do so. America is, after all, a country devoted to reinvention.

Once again, as before, the hope for America is Americans. But it is time to face what the Americans of the 1850s found so difficult to face: The system is broken, all along the line. The situation is clear and the choice is basic: reinvention or fall.

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# BROOKINGS

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## Is the US headed for another Civil War?

William G. Gale and Darrell M. West Thursday, September 16, 2021

Is it really possible that America could face the possibility of civil war in the near future? It may seem unthinkable, and yet there's much to worry about.

A 2021 national survey by pollster John Zogby found a plurality of Americans (46%) believed a future civil war was likely, 43% felt it was unlikely, and 11% were not sure. War seemed more likely for younger people (53%) than older ones (31%), and for those residing in the South (49%) and Central/Great Lakes region (48%) relative to those in the East (39%).

Meanwhile, Republican Rep. Madison Cawthorn of North Carolina made a false claim regarding election integrity and said, "If our election systems continue to be rigged, then it's going to lead to one place and that's bloodshed. ... There's nothing I would dread doing more than having to pick up arms against a fellow American." (Translation: "It would be a shame if false election claims cause a civil war.") These kinds of remarks should not be taken lightly.

The recent survey did not ask why people thought civil war was possible or how it could happen. But we believe there are several forces pushing many to imagine the unthinkable.

**Hot-button issues:** Racial equity, gun control, abortion, election legitimacy, climate change, vaccines, masks—the list goes on. Cultural, economic, and political issues generate outrage and hostility. We already are seeing "border wars" via federalism, with individual states passing major legislation that differs considerably from that in other places. As an illustration, a new Texas law virtually outlaws abortions after six weeks of pregnancy (a time at which many women do not even know they are pregnant), while other states continue to uphold the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* framework and a clear majority of Americans support legalized abortion.

**High levels of inequality and polarization:** These hot-button issues are driven in part by the widespread and interrelated divisions that burden the country. Separated by ideology, race, gender, living standards, and opportunities for education and economic advancement, different groups have dramatically different views about public policy and American society. There can be large variations in opinions, depending on the issues.

**Winner-take-all politics:** The sharp delineation in perspectives does not, in itself, have to bring government to a halt; Tip O'Neill and Ronald Reagan were able to negotiate and reach agreements, for instance. But today's toxic atmosphere makes it difficult to negotiate on important issues, which makes people angry with the federal government and has helped create a winner-take-all approach to politics. When the stakes are so high, people are willing to consider extraordinary means to achieve their objectives. Winning becomes the goal over almost every other consideration, which leads to ...

**Belief that the other side doesn't play fair:** One of the most worrisome contemporary signs is the widespread belief that "the other side" is ruthless. Liberals see conservatives limiting voting rights, endangering democracy, and ignoring procedural safeguards, while conservatives think progressives are turning to socialism and disrespecting freedom and liberty. Viewing others with great suspicion and doubting their motives is an indication that faith in the system is eroding and there is little good will in how people deal with one another

**Prevalence of guns:** As if the problems above were not enough, America has an extraordinary number of guns and private militias. According to the National Shooting Sports Foundation, a gun trade association, there are "434 million firearms in civilian possession" in the United States—1.3 guns per person. Semi-automatic weapons comprise around 19.8 million in total, making for a highly armed population with potentially dangerous capabilities.

**Private militias:** Rachael Levy of The Wall Street Journal writes that "several-hundred private-militia groups now exist around the country, and they have proliferated in recent years." Current militias generally are made up of right-wing white men who worry about changing demographics, stagnating wages, and how the shift to a multi-racial and multi-ethnic America will affect them. These groups create the potential for



violence because they tend to attract radicalized individuals, train members for violent encounters, and use social media to reinforce people's existing beliefs. They openly talk about armed rebellion, and some members of these organizations already have engaged in violence and are helping others plan their own assaults and shootings.

## **Still, civil war is not inevitable**

Take a deep breath. Despite the factors above, civil war is not inevitable. Indeed, that scenario faces several limiting factors that hopefully will stop the escalation of conflict. Historically, other than during the 1860s and the Reconstruction period, these kinds of forces have limited mass violence and kept the country together.

### **Most of the organizations talking about civil war are private, not public entities:**

When Southern states seceded in 1860, they had police forces, military organizations, and state-sponsored militias. That varies considerably from today, where the forces who have organized for internal violence are mostly private in nature. They are not sponsored by state or local governments and do not have the powers of government agencies. They are voluntary in nature and cannot compel others to join their causes.

**There is no clear regional split:** We do not have a North/South schism similar to what existed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There are urban/rural differences within specific states, with progressives dominating the cities while conservatives reside in rural communities. But that is a far different geographic divide than when one region could wage war on another. The lack of a distinctive or uniform geographic division limits the ability to confront other areas, organize supply chains, and mobilize the population. There can be local skirmishes between different forces, but not a situation where one state or region attacks another.

**A history of working through ballot box:** Despite Republicans' increasing (and false) accusations that elections they lose are fraudulent—GOP candidate Larry Elder made unfounded claims of voter fraud in the recent California recall election before the election even happened!—America has a history of resolving conflict through electoral and political means, not combat.

Although there has been a deterioration of procedural safeguards and democratic protections, the rule of law remains strong and government officials are in firm position to penalize those who engage in violent actions.

We expect that these limiting factors will allow the country to avoid a full-scale civil war. However, with nearly half the country believing this conflict to be likely, we need to take that scenario seriously. This is, after all, not the first time the country has been sharply divided. The 1860s conflagration—a needed step to rid the nation of slavery—lasted four years, cost over 600,000 lives, and had a devastating impact on the economy, political system, and society as a whole. It was a shocking breach of the national union by slave-holders and a demonstration of what happens when basic governance breaks down.

We should not assume it could not happen and ignore the ominous signs that conflict is spiraling out of control. Even if we do not end up in open combat, there could be an uptick in domestic terrorism and armed violence that could destabilize the country. It is time to take steps to safeguard democracy, address societal concerns, and defuse our current tinderbox.