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Talking Sense About “A New American Civil War”



Photo by [Colin Lloyd](#)

For some time, people who analyze social conflicts have been watching the growth of political and cultural polarization in the U.S. with more than a little trepidation. At present, the bookshelves and airwaves are filled with talk of a possible armed conflict between elements of the nation’s far-right “Red” and left-liberal “Blue” tribes.[1] What gives this scary analysis more credibility than it might otherwise have is not only the proliferation of weapons in America (over 400 million guns in a population of 330 million), but the increasingly sharp polarization of institutions originally designed to resolve civil conflicts nonviolently – in particular, political parties, government offices, elections, and courts.

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Especially since the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol by frenzied supporters of Donald Trump, most of the “new civil war” talk has focused on far-right groups like those involved in the attack, and on the armed militias, estimated to be about 30,000 strong, that tend to identify as conservative nationalist, Christian nationalist, or white supremacist. Many of their members are war veterans, current or former police officers, or security personnel, and they know how to use the weapons of war. Of course, some leftists also have a capacity for organized violence. They have not been much in evidence lately, but one assumes that if a new civil war begins, they will make their presence felt.

We need to talk sensibly about the potential of a nation like the U.S. for serious political violence, but this isn't easy to do so. “It can't happen here” is obviously too glib and complacent, while “It will happen here” is alarmist and demoralizing. The questions that most need thoughtful discussion are these: What are the most important causes of serious political violence in wealthy nations like the United States? Can these conditions be altered so as to make civil war less likely? If so, how do we go about preventing the violence?

Why even in relatively wealthy societies do people sometimes cross the line from nonviolent to violent politics? The list of underlying causes and conditions is a long one, including socioeconomic inequalities, ethnic and racial tensions, cultural differences, and more. I will get back to these underlying structural causes at the end of this discussion. Three more subjective causes, however, seem particularly important in conditioning civil groups to fight: the growth of “all or nothing” consciousness, the loss of trust in mediating institutions, and a conviction that the war has already begun.

The growth of “all or nothing” consciousness

One reason that political conflicts usually remain peaceful even for those on the losing side is the perception that you can compromise with an opponent or even suffer defeat in particular battles and still avoid permanent harm or damage. The idea that a movement can live to fight another day rests on two assumptions. First, the fight is about negotiable interests, not core values or urgent needs that must be satisfied right now if they are not to be sacrificed permanently. Second, the struggle takes place within a system that can be expected to survive more or less intact, whatever the outcome of the current struggle.

On the contrary, if the conflict is all about core values, and if losing it would entail a permanent change in the political system, this tends to produce a win-or-lose-everything mentality that increases the likelihood of serious civil violence.

To illustrate, consider what it might mean to prosecute former president Donald Trump for crimes connected with his attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 election or for removing classified documents from the White House. Trump very likely broke the law in Georgia, and perhaps in other states as well. He may also have committed a felony by bringing top secret information to his Florida home and destroying some of it. But unless the case against Trump is open and shut – and, perhaps, even if it is – putting a political leader favored by almost half of American voters in the defendant’s chair and threatening him with a jail sentence seems quite likely to provoke serious disorder.

The problem can be summed up in two words: “rigged system.” One cause of civil violence is a conviction on the part of a political movement’s members that the existing system is not only biased against them, but *so* rigged that peaceful forms of politics have become utterly useless.

At present violent far right groups such as the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Boogaloo Bois constitute a relative handful of militants, and events since their January 6th attack on the Capitol have set them back on their heels. But prosecuting Trump could change all that. Making the former POTUS a criminal defendant and potential martyr to the MAGA cause would very likely stimulate an increase in far-right organizing, the formation of new armed groups, and a turn to direct violence by some of them. An armed rebellion, in turn, would almost certainly generate an increase in state violence (and perhaps in violence by far-left groups), and the fat would be in the fire.

But wait! A frequent left-liberal response to this reasoning emphasizes the costs of *failing* to prosecute and convict Trump. Leaving him at large allows him to continue whip up potentially violent outrage and – should he become President again – puts him and his minions in a position to alter the system to secure the authoritarian rule they thirst for. The liberal view offers an anticipatory version of the same argument made by the far right – i.e., that the system is or soon will be so rigged as to make the use of ordinary political methods useless. It illustrates that the trend toward all or nothing thinking is common to both the “Red” and “Blue” tribes. It is general and it is dangerous, although not necessarily foretelling immediate violence.

How close *are* we to experiencing serious civil violence? The clock that some imagine ticking toward a new American civil war is not yet at one minute or even fifteen minutes before midnight. What pushes the minute hand further back is the fact that each side still considers certain political instrumentalities usable and is investing time, energy, and resources in hopes of using them successfully. On the right, these instrumentalities

include the U.S. Supreme Court, many inferior courts, the U.S. Senate, and roughly half of the state legislatures, while on the left they include the remaining state legislatures, the U.S. House of Representatives, and (although with a good deal of handwringing) the Presidency. The problem is that each side fears that its hold on these power bases could easily slip, permitting the other side to institutionalize its own interests and values permanently. The political game somewhat mitigates each side's "all or nothing" consciousness; thus, the intense interest in both camps in the November 2022 midterm elections. But the clock keeps ticking.

Loss of confidence in "super-political" institutions

A related factor promoting potential civil violence is the tendency for a general movement toward polarization to weaken or render obsolescent the institutions designed to mediate and soften partisan political conflicts. No doubt, the notion that certain institutions were "above" politics was always largely fictitious. But the widespread loss of faith in the *relative* impartiality of judicial and prosecutorial agencies, as well as in legislators acting as a guarantor of the integrity of elections, removes an important inhibitor of impulses toward collective violence.

Like most political systems, the U.S. system was designed to avoid serious violence between groups considered legitimate. The Constitution embodied a series of historic compromises designed to head off potentially violent economic and sectional conflicts, and the major political parties long functioned as mediators of disputes between competing groups within each party-coalition. Nineteenth century elections could be stormy and were sometimes marred by fraud and violence, but their results, except in the years prior to the Civil War and during Reconstruction in the South, were generally accepted as legitimate.

Even so, polarization remained a force to be reckoned with in the twentieth century, with its industrial labor struggles, its foreign wars, and its endemic racial and ethnic conflicts. Key institutions relied on to reduce the potential for civil violence in modern times were "super-political" in the sense that they were believed able to transcend partisan politics and to mediate serious social conflicts. Among the most important of these were the state and federal courts, prosecutorial agencies such as the U.S. Department of Justice and the F.B.I., and military organizations such as the U.S. Armed Forces and National Guard.

In the current atmosphere of increasing polarization, the trend is clearly toward a loss of confidence in these resources. Consider, for example, the precedent-shattering series of right-wing decisions issued by the U.S. Supreme Court in its 2021-22 term. It seems

unlikely that the conservative Justices who presided over these decisions understand how profoundly anti-conservative (in a systemic sense) they really are. Whatever one may think of their legal justifications, rulings like the anti-abortion decision, *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Organization*,

have clearly disabled the Court from fulfilling its traditional function of claiming to instantiate “a government of laws and not of men.” Few cases since the pro-slaveowner *Dred Scott* ruling in 1856 have done more to stimulate the growth of an “all or nothing” consciousness among groups feeling themselves unjustly treated.

At certain times, the judicial system's prosecutorial offices have also played a mediatory role by upholding non-partisan legal norms, although polarization tends to politicize them as well. The vicious vendetta conducted by J. Edgar Hoover's F.B.I. against Martin Luther King helped to produce the right-wing civil violence that eventually killed him. Donald Trump's allegations that that same agency was used to smear him as a Russian agent and, more recently, to endanger his current campaign for the Presidency, further besmirch the federal prosecutors' “super-political” reputation. Similarly, the possibility that the Department of Justice might indict Trump for election-related or other crimes could reduce its mediatory clout virtually to zero.

Strangely, if such a development were to continue, the only remaining organizations capable of maintaining public acceptance as trustworthy mediators might be the military services – the same services that refused to collaborate in Trump's attempt to discredit the 2020 election results. In a society feeling threatened by the possibility of serious internal violence, the unspeakable – military intervention to “save the Constitution” – loses its taboo character and becomes part of common conversation.

“The war has already begun” – and the structural causes of violence

A third condition opening the door to mass violence is a widespread perception that political violence has already become more intense and general – the idea that the war has already begun. Most of those who pick up a gun and join a group dedicated to armed struggle do not believe that they are *initiating* violence. They feel that they are *defending* against it and that they have no choice but to confront their enemy now or be defeated later. Soon, if not immediately, they will have martyrs to emulate and dead or injured comrades to avenge. Soon they may see their own violent heroism and willingness to sacrifice as the only way to awaken others who are “sleeping” to their own danger and duty. This consciousness is, perhaps, the clearest indication that a civil struggle is about to turn violent.

In the current atmosphere of heightened polarization, there is a tendency to assert that political violence is rapidly on the rise and spreading. Incidents such as the January 6th assault on Congress might seem to justify this perspective, but the assertion is exaggerated by an intense media focus on a limited number of shocking events.

Fortunately, a widespread turn to political violence has *not* yet materialized. The militia movement in the U.S. lacks a central command structure, political coherence, and a tradition of mutual aid. Reports of the growth of right-wing militias are inconsistent, but they do not seem to be undergoing serious expansion. One also hears reports of increasing activity among anarchist or “antifa” groupings on the left, but here there is even less evidence of rapid growth or an increase in violent incidents.

A crucial question, then, is how to prevent political violence from escalating to the level that a self-generating violent system is created. Answering it requires that we think critically and creatively about the underlying causes of polarization, especially about the gross economic and social inequalities that have generated strong populist currents on both the Right and the Left.

Growing inequality is a problem that neither the “Red” nor “Blue” tribe seems able to understand properly or to counteract. Conservatives can’t deal with inequality because they are pro-capitalist; therefore, they tend to convert problems like wage stagnation, job insecurity, deindustrialization, and the failure of social welfare programs into cultural identity issues. (White people – or non-Christians – or native workers – are being disfavored and “replaced,” radical leftists who hate America are out to destroy traditional moral standards, and so forth.) Liberals can’t deal with it because they think that they *are* dealing with it by tinkering ever so tentatively with the social system. They are pro-capitalist, too, but they believe that by increasing taxes on the rich, raising minimum wages, favoring “clean” energy over dirty energy, mending the social safety net, and so on, they can combat inequality or at least give it a human face.

Wrong! Most of the problems that generate social inequality are structural, and neither Democrats nor Republicans are willing to consider solutions that are sufficiently radical to be effective. Many members of the “Red” tribe think that the “Blues” are already socialist, but they are not, not by a long shot. Socialism means using public agencies not driven by the profit motive to do jobs that profit-seeking enterprises can’t do without reproducing gross inequality. It means giving popularly elected and controlled federal and local governments the last word concerning social and economic problems that capitalist elites can’t solve. So many unsolved problems become solvable this way that it makes

one recognize how little interest either Reds or Blues have in actually solving them! Both tribes would rather fight their issues out on the terrain of cultural warfare than endanger the sacred system of private profit.

Immigration – and other non-problems

Space permits only one short illustration of this dynamic: the controversy over immigration. According to conservatives, large-scale immigration to the U.S. from poor nations costs native workers jobs, undermines wage levels, and disrupts existing local cultures. Liberals counter that immigration creates new jobs and generates sources of economic opportunity, and that multiculturalism has enriched American civilization. In fact, one can easily demonstrate that large-scale immigration works to the disadvantage of lower-paid workers in areas of highest immigrant concentration, and that its chief economic beneficiaries are capitalist enterprises dependent on cheap labor. It is also demonstrable that the new workers settle where those jobs happen to be located, not where their services are most needed by the society.

One solution, then, seems obvious. Get the government to guarantee wage levels and to provide good jobs to workers in areas of high immigration, and get it to ensure that the level of social services in these areas will improve rather than deteriorate as new residents arrive. The trouble is, this would require government intervention in the economy to an extent that no “Red” or “Blue” figure currently in office has been willing to consider. Or, how about this as part of a solution: have the government develop and enforce an immigration policy directing new residents to live and work for a certain period of time in regions of the country and jobs where they are most needed, instead of regions and jobs producing the most profit for a few companies. Eliminating economic stress in areas of high immigrant concentration would almost certainly lower the level of cultural stress in those same communities, and popularly controlled and funded local governments could do all sorts of things to help culturally diverse groups live together peacefully.

Not only is this sort of intervention not proposed, discussing it is considered taboo by both “tribes.” For similar reasons, America’s gigantic military budget, exceeding the budgets of the next seven most powerful nations combined, and the skyrocketing profits of the military-industrial complex are also taboo topics. Even while U.S. residents suffer the consequences of a decaying infrastructure, uncontrolled climate change, areas of desperate rural and urban poverty, and grossly underfunded public services, U.S.-style capitalism and U.S.-style empire are taken off the table as subjects for political debate.

What are left on the table, of course, are the so-called social issues: the power of the states to outlaw abortion, the freedom of football coaches to pray on the 50-yard line, the right of citizens to carry military assault rifles, their duty to support U.S. troops in whatever war they may be ordered to fight, and so forth. As a result, many analysts trying to assess the likelihood of a new American civil war tend to conclude that the struggle between Red and Blue tribes is a clash of cultures having virtually nothing to do with issues of economics or social class. They do not understand – or perhaps they don't want to – that noisome cultural conflicts flourish in the muck of unsolved social and economic problems. Drain *that* swamp and issues that seem so value laden as to be unresolvable turn out to be manageable without the threat or reality of violence.

Conclusion: beyond the “culture gap”

A final illustration of this principle is the “culture gap” between college-educated Americans, who tend in large numbers to support the Blue tribe, and those with a high school education or less, who in equally large numbers back the conservative Reds. Are there cultural and value-based differences between these groups? Certainly. But are their differences *purely* matters of ideology and lifestyle? Certainly not! Most of America's college-educated population are workers, small entrepreneurs, or lower-level professionals, not members of some wealthy elite. In fact, they are often vulnerable workers, since so few are members of labor unions or other associations with real economic clout. But most are lucky, advantaged, or plucky enough to have secured employment in an industry related to new technologies rather than in older industries threatened by deindustrialization and environmental change. They tend to work with computers rather than with their hands, and they are not dependent on the price of coal, oil, or agricultural crops to survive.

Most of these newer industries are located in urban or suburban areas rather than in the countryside. That is where the newer workers live, which means that their culture tends to be urban rather than rural and often reflects values that are more modernist than traditional. In short, the clash of cultures correlates with a split in the American working class. Relative to workers in older industries, what we could call “high-tech” employees have many of the privileges that skilled craft workers in America long enjoyed. This gives some of them the delusion that they are no longer wage-earners dependent upon the vagaries of the capitalist market, but members of some sort of educated middle-class elite. Most will soon discover, if they have not already done so, that when push comes to shove,

they are in the same boat with the workers that many look down on as reactionary rednecks.

To avert a new American civil war, the urbanized, college-educated workers who tend to support the Blue tribe need to see themselves as pawns of the same profit-obsessed system that turns so many rural or deindustrialized workers into gun-toting, Bible-thumping Reds. This is the system, after all, that gives the Blues unsafe overpoliced streets, schools that don't teach, families that can't provide love or security, endless foreign wars, endemic environmental emergencies, and salary checks that don't pay the rent. A few successful entrepreneurs or professionals make it into the ranks of those who can afford to purchase costly private substitutes for decaying or nonexistent public services. Most do not, and soon discover that they must run harder and harder just to stay in their relatively privileged place.

The psychological toll on both Reds and Blues is very high, and the temptation to see the other side as the problem, rather than the system that has ensnared them both, is strong. It is this failure to think systemically, above all, that creates the threat of civil war between America's Red and Blue tribes. If only they would recognize that their common enemy is a soulless, predatory system that prioritizes profits over human needs, they could put their imaginations to work creating popularly controlled institutions designed to satisfy those needs.

This will happen, I think, as our sense of crisis undermines the power of political taboos. In the meantime, we can work to avoid inflaming the "all or nothing" consciousness that often leads in the direction of civil violence. Where immediate decisions are called for – for example, the decision whether or not to prosecute Donald Trump as a felon – my own preference is to make the profit system rather than the profiteer the target. Trump is an ugly symptom of the social disease called capitalism. Treating the disease, it seems to me, is priority number one.

Notes.

[1] See, e.g., Stephen Marche, *The Next Civil War: Dispatches from the American Future* (Avid Reader Press/Simon & Schuster, 2022); Barbara F. Walter, *How Civil Wars Start: And How to Stop Them* (Crown, 2022).

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