

BARBARA F. WALTER

**HOW
CIVIL
WARS
START**

And How to Stop Them

'When one of the world's leading scholars of civil war tells us that a country is on the brink of violent conflict, we should pay attention. An important book'
Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, authors of *How Democracies Die*

VIKING

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Viking is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in the United States of America by Crown 2022
First published in Great Britain by Viking 2022
001

Copyright © Barbara F. Walter, 2022

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK ISBN: 978-0-241-42975-4
TRADE PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-0-241-42976-1

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

To Zoli and Lina

and weak compared to the opposition. It's at this point that violence breaks out: when citizens become convinced that there is no hope of fixing their problems through conventional means.

Fueled by social media, they come to believe that compromise is simply not possible.

CHAPTER 6

HOW CLOSE ARE WE?

Wearing winter coats and MAGA hats, the crowd of Trump supporters began to gather at the Ellipse, a park just south of the White House, early on the morning of January 6, 2021. They had traveled to Washington from every corner of America. As they waited for the president to appear, they surveyed their country's venerated ground: the Washington Monument to the south; the Lincoln Memorial to the west; the Capitol to the east. The lawn where they stood had once served as a campsite for Union troops. This was fitting because they too—they told themselves—were patriots. They loved America too much for it to be taken away.

By noon, when President Trump came out to address them, the "Save America" rally had swelled to several thousand. The crowd was restive. In the weeks since the presidential election in November, Trump had refused to concede that he'd lost to Democrat Joe Biden, insisting instead that widespread voting fraud had cheated him of his rightful landslide victory. Democrats, he claimed, had worked behind the scenes, state by state, to ensure his loss. After the

election, Trump had rallied an army of lawyers to contest the results, and he had bullied governors and election officials to try to alter vote counts. He had also asserted, falsely, that Vice President Mike Pence had the power to overturn the votes of the electoral college. But his efforts had gone nowhere, and that morning, as he stood before his supporters, lawmakers were gathering at the Capitol to certify Biden's victory.

This did not have to be, Trump told his supporters. Standing on a dais, surrounded by American flags, he told his listeners he was not giving up. Congressional Republicans could still overturn the vote, he claimed. For more than an hour, supporters listened with a mix of adoration and pride, their anger and energy growing with Trump's every word. They waved flags with his name, and placards with his rallying cry: "Stop the Steal." As he stood looking at them, chants of "USA, USA, USA!" broke out across the crowd.

Trump was delighted. Grassroots groups, along with Republican funders and operatives, had helped to organize the rally, and Trump had done his part to ensure a large turnout, tweeting on December 19: "Big protest in D.C. on January 6. Be there, will be wild!" On the first day of the new year, he'd tweeted again: "The BIG Protest Rally in Washington, D.C., will take place at 11.00 A.M. on January 6th. Locational details to follow. StopTheSteal!" Trump became even more insistent when Vice President Pence signaled he would not interfere with the certification. On January 4, at a rally in Georgia, Trump declared: "If the liberal Democrats take the Senate and the White House—and they're not taking this White House—we're going to fight like hell. . . . We're going to take it back!"

"Today is not the end!" the president shouted into the

crowd on the Ellipse. "It's just the beginning!" The crowd contained a mix of people: veterans, business owners, real estate agents, grandfathers, mothers, a state legislator, a former Olympian, members of the Proud Boys wearing orange hats. Most were white. Most were men. Some wore T-shirts that said "God, Guns, and Trump." Others carried Bibles. (At a rally the night before, pastor Greg Locke had told the crowd that God was raising up "an army of patriots.") To the approving roar of his listeners, Trump urged his followers to march to the Capitol and press lawmakers to do what was right. "We're going to try to give them the kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country," he said. And then he pledged to join them.

In fact, he returned to the White House. But his supporters knew what to do: For weeks, spurred by Trump's tweets, they had been preparing for this moment on Facebook and Parler, a right-wing social networking service. There they had coordinated their travel as they shared their fury over the "stolen" election. They had outlined the best streets to take to the Capitol to avoid the police, and shared advice about what equipment and tools to bring to break into the building. Some of the more extreme voices online had called for the arrest of Pence, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and other lawmakers. Many came armed for battle, wearing bulletproof vests, carrying gas masks and zip ties (to use as handcuffs), and loaded handguns.

Political violence had long been encouraged as legitimate by their leader himself—as far back as 2016, in fact, when he'd run his presidential campaign against Hillary Clinton to chants of "Lock her up!" While campaigning, Trump had discovered that crowds became delighted at his belligerence. Months before the 2016 election, Trump told supporters in

Cedar Rapids that he would cover their legal fees if they tussled with people protesting his campaign rallies. That same month, when a rally in Las Vegas was disrupted by a heckler, Trump crowed: "I'd like to punch him in the face, I'll tell you." Later, Trump stunned the nation by hinting that gun owners could prevent Clinton from becoming president. "If she gets to pick her judges, nothing you can do, folks. Although the Second Amendment people—maybe there is, I don't know."

The presidency had emboldened him. Six months into his tenure, when white nationalist demonstrators converged in Charlottesville and a counterprotester was killed, Trump had shrugged off the violence, saying there were "very fine people" on both sides. And though he'd decried the rioting in cities such as Minneapolis and Portland during Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, he'd then escalated tensions by calling protesters "terrorists" and threatening to unleash federal agents on them. That spring, as the COVID-19 pandemic forced states to shut down businesses, he'd called on "patriots" to "liberate Michigan" by going to the state's capitol and demanding that Governor Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat, lift restrictions. After photos circulated online of armed protesters staring down at Michigan lawmakers in the Senate chamber, Trump praised them on Twitter, again calling them "very good people."

Trump's supporters at the higher echelons—Republican lawmakers, evangelical leaders, conservative media elites—had for years dismissed the rhetoric, insisting that he was just a bombastic, charismatic leader. But to the crowd standing on the Ellipse that January morning, the president's words were not an abstraction. He was giving them a mission: to save the integrity of their glorious Republic. "If you don't

fight like hell," he told them, "you're not going to have a country anymore."

They were streaming toward the Capitol before he'd even finished his speech. They didn't bother with side roads, instead marching along Pennsylvania and Constitution avenues and straight down the Mall, taking selfies and videos of one another. The night before, someone had placed pipe bombs at the nearby headquarters of the Republican National Committee and the Democratic National Committee. Converging on the Capitol, they surrounded the building, looking for a way to enter and interrupt the count of the electoral college votes. Some wore tactical gear; some wielded automatic weapons. They carried Confederate flags, American flags, flags that said "Fight for Trump" and "Veterans for Trump," and "Jesus Saves" signs. A fake gallows was erected.

On the west side, the mob quickly knocked barricades over, violently clashing with police officers. Others scaled walls. Still others sprayed chemical agents and broke windows. Some climbed window-cleaning scaffolding to the second floor. On the east side, they breached the largest barricade. Ten minutes after Vice President Pence and the rest of the Senate were hustled off the Senate floor, Trump tweeted, "Mike Pence didn't have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution." Energized, the protesters finally broke down the main door on the west side. Pushing their way into the rotunda, they chanted the names of their targets: Pelosi, Schumer, Pence.

As police barricaded the House chamber and lawmakers scrambled to evacuate, protesters streamed through the hallways, taking more selfies. They were confident, unafraid. They walked through the Capitol as if they belonged there,

deserved to be there, and would be protected by the law. They had nothing to hide, nothing to fear. They ransacked offices, smashed furniture, stole a podium with the seal of the Speaker of the House, stole laptops and a framed photo of the Dalai Lama. They defaced statues and ripped Chinese art off the wall. They live-streamed themselves to the world: breaking into the House chamber, invoking God from the Senate dais, and posing next to a life-sized statue of Gerald Ford on whom they had placed a red MAGA hat and a “Trump 2020 No More Bullshit” flag. They were exultant. They were the true American patriots saving the Republic from a stolen election.

At around three p.m., Trump tweeted: “No violence!” But by then it was too late. One rioter had already been fatally shot. Another had been crushed by the mob. Numerous police officers had sustained physical injuries. The siege would last more than four hours, and by the end, five people would be dead. At 4:17 p.m., after multiple pleas by his staff and by President-elect Biden, Trump tweeted a video. He had watched the siege on television from his dining room off the Oval Office. “It was a landslide election, and everyone knows it,” he announced. But it was time to go home, he told the rioters. “We love you, you’re very special.”

A couple of hours later, he tweeted again. This time, he excused the riot, claiming that it was the natural consequence of an election victory being stripped away from “great patriots” who had long been mistreated. “Remember this day forever!”

LIKE ALL AMERICANS, I was shocked by what happened on January 6. But it was, at the same time, deeply familiar. Pres-

ident Trump’s defiance after losing the 2020 election reminded me of other presidents, from Nicolás Maduro, who in the months before Venezuela’s 2015 election declared he would not relinquish his post no matter the outcome, to Laurent Gbagbo, who refused to concede after Ivory Coast’s 2010 election because he claimed it was stolen. Venezuela slid toward authoritarianism; the Ivory Coast descended into civil war. A part of me did not want to accept the implications of what I was seeing. I thought of Daris, from Sarajevo, who, even years later, still struggled to understand how the people of his multicultural, vibrant country had turned so violently on one another. *This is America*, I thought. *We are known for our tolerance and our veneration of democracy.*

But this is where political science, with its structured approach to analyzing history as it unfolds, can be so helpful. No one wants to believe that their beloved democracy is in decline, or headed toward war; the decay is often so incremental that people often fail to notice or understand it, even as they’re experiencing it. If you were an analyst in a foreign country looking at events in America—the same way you’d look at events in Ukraine or the Ivory Coast or Venezuela—you would go down a checklist, assessing each of the conditions that make civil war likely. And what you would find is that the United States, a democracy founded more than two centuries ago, has entered very dangerous territory.

The first condition—how close we are to anocracy—is best understood through our polity index score, which, as you’ll recall, places countries on a fully autocratic to fully democratic scale of -10 to $+10$. The middle zone covers the -5 to $+5$ zone. Polity data has been collected on the United States since 1776. The last time America was an anocracy was between 1797 and 1800, when it was rated a $+5$, mostly

for its limited political competitiveness (the Federalists had dominated government since their party's inception in the 1790s). America's polity ranking increased to +6 in March 1801 with the inauguration of Thomas Jefferson, a Democrat-Republican, and then increased to +10 in 1829 with the inauguration of Andrew Jackson, a Democrat.

In the years that followed, the country experienced only two large dips in its polity rating. The first happened in 1850, when Southern Democrats were pursuing take-no-prisoner politics against Northern Republicans in the years that led to the Civil War; the U.S. polity score dropped as low as a +8. It did not recover until 1877, when the heavily disputed election of 1876 was settled. The second dip came during the civil rights era of the 1960s and early '70s, when mass demonstrations increased, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated, President Richard Nixon began to pursue more predatory tactics, and the government began to direct violence against its own people. Once again, American democracy was downgraded to a +8. Civil rights legislation, the Watergate investigation, and Nixon's resignation brought it back to a +10.

And then it dropped again: In the wake of the 2016 presidential election, America fell to a +8. There are four major factors that the Polity Project uses to assess democracy: how free elections are from government control, how constrained the executive branch is, how open and institutionalized political participation is, and how competitive the recruitment for the presidency is. Though international observers deemed the 2016 election free, they decided it was not entirely fair: Election rules had been changed as a result of partisan interests, and voting rights were not guaranteed for all citizens. In

addition, U.S. intelligence agencies detailed a systematic on-line campaign by Russian agents to interfere in the election.

Within months of his inauguration, Trump and the Republican Party also began to erode the constraints on the executive branch. Trump unilaterally purged government figures he found disloyal and leveraged bureaucratic operations to benefit his administration and punish opponents. As his tenure progressed, he sought to expand executive powers, refused to release his tax returns, instituted a rash of executive orders, and pardoned guilty friends of crimes. America had become an "imperial presidency"—as presidential historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., once put it—with its president ruling by executive order rather than consulting with Congress. In terms of executive constraints, the United States is now classified in the same category as Ecuador, Burundi, and Russia.

In 2019, after Trump refused to cooperate with Congress, especially during its impeachment inquiry, America's democracy score dropped to a +7. Congress has the right to investigate and oversee the executive branch; as William P. Marshall, a law professor at the University of North Carolina, has noted, "We're supposed to be in a system of checks and balances, and one of the biggest checks that Congress has over the executive is the power of congressional oversight." But the White House refused to turn over any information, sued to block subpoenas, and instructed officials to ignore the subpoenas they did receive. Republicans in both the House and the Senate, meanwhile, willingly followed the president's lead, allowing the executive branch to run roughshod over their own branch.

The year 2020 brought crises that would have stressed

even the most robust democracy: a global pandemic, a teetering economy, and riots in the streets over systemic racism, sparked by police killings of Black citizens. But rather than shore up citizens' trust in their country's institutions, Trump deliberately undermined them. He challenged governors who tried to contain the spread of COVID-19 by turning shutdown measures into a political issue. (In April 2020, he tweeted: "LIBERATE MICHIGAN! LIBERATE MINNESOTA! LIBERATE VIRGINIA!, and save your great 2nd Amendment. It is under siege!") As Black Lives Matter protests roiled the country, he attacked city mayors for being ineffectual and threatened to use government force against protesters. He then wielded it for his own purposes: On June 1, Trump had police officers use an irritant (likely tear gas) to clear out hundreds of peaceful protesters in Lafayette Square for a photo op. "If a city or state refuses to take actions that are necessary to defend the life and property of their residents," he told journalists, "then I will deploy the United States military and quickly solve the problem for them." As he reached the end of his term, he sowed distrust in the election by undermining voting by mail. He then questioned the peaceful transfer of power, a hallmark of American democracy. On January 6, 2021, he encouraged the crowd at the Ellipse to "fight like hell." And fight they did. But instead of saving their country, they degraded democracy even further. That day led to America's polity score dropping from a +7 to a +5, the lowest score since 1800.

The United States is an anocracy for the first time in more than two hundred years. Let that sink in. We are no longer the world's oldest continuous democracy. That honor is now held by Switzerland, followed by New Zealand, and then Canada. We are no longer a peer to nations like Can-

ada, Costa Rica, and Japan, which are all rated a +10 on the polity index.

There is some good news. A few of the guardrails that protect democracy remained firm in the face of challenges. Though Trump and the Republican Party filed more than sixty lawsuits claiming election fraud in swing states, more than fifty of those were dismissed or denied (the handful that did make it through were overturned in higher courts). The Supreme Court, which has a majority of conservative judges, also rejected Trump's election challenge. Republican state officials on the receiving end of the president's bullying—Trump threatened to sideline Arizona's governor for certifying election results and pressured Georgia's secretary of state to "find" the votes he'd need to win—held their ground.

So, too, did the military. Trump catered to America's generals throughout his time in office, but rather than validate his bids for more power, they distanced themselves from his agenda at key moments. In 2020, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper refused to use active-duty troops to control Black Lives Matter demonstrators (he was later fired). And on January 3, 2021, the ten living former defense secretaries, including James Mattis, Mark Esper, Dick Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld, issued a statement in *The Washington Post* making clear that they would defend the Constitution, not the president. They concurred with a statement made months earlier by General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: "There's no role for the U.S. military in determining the outcome of a U.S. election."

There are other reasons for hope. On January 6, after the Capitol was again secure, members of Congress immediately returned to work. They certified the results of the election,

ensuring a peaceful transfer of power and safeguarding the rule of law. The FBI immediately launched investigations into the rioters, filing its first conspiracy charge against the leader of the Oath Keepers. The agency vetted National Guard troops in charge of security at the inauguration, and the Pentagon ramped up efforts to eliminate far-right extremism within its own ranks. Biden and his vice president, Kamala Harris, were sworn into office peacefully.

Still, we cannot ignore what has happened, or the speed at which it's happened. Americans are used to thinking of their democracy as the best in the world—we've even exported our Constitution to countries in eastern Europe and Latin America—but we have transitioned from a full democracy to an anocracy in just five years. That's not quite as fast as the countries that have found themselves in civil wars (they usually see a six-point or more drop in their polity score within three years), but it's close. "A drop of five points is considered borderline," Monty Marshall has noted, and it signals potential "regime change." In the words of Anna Lührmann, the deputy director of the V-Dem Institute, the democratic decay in the United States has been "precipitous" and, at least in the U.S., "unprecedented."

A partial democracy is three times as likely to experience civil war as a full democracy. Recall, too, that the risk of civil war for a decaying democracy rises significantly soon after it enters the anocracy zone. A country standing on this threshold—as America is now, at +5—can easily be pushed toward conflict through a combination of bad governance and increasingly undemocratic measures that further weaken its institutions. The question for America moving forward is whether voters can be persuaded that their democracy works

(and is critical to their safety)—and whether leaders will choose to reinstate its guardrails.

JAMES MADISON AND Alexander Hamilton believed that if American democracy were to die, it would happen at the hands of a faction. The greatest threat to the republic, wrote the authors of the Federalist Papers, was not an outside adversary but a homegrown group ravenous for control. Given the chance, the leaders of such a faction—"adverse to the rights of other citizens or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community"—would consolidate power and elevate their own interests over the public good. The type of faction the founders saw as the greatest threat was based on class; they worried that property owners might seek to concentrate political power to protect their wealth and prevent its redistribution. The Madisonian model of creating separate, powerful branches of government—executive, legislative, judicial—was designed to counteract this threat.

What America's eighteenth-century leaders couldn't have predicted was that the factionalization they feared would be rooted not in class but in ethnic identity. That's because in 1789, at least at the federal level, all American voters were white (and all of them were men). Today, the best predictor of how Americans will vote is their race. Two-thirds or more of Black, Latino, and Asian Americans consistently vote for Democrats, while roughly 60 percent of white Americans vote for Republicans. That represents a dramatic shift from the middle part of the last century, when the ethnic minority vote was split roughly between the two parties, and most white working-class Americans tended to vote Democratic.

In fact, as late as 2007—the year before Barack Obama was elected president—whites were just as likely (51 percent) to be Democrats as they were Republicans. Today, 90 percent of the Republican Party is white.

The shift toward identity-based politics began in force in the mid-1960s, when Lyndon Johnson—the bawdy, bigoted, and politically savvy Texan—betrayed white southerners by backing the Civil Rights Act. Voters in the eleven former Confederate states had been faithful Democrats for over a hundred years, still angry that Republican president Abraham Lincoln had refused to accept secession. But Johnson's legislation, in 1964, led to a seismic change. ("I think we just delivered the South to the Republican Party for a long time to come," Johnson said to his special assistant, Bill Moyers.) Though the Democrats won the presidency that year in a landslide, Johnson's Republican rival, Barry Goldwater—who opposed the Civil Rights Act—was the first Republican candidate to win all of the Deep South's electoral votes since Reconstruction. Richard Nixon, a former presidential candidate himself, had already seen the implications from afar. As he told a reporter for *Ebony* magazine in 1962, "If Goldwater wins his fight, our party would eventually become the first major all-white political party. And that isn't good."

It didn't take long, however, for Nixon to change his mind. Running for president in 1968, Nixon decided to capitalize on racial resentment himself, leveraging white fear with calls for "law and order" and a pledge to fight the "war on drugs." This so-called Southern Strategy helped the GOP win the presidency and later retake the Senate after being out of power for almost thirty years. Future Republican candidates would rely on similar appeals to win the presidency,

though always with coded language, whether it was Ronald Reagan shaming "welfare queens" or George H. W. Bush disparaging Willie Horton. George W. Bush's campaign was accused of spreading rumors of John McCain fathering an illegitimate Black child.

Over the following decades, other identity markers became politicized. Religion was next. In an effort to secure the support of evangelical leaders and their increasingly mobilized flock, Republican elites staked out more and more pro-life positions. People like Jerry Falwell, Sr., the leader of the Moral Majority, a political organization associated with the Christian right, grew increasingly powerful. Democrats, seeing a chance to win over more atheists, agnostics, and culturally liberal voters, came out more and more in favor of women's rights and access to abortion. By the early twenty-first century, if you were Christian or evangelical, you had little choice but to vote Republican. Early partisan divides on abortion were followed by increasingly polarized positions on gay rights and eventually transgender rights. Wealthy Republicans used these issues to capture the white working-class vote, and they largely succeeded, even though voting Republican was often not in workers' economic interest. Moral imperatives and cultural identities were now, more than ever, driving voting patterns. White evangelicals now represent two-thirds of the Republican Party. By contrast, non-Christians—including agnostics, Jews, and Muslims—represent half of the Democratic Party.

By appealing to their core policy concerns like gun rights and by playing on their anxieties about immigration and America's changing racial demographics (whites are projected to be in the minority by 2045), Republicans have been able to win over larger and larger shares of the white

rural vote. Likewise, the Democratic Party has become an increasingly urban party by doing essentially the opposite—trying to reduce violence by restricting access to guns and embracing the diversity that is reshaping urban America. Today, the rural-urban divide is really a divide between citizens whose orientation is national and citizens whose orientation is global.

By the time Obama came into office, political division had become deeply intertwined with a host of ethnic and social identities. Your group affinities—who you liked and who you didn't—were becoming much more important politically than how you felt about policy and whether, for example, you favored higher or lower taxes or supported school choice. This phenomenon was epitomized by the inordinate attention Obama received not for his policy positions but for identity-related concerns, such as whether he was a Muslim (he was not) and whether he was a citizen (he was). The result was two tribes that increasingly fought over almost everything—and were increasingly willing, especially on the Republican side, to subvert democracy to win.

All of this was exacerbated by social media. Just as the two parties were diverging on identity, Twitter exploded, Facebook went mainstream, and social media became an ever present part of our lives. Critically, a network of gleeful ethnic entrepreneurs realized that they could gain ratings and influence by emphasizing this division. Media titans whose bottom lines were enhanced by each of those clicks fed us more and more polarized content. Savvy TV personalities like Tucker Carlson and Sean Hannity were only too happy to spread conspiracy theories and use hatred and division to increase their own ratings. They were joined by conspiracy

theorist Alex Jones, who promoted distrust of the political system altogether; by 2010, *The Alex Jones Show* was attracting two million listeners each week. Keith Olbermann, for his part, stirred up left-leaning voters.

Into this political morass stepped the biggest ethnic entrepreneur of all: Donald Trump. And in his bid for power, he quickly realized that appeals to identity could galvanize his political base. He had already, in the past, made a racist crusade of questioning Obama's birthplace. Now he embraced identity politics explicitly and with gusto. He painted Black Americans as poor and violent. He referred to Mexicans as criminals. He spoke of Christian values, despite numerous accusations of sexual assault. He called women "horseface," "fat," and "ugly." Once sworn into office, he quickly instituted a travel ban on Muslims, and called Haiti, El Salvador, and African nations "shithole" countries. His policies were nativist policies: He started building a "big, beautiful wall" along the border with Mexico, pulled out of international agreements, and started a trade war against China. Trump retweeted a video of a retiree in Florida chanting "white power." And he threatened to veto a defense spending bill in order to protect the legacy of Confederate generals on U.S. Army bases.

In all of these ways, Trump was encouraging ethnic factionalism. It's exactly what Tudjman did when, as part of his plan to become president of an independent Croatia, he began to consolidate Croatians into an ethnic faction in 1989. It is what Hutu extremists did when they characterized Tutsis as cockroaches and Hutus as the chosen people. It's what President Henri Konan Bédié did in the Ivory Coast in the mid-1990s, when he reversed his pro-immigrant poli-

cies to gain more votes from native citizens. And it is what Modi in India still does, when he promotes an India primarily for Hindus.

No Republican president in the past fifty years had ever pursued such an openly racist platform, or championed white, evangelical Americans at the expense of everyone else. At first, it wasn't clear that the Republican leadership would go along—during his own presidential campaign, Texas senator Ted Cruz blasted Trump, calling him “utterly amoral”—but in Trump they saw a way to enact their own agendas. This included tax cuts for the rich, business deregulation, and environmental rollbacks. With Trump in the White House and Republicans controlling the Senate, the party could also stack the Supreme Court and the judiciary more generally with conservative judges who could potentially stymie democratic initiatives for years to come. Though gerrymandering was a tactic on both sides, Republican governors and Republican state legislatures have made concerted efforts to enact voter ID laws, purge voter rolls, limit polling stations and hours, and even withhold food and drink from people waiting in lengthy voting lines.

As you'll recall, the level of factionalism in a country is based on a five-point scale, with 5 being the least factional and 1 being the most (a 3 puts a country firmly in the danger zone). In 2016, the United States dropped to a 3—factionalized—and it remains there today, alongside Ukraine and Iraq. (The United Kingdom also fell to a 3 in 2016.) We've seen this level of political factionalism only twice before: In the years before the Civil War, which were marked by the intransigence of Southern Democrats and their willingness to exclude non-whites from equal protection under the law; and in the mid-1960s, when the coun-

try was roiled by civil rights demonstrations, the Vietnam War, and a corrupt government intent on crushing the anti-establishment movement. Both times, the country's political parties had radically different visions of America's future: What could the country be? What *should* the country be?

The same is happening today. Just as in the past, one group is increasingly becoming more radical, more willing to use extralegal measures, and more violent in the pursuit of its vision. Today, the Republican Party is behaving like a predatory faction. In a 2019 survey that asked nearly two thousand experts to rate the world's political parties, the GOP was rated most similar to radical right anti-democratic parties such as Turkey's Justice and Development Party (known as the AKP) and Poland's Law and Justice Party (known by its acronym PiS). It is primarily ethnic and religious based. It has supported a populist who pursued white nationalist policies at the expense of other citizens, and it has elevated personality above principle. The annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in February 2021 showcased a golden statue of Donald Trump; a poll of attendees revealed that 68 percent of them wanted Trump to run again, and 95 percent wanted the GOP to pursue Trump's agenda and policies moving forward.

Republicans are now in a state of desperate survival politics where they are playing to an increasingly rabid base just to hold on to their seats. Nowhere was this more evident than after the 2020 election, when Republican politicians openly supported—or tacitly approved—Trump's claims of fraud, against all evidence. Ted Cruz went on Fox News's *Sunday Morning Futures with Maria Bartiromo* to talk about voter fraud. On January 6, as Trump supporters were cheering at the Ellipse, Republican senators Ted Cruz, Mike

Braun, John Kennedy, Ron Johnson, Steve Daines, James Lankford, Marsha Blackburn, and Bill Hagerty made a final attempt to overturn the votes. One hundred and thirty-nine Republican members of the House of Representatives (66 percent) voted against certifying Joe Biden as president. Two House members—Mo Brooks from Alabama and Madison Cawthorn of North Carolina—had spoken at the rally on the Ellipse. It was James Madison and Alexander Hamilton's worst fear: the dismantling of democracy by a faction's cynical bid for power.

FOR AMERICA'S FIRST 219 years, every president was a white man. So was almost every U.S. senator, representative, Supreme Court justice, and cabinet member. That the early founders had sanctioned mass genocide of Native Americans, or that many of them were slaveholders, were inconvenient chapters in a mythic narrative of freedom and unbound opportunity. Serbs had their Battle of Kosovo, Russians had Kievan Rus (the belief that mother Russia originated in Ukraine), Spaniards had the Reconquista, which claimed their land for Catholics. We had our Pilgrims seeking a new life. According to our founding story, it was the manifest destiny of our people—at least those who were white and Protestant—to expand across the continent and harvest its riches.

The election of Barack Obama, a dark-skinned president with a Muslim middle name, shattered that myth. His victory was clear evidence that America's demographics and balance of political power were changing. Americans not only had their first Black president, but the majority of Obama's cabinet was non-white as well. The seismic change

reflected in the faces of the new administration was confirmed by the 2012 Census Bureau population estimate, which revealed that, for the first time, a majority of babies born in the United States were non-white. Hispanic and Asian populations had grown by 43 percent in the previous ten years, while the white population had grown by just 6 percent. By around 2045, minorities in America will likely outnumber the white majority. The census, according to Andrew Cherlin, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins University, was a “watershed moment. It show[ed] us how multicultural we'[d] become.”

In 2015, Lin-Manuel Miranda, a composer from New York City of Puerto Rican and Mexican descent, premiered *Hamilton* on Broadway. All the founding fathers were played by people of color. It was a smashing success. But for those who had once felt secure in America, it signified a radical departure from tradition. Many white citizens, particularly those in rural areas, were already feeling left behind economically. Since 1989, the quality of life for the white working class with no college education had been declining according to almost every measure: Their share of income had fallen, their homeownership and marriage rates had plummeted, and their life expectancy had dropped. (The same was not true of working-class Latinos or Black families, or of households headed by white college graduates; living standards for these groups remained steady or improved slightly between 1989 and 2016.) Increasingly open global trade had hollowed out U.S. manufacturing. Citizens of Homestead, Pennsylvania, and Youngstown, Ohio, saw union jobs at the local steel mills disappear, then the steel mills shut down entirely. They saw their children go off to foreign wars and come back to minimum wage jobs with no

benefits. They were losing friends to opioid addiction or suicide.

Working-class whites had been hailed as the backbone of America, their ways and values memorialized in Norman Rockwell paintings. And now, it seemed, the government was abandoning them. Global trade agreements were signed that benefited coastal elites and city dwellers at their expense. Immigration continued, and allowances were made for illegal immigrants. To whites experiencing real economic and social decline, the U.S. government was like the Indian government that encouraged Bengalis to migrate to Assam, the Indonesian government that encouraged Javanese to migrate to West Papua, or the Sri Lankan government that had encouraged the Sinhalese to migrate to Tamil regions. White Americans were seeing young people from countries like India and China—whose first language wasn't English, whose religion was not Christianity—get lucrative tech jobs and live an American dream that no longer existed for them.

Trump intuitively understood that this deep feeling of alienation could carry him to power. And so he didn't just focus on division, denigrating Muslims or Black Americans as the "other." He also emphasized the downgrading of the former white majority—America's own sons of the soil. Like other ethnic entrepreneurs before him, he put the grievances of white, male, Christian, rural Americans into a simplified framework that painted them as victims whose rightful legacy had been stolen. He spoke often about what was being taken away: religious rights, gun rights, job opportunities. His campaign slogan promised a return to glory: "Make America Great Again." In him, people saw someone unlike any other candidate, someone who recognized their lives. In January 2017, in his inaugural address, he described their

experience as an "American carnage." "Their pain is our pain," Trump told the nation. "Their dreams are our dreams, and their success will be our success."

In the United States, white Americans are now disproportionately concentrated in rural areas throughout the Northeast, Midwest, and mountain states, while non-whites tend to be concentrated in urban areas, the South, and along the coasts. This urban-rural divide has become a critical feature in other far-right movements, such as in Turkey and Thailand, where the territorial distribution of power and economic resources increasingly lies in the major cities, which also tend to be more multicultural than the more homogenous rural regions. Movements that are geographically concentrated and predominantly rural are more likely to mobilize violent resistance because it's easier to recruit soldiers, collect funding, and evade police in areas far from the capital. This was true of the Sunnis in Syria, the Moro people in Mindanao, and Papuans in West Papua. Extremists exist in American cities, but they are more often located in rural areas—areas that also contain a higher percentage of military veterans and where gun culture has strong roots.

The grievances of sons of the soil are often deeply felt, if not always legitimate. It's what makes the appeals of political leaders such as Trump so effective. The leaders of the Provisional IRA tapped into Irish Catholics' genuine anger at economic and political discrimination at the hands of Protestants. The leaders of Hamas tapped into Palestinians' deep resentment at losing their land. The Republican Party, by embracing white Americans' grievances, has become like other political parties that have championed sons of the soil movements around the world: the Serbian Radical Party in Yugoslavia, the Islamic Party of the Philippines in Mindanao, the

Tamil National Alliance in Sri Lanka, and the far-right parties that have emerged in Europe. The Sweden Democrats campaigned, and won votes, on the issue of immigration. After Europe's Syrian refugee crisis, in 2015, Germany's populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) went from a failed party to the country's second largest. And Austria's Freedom Party, after struggling in the early 2000s, had enormous success in the 2017 election with its anti-immigration platform. It now shares power with the center right.

Trump's emphasis on grievance has been amplified by other ethnic entrepreneurs, whose conspiracy theories and half-truths have fed a vulnerable audience that was already convinced it was under attack. Breitbart News, led by Trump's chief campaign strategist Steve Bannon, emphasized what Bannon called "alt-right" news. This included a focus on the perils of immigration and the coming of American sharia. Mike Cernovich, a social media personality, gained hundreds of thousands of followers on Twitter and had Fox pick up his stories by spreading conspiracy theories such as Pizzagate, which claimed that Democrats were Satanists and pedophiles.

Social media algorithms—and Trump's rapid-fire tweeting—have reinforced the sense of aggrievement among white conservatives. A 2016 study by researchers at Princeton and New York University found that self-identified conservatives and Republicans were more likely to share false news than Democrats and liberals. Researchers at the University of Oxford similarly found that conservatives were far more likely than liberals to spread information that is intentionally misleading or not true. This pattern was present in the most recent 2019 election in the United Kingdom. Claire Wardle, a leading expert on social media, found that

the Conservative Party was running ads in which 88 percent of the content was labeled as misleading by a fact checker. The same was not true of other parties.

Trump showed future candidates how to lock in a subset of white voters and rally them to go to the polls. One particularly compelling study showed that the best predictor of voters who switched from Obama to Trump was not a change in financial well-being—which had little impact on candidate preference—but instead concerns about status threat, including deep anxiety about the rise of a majority-minority America. Justin Gest showed that the best way to predict Republican support was simply to ask white working-class Americans how much power and status they felt they had lost in the past few decades. White Americans who perceived that they were losing power voted overwhelmingly Republican. In another study, researchers found that by experimentally triggering threats to whites' social standing, they could greatly increase whites' support for punitive policies against minorities.

Almost everyone who scored highest on a widely respected racial resentment measure voted for Trump in 2016, while almost everyone on the opposite end of the scale supported Hillary Clinton. Even after taking into account partisanship, whites' resentment at Black gains and Black demands for equal rights had an oversized impact on the vote. According to one analysis, Republicans with high racial resentment scores were about 30 percent more likely to support Trump than their less aggrieved Republican peers. Perhaps most convincing are studies showing that attitudes on race strongly predict party defections. Those who are racially resentful today are especially likely to become Republicans tomorrow.

The scholars who created the racial resentment scale argue that the racial views of white Americans have changed radically over the last half century. The United States, they write, has shifted from a nation where most of the population believed that racial minorities were inferior to one where many Americans believe that all races are equal but resent African Americans and other minorities for demanding too much in the way of special favors and accommodations. Along with being anti-Black, these attitudes are fueled by reverence for rugged individualism: Racially resentful whites feel that, by asking for government support and protection, Blacks are not adhering to values associated with the Protestant work ethic. In the 2016 American National Election Study, about 40 percent of Americans (and almost 50 percent of white Americans) could be categorized as racially resentful—figures that suggest this new, more subtle form of prejudice is widely held. Remember, it's not the desperately poor who start civil wars, but those who once had privilege and feel they are losing status they feel is rightfully theirs.

People throughout history have spent a lot of time and energy justifying their claims to a place. American Southerners did this after the Civil War: Unwilling to accept the reality of defeat, groups such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the United Confederate Veterans Association, and the Ku Klux Klan carefully crafted a narrative of a genteel South whose culture and way of life had been destroyed by the money-grabbing, industrial North. Symbols of the Confederacy—memorials, plantations, flags—advanced the “Lost Cause” narrative: a nostalgia for a better, simpler time in America, when the South's dominance was uncontested.

Trump spun a similar narrative in the wake of his 2020

presidential loss. Just as the Confederates clung to the story of the Lost Cause—the South had better men, they were never truly defeated—so, too, did Trump, insisting that he hadn't really lost and, more critically, that the election had been stolen from its true heirs. After the attack on the Capitol failed to produce the results he wanted, Trump's myth would offer him and his followers just the story line they needed. They didn't shut out immigrants; they just made them play by the rules. They weren't intolerant; they honored God. They weren't extremists; they were patriots who cared about their country. *That's* what they were fighting for.

THE 2020 ELECTION was devastating for Republicans. They turned out in record numbers for an incumbent president, but still lost the White House by more than seven million votes. Two months later, a pair of Democratic victories in Georgia, a key flip state in the presidential election, made the new vice president, a Black and South Asian woman from California, the deciding vote in the Senate.

A movement turns to violence when all hope is lost. As the storming of the Capitol made clear, citizens on the right are not just resentful of their declining status, they now believe that the system is stacked against them. Everyone they trust—from Fox News to their senators—has told them so. In a poll conducted days after the Capitol siege, nearly three-quarters of likely Republican voters continued to doubt the presidential election results. Polls also revealed that 45 percent of Republicans supported the attack on the Capitol. And more than six months after the election, a majority of Republicans surveyed still claimed that the election had been

stolen and that Donald Trump was the true president. The peaceful inauguration of President Biden did not change their views.

Americans across the political spectrum are becoming more accepting of violence as a means to achieve political goals, not less. Recent survey data show that 33 percent of Democrats and 36 percent of Republicans feel “somewhat justified” in using violence. In 2017, just 8 percent of people in both parties felt the same way. Another recent survey found that 20 percent of Republicans and 15 percent of Democrats say the United States would be better off if large numbers of the other party *died*. But when does sporadic violence escalate into civil war? How do you pinpoint the moment when hope is lost?

The CIA has been studying this question for decades, in an effort to quell insurgencies around the world—in effect, to stop civil wars before they start. Though the agency’s mission is to provide intelligence about foreign countries, a declassified report from 2012 sheds light on how homegrown extremism tends to evolve. Most insurgencies, the report notes, “pass through similar stages of development during their life cycle.” In the pre-insurgency phase, a group begins to identify a set of common grievances and build a collective identity around a gripping narrative—the story or myth that helps them rally supporters and justify their actions. They begin to recruit members, some of whom even travel abroad for training. They begin to stockpile arms and supplies.

The United States probably entered the pre-insurgency phase in the early 1990s, with the formation of militias in the wake of the deadly standoffs at Ruby Ridge in Idaho—when federal agents killed right-wing activist Randy Weaver’s wife and son—and the fifty-one-day siege in Waco, Texas, which

left eighty dead, including twenty-two children, after the Branch Davidians set fire to the compound as the FBI attempted to raid it. By the mid-1990s, militias were active in virtually all fifty states, peaking just after Timothy McVeigh killed 168 people in Oklahoma City in the deadliest domestic terror attack in U.S. history. The number of militias in the United States began to grow again in 2008, when Barack Obama was elected president. Prior to 2008, only about 43 militias existed; by 2011, there were 334.

Today’s militias are different in nature from those in the past. In the 1970s, most violent extremist groups in the United States were left leaning. Today, less than a quarter are. During Obama’s presidency, the country began to see an increase in far-right organizations plotting racially motivated attacks. About 65 percent of far-right extremists in the United States today have white supremacist elements. These groups are, in the words of the FBI, “motivated by a hatred of other races and religions,” and they have more guns and more members than militias of the past. A subset—29 percent—are also part of the sovereign citizen movement, which rejects the authority of the federal government. Two of the most high-profile militias in the United States, the Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters, were founded after Obama became president, out of the belief that the federal government was “working to destroy the liberties of Americans.” A more recent addition is the anti-immigrant, all-male Proud Boys. As of March 2021, ten people associated with the Oath Keepers have been arrested for helping to organize the January 6 siege of the Capitol. More troubling, members of all three organizations had been actively communicating in the lead-up to January 6, suggesting a possible alliance. According to JJ MacNab, one of the world’s experts on ex-

tremist organizations, “You have had distinct groups in the past—sovereign citizens, tax protesters, militia, survivalists, Oath Keepers, Three Percenters—and I think they are just becoming one big messy family right now.”

Right-wing terrorism used to rise and fall depending on who was president: It decreased when a Republican was in the White House and increased when a Democrat was in power. President Trump broke the pattern. For the first time, violent right-wing groups increased their activity during a Republican administration. The president encouraged the more extreme voices among his supporters rather than seeking to calm or marginalize them. To these followers, Trump’s 2016 victory wasn’t the end of their fight; it was the beginning. As Trump put it in his first presidential debate against Democrat Joe Biden, they were to stand back and stand by.

The second stage of insurgency, which the CIA calls the incipient conflict stage, is marked by discrete acts of violence. Timothy McVeigh’s attack in Oklahoma City could be viewed as the very earliest attack, in some ways years before its time. The insurgents’ goal is to broadcast their mission to the world, build support, and provoke a government overreaction to their violence, so that more moderate citizens become radicalized and join the movement. The second stage is when the government becomes aware of the groups behind these attacks, but according to the CIA, the violence is often dismissed “as the work of bandits, criminals, or terrorists.” Timothy McVeigh seemed to many Americans a lone wolf actor. But McVeigh and his accomplice, Terry Nichols, were suspected members of the Michigan Militia. In 2012, the number of right-wing terrorist attacks and plots was fourteen; by August 2020, it was sixty-one, a historic high.

The open insurgency stage, the final phase, according to the CIA’s report, is characterized by sustained violence as increasingly active extremists launch attacks that involve terrorism and guerrilla warfare, including assassinations and ambushes, as well as hit-and-run raids on police and military units. These groups also tend to use more sophisticated weapons, such as improvised explosive devices, and begin to attack vital infrastructure (such as hospitals, bridges, and schools), rather than just individuals. These attacks also involve a larger number of fighters, some of whom have combat experience. There is often evidence “of insurgent penetration and subversion of the military, police, and intelligence services.” If there is foreign support for the insurgents, this is where it becomes more apparent. In this stage, the extremists are trying to force the population to choose sides, in part by demonstrating to citizens that the government cannot keep them safe or provide basic necessities. The insurgents are trying to prove that they are the ones who should have political power; they are the ones who should rule. The goal is to incite a broader civil war, by denigrating the state and growing support for extreme measures.

Where is the United States today? We are a factionalized anocracy that is quickly approaching the open insurgency stage, which means we are closer to civil war than any of us would like to believe. The siege on the Capitol has made it impossible for the government to dismiss the threat that far-right groups pose to the United States and its democracy. January 6 was a major announcement by at least some groups—such as the Oath Keepers—that they are moving toward outright violence. Many in the crowd declared this intention with black signs and T-shirts that said “MAGA Civil War January 6, 2021.” In fact, the attack on the Capitol

could well be the first of a series of organized attacks in an open insurgency stage. It targeted infrastructure. There were plans to assassinate certain politicians and attempts to coordinate activity. It also involved a large number of fighters, some of whom have combat experience. At least 14 percent of those arrested and charged are thought to have connections to the military or law enforcement.

As Tim Alberta, chief political correspondent for *Politico*, tweeted after the insurrection: “The stuff I’ve heard in the last 72 hours—from members of Congress, law enforcement friends, gun shop owners, MAGA devotees—is absolutely chilling. We need to brace for a wave of violence in this country. Not just over the next couple of weeks, but over the next couple of years.”

We do not yet know whether the attack on the Capitol will be replicated or become part of a pattern. If it does, Americans will begin to feel unsafe, unprotected by their government. They will question who is in charge. Some will take advantage of the chaos to gain through violence what they couldn’t gain through conventional methods. That’s when we’ll know we’ve truly entered the open insurgency stage. For now, one thing is clear: America’s extremists are becoming more organized, more dangerous, and more determined, and they are not going away.

CHAPTER 7

WHAT A WAR WOULD LOOK LIKE

On the morning of Tuesday, November 14, 2028, Wisconsin House Speaker Justin Lawrence steps to the podium to call the state legislature to order. Before he can speak, a bomb explodes, shattering the enormous skylight and showering the ornate second-floor room with shards of glass. Amid the smoke and splintered furniture, the mangled bodies of twelve legislators lie on the red carpet—among them Lawrence, nearly ten feet from where he’d been standing. A security guard, covered in blood, also lies motionless on the floor. Two thousand miles away, another bomb explodes in the state capitol in Salem, Oregon. Reports circulate of large explosions in or around capitol buildings in Denver, Atlanta, Santa Fe, and Lansing, Michigan. People are already on edge, with fires raging in California and several Category 4 hurricanes having hit the East Coast in quick succession, causing catastrophic damage.

As word of the bombing spreads, Americans stop what they are doing to watch the news and frantically scroll through their social media feeds. No one understands what is happening, or whether they can even trust what they’re seeing. One video, apparently from inside a large auditorium

could well be the first of a series of organized attacks in an open insurgency stage. It targeted infrastructure. There were plans to assassinate certain politicians and attempts to coordinate activity. It also involved a large number of fighters, some of whom have combat experience. At least 14 percent of those arrested and charged are thought to have connections to the military or law enforcement.

As Tim Alberta, chief political correspondent for *Politico*, tweeted after the insurrection: “The stuff I’ve heard in the last 72 hours—from members of Congress, law enforcement friends, gun shop owners, MAGA devotees—is absolutely chilling. We need to brace for a wave of violence in this country. Not just over the next couple of weeks, but over the next couple of years.”

We do not yet know whether the attack on the Capitol will be replicated or become part of a pattern. If it does, Americans will begin to feel unsafe, unprotected by their government. They will question who is in charge. Some will take advantage of the chaos to gain through violence what they couldn’t gain through conventional methods. That’s when we’ll know we’ve truly entered the open insurgency stage. For now, one thing is clear: America’s extremists are becoming more organized, more dangerous, and more determined, and they are not going away.

CHAPTER 7

WHAT A WAR WOULD LOOK LIKE

On the morning of Tuesday, November 14, 2028, Wisconsin House Speaker Justin Lawrence steps to the podium to call the state legislature to order. Before he can speak, a bomb explodes, shattering the enormous skylight and showering the ornate second-floor room with shards of glass. Amid the smoke and splintered furniture, the mangled bodies of twelve legislators lie on the red carpet—among them Lawrence, nearly ten feet from where he’d been standing. A security guard, covered in blood, also lies motionless on the floor. Two thousand miles away, another bomb explodes in the state capitol in Salem, Oregon. Reports circulate of large explosions in or around capitol buildings in Denver, Atlanta, Santa Fe, and Lansing, Michigan. People are already on edge, with fires raging in California and several Category 4 hurricanes having hit the East Coast in quick succession, causing catastrophic damage.

As word of the bombing spreads, Americans stop what they are doing to watch the news and frantically scroll through their social media feeds. No one understands what is happening, or whether they can even trust what they’re seeing. One video, apparently from inside a large auditorium

at the University of Texas in Austin, shows students screaming and running. It's blurry, but it looks like there's a body in a pool of blood on the stage. It's later revealed that someone opened fire in the school's largest lecture hall, killing the head of the biology department as he was teaching a class on molecular immunology. Videos stream in from all across the country with scenes of blood and chaos. It seems like everything is exploding at the same time.

James Demick, CNN's chief news correspondent, reports that seven state capitol buildings have been hit. CNN has also received reports that, earlier in the day, Secret Service agents foiled plans to assassinate President-elect Kamala Harris as she gave a speech announcing her intention to ban assault weapons, and Fox News reports that another failed assassination attempt targeted the Democratic governor of California.

By the next morning, Americans have a better sense of the extent of the damage. Wisconsin's Democratic governor and attorney general, a Republican, are in critical condition, and it's not clear whether they will survive. Unexploded bombs have been discovered in Topeka, Salt Lake City, Phoenix, and Albany. The main courthouse in downtown Philadelphia has also been hit, killing four judges, and has been closed indefinitely. Looting has begun.

It is unclear who is behind the attacks or why these targets were chosen. In fact, the range of methods and weapons—an army grenade in Denver, a car bomb in Santa Fe—suggests that multiple groups are behind it. But no one comes forward. Instead, stories quickly emerge and spread on Rumble, Gab, and MeWe, as well as Telegram, Facebook, and Twitter, that a left-wing group—Blacks for Anarchy (“blaKx”)—is to blame, and that this is part of a

coordinated attack by minorities to take over the country. Viral YouTube videos show Black youths throwing bricks through store windows and setting cars on fire. In one particularly disturbing video, a Black Lives Matter leader threatens further violence and calls on Black Americans to “prepare for the war we all know we need to fight.” QAnon's network is on fire with rumors that blaKx is working with Mexicans, Salvadorans, Puerto Ricans, and Muslims, and that professors at America's elite universities are directing the movement behind the scenes. That afternoon, YouTube announces that the Black Lives Matter video is a deepfake, and takes it down after 3.7 million views.

Three days later, an anonymous fourteen-page manifesto, called “Cast off the Yoke,” appears on 8kun. The language, rambling and combative, celebrates the carnage, and appears to take credit for some of it, insisting that violence is an overdue corrective to the “radical-left politics” of America's cities, which are ruled by a “corrupted, self-hating elite” that is “killing the country in darkness with their silent blades.” The manifesto repeats conspiracy theories that have circulated on Telegram in the past few years: that Democrats, supported by immigrants and Jews, plan to confiscate all guns, abolish local police and declare martial law, turn churches into abortion clinics, and seize land from white farmers to hand over to Black families as reparations. They must be stopped, the user declares, before they take over the country and turn the United States into a mixed-race, secular, socialist state. The next day, authorities trace the 8kun account to the Countrymen, a right-wing militia. The two competing narratives—is the country under siege from the left or the right?—are almost impossible to sort out, but the FBI determines that the Countrymen are almost certainly behind the attacks.

Government offices, schools, places of worship all close—everything grinds to a halt. People stay at home, afraid to shop or go to work. Americans across the country wait for help. President-elect Harris calls for calm and tries to dissuade her party from sending in federal troops, fearing it would just incite more violence by groups she believes are already anti-government. Congress is deadlocked.

Over the next ten days, sporadic attacks continue, this time in Los Angeles, Boston, Tallahassee, Miami, and New Orleans. The scope is widening, too, with attacks on schools, churches, and big-box stores. People feel as if their government has collapsed. Jennifer Lawson, a working mother who lives in Maplewood, New Jersey, appears in an interview on CNN. Staring into the camera with tired, glazed eyes, she says, “I feel like no one is there for me and my family. I have no idea who to trust.”

Militias grow more visible, often claiming to be neighborhood watchmen, but in fact selectively harassing young Black men, Latinos, and Asians. They have even begun to threaten National Guard troops, judges, politicians, and police officers that they can't persuade to join them. They seem determined to take control of local governments and limit the federal government's ability to enforce any laws the militants dislike. Black-clad men with automatic weapons force abortion clinics to close and intimidate customers who frequent minority-owned shops. No one stops them.

Americans on the left begin to form their own militias to protect their families and neighborhoods. Local law enforcement and federal agents increasingly fade into the background, becoming secondary players in a larger contest between local militias as more and more Americans are forced to choose with which group to align.

On January 13, 2029, a week before the inauguration, supporters of soon-to-be President Harris march in Detroit, demanding even stricter gun control legislation and the deployment of federal troops to safeguard their city. But another crowd has also gathered near the capitol. The militiamen include individuals who appear not to speak English, some of whom have insignias associated with the AfD in Germany and the far-right Russian Imperial Movement (RIM). Soon drones can be heard overhead, whirling ominously above the protesters. As pro-Harris demonstrators advance down the street, the militiamen step into their path. The pushing and jostling starts almost immediately. “Go back to Portland!” someone is heard to yell. “This is a true-Patriot state!” A rock flies through the air and a nearby storefront shatters. People are climbing over cars. Firecrackers explode.

Suddenly, someone fires two shots, and the crowd scatters. Undercover federal agents step in. They spray tear gas into the hyped-up crowd, and then fire rubber bullets into a group of militiamen who appear to have started the shooting. Videos of bleeding militiamen quickly reach the internet. Angry supporters erupt into side streets, taking baseball bats to windshields as they flee. A “Black Lives Matter” flag is set on fire and thrown through a car window; the vehicle is engulfed in flames. Twelve-year-old Emma Jones, the daughter of one of the militiamen, is rushed to the hospital with burn wounds. The next day, she dies in the intensive care unit. Across the Midwest, her name becomes a rallying cry for white nationalists, who accuse “radical left crazies” of stoking violence. The hashtag #Fight4Emma goes viral, spreading on social media. On YouTube, QAnon influencers warn followers that the Storm has finally arrived.

On Twitter, Senate Majority Leader John Cornyn and

other prominent Republicans call for national unity. But it doesn't rise above the cacophony of competing messages: *The radical left is taking over the country. White nationalists plan to kill any minorities who protest. The government is colluding with the right. The government is colluding with the left. The government is doing nothing.* Gun and ammunition sales spike. Canned goods fly off grocery shelves.

After nine consecutive nights of protests and riots, Detroit residents begin to flee the city. The streets are choked with smoke. "My daughter's afraid to sleep at night," says Anna Miller, who has lived in the city for thirty years. Detroit's faith leaders call for peace and healing. But the violence doesn't subside; it spreads to Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and Atlanta. "We don't want a fight," says Elijah Lewis, a protester from Milwaukee, "but if Harris doesn't step up, I just don't see what else we can do."

WHEN WE IN the United States think of civil war, most of us think about our country's first Civil War, which lasted from 1861 to 1865. We picture officers on horseback, and blue-and gray-clad infantrymen charging each other on enormous battlefields. We see in our minds the photograph of President Lincoln at Antietam, consulting with officers outside a Union tent in his long coat and stovepipe hat. Or we remember Pickett's Charge, commemorated in paintings, when a mass of Confederate soldiers attacked a wall of Union soldiers on the last day of the Battle of Gettysburg. We think of bodies littered upon empty fields. We think of muddy embankments and cannons.

A civil war like this, we conclude, could not happen

again. For one thing, the U.S. government and its military is much stronger today. The U.S. military was weak in 1860, with only sixteen thousand soldiers spread out over the enormous continent; most of them, in fact, were stationed west of the Mississippi, to neutralize the "threat" posed by Native Americans. Today, the U.S. military has about 1.3 million soldiers under arms, an additional 900,000 in reserve, and roughly 450,000 in the National Guard. It also has the ability to move these soldiers quickly to problem areas. It was not crazy for Confederates to think they could take on the American military in 1860. It is crazy for militias to think that today.

There's also the matter of geography. By 1861, Confederates were unified in their decision to secede; the leaders of all eleven states of the South agreed to create their own separate country. This was possible, in part, because the states were concentrated geographically in a single region. Most of the South's citizens supported secession; by 1861 there was very little disagreement about what they should do in the wake of Lincoln's election. Today, by contrast, would-be secessionists are dispersed around the country, and attempts to separate—from the Alaskan independence movement to the Cascadia secessionist movement (which would join Oregon and Washington State with British Columbia)—seem far-fetched. There are also large and powerful pockets of left-leaning citizens living in urban areas of even the most conservative states, which means that a sizable contingent of citizens would oppose such a move.

But to think this way—to think of civil war only in these terms—is a failure of the imagination. That's because civil wars look entirely different today. Those who wage war

against their governments in the twenty-first century tend to avoid the battlefield entirely; they know they will almost certainly lose in a conventional war against a powerful government. Instead, they choose the strategy of the weak: guerrilla warfare and terrorism. And, increasingly, domestic terror campaigns are aimed at democratic governments.

Terror can be effective in democracies because its targets—citizens—have political power: They can vote against politicians who are unable to stop the attacks. The Provisional IRA, Hamas, and the Tamil Tigers all believed that the more pain they inflicted on average citizens, the more likely governments would be to make concessions to the terrorists in exchange for peace. Either way, extremists benefit: They either convince the incumbent leader to pursue policies more favorable to the extremists (no gun control, stricter immigration policies), or they convince enough voters to elect a more extreme leader who is ideologically closer to them. Terror is also surprisingly easy to pull off in democracies, where there is more freedom of movement and less surveillance. There are also numerous constitutional constraints against labeling domestic groups terrorists, giving them more leeway than foreign terrorists would have.

If America has a second civil war, the combatants will not gather in fields, nor will they wear uniforms. They may not even have commanders. They will slip in and out of the shadows, communicating on message boards and encrypted networks. They will meet in small groups in vacuum-repair shops along retail strips, in desert clearings along Arizona's border, in public parks in Southern California, or in the snowy woods of Michigan, where they will train to fight. They will go online to plan their resistance, strategizing how to undermine the government at every level and gain control

of parts of America. They will create chaos and fear. And then they will force Americans to pick sides.

EXTREMISTS TYPICALLY FIND inspiration for their beliefs in certain canonical texts. The members of al-Qaeda had Osama bin Laden's thirty-page manifesto, titled *Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places*. The Nazis had Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, which he published in 1925, fourteen years before the German army invaded Poland. Libyan terrorists would refer to Muammar Gaddafi's *Green Book*—an homage to Mao's *Little Red Book*—which laid out Gaddafi's radical vision for remaking Libyan society.

In the United States, there is *The Turner Diaries*, which the FBI has called the “bible of the racist right.” The book is a fictional account of an Aryan revolution that overturns the U.S. government. But the narrative—written in 1978 by William Pierce, who led the National Alliance, a neo-Nazi group—offers a playbook for leveraging racial resentment into a race war, offering a specific picture (terror attacks, mass casualty bombs) for how a band of fringe activists could take down the federal government and “awaken” other white people to the cause. Its themes—the media can't be trusted, the feds are coming for your guns, violence is inevitable—form a “heady heroic narrative that appeals to would-be rebels, patriots, and martyrs for a cause,” as journalist Aja Romano has noted. “It teaches its adherents not just to adopt the mentality that they are at war with progressives, but that a real-life war is inevitable.”

The Turner Diaries has directly inspired far-right terrorism. Pages from the book were found in Timothy McVeigh's

truck after his attack on the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Both Patrick Crusius, the alleged El Paso Walmart gunman, and John Timothy Earnest, accused of shooting up a synagogue in Poway, California, echoed ideas from the book in their manifestos. And the influence of the book was evident during the Capitol insurrection. It describes bombing FBI headquarters, attacking the Capitol building, and instituting “the Day of the Rope,” in which “race traitors”—including politicians, lawyers, TV newscasters, judges, teachers, and preachers—are strung up on a gallows. In one video from January 6, 2021, a Proud Boy can be seen telling a journalist to read *The Turner Diaries*.

But there is also *Siege*, by neo-Nazi James Mason, a fan of cult leader Charles Manson. In the 1980s, Mason—who is still alive—wrote a series of newsletters for the American Nazi Party, in which he advocated murder and violence to create the kind of chaos that would destabilize the U.S. government. Mason’s writings were then collected into a book. As reported by ProPublica, Mason encouraged his disciples to launch a clandestine guerrilla war to bring down “the System.” He envisioned a mobile, decentralized White Liberation Front that would execute “hit-and-run” raids while hiding out “in wilderness areas.” Mason even publicized what Americans were likely to experience first. “If I were asked by anyone [for] my opinion on what to look for,” he writes, “I would tell them a wave of killings, or ‘assassinations’ of System bureaucrats by roving gun men who have their strategy well mapped-out in advance and well-nigh impossible to stop.”

In 2017, a new 563-page edition of *Siege* was released, and in June 2020, *The Turner Diaries* was number 46 on Amazon’s “Bestselling Literature” list. You could purchase both

books on Amazon, where the site’s recommendation engine would suggest you also purchase *White Power, Hunter* (an action novel about race), *Mein Kampf*, *Revolt Against the Modern World*, and *International Jew*. (Amazon is the biggest distributor of self-published books and as such has become a popular site to sell and distribute far-right material.) This changed only after the attack on the Capitol in January 2021, after which Amazon removed *Siege* and *The Turner Diaries* from its site.

Increasingly, civil wars involve some type of ethnic cleansing, and—thanks in part to these texts—there is every reason to suspect that this is where an escalating campaign of far-right terror in the United States would lead. In their quest to reset the country’s social order, terrorists would aim to turn citizens against the federal government; convince moderates to accept the new status quo; intimidate minorities into remaining silent; and deter new immigrants from coming. They would also try to persuade regular Americans that they’d be safer if certain people—minorities, liberals, anyone deemed a “socialist”—left their cities and their states, creating a set of white ethno-states in the rural heartland.

Consider the recent decision made by the town clerk in Stratton, Vermont, to use the following language on the cover of the town’s annual report: “You came here from there because you didn’t like there, and now you want to change here to be like there. We are not racist, phobic or anti-whatever-you-are, we simply like here the way it is and most of us actually came here because it is not like there, wherever there was. You are welcome here, but please stop trying to make here like there. If you want here to be like there you should not have left there to come here, and you are invited to leave here and go back there at your earliest

convenience.” Internal migration alters the ethnic and religious makeup of an area, often in ways that local inhabitants don’t like, and ethnic cleansing—whether forceful or subtle—is designed to roll it back.

Citizens almost never believe that ethnic cleansing could happen in their country—remember Daris and Berina in Sarajevo. But this is where a document by Gregory Stanton, the president of Genocide Watch, proves extremely useful. The document, titled “The Ten Stages of Genocide,” argues that countries go through eight steps before they reach genocide, and forcibly moving minorities out of a region is one of them. The Indian government, in an attempt to ensure that Hindus would be a majority in the Jammu region of the state, forced Muslims to flee to Pakistan between October and November 1947. The displacement quickly devolved into the killing of hundreds of thousands of Muslims by mobs and paramilitaries. Soon enough, Muslims, who had previously composed 60 percent of the population of Jammu, were a minority in the region. What is striking—and alarming—about Stanton’s framework is how normal and seemingly innocuous many of the early stages of genocide are. Muslims in Jammu were initially told that they were being “evacuated.” Only later, once they were rounded up and put on buses, or attempted to cross the border, were they killed. If you are in a country in the early stages of ethnic cleansing, you might not even notice the dangerous path your country is on.

The first two stages are known as “classification” and “symbolization.” This is when an identity group in power begins to highlight differences among a country’s citizens, categorizing them by groups—as Belgian colonizers in Rwanda did when they created identity cards for the previ-

ously indistinguishable Tutsis and Hutus—and then adopting certain markers for themselves or others (as the Nazis did when they appropriated swastikas and forced Jews to wear yellow stars of David on their clothing). Already, the United States has moved through both of these stages. Consider our deep ideological divide: We have classified ourselves by race, geography, and beliefs. Members of America’s far-right faction have appropriated symbols—think of the now ubiquitous Confederate flag, the orange hats of the Proud Boys, or even the Hawaiian shirts flaunted by extremists in Charlottesville or at the Capitol. And members of both parties have proposed issuing national ID cards that would be synced to a government database. Stage three is “discrimination,” which is when a dominant group denies or suppresses the rights of others by means of law or custom—as the Buddhist majority did in Myanmar, stripping the Rohingya of voting rights, jobs, and citizenship. Stage four, or “dehumanization,” easily follows: Those in power use public discourse to turn regular citizens against the targeted minority, denigrating them as criminals (as Serbs did with Bosniaks) or subhuman (as when Hutus called Tutsis “cockroaches”).

The United States has already passed through these stages, too. Racial discrimination has long been a fact of American life. Research has shown that Blacks are half as likely as whites to get a callback when applying for a job, even when their qualifications are exactly the same. Another experiment showed that legislators are much more likely to respond to and act on an email from a white-sounding name than from an identical email with a Black-sounding name. Black families get fewer loans to buy homes than whites and are redlined into poorer neighborhoods. And the recent wave of voting restriction laws in Georgia, Alabama, Wis-

consin, Florida, and likely Texas, have been designed specifically to target and reduce minority turnout at elections. Trump—as well as the Republican lawmakers and conservative media figures who abetted him—ushered us into the dehumanization stage, embracing abuse in public discourse by calling immigrants rapists, animals, and killers and even denigrating his Black former White House aide, Omarosa Manigault Newman, as a “dog.” In May 2018, Trump said about undocumented immigrants, at a White House meeting: “You wouldn’t believe how bad these people are. These aren’t people—these are animals.”

“Organization,” the fifth stage, comes next. This is where a dominant group begins to assemble an army or militia and formulate plans to eradicate other groups. In Bosnia, a plan to exterminate Muslims was drawn up by Radovan Karadžić, the former supreme commander of the Bosnian Serb Army, as early as the 1980s. Karadžić envisioned a secret police force that would train Serbs to form local paramilitary groups, utilizing weapons caches stored in strategic locations throughout Croatia and Bosnia. In stage six, “polarization,” the dominant group escalates the propaganda, further demonizing and separating the target group. Often, interaction between groups is discouraged or prohibited, and moderate members of the dominant group—those who resist or protest these efforts—are imprisoned or killed. The relentless hate-filled radio broadcasts disseminated by Hutu extremists in the months leading up to the Rwandan genocide were a clear example of this.

This is where the United States is today: solidly in stage five, perhaps entering stage six. Militias, which exploded under Obama, have been increasingly organizing, training, and arming themselves. Stewart Rhodes, an army veteran

and Yale Law School graduate, founded the Oath Keepers in 2009, and has been talking about civil war ever since. When seventeen-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse allegedly killed two people at protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Rhodes called him “a Hero, a Patriot.” And after a Trump supporter was killed in Portland, Oregon, he tweeted, “The first shot has been fired brother. Civil war is here, right now.” Extremists in the Republican Party, as well as their followers, are increasingly choosing to amplify polarizing propaganda over the airwaves and the internet. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a recently elected Republican member of Congress from Georgia, has repeatedly endorsed using violence against Democrats, saying that “the only way you get your freedoms back is it’s earned with the price of blood.” Moderates who resist or refuse to espouse these views, such as South Carolina Republican representative Tom Rice and Wyoming representative Liz Cheney, have been censured by the GOP, or have even had their lives threatened, as happened to Peter Meijer, a Republican representative from Michigan after he voted to impeach Donald Trump.

AMERICA’S EXTREMISTS TODAY subscribe to an idea known as accelerationism: the apocalyptic belief that modern society is irredeemable and that its end must be hastened, so that a new order can be brought into being. In a way, it’s their language for pushing the country up the insurgency scale and perhaps also toward ethnic cleansing. Adherents believe that they are not making enough progress through regular means—rallies, election of right-wing politicians—and as a result must precipitate the change through violence. As the terrorism expert JJ MacNab has explained, they are

looking for any excuse, from COVID lockdowns to protests for racial justice, to incite conflict. The hope is that this will set off a chain reaction of violence, which will, in turn, cause moderate citizens—their eyes now open to government oppression and social injustice—to join their cause. MacNab even sees a possibility of far-right extremists joining with the far left: “Some of the groups that are traditionally left-wing extremist, I think, have realized that they are in the same boat. They are equally unhappy. They feel disenfranchised. They do not have any control over their lives, the government, or anything else. This is their way of acting out.”

Atomwaffen Division (AWD) was the first accelerationist group to gain notoriety, in part because of a documentary film released by ProPublica and PBS’s *Frontline* in 2018. Founded two years earlier on Iron March, a fascist web forum linked to Russian nationalist Aliser Mukhitdinov, Atomwaffen, which means “nuclear weapons” in German, is a neo-Nazi, anti-Semitic, fascist, and national-socialist group whose members believe that widespread violence will cause a race war and allow them to rebuild society into a white utopia.

Experts estimate that AWD has between fifty and one hundred members, all of whom are young white men. James Mason’s book is mandatory for new recruits, and AWD message boards feature countless references to *The Turner Diaries*. Despite its small size, the group is one of the most violent alt-right groups in the United States. It’s been linked to multiple killings and attacks in the United States. (When former AWD member Devon Arthurs was arrested for killing his two roommates in Florida in 2017, he left a shrine to *The Turner Diaries* above their bodies.) The group is currently located in Texas, where they gather at “hate camps” to train

members. It has also traveled to Europe to train with other far-right groups. In 2019 and 2020, the FBI arrested members across the country, and James Mason declared the organization dead. (Mason, though idolized by the group, is not a member.) In the summer of 2020, however, reports of new AWD cells spread across news platforms. In August 2020, the group rebranded and changed its name to the National Socialist Order (NSO), creating a new leadership structure.

Members of AWD were among those who participated in the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, yelling “You will not replace us!” as they marched with torches. Soon after the rally, the hashtag #ReadSiege spread like wildfire on Twitter. Some in the group found Charlottesville—and the subsequent arrests, deplatforming, and bad press—to be disheartening, proof that Mason had been right all along: They would not be successful if they stayed within the bounds of the law. As one former AWD member later told investigative journalist A. C. Thompson (who made the ProPublica documentary), Charlottesville sparked the group’s shift toward violence, because members felt their efforts had been ineffectual. “Huge rallies don’t work,” he explained. “All that happens is people get arrested, people lose jobs, and you get put on some FBI watch list.” The answer, he continued, was to go underground, and to pursue a form of cell-style terrorism known as “leaderless resistance.”

The term “leaderless resistance” originated in the 1950s with a former CIA officer named Ulius Amoss, who was analyzing ways to protect CIA-supported resistance cells in Eastern Europe. The concept was picked up by Louis Beam, a soldier in the Vietnam War who, after returning to the United States, became a Ku Klux Klan member. In 1983, Beam published an essay advocating leaderless resistance as

the best way for white nationalists to continue their struggle against the far more powerful U.S. government. Beam believed that the movement could survive only if it became decentralized. As J. M. Berger recounts, Beam envisioned a collection of small, independent groups, and even lone actors, who would loosely coordinate their activities based on shared information distributed via leaflets and newspapers. Beam felt it was important to keep the numbers small, because the FBI would find it impossible to identify, infiltrate, and investigate so many individuals and tiny, disparate groups. “A thousand small phantom cells . . . is an intelligence nightmare for a government,” he wrote.

It turned out to be difficult for small, disconnected cells to communicate and recruit primarily through printed leaflets in a pre-internet age. But this changed with social media. Suddenly, groups could not only coordinate—via 4chan, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram—but they could also attract thousands of new members. Two groups on the forefront of this internet revolution have been al-Qaeda and the Islamic State; al-Qaeda even created an online magazine called *Inspire*, which contained step-by-step instructions for carrying out terrorist attacks. Both terrorist groups have embraced the idea of leaderless resistance. Al-Qaeda’s decentralized strategy has come to be called “leaderless jihad.”

In the United States, perhaps the best example of a leaderless resistance movement is the Boogaloo Bois. A loose affiliation of different types of far-right groups—pro-gun, radical right, anarchical—it coalesced first on 4chan and then later on Instagram, Reddit, and Facebook. The Boogaloo movement has no leadership structure, no local chapters, and no manifesto, or even a fully articulated ideology—at least not yet—and its ultimate goals differ depending on which

Facebook or Telegram group you are following. Members, however, are unified in their desire to drive America to civil war in order to change the status quo. Most of the members are young white men who believe that a revolution in America is imminent and necessary. They call this showdown Civil War 2: Electric Boogaloo, after a 1984 breakdancing movie called *Breakin’ 2: Electric Boogaloo*. (The movie is the basis for a longstanding internet joke about sequels, and the floral Hawaiian shirts that members have adopted as a uniform came about after references to “boogaloo” got contorted into “big luau.”) Subscribers to the movement urge people to be “boogaloo ready” or to “bring on the boogaloo.” Adam Fox, one of the men behind the plot to kidnap Governor Whitmer, talked about Boogaloo as “the battle that would erupt if the government tried to take away Second Amendment rights.” Another man charged in the Whitmer plot, Joseph Morrison, the leader of the Wolverine Watchmen, referred to himself as “Boogaloo Bunyan” on social media.

It’s not clear exactly how the Boogaloo Bois plan to achieve their goals. Some individuals simply want to create chaos. Others see civil war as necessary to counter government overreach, especially related to guns. Others want to kill immigrants. What is clear, however, is that they can turn out in force. The first time most Americans heard anything about the Boogaloo movement was in January 2020, when a bunch of white men wearing Hawaiian shirts and carrying assault rifles showed up at a massive pro-gun rally in Richmond, Virginia. The Hawaiian shirts caught people’s attention; there were too many of them for it to be a coincidence. The movement then grew rapidly during the COVID pandemic as some people reacted to what they saw as tyrannical moves by government officials to strip Americans of their

liberties. Men with Hawaiian shirts started showing up in greater numbers at anti-lockdown protests across the United States. In the spring of 2020, one watchdog group identified 125 “boogaloo” Facebook groups. According to the report, more than half of the groups had been established between February and April 2020, as mask mandates and shutdowns took hold in the country. By that summer, there were more than ten thousand adherents.

On Facebook, Boogaloo members share military playbooks and instruction manuals for developing homemade explosives. One group even compiled a document detailing government supply lines so that weapons and ammunition could be pilfered if necessary, and a hit list of potential government officials to target or assassinate. The group’s bible is the *Yeetalonian*, a 133-page document covering the steps to war and a how-to guide for winning public sympathy and support through propaganda. Boogaloo Bois have engaged in violence at rallies, killed law enforcement officers, and orchestrated larger plots against the government. (The Wolverine Watchmen militia group involved in the Whitmer kidnapping plot includes Boogaloo supporters. And three men arrested in Las Vegas for trying to incite violence at protests are also part of the movement.)

In May 2020, Facebook banned the use of “boogaloo” and similar terms when used together with mentions of weapons or calls to action. It then changed its recommendation algorithms, removed hundreds of accounts and groups associated with the movement, and banned Boogaloo content on its platforms. But members have flocked to other social media networks such as Gab and Telegram, which are encrypted. This means that it will become only more difficult to curb their reach and influence.

And yet, if there’s another civil war, these will be its soldiers. There are hundreds of far-right groups in America today that believe the country needs a major conflict to right itself. Their names may change—the Proud Boys, the Three Percenters, and the Oath Keepers are the biggest at the moment—but they agree on similar goals. Most want the federal government out of their lives. They want fewer laws and restrictions on their freedom. An increasing number of them want white Christian men in charge. And all of them believe that violence is the way to make their vision a reality.

THE RAPIDLY EVOLVING, ever-more-diffuse nature of homegrown extremist groups can make them difficult to penetrate and hard to predict. But a look at how terrorists have prepared for, and executed, battle in other democracies can help us imagine how a civil war might unfold here. Just as there are multiple large datasets examining the myriad factors leading to civil war, so, too, are there datasets examining the many dimensions of organized terror campaigns. Hundreds of studies have looked at who tends to engage in terror, when they tend to do so, and how effective it is in achieving a rebel group’s goals. Though these studies cover terrorism in general—not specifically the homegrown variety—they can help us identify common tactics and strategies.

There are a number of strategies that insurgents tend to use against powerful democracies. One is essentially a war of attrition, involving a steady stream of attacks against both people and public infrastructure: federal buildings, markets, schools, courthouses, transportation systems, and electrical grids. This sort of campaign is designed to inflict pain on citizens until they plead for relief and demand that the gov-

ernment give in to the terrorists' demands. Hamas employed this strategy for years, detonating bombs on buses in Jerusalem, Nablus, and Beersheba; launching suicide attacks on cafés in Tel Aviv; booby-trapping cars on busy streets in Haifa; and bombing medical clinics, shopping malls, and security checkpoints. Al-Qaeda's attack on the United States on 9/11 was also part of a war of attrition; it came after a series of attacks on other U.S. targets, including two U.S. embassies in Africa and the USS *Cole*. The strategy succeeded: It convinced the United States to pull its soldiers out of Saudi Arabia, a key goal of al-Qaeda's.

If the demands of far-right groups in America are ignored, they could resort to the same strategy. A classic war of attrition campaign would target high-value buildings, infrastructure, and people—anything that could inflict financial or psychological pain on the U.S. population. This would include not only churches and subway systems but places like Federal Reserve buildings, state capitols, or monuments in Washington, D.C. It would also target citizens who are likely to vote for liberal candidates, such as immigrants or those who live in cities or swing states. Violent extremists would continue to target these sites and individuals until those in power offered the terrorists the concessions they wanted, or voters replaced existing politicians with ones who were more sympathetic to the extremists' cause.

Another strategy is intimidation. If you cannot topple the central government, then you can use violence to goad the population directly into submission. Targeted violence can be used to intimidate agents of the federal government—law enforcement personnel, civil servants, members of Congress, and the judiciary—convincing them not to enforce existing rules. That's one of the things that death threats to Republi-

can members of Congress such as Peter Meijer are designed to do. Violent extremists can target and kill liberal politicians who have voted in favor of gun control, judges who have ruled in favor of abortion rights, or police officers who protect immigrants' civil liberties. But they can also target moderate Republicans who do not toe the extremists' line. Militias become a form of vigilantism designed to prevent the implementation of social change. Mexican drug cartels pursued this strategy against the judges and police officers who refused to be bribed into turning a blind eye to the lucrative drug trade. Once headless bodies began appearing in the streets of Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana, government agents became much more hesitant to enforce the law, and drug cartels and their leaders had freer reign.

We've already seen this kind of strategy in the United States. Intimidation was the preferred tactic of the Ku Klux Klan, which responded to the federal government's expansion of civil rights by turning to violence and murder to suppress the Black vote, win control of state legislatures, and enforce white supremacy in the South. Intimidation has also been the tactic of anti-abortion terrorists, when they target Planned Parenthood clinics or the doctors who perform abortions. If the government won't outlaw abortions, then these extremists turn to violence to prevent women from having the procedures and doctors from performing them. This same thinking animated Patrick Crusius, the accused El Paso shooter. In his manifesto, he wrote that the massacre was meant to serve as an "incentive" for Hispanics to leave the country.

In a country flush with guns, legal militias, and open-carry laws, politicians and citizens have good reason to be afraid. This is even more true in rural areas, where the reach

of the federal government is weaker, and where overlapping jurisdictions between the federal, state, and local governments leave citizens uncertain about who is really in charge. One of America's unique attributes is its decentralized federal structure, but this also leaves it vulnerable to rogue elements taking control of a region—even gaining the support of local law enforcement. State-level militias are legal in twenty-two states, and during the pandemic, they frequently positioned themselves as defenders of small businesses that insisted on staying open despite government-mandated shutdowns. In Kenosha, Wisconsin, a call from former city council member Kevin Mathewson for armed citizens to protect the city in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests brought hundreds of men to town. After Kyle Rittenhouse was accused of killing two protesters and wounding another, his lawyer argued that his involvement in the militia was necessary. “He was in Kenosha as part of his right and duty to protect his community where the state and local government had totally failed in their most basic responsibility to provide law and order.”

Another terror strategy is known as “outbidding.” This tactic is used when one militant group competes with other groups to cement its dominance. Hamas embraced suicide bombing in part to signal that it was more committed to the Palestinian cause than its main competitor, Fatah. The Islamic State, which was late to enter the civil war in Syria, switched to brutal kidnappings and killings in part to differentiate itself from a rival group, Jabhat al-Nusra. Rebel groups that embrace an extreme ideology and methods often do better in war than more moderate groups. This is because they often attract a more dedicated fighting force and more determined supporters. Extremist groups also tend to wield

greater psychological power by offering greater recompense: Honor, martyr status, and glory in the afterlife, and an extreme ideology weeds out those who are less committed to a cause, reducing the problem of poor performance, side switching, or betrayal.

We have not yet seen the outbidding strategy take hold in the United States, but it's easy to imagine it as right-wing groups proliferate. What ISIS did in Iraq and Syria provides a blueprint: The group invested heavily in internet propaganda, advertising its military strength and publicizing both the brutal acts it was willing to commit and the public services it was willing to provide to local populations. When it entered a town, it quickly targeted leaders of the opposition. If this was to occur in the United States, you would see one extreme group, such as Atomwaffen, escalating to ever-more brutal acts of violence, to prove that it was stronger, more capable, and more dedicated to the cause than other groups.

A final terror strategy is “spoiling.” Terrorists wield this tactic when they fear that more moderate groups—those that would put aside violence in exchange for, say, concessions from the government on immigration—will compromise and subvert the larger goal of establishing a new ethno-state. This strategy usually comes into play when relations between more moderate insurgent groups and the government are improving, and a peace agreement seems imminent. Terrorists know that most citizens will not support ongoing violence once a deal is in place. When Iranian radicals kidnapped fifty-two Americans in Tehran in 1979, it wasn't because relations between the United States and Iran were worsening, but because there were signs of rapprochement: Three days earlier, Mehdi Bazargan, Iran's relatively moderate prime minister, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, the U.S. national

security adviser, had appeared in a photograph together shaking hands. The radicals knew that reconciliation between the two countries would be disastrous for them, so they did whatever they could to prevent it. Arab-Israeli peace negotiations, and talks between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, have also been “spoiled” in this way.

In the United States, one could imagine the Proud Boys, the Three Percenters, and the Oath Keepers eventually forming an alliance. (Rebel groups in civil wars frequently join forces, if only temporarily.) The new unified group might then decide to sign a peace deal with the federal government, guaranteeing no future gun control legislation and a significant reduction in immigration—or any set of terms that would be acceptable to a majority of the group’s supporters. By definition, the most radical anti-government and white supremacist groups would be left out of this deal because no compromise would help them achieve their ultimate goal: the establishment of a white ethno-state. Their only recourse would be to try to scuttle the deal. And the best way to accomplish that would be to trigger a civil war.

To do this, they would likely need foreign support. The Provisional IRA survived in large part because of substantial financial backing from Irish Americans living in the United States. The Contra rebels in Nicaragua were able to continue fighting only because the United States funneled money their way. Rebels in the Donbas region of Ukraine depended on material assistance and manpower from neighboring Russia. And Hezbollah has succeeded largely thanks to sponsorship by Syria, Iran, and Lebanon. Here in the United States, terrorist groups could be aided by America’s enemies (China, Russia, and Iran), as well as by sympathetic white suprema-

cist groups in other white-majority countries (Canada, Ukraine, the United Kingdom). Thanks to the internet, this would be easy to facilitate. China and Russia could supply money and materials to far-right groups with little trouble. Ukraine could supply training and combat experience. And rural Canada could provide a safe haven from which groups could escape the U.S. government’s reach. The Rise Above Movement (RAM), a white supremacist group based in California, has traveled to Ukraine for training with Azov Battalion. As Tim Hume reports in *Vice*, Azov has handed out pamphlets at neo-Nazi concerts in Europe, created propaganda videos, and headlined far-right conferences in Scandinavia. They’ve sold the war in Ukraine as a way for far-right groups to gain combat experience, which they can then use to train their own militants. As intelligence analyst Mollie Saltskog told Hume, “You have a global network of violent white supremacists now who can easily keep in touch on different platforms and go back home, spread that propaganda, conduct training—or move on to the next fight.”

THE STEPS TOWARD ethnic cleansing are often so gradual as to feel imperceptible. But according to “The Ten Stages of Genocide,” there’s a noticeable shift that takes place with stage seven. Known as the “preparation” stage, this is when a dominant group forms an army. Leaders also indoctrinate the populace with fear of becoming the victim, claiming that “if we don’t kill them, they will kill us.” It’s after this indoctrination that a country can explode quickly into stages eight and nine—“persecution” and “extermination”—and then the final stage, “denial,” which is when perpetrators deny

having committed their crimes. Turkey still refuses to acknowledge the Armenian genocide one hundred years after the fact.

Stage seven is significant, in other words, because it's when the logic of genocide develops as a means of self-defense. It's common to think that ethnic cleansing is driven by hate. There is hate, yes, but the real fuel is fear—fear that you are threatened and vulnerable. Violence entrepreneurs tap into this anxiety, exploiting the survival instinct that cues you to destroy your enemy before he can destroy you. During the Nuremberg trials, Hermann Göring was interviewed by a young American psychologist, Gustave Gilbert, who told Göring that he didn't think the average person wanted to be dragged into war. Göring responded: "Why, of course, the people don't want war. Why would some poor slob on a farm want to risk his life in a war when the best that he can get out of it is to come back to his farm in one piece? . . . It is always a simple matter to drag the people along. . . . All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism, and [for] exposing the country to greater danger."

This existential fear leads to a domestic arms race, in which one group is made to feel insecure and, in an attempt to feel more secure, forms militias and purchases weapons, which in turn makes the rival group feel insecure, and so it, too, forms militias and purchases weapons—which then triggers the original side to arm itself even more. Both sides believe they are taking defensive measures, but the effect is to create ever more insecurity, which can spiral into war. Average Serbs in Bosnia did not want war. Neither did average Hutus in Rwanda. Their leaders, however, needed average citizens to fight on their behalf to secure power. Their solu-

tion? To tell their followers that they would soon be attacked, prompting many to jump into action. The organizers of the genocide in Rwanda used newspapers and then state radio to spread false ideas: that Tutsis were newcomers who had no claim to the land, that they were perpetuating Hutu impoverishment, and that Hutus had a right to protect themselves. A report by Human Rights Watch concluded that "it was particularly the last idea—that [the] Hutu were threatened and had to defend themselves—that proved most successful in mobilizing attacks on Tutsis from 1990 through the 1994 genocide."

An armed population increases the likelihood of this kind of security dilemma. U.S. gun sales hit an all-time high in 2020, with seventeen million firearms sold between January and October. Buyers were primarily conservatives, who tend to buy guns in response to Democratic electoral gains (16.6 million firearms were sold in 2016, driven by the candidacy of Hillary Clinton, who advocated strong gun control legislation). But it is also the greatest number of guns sold in any single year in America's history, according to the chief economist of Small Arms Analytics. Many sales were to first-time buyers, data suggests, and researchers at the University of California, Davis, found that new gun owners were driven predominantly by fears of lawlessness and government instability. According to Kareem Shaya, a Second Amendment advocate, "The common thread is just uncertainty, a feeling of, hey, if nobody else is going to be able to take care of me, push comes to shove, I want to be able to take care of myself."

Whether or not the United States will find itself in a security dilemma depends on whether those on the left—liberals, minorities, city dwellers—decide they should also

arm themselves. There's some evidence that this is already starting to happen: The loose affiliation of left-wing activists known as antifa, who define themselves in opposition to fascism, nationalism, and racism, have grown more active in the past few years. In the spring of 2017, for example, antifa launched hammers, pipes, and homemade explosives at alt-right protesters in California; two years later, the police killed an antifa member before he could detonate a propane tank at a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility in Washington.

A broader movement among the left appears to be growing. In 2019, only 8 percent of terrorist incidents were perpetrated by left-wing groups; in 2020, it was 20 percent. Armed groups, such as the Socialist Rifle Association—which is dedicated “to providing working class people the information they need to be effectively armed for self and community defense”—and the Not Fucking Around Coalition (NFAC), a Black nationalist militia group that supports self-policing and firearms training in Black communities, have made appearances in Louisville, Kentucky, in the wake of Breonna Taylor's killing, and in Stone Mountain, Georgia, to protest the nation's largest Confederate monument. The Redneck Revolt, which stands “for organized defense of our communities,” was founded in 2009 and re-formed in the summer of 2016. Members have shown up at protests to protect minorities and at gun shows, flea markets, state fairs, and NASCAR races to try to counter recruitment into white supremacist groups.

Even as they arm themselves, however, it won't be left-wing groups that instigate the ultimate clash. This is in part because their members, who are often ethnic minorities, have historically experienced repression; Black militias have

not been tolerated in the same way as white militias. The left-wing movement, with its loose association of subgroups, is also more diverse, including everyone from anarchists, radical environmentalists, and animal rights activists to anti-globalists, anti-capitalists, and gun rights advocates, which makes coordination more difficult. Most critically, however, left-wing groups simply have less to lose in a changing world, and less to gain from violence. The coalition of minorities who support the Democratic Party, and the extremists who would fight on their behalf, know that time is on their side: as long as the system isn't heavily rigged against them, they are the future majority.

Still, the specter of left-wing radicals flexing their muscle will be what right-wing extremists invoke—to stoke fear and, ultimately, justify their own violence. It will be the evidence they use to gain even more support for their movement. Trump already set the example when he and his national security team insisted that the main domestic terror threat in the United States came from antifa, devoting resources to eradicating leftist groups while ignoring those on the far right. That the left is violent and filled with terrorists is a useful narrative of fear—it creates a common enemy and supports the idea of self-defense.

A country does not need a large percentage of the population to be involved for violent ethnic cleansing to occur. Small numbers of heavily armed citizens—together with help from law enforcement and the military—are often enough to move to stage nine, the “extermination” phase. In fact, Dartmouth's Benjamin Valentino found that a remarkably small number of people can organize and mobilize to commit mass genocide. You just need the rest of the population to remain passive, which can easily be accomplished

through intimidation. In Bosnia, for example, Višegrad's violence was perpetrated by one man, Milan Lukić, and fifteen well-armed buddies, including his brother and cousin. Most citizens did not join in the fighting.

The United States is not on the verge of genocide. But if militias were to rapidly expand, and violence entrepreneurs were able to work citizens into a frenzy over the need for self-defense, stage seven could be on the horizon. If militias become more brazen, and a sense of insecurity grows, right-wing terrorism in the United States could accomplish a more immediate objective: It could shift the country even more willingly toward authoritarianism. Sustained campaigns of terror typically move citizens ideologically to the right, in favor of law-and-order candidates; this often brings even more conservative politicians to power. This is what happened in Israel during the second intifada. Terror shifted the Israeli public to the right, in support of a far-right pro-security agenda. Something similar happened in the United States after 9/11; a large study found that the attacks, though unleashed by foreign terrorists, caused citizens to become more active in politics, more involved in the military, and more likely to change their affiliation from independent to Republican.

There is evidence that Americans would, in fact, support a more authoritarian government. The number of people who have a negative view of democracy has grown from 9 percent in 1995 to 14 percent today. Meanwhile, a recent study by two Yale political scientists found that only 3.5 percent of Americans—Republican or Democrat—would refuse to vote for their preferred candidate if he or she did or said something anti-democratic, like shutting down polling stations. Faith in government has plummeted: From 1964 to

2019, the share of Americans who trust those in Washington to do "what is right" tumbled from 77 percent to 17 percent. Americans are also losing faith in one another: The percentage of Americans who don't have confidence in the electorate to make good political decisions has grown from 35 percent in 1997 to 59 percent today. Perhaps even more troubling, those who would view "army rule" as a good thing has risen, from just 7 percent in 1995 to 18 percent today.

America was lucky that its first modern autocratic president was neither smart nor politically experienced. Other ambitious, more effective Republicans—Tom Cotton, Josh Hawley—have taken note and will seek to do better. They will try to adopt Trump's eighty-eight million passionate followers, knowing that the Republican Party will bend to the will of these voters. Or new politicians will rise and play by their own new rules. How far will these leaders go? How far will we let them?

CHAPTER 8

PREVENTING A CIVIL WAR

When I was a college student, in the mid-1980s, my classmates and I were asked to identify where in the world civil war was most likely to break out. Without hesitation, we knew exactly: South Africa. The country's system of apartheid, which enforced segregation among government-defined ethnic groups—white, Black, and mixed race—was under increasing stress as the majority Black population pushed back against restrictions, and the dominant white minority responded with violence. In 1976, the government had fired into crowds of Black schoolchildren, killing at least 176—an incident that caused international outrage. But rather than reform, the apartheid regime had pursued a policy of “total onslaught” against Black citizens, declaring a state of emergency in 1985 that allowed for indiscriminate arrests, police killings, and torture.

South Africa had all the risk factors associated with civil war: The country was an anocracy in 1988 and had been for decades, scoring just +4 on the polity scale. There was a minority government that excluded people from power based on race, and white citizens saw themselves as the country's rightful heirs. They understood that any move to majority

rule would mean a loss in their political status. Similar conditions had existed in Rhodesia, a country just north of South Africa, and a brutal civil war had occurred there.

But then something happened that brought South Africa back from the brink. In 1986, in response to the escalating oppression by the apartheid government, South Africa's most important trading partners—the United States, the European Community, and Japan—imposed economic sanctions. South Africa was already suffering a recession, and in 1989, when F. W. de Klerk became president, replacing the inflexible P. W. Botha, he made an important calculus: to focus on his country's survival. Though a member of the ruling National Party, de Klerk was also a pragmatist. If the economy collapsed, so would white wealth. Three out of four South Africans were Black; if he continued to insist on white rule, the ensuing civil war would be, for whites, unwinnable. Instead, de Klerk lifted the twenty-nine-year ban on the African National Congress and other Black liberation parties, restored freedom of the press, and released political prisoners, including ANC leader Nelson Mandela.

South Africa was closer to civil war in 1989 than the United States is today. The apartheid state that white South Africans created to suppress Blacks was far more repressive than the pseudo-apartheid state the United States had until 1965. It was illegal for Black South Africans to marry white people, to establish their own businesses in white parts of town, or to access beaches, hospitals, and parks that were marked “white only.” Also, South Africa's history as an anocracy was much deeper than that of contemporary America, having lasted for decades. The United States has only just entered the middle zone. South Africa also had two major groups that considered themselves sons of the soil: both

Blacks and whites claimed a historical stake to the land. In the United States, only one group (besides the marginalized and relatively small population of Indigenous peoples) makes that claim. The threat of bloody conflict in late-1980s South Africa dwarfs the danger in America today, and yet South Africa avoided war.

South Africa reminds us of the power of leaders—business leaders, political leaders, opposition leaders. Leaders can compromise in the face of danger, or they can choose to fight. Botha chose to fight. De Klerk and Mandela chose to work together. Mandela and other Black leaders could have rejected terms that allowed whites to retain significant political and economic power. De Klerk could have refused to give Blacks full civil rights and majority control of the government. Botha hadn't been willing to do what de Klerk did. The same is true of President Assad in Syria. He chose not to compromise with the majority Sunnis despite the enormous costs of remaining firm. Ulster Protestants didn't compromise with Irish Catholics. Maliki didn't compromise with Iraq's Sunnis. Mandela, who had originally been in favor of violent resistance, could have advocated ethnic violence—he could have been an ethnic entrepreneur, tapping the anger and resentment of his Black countrymen to seek full control of South Africa through civil war. But instead he preached healing, unity, and peace. It was the leaders in charge who spared South Africa more conflict and bloodshed.

In 1993, both de Klerk and Mandela received the Nobel Peace Prize. Critics have argued that de Klerk did not deserve the award; he had been part of the system that had oppressed Black South Africans for decades and had compromised only to survive. It was Mandela, they argue, who saved the country. This is only partly true. Mandela

certainly had the moral high ground; most leaders who had spent twenty-seven years in a prison cell would have wanted to exact revenge, especially with such an overwhelming demographic advantage. But de Klerk's actions were no less critical. Had South Africa's new leader refused to negotiate in 1990, had he not agreed to significant political reforms, Black South Africans would have eventually rebelled with or without Mandela. This is what we saw in Syria in 2011, when Assad chose to start bombing his people. This is what we saw in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and early '70s, when the British government sent troops rather than mediators. De Klerk made a different decision.

Violence often springs from a sense of injustice, inequality, and insecurity—and a sense that those grievances and fears will not be addressed by the current system. But systems can change. No one thought that white South Africans would reform a system designed specifically to cement their dominance. But when the costs of maintaining that dominance became too high, and business leaders who were hurt by sanctions insisted on reform, they dismantled it. If South Africa could reform, so can the United States.

I wish I could take all the facts and figures that experts have collected over the past half century and tell you exactly what will happen to our country. But even with the best data, we cannot predict the future. All we can do is try, along with our fellow citizens, to shape it in a positive, peaceful way. Political scientists have spent decades studying the forces behind civil wars and the dynamics of terrorism; these insights can be used not just to anticipate war but to thwart it. We know why democracies decline. We know why factions emerge and the conditions under which they thrive. We know the early warning signs and the tactics of violent ex-

tremists. Groups like the Proud Boys have a playbook. But there is no reason why we, the people of the United States, cannot choose to carve out our future; we, too, have a playbook.

CIVIL WARS ARE RARE—in any given year, less than 4 percent of countries that meet the conditions for war actually descend into armed conflict—but where they do happen, they tend to repeat themselves. Between 1945 and 1996, over a third of civil wars were followed by a second conflict. Since 2003, with the exception of conflicts in Libya and Syria, every civil war has been a sequel—a repeat of a previous war. Leaders of these movements (or their modern incarnations) will go underground or disappear, waiting for a moment when grievances are reignited or the government is once again weak. Then they will begin to build a new movement. Even if the original leaders and soldiers are long dead, old fault lines often haven't been repaired, and the myths and stories live on. Ethnic groups, especially those in decline, often fight a second civil war because the conditions that drove their original grievances either haven't been addressed or have worsened. The next generation of fighters has lived with the loss, and witnessed the further downgrading of their people. They are determined to take back what they believe is rightfully theirs. Croats and Serbs have fought multiple times throughout history. So have the Sunni and Shia in Iraq. And the war between the Moros and the Philippine government has gone through several iterations as various groups have disappeared, only to reemerge in new forms. Ethiopia, Myanmar, and India have experienced multiple civil wars. Experts call it “the conflict trap,” and while it's of course bad

for the combatants, it's good for outside observers. Countries like China and the United States, which have each experienced only one civil war, can learn from others' mistakes.

Back in 2014, I was commissioned by the World Bank to study the conflict trap. I looked at all civil wars between 1945 and 2009, and what I found was this: Most countries that were able to avoid a second civil war shared an ability to strengthen the quality of their governance. They doubled down on democracy and moved up the polity scale. Mozambique did this after its civil war ended in 1992, when the country moved from one-party rule to multiparty elections. In the wake of a conflict that ended in 2003, Liberia increased institutional restraints on presidential power and pushed for more judicial independence. Countries that created more transparent and participatory political environments and limited the power of their executive branch were less susceptible to repeat episodes of violence.

Improving the quality of a country's governance was significantly more important than improving its economy. In another large study commissioned by the World Bank, James Fearon considered the economic question. When a rich country had a worse government than experts would expect given its prosperity, he found that it faced “a significantly greater risk of civil war outbreak in subsequent years.” So a wealthy country like the United States is more likely to experience a civil war when its government becomes less effective and more corrupt, even if its per-capita income doesn't change.

Until this study, we knew that anocracy left a country at higher risk of civil war, but we didn't know exactly why. What was it about anocracies that made them particularly vulnerable? Or to put it another way, which features of de-

mocracy were more or less important? Fearon found that “all good things tend to go together” but that three features stood out: “the rule of law” (the equal and impartial application of legal procedure); “voice and accountability” (the extent to which citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and a free media); and “government effectiveness” (the quality of public services and the quality and independence of the civil service). These three features reflect the degree to which a government serves its people and the degree to which its political institutions are strong, legitimate, and accountable. Improvements in governance tend to reduce the subsequent risk of war.

The quality of American governance has been declining since 2016, according to the Polity Scale and since 2015 according to V-Dem’s scale. One of the most obvious ways has been in accountability. Free elections are the central mechanism of accountability in a democracy, but unlike many other countries, America lacks an independent and centralized election management system. According to the political scientist Pippa Norris, an elections expert and the founding director of Harvard University’s Electoral Integrity Project, almost every new democracy going through a transition sets up a central independent election management system to protect the integrity of elections. This helps to build trust in the electoral process. Uruguay, Costa Rica, and South Korea all did this when they created their democracies. Large federal democracies such as Australia, Canada, India, and Nigeria have also managed their elections this way. Canada’s election system is run by Elections Canada, and all voters follow the same procedures no matter where they live.

An independent and centralized election management

system establishes a standard procedure for designing and printing ballots and tabulating votes accurately and securely, untainted by partisan politics. It can handle legal disputes without the involvement of politicized courts. In a 2019 report, the Electoral Integrity Project examined countries’ electoral laws and processes and found that the quality of U.S. elections from 2012 to 2018 was “lower than any other long-established democracies and affluent societies.” The United States received the same score as Mexico and Panama, and a much lower score than Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Chile. This is the reason why it is easier to spread claims about voter fraud in the United States, and why Americans are more likely to question the results.

The right to vote has also been increasingly politicized, with Republicans repeatedly stacking the deck against minorities. Strengthening the Voting Rights Act would go a long way toward eliminating voter suppression and deepening people’s trust in the system. Another important reform is automatic voter registration (AVR), where anyone who interacts with the Department of Motor Vehicles is automatically registered to vote unless they opt out. In states that have already adopted AVR, including California, Oregon, and Washington, the measure has led to major increases in voter turnout. It is the single easiest thing that we could do to make our government more participatory and, therefore, more democratic. These measures won’t assuage the far right—their vision of a white Christian nation depends on disenfranchising minorities—but shoring up the system as a whole could earn the support of moderate Americans and deepen their trust in the legitimacy of their leaders.

America might also take inspiration from the small wave of democratic rejuvenation that is occurring, even as democ-

racy retreats worldwide. Canada and Scandinavia are leading the way. Canada focused on reaffirming voting rights after the center-left Liberal Party won a majority of votes in 2015. The 2018 Elections Modernization Act eliminated voter identification requirements, restricted political party and independent campaign spending and donations, expanded voting rights to include all Canadians abroad (even those who have lived outside the country for more than five years and are not planning to return), improved voter privacy, gave the commissioner of Canada elections more investigatory power, banned foreign donations, and required online platforms such as Google and Facebook to “create a registry of digital political advertisements” so that citizens could see who was trying to influence elections. In 2020, Canada received one of the highest freedom and democracy scores in the Freedom House Report.

In our country, gerrymandering—the practice of redrawing congressional districts to favor one party—tends to bring more extreme candidates to the forefront, since getting through primaries requires appealing to more extreme voters in those districts. These voters turn out in higher numbers because they tend to be more passionate about the outcome. Only federal lawmakers—America’s own de Klerks—have the power to institute a national reform of this system. Doing so would weaken the influence of extremist voters in both parties and greatly increase the potential for bipartisanship.

The U.S. government could also increase bipartisanship—and help avert conflict—by reexamining the electoral college system, which is, in its own way, a form of political gerrymandering. The American system is structured to exacerbate the urban-rural divide by giving small states disproportionate power in the Senate. Since 2000, two presidents have lost the

popular vote but won the election after electoral college victories. Switching to a system where the popular vote determines who is president would prevent that, and also make it virtually impossible to win without appealing across racial lines. Want to know how to undercut destructive ethnic factions in the United States? Make each citizen’s vote count equally rather than giving preferential treatment to the white, rural vote.

This type of reform, however, is unlikely. Eliminating the electoral college through a constitutional amendment would require supermajority support, and this will be hard to achieve, since jettisoning the current system will put the Republican party at a disadvantage. But Congress could work to resolve another factor in Americans’ loss of faith in democracy: the idea that government serves special interests more than voters. Thanks to the Supreme Court’s 2010 ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, individual donors can contribute unlimited amounts of cash to tilt the political scale in favor of candidates aligned with their own, rather than the country’s, best interests. The handful of individuals who donate billions of dollars to float dubious campaigns also tend to be far more ideologically extreme than the average American citizen. To prevent this, the federal government should close fundraising loopholes for candidates and officeholders, as Canada and other countries have done, and reinstate campaign finance rules.

All of these electoral problems damage the perceived legitimacy of the government, weaken America’s democracy, and worsen governance. They also move the country deeper into the anocracy zone. Today, Americans are distrustful of their government. They believe, quite rightly, that their democratic institutions often don’t serve the people’s inter-

ests. The solution is not to abandon democracy but rather to improve it. America needs to reform its government to make it more transparent, more accountable to voters, and more equitable and inclusive of all citizens. Rather than manipulate institutions to serve a narrower and narrower group of citizens and corporate interests, the United States needs to reverse course, amplifying citizens' voices, increasing government accountability, improving public services, and eradicating corruption. We need to make sure that all Americans are allowed to vote, that all votes count, and that, in turn, those votes influence which policies are enacted in Washington. Americans are going to regain trust in their government only when it becomes clear that it is serving them rather than lobbyists, billionaires, and a declining group of rural voters.

Americans must be educated about the key levers of power in our democracy and the ways in which they can be manipulated. According to community organizer Eric Liu, "too many people are profoundly—and willfully—illiterate [about] power: what it is, what forms it takes, who has it, who doesn't, why that is, how it is exercised." And if Americans remain ignorant about how power operates in American politics, then people with nefarious purposes will step in and take it away from them. A 2016 survey led by the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that one in four Americans could not name the three branches of government. This is why civic education, which has been declining for decades, must be reinstated. It teaches America's youth how our democracy works, and the values, habits, and norms that are necessary to maintain it. A group of six former U.S. education secretaries, both Democrat and Republican, recently made the case for revamping civics through a project called

the Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy. They pointed out that we spend 1,000 times more per student on STEM education than we do on history and civics. The roadmap "cultivates civil disagreement and reflective patriotism"—an urgent task now that our democratic institutions are so vulnerable and precarious. A twenty-first-century civics curriculum would not only create a stronger electorate to balance the power of elites, but also lead to greater faith and trust in the system. "Our democracy," according to Liu, "works only if enough of us believe democracy works."

MOST PEOPLE DON'T realize they are on the path to civil war until the violence is a feature of everyday life. Noor in Baghdad, Berina and Daris Kovac in Sarajevo, and Mikhail Minakov and Anton Melnyk in Ukraine—all confess that they didn't see war coming until it was too late. By the time they grasped that something had changed, militias were operating in the streets and extremist leaders were hungry for war.

And these leaders, of course, have an incentive to keep the average citizen distracted from the work of the militias. At first, at least, they operate not by upending normal life but by reshaping it gradually, protecting their larger aims against possible countermeasures. This is a historical pattern. Milton Mayer, an American journalist who traveled to Germany in 1951, asked ordinary citizens about daily life in the years Hitler rose to power. One man, a baker, repeated a common refrain: "One had no time to think. There was so much going on." Another German, a philologist, recounted that people could no more see it "developing from day to

day than a farmer in his field sees the corn growing. One day it is over his head.”

Our own psychological biases often prevent us from recognizing internal threats. It is much easier to blame outsiders for a heinous act than our own fellow citizens. Law enforcement officials, for example, are more likely to minimize the danger posed by individuals living in communities they know—most often, white communities—than by those they are less familiar with. It is no surprise that we tend to regard foreign terrorists as part of a larger movement while domestic terrorism is thought of as rare and isolated. In fact, unlike in other countries, such as Canada, the United States designates only foreign (not domestic) groups as terrorist organizations. There is no law that criminalizes domestic terrorism—none of the Capitol insurgents could be arrested on these grounds. Many Americans just don’t want to believe that our biggest threat comes from within.

Politicians on both the left and the right have also been reluctant to discuss America’s domestic terror problem, for political reasons: They either actively benefit from the support of extremists or worry about the political cost of turning on them. This collective blindness, willful or not, has put us in a precarious position. We are more prepared, as a country, to counter foreign enemies such as al-Qaeda than we are to disarm the warriors in our midst, even though the latter are currently more virulent and dangerous. If we are to avert civil war, we must devote the same resources to finding and neutralizing homegrown combatants as we do to foreign ones.

Already, we are behind. The United States has been slow to identify far-right infiltration of our security services, a threat that is common in the buildup to civil war. A 2009

report from the Department of Homeland Security observed that “right-wing extremism” was on the rise. The team behind the report, led by Daryl Johnson, had begun to scour extremist websites and message boards in 2007 and were surprised by what they found: bomb-making manuals, weapons training, and hundreds of militia-recruitment videos (on YouTube). Johnson’s report suggested that veterans might be especially susceptible to recruitment, based on a 2008 FBI assessment that found that more than two hundred individuals with military experience had joined white-supremacist organizations since the 9/11 attacks. The report, however, led to an outcry among congressional Republicans and veterans groups, and the DHS was pressured to withdraw it.

But Johnson was on to something. Though the networks of the armed services and law enforcement are vast, and white supremacist sympathies are far from dominant, there is nevertheless some overlap. An FBI report written in 2006, “White Supremacist Infiltration of Law Enforcement,” detailed the influence of white nationalism on police forces. “Having personnel within law enforcement agencies,” the report said, “has historically been and will continue to be a desired asset for white supremacist groups seeking to anticipate law enforcement interest in and actions against them.” A follow-up report, in 2015, found that right-wing and anti-government “domestic terrorists” appeared to be using contacts in law enforcement to access intelligence and avoid detection.

Indeed, the recruitment of former fighters appears to strengthen a movement. Janet Lewis, a civil war expert from George Washington University, found that almost all the rebel groups that were able to grow and endure in Uganda did so, in part, because they were able to enlist former sol-

diers and police officers to their cause. Ex-military and those in law enforcement offer a ready-made band of individuals with the training and experience to be effective soldiers. The 2009 Department of Homeland Security report also identified this phenomenon and concluded that “rightwing extremists [in the United States] will attempt to recruit and radicalize returning veterans in order to exploit their skills and knowledge.”

If Obama was slow to respond to the threat of domestic terrorism, whether from outside or within government agencies, Trump simply ignored it. Instead, he continued the government’s policy, since 9/11, of focusing aggressively on Islamic terrorism. When he was pressed on domestic terror, he repeatedly portrayed left-wing militants as the real danger. FBI director Christopher Wray highlighted the threat posed by right-wing groups, and Trump’s response was to publicly criticize him. The muddled reaction by law enforcement to the attacks on the Capitol revealed the widespread failure to grasp the true menace—and reach—of extremism in America. After the attack, Wray told the Senate Judiciary Committee that arrests of white supremacists had almost tripled over the course of the last three years. He warned them that domestic terrorism was “metastasizing across the country.”

Stopping this cancer must be a priority. The decline in militias after the Oklahoma City bombing was in large part the result of an aggressive counterterrorism strategy supported by both Democratic and Republican administrations. The immense scale of the bombing led to real change within the FBI: In less than a year, the number of Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTFs) doubled—these are units that draw on the expertise of various agencies and levels of law enforcement—and there was an increase in hazardous-device training pro-

grams for local, federal, and state police officers. In 1996, the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act was passed, leading to the hiring of hundreds more investigators by the FBI. In 1997, various of the new JTTFs were responsible for preventing domestic terrorism acts by the KKK and other white supremacist groups. After the Oklahoma City bombing, the FBI enlisted more than 1,400 investigators to sift through three tons of evidence to find the bomber Timothy McVeigh without any digital photographs. Deputy Attorney General Merrick B. Garland was the man put in charge of the investigation, and as the Biden administration’s new attorney general, he will also oversee the investigation of the Capitol attack. In this way, he will help shape the American response to domestic terror over the next decade.

WHAT SHOULD AMERICA’S response look like? If we know what terrorists are after, and how they are likely to pursue their goals, we can formulate our own counterstrategy, drawing on the experiences of other countries around the world. In the same way that extremists wield common tactics to destabilize democracies, so too are there field-tested methods of undermining, and disabling, their efforts.

The best way to neutralize a budding insurgency is to reform a degraded government: bolster the rule of law, give all citizens equal access to the vote, and improve the quality of government services. In the words of David Kilcullen—former special adviser for counterinsurgency in George W. Bush’s administration and chief counterterrorism strategist for the U.S. State Department—the most important thing governments can do is to “remedy grievances and fix problems of governance that create the conditions that extremists

exploit." If America does not change its current course, dangers loom.

In the case of the United States, the federal government should renew its commitment to providing for its most vulnerable citizens, white, Black, or brown. We need to undo fifty years of declining social services, invest in safety nets and human capital across racial and religious lines, and prioritize high-quality early education, universal healthcare, and a higher minimum wage. Right now many working-class and middle-class Americans live their lives "one small step from catastrophe," and that makes them ready recruits for militants. Investing in real political reform and economic security would make it much harder for white nationalists to gain sympathizers and would prevent the rise of a new generation of far-right extremists.

This is how most governments respond when faced with the possibility of insurgency—they institute the reforms necessary to avoid war—and it usually works. The Provisional IRA actively pursued a war of attrition against Great Britain, demanding fairer treatment, and they continued to launch terrorist attacks until Westminster eventually agreed to reform. The U.S. government shouldn't indulge extremists—the creation of a white ethno-state would be disastrous for the country—nor should it exempt them from federal laws, but it could address grievances that affect a broad range of citizens, improving living standards and increasing social mobility after decades of decline. As Robert A. Johnson, head of the Institute for New Economic Thinking, put it: If America put "much more money and energy . . . into public school systems, parks and recreation, the arts, and healthcare, it could take an awful lot of sting out of society. We've largely dismantled those things."

Governments that work to show they're effective receive an added benefit. Not only do they make it harder for extremists to radicalize moderates, they also undercut the ability of extremists to step in and compete with the state to offer services. Hamas's popularity was built on the benefits it provided to Palestinians who were being neglected by the Israeli government, not on the attacks it launched against Israeli civilians. On some level, the support of the population comes down to who can provide the best services and the most protection. Today, U.S. lawmakers could, for example, reform existing immigration laws, laying out a path to citizenship and reducing the number of illegal immigrants, while ensuring that *all* citizens—white, Black, and brown—have affordable housing, the opportunity to go to college, and access to effective addiction treatment. The government should obviously take a zero-tolerance stance on hate, and punish domestic terrorism, but it could weaken support for extremism by addressing the legitimate grievances that many citizens have.

There are times, however, when the demands of insurgents would be dangerous for democracy, leaving a government little choice but to engage in targeted retaliation. President Lincoln was correct to refuse to negotiate with Confederate states over slavery. In these cases, governments should arrest, prosecute, and seize the assets of insurgents, making it harder for them to operate. Governments should also pursue a strategy called "leadership decapitation," which involves imprisoning the leader or leaders of a terrorist group to hasten its collapse. Sometimes there is legal recourse. Following the Unite the Right rally at Charlottesville, a team from Georgetown Law School sued the right-wing demonstrators, citing an archaic state law prohibiting the gathering

of "unauthorized militias." Most of the groups that participated in the rally are now barred from ever returning to the city in an armed group of two or more.

In the United States, lawsuits have been particularly effective against the Ku Klux Klan. In 1980, a group of three Klansmen went on a shooting spree in a Black neighborhood in Chattanooga. They burned a cross on the train tracks and then, using a shotgun loaded with birdshot, injured four Black women who were two blocks away. Flying glass injured a fifth. The women sued and were awarded \$535,000. More important, the judge issued an injunction against the Klan, preventing it from engaging in violence in Chattanooga. That means that if members of the Klan in Chattanooga were to violate the order they would be criminally liable. In another case, in 1981, a man named Michael Donald was walking into a store in Mobile, Alabama, when he was abducted by two members of the United Klans of America who were seeking retribution for the acquittal of a Black man in the shooting of a white police officer. Donald was beaten, had his throat slit, and was hanged; he was nineteen years old. The Southern Poverty Law Center sued the United Klans of America, then one of the largest KKK groups, on behalf of Michael's mother, Beulah Mae Donald, using the Civil Rights Act of 1870 as the basis. Ms. Donald was awarded \$7 million in damages for the loss of her son. This bankrupted the group, leaving Ms. Donald the owner of their headquarters.

Governments can also undermine extremists' attempts to intimidate. Intimidation works only because the local population doesn't believe that the government can take care of them or protect them from violence. The best way to counter this is not only by reestablishing people's trust in the le-

gitimacy of government, but also by ensuring adequate law enforcement and justice. This signals that the government is capable of protecting the population and identifying and punishing the perpetrators of crimes. It also discourages citizens from seeking protection from the extremists, which is often the first step in switching moderates' allegiance. If citizens in rural Nevada or Oregon know that the federal government is in charge, as opposed to a far-right sheriff, they might be less apt to support a militia. This strategy, however, could also backfire, particularly in the West, where people are more likely to be fearful of federal encroachment on their land or freedom. In this case, the government could enlist federal agents who are from the area, or it could shore up local security forces that are viewed as legitimate by local citizens. This could go a long way toward building trust and acceptance of government even in places skeptical of government overreach.

What about outbidding? Local citizens will gravitate to the group they believe is more likely to deliver security and success. *If you make sure my family is safe, and I believe you will give me a good job, I'll support you.* Governments can undercut support for extremists by reducing grievances, providing benefits for all citizens, and supplying hard evidence that playing within the system is more fruitful than defecting. The U.S. government, with its enormous wealth and institutional capacity, has the ability to outbid any insurgent group. If people feel that the government is on their side, they won't need the insurgents. Delivering basic services can help the United States break out of the cycle of loss of hope and loss of faith in government.

What happens when insurgents want to prevent a compromise with the government? Moderate lawmakers and

citizens have to believe that extremists can't thwart a deal or impede reform by issuing death threats or threatening other violent action. Here in the United States, a deal would likely take the form of gun control legislation or immigration reform, and members of Congress would need to feel safe enough to publicly support such measures. Northern Ireland's peace deal, the Belfast Agreement, succeeded, in part, because it required the passage of a popular referendum, which then revealed overwhelming Catholic and Protestant support for the deal. Governments can prevent extremists from holding legislation hostage by advertising public support for reform, and by identifying and punishing those who threaten or resort to violence in an effort to stop it.

WE LIVE IN deeply partisan times, and it is common to hear polarization described as the root of our problems. Liberals have become more liberal, conservatives have become more conservative, and there is little chance of the two sides meeting in the middle. Polarization, many pundits have argued, is tearing America apart.

But political polarization does not increase the likelihood of civil war. What increases the likelihood of civil war is factionalization—when citizens form groups based on ethnic, religious, or geographic distinctions—and a country's political parties become predatory, cutting out rivals and enacting policies that primarily benefit them and their constituents. And nothing abets and accelerates factionalization as much as social media. After January 6, people kept asking me: What should we do? Do we need better policing? Better domestic terror laws? Does the FBI need to aggressively infiltrate far-right militias? My first answer was always the

same. Take away the social media bullhorn and you turn down the volume on bullies, conspiracy theorists, bots, trolls, disinformation machines, hate-mongers, and enemies of democracy. America's collective anger would drop almost immediately, as it did when Donald Trump could no longer reach every American twenty times a day, every day. (As the journalist Matthew Yglesias noted on Twitter: "It's kinda weird that deplatforming Trump just like completely worked with no visible downside whatsoever.") Curbing the dissemination of hate and disinformation would greatly reduce the risk of civil war.

A central driver to factionalism has always been conspiracy theories. If you want to incite people to action, give them an "other" to target. Emphasize a behind-the-scenes plot designed to hurt their group. Convince them that an enemy is steering the country to their disadvantage. This is exactly what slaveholders in the South did in the years before the Civil War. They portrayed abolitionists as an existential threat to their way of life. Online platforms have made conspiracies more virulent, more powerful. Modern conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones of Infowars have painted immigrants and Jews as an existential threat. As Voltaire once said, "Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities."

This kind of paranoia has always been part of the fabric of American life. But a new conspiracy theory took hold during the Trump era: QAnon, a fringe movement claiming that a secret cabal of prominent pedophilic Democrats are plotting to take down Trump. A December 2020 poll found that fully 17 percent of all Americans—*almost one in five*—agree with the statement "A group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our

politics.” Perhaps even more destructive, QAnon followers have joined with millions of other Trump supporters to spread the Big Lie—the idea that the 2020 election was stolen and that Democrats are intent on cheating to preserve power. In the weeks after the chaos of January 6, 2021, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter cracked down on QAnon, removing accounts and pages associated with the group.

It doesn't have to be this way. America is where the social media industry was born, and it's home to the five major tech companies that control most of the information that is spread on social media. The U.S. government regulates all kinds of industries—from utilities and drug companies to food processing plants—to promote the common good. For the sake of democracy and societal cohesion, social media platforms should be added to the list. The impact would be global. Indeed, events in Charlottesville and elsewhere have inspired far-right movements around the world. The Capitol insurrection brought to light how U.S.-based movements are part of a global network of extremism. As pro-Trump supporters marched from the White House to the Capitol, alt-right propagandists in Berlin cheered them on. In Tokyo, meanwhile, demonstrators rallied under Rising Sun flags. Regulating social media would likely strengthen liberal democracies around the world.

It would also minimize factionalism by inhibiting foreign meddlers. Foreign governments have long sought to influence the outcome of civil wars. The United States sent billions of dollars to Chiang Kai-shek to try to help him defeat Mao's communist rebels. European countries sent supplies to the Confederacy during our own Civil War. The United States fought proxy battles with the Soviet Union in civil

wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Peru, Angola, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos.

But now any country, any group, and any individual can use the internet to destabilize an adversary. Rivals of the United States are deeply invested in stoking civil conflict, through support for a preferred group or by inciting both sides. Vladimir Putin, an ex-KGB officer, has long understood the power of disinformation. Others have caught on. The Empirical Studies of Conflict Project—together with a team of scholars at Princeton—found that Russia, together with China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, used clandestine social media campaigns fifty-three times between 2013 and 2018 to try to influence the internal politics of another country. Most of the campaigns examined by the Princeton team (65 percent) aimed to denigrate a public figure, usually a politician, in order to get his or her opponent elected. (Between 2012 and 2017, for example, seven of the ten most-read online pieces about Angela Merkel were fabricated, according to BuzzFeed.) The United States was the main target of these attacks but not the only one. Great Britain, Germany, Australia, and others were also targeted. Almost all the attacks were aimed at democracies.

Social media has created the perfect conditions for factionalism by making it easy for outsiders to sow distrust and division. In 2016, a Facebook account called Blacktivist, supposedly run by Baltimore-based Black Lives Matter organizers, shared videos of police brutality and information on upcoming rallies. It also hawked “Blacktivist” merchandise with T-shirts emblazoned with “Young, Gifted, and Black.” The page had received 360,000 likes—even more than the official BLM page. CNN later reported that Blacktivist was

one of more than 470 accounts linked to a Kremlin effort to infiltrate the Black Lives Matter movement. The larger goal, experts believe, was to inflame racial, regional, and religious tensions here in the United States.

The threat is as serious as a foreign power hiring mercenaries to fight on U.S. soil. America is a technological and military giant, but the internet and social media have left our democracy vulnerable to potent attacks. It used to be that if you wanted to aid a radical movement in another country you would drop leaflets from planes, distribute books and newspapers, send advisers to instruct soldiers, and smuggle arms and ammunition across borders. Now all you have to do is dominate the narrative on social media, and watch factionalism take root.

The United States is supposed to be a model of democracy, a beacon of freedom, but we have allowed money and extremism to infiltrate our politics. We can strengthen our democratic institutions and our society: We did this with the New Deal, when our government put people back to work, lifted many Americans out of poverty, and restored Americans' faith in their economic system, reviving a sense of hope. We did it in the civil rights era, when citizens demanded equal rights and freedoms for African Americans, and the government responded, satisfying a desire for equity and justice.

And we can do it again, by reclaiming and mediating our public discourse so we can get off the path of self-segregating, predatory factionalism and restore hope in the long-term health of our country. We are already seeing this at the local level, where groups of citizens in every state are forming small organizations to try to restore civic values. One such group is Citizen University, started by Eric Liu, the son of

Chinese immigrants, and Jená Cane, the granddaughter of a family who owned slaves and fought for the Confederacy. Both have dedicated their lives to rebuilding America's civil society, one block, one neighborhood, one town at a time. "We want to put an end to the myth," Cane said, "that we're a rugged, individualistic society, when the truth is that throughout our history, when disaster strikes, when a community needs rebuilding, when people are in need, Americans come together to help one another. That's who we really are."

One of the programs run by Citizen University is called Civic Saturday. Jen Boynton, a reporter, attended a Civic Saturday in Athens, Tennessee, in 2019. Almost seventy people attended the event in a dilapidated downtown park. What she found was the civic version of a church service: local citizens coming together to worship the Constitution and build their faith in our democracy. Instead of opening with a prayer, they opened with the Pledge of Allegiance. Instead of singing a hymn, they read a poem from an American author. Instead of reading a Bible passage, they read the Declaration of Independence. The first Civic Saturday was held in 2016 in Seattle, and Liu and Cane (who happen to be married) hoped—prayed—that people would show up. They came in droves; more than two hundred crowded into the bookstore that was hosting the first event. Five months later, eight hundred people came. What people are hungry for, said Liu, is community. Today, Civic Saturdays are being held in over thirty cities and towns around the country, both red and blue, from Indianapolis, Phoenix, and Kansas City to Southern Pines, North Carolina. "The great majority of people in America," said Liu, "want to be part of a healthy version of us and not the January 6th version."

And then there is EmbraceRace, a small nonprofit based in Amherst, Massachusetts. It was founded in 2016 by two parents of mixed-race children whose goal is to help other parents raise kids in a world where race is appreciated and embraced. BriteHeart is another nonpartisan group based in Tennessee that is dedicated to strengthening civic participation. According to Kate Tucker, who helps lead the group, "We don't know if Tennessee is a red state. We do know it's a non-voting state." Living Room Conversations and Braver Angels both pair people from the left and the right in order to begin to rehumanize "the other."

There are so many organizations like this emerging around the country, as Americans have begun to realize how fragile our democracy is and take action to preserve it. It is at the local level—in churches, voluntary associations, and grassroots groups—that we can once again come together and relearn the power of citizenship and community. Our shared history and ideals can inspire and guide us, reviving our national pride in a system that is truly of the people, for the people, and by the people.

LAST SUMMER, in the lead-up to the 2020 election, my husband, Zoli, and I found ourselves asking a question neither of us had ever contemplated before: Were we nearing the time when we would have to leave our country?

My mother immigrated to the United States from a tiny town in Switzerland where women in her home canton did not get the right to vote until 1991. Her life on a small dairy farm had been hard, and there was no possibility of college. She moved to New York City in 1958 and fell in love with baseball, business, and the friendliness and ease of Ameri-

cans. She never wanted to go back. My father journeyed to New York from a small town in Bavaria where he had lived through World War II. He started a small business and built it into a success. "Only in America," he says, "could this have happened."

Zoli, who came from Canada to attend college in America, has his own immigrant story. His father fled to Canada in 1956 from Hungary, after the Russians moved in and cracked down on student protesters. Between us, Zoli and I have many passports: Swiss, Canadian, Hungarian, German. But the United States is home. The most joyous holiday at our house in San Diego is Thanksgiving. It embodies everything we are grateful for: friends, family, food. America has given our family the gift to pursue our dreams. The gift to be ourselves. The gift to feel safe and free and to prosper.

This is where we want to live. But in November, after the election, Zoli and I began to actively discuss a plan B. Joe Biden had won, but Trump and many Republicans were doing everything they could to overturn the results. When the attack on the Capitol took place, on January 6, it seemed that America might be at a turning point. I knew from my research what happened to people who waited too long to leave combat zones. Daria was lucky enough to survive the siege of Sarajevo. Many of his neighbors were not.

Over the Christmas holidays, Zoli renewed our passports. We considered whether it made sense to apply for Hungarian citizenship for our daughter, Lina. In the end, we decided on Canada, because we could drive there in less than a day if necessary. Switzerland would be the backup. We were used to making emergency plans while traveling to conflict-prone countries: "If a coup happens in Zimbabwe while we are there, what do we do?" But now, suddenly, we were