



Should we start taking the risk of a second American Civil War seriously?

A recent Rasmussen poll revealed that 57% of Democrats think that Trump supporters represent a threat to America. That's more than the Taliban (44%), China (44%) or Russia (only 37%). In mid-September, conservative American commentator Matt Walsh was calling for a 'national divorce'. On the same day, liberal commentator Sarah Silverman was also calling for a break-up into 'USA 1 and USA 2'. In Walsh's words there is a deep division in American society, 'one sides dream for the future is the other sides nightmare ... we have no common values, no shared principles, no shared beliefs, we have nothing in common, we don't like or respect each other.'

America is a land divided. The number of genuinely swing voters has plummeted in the past twenty years from 22% of the electorate to just 7%. As more voters become rusted on Republicans or Democrats, winning elections becomes less about appealing to the middle, but instead appealing to each party's base. This has pushed both parties to the ideological extremes and created polarisation over issues such as race, religion, gender identity, abortion and just about everything else. Mask and vaccine mandates, how racism is taught in schools, whether statues of Confederate Generals should be torn down, even the latest flavour of Ben & Jerry's ice cream 'change is brewing' – everything in modern America is political.

Such divisiveness means politics ceases to be about policy or ideas, but about identity – to which political tribe do I belong. This is most evident with respect to internal migration, in which conservatives are fleeing liberal States and vice versa. This is making ‘Blue’ States bluer and ‘Red’ States redder, adding to the polarisation. New York and California increasingly seem like different countries to Texas or Florida. Historian Victor Davis Hanson calls this the ‘Afghanistization’ of America, where tribal loyalties (based on ethnicity, race and religion) replace national identities. (If a comparison to Afghanistan seems overwrought, it might be remembered that the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, as well as ISIS conquests in Syria, were similarly accompanied by the toppling of ancient statues and monuments. Ideological extremism is intolerant, including intolerant of the past).

Could such polarisation and tribalism continue to the point of open violence? Is another American civil war a real possibility? There are three key historical indicators for when a country is liable to dissolve into civil war. All three indicators bode ill for America.

The first is when a national government loses the monopoly over the legitimate use of violence within its borders. Civil war prone countries like the Congo, Somalia, Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan all suffer from weak or non-existent governance, incompetent or corrupt policing, warlordism, and having porous undefended borders. Despite about 22% of the world’s prisoners residing in American penitentiaries, America is similarly becoming increasingly lawless. Despite nationwide, weeks-long race riots last year after the death of George Floyd, the January 6 Capitol insurrection, huge spikes in the levels of crime and homicide, and an immigration crisis on America’s porous southern border, some are so distrustful of American law enforcement that they have made calls to ‘defund the police’. Political divisiveness is making America ungovernable, and into the void are entering new urban militias like the left-wing Antifa and right-wing Proud Boys. This is eerily reminiscent of Weimar Germany, where Communist militias and Nazi brownshirts ran amok within a poorly governed and lawless country. It did not end well.

Another indicator of civil strife is when there is no peaceful way to transfer political power. Disputed elections are often a cause for civil violence, particularly in divided tribal societies like Rwanda or Iraq where one political party represents a certain ethnic or religious group. Because loss of political power will place that group at the tender mercies of an enemy ethnic group, elections are routinely tampered with, or their outcomes denied. Political power can only be transferred violently.

The polarisation of American politics is similarly making elections appear to be winner takes all affairs, the pendulum swinging violently from liberal to conservative and back in recent elections. Right on cue, we have also seen highly fractious election outcomes. Donald Trump refused to concede the 2020 election due to unproven allegations of fraud. The break with Constitutional convention went as far as insisting his Vice President (as President of the Senate) refuse to ratify the election outcome. If Mike Pence had gone along, America might now be ruled by a self-appointed Dictator, not an elected President. Pence’s refusal to play along led to the most deplorable events in American politics since Watergate, the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Of course, these events took place after four years during which Trump was treated as illegitimate by Democrats and the Washington establishment. Despite never proving collusion with Russia, the elites and the bureaucracy just couldn’t (and wouldn’t) accept that America could have elected such a man. Recent efforts by some States to tighten election laws has been called voter repression by the political Left. So future disputed elections are almost certain.

The final indicator for when a country is ripe for civil conflict is when the government loses control over the military. A disloyal military is perhaps the biggest internal danger to any nation, and disloyalty is precisely what is being alleged against the current Pentagon brass.

A recent report suggests that Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley twice made unauthorised contact with his Chinese counterpart before and after the disputed 2020 Presidential election to assure him that the United States was stable and was not going to attack China. Further, he is reported to have informed China that if such an order were given, he would alert China ahead of time. The report suggests Milley thought Trump was unstable, so without authorisation he apparently took it upon himself to engage in some private warrior diplomacy. Milley and the senior Pentagon leadership have also in recent months been criticised for turning the military “woke” such as placing controversial author Ibrahim X Kendi’s polarising book *How to be an anti-racist* on approved reading lists (to better understand ‘white rage’ in Milley’s words), embracing action on climate change and adopting controversial racial and gender diversity policies. Recently retired American Generals have also been accused of breaching military codes of conduct when they openly criticised the former Commander in Chief, Donald Trump.

If a shift to the Left within the American military leadership pleases Democrats, they should be equally concerned about a disloyal military. Rank and file soldiers and marines who have served overseas feel betrayed by Biden’s withdrawal from Afghanistan. The combat forces lean towards being male, white, rural and conservative. About three quarters of all combat deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan were white men (about double the proportion that white men make-up of the total population). Disgruntled French soldiers returning home after France’s failed colonial wars in the 1950s and 60s nearly led to a military coup against De Gaulle. Many of the soldiers who have been fighting in America’s imperial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan serve in the special forces, who have been raiding terrorist bases and killing insurgents for twenty years now. They are very good at it. In a catastrophic meltdown of the American political system, they are death squads in waiting if sufficiently radicalised.

Ungovernable citizenry, distrusted electoral processes, politicised military leadership and a ‘Balkanised’ population would all be ringing alarm bells if this were unfolding in any other country, why not the US? Americans make up 4% of the global population, but own 46% of the world’s civilian firearms, so if political pundits are starting to call for a national ‘divorce’, nothing suggests it would be any less violent than the last time it was tried in the 1860s.

*John Storey is a lawyer and military historian. His new book *Big Wars: Why do they happen and when will the next one be?* is available for pre-order now direct from [Hybrid Publishers](#) and on [Kindle via Amazon](#). Image by [Brandon Mowinkel](#) on [Unsplash](#).*