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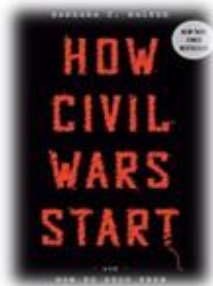
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Insights on How Civil Wars Start



Barbara Walter. *How Civil Wars Start and How to Stop Them*. (New York: Crown Publishing, 2022).

How do civil wars start?

Who starts them?

Why?

What, in fact, is a civil war?

The last question is not an idle one for at least two reasons. First, there has been a “cold” (non-shooting, for the most part) civil war since at least 1992 when Pat Buchanan declared at the Republican National Convention that a culture war had begun for the soul of America – our so-called “culture wars.” Buchanan said to his approving audience, “Friends, this election is about more than who gets what. It is about who we are. It is about what we believe and what we stand for as Americans. There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself. For this war is for the soul of America.” [1]

One could argue the threads go back even further than 1992. They go back to at least Richard Nixon’s 1968 “southern strategy” (in which Buchanan had a hand) or possibly as far back as 1948 and Strom Thurmond and his Dixiecrats storming out of the Democratic National Convention after Hubert Humphrey challenged the Democratic Party to become the party of all Americans – white, black, and brown.

Sorting all of that out has been the primary focus of my ***The American Tapestry Project*** and its two competing meta-threads. One meta-thread is an essentialist, exclusionary story defining America as a white, Christian patriarchal society – the society Buchanan and those Barbara Walter calls “sons of the soil” believe is under attack. The other meta-thread is a protean, inclusionary story about America’s ongoing experiment in self-government and its ever-expanding understanding of the “We” in its founding documents – “We the People ...” The competition between those two meta-threads goes way back in American history, but, although it was 30 years ago, 1992 serves as a convenient signpost for their head-on confrontation and our current cultural splintering.

The other reason that what constitutes a civil war is not an idle question stems from Americans’ lack of imagination when thinking about civil wars. Upon hearing the phrase, they immediately envision marching blue- and gray-clad armies meeting in large-scale, set-piece battles fighting over specific geographic territory. But that is not what Barbara Walter worries about. The 19th century American Civil War, in many ways, was atypical of civil wars. Most civil wars, as Walter details, are insurgencies in which decentralized bands of marauding militias engage in hit-and-run attacks on government installations and one another, political assassinations, and terroristic attacks on civilians. In Walter’s analysis, civil wars are much more like the Balkan Wars of the 1980s and 1990s, the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s, the post-American invasion internecine savagery in Iraq, and numerous other wars around the globe.

While America might not be on the precipice of civil war, Walter contends that it is moving dangerously in that direction. It is a contention most people do not want to hear. Walter herself recalls the reaction the first time she spoke of this in

public. She gave a talk about the possibility of a second American civil war at the University of California at San Diego, where she is a faculty member. In her own words, “it was a complete bomb.” [2] People of all political persuasions were angry; they accused her of fearmongering. Which is (or was) the typical reaction to such assertions. People don’t want to hear it. They believe it can’t happen here. As Fintan O’Toole said in an article in *The Atlantic* reviewing Stephen Marche’s *The Next Civil War*, such assertions are “flammable and corrosive” – giving vent to the unthinkable now makes it thinkable. [3]

Perhaps.

But I see Walter as a truth-teller telling us the things we don’t want to hear but need to hear. She reminds me of a woman who was the chief financial officer at one of the institutions I had the privilege to serve as president. Everyone in positions of responsibility need people on their staffs who will tell them what they don’t want to hear but need to know. Janet was a truth-teller. Like Walter, she’d tell me “Here is a problem I just uncovered.” Then, armed with a mass of data, she’d continue, “And here are two or three things we can do to correct it.” So, too, Walter. After years of study, armed with a mass of data, she is telling Americans “Here is a problem we need to address and here are some things we can do about it.” Unfortunately, her book’s great weakness is the blandness of her solutions; its great strength is the rigor of her problem analysis and the data upon which it rests.

Who is Barbara Walter?

A graduate of Bucknell University and holder of both an M.A. and a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago, Walter is a professor of political science and Rohr Chair in Pacific International Relations in the School of Global Policy and Strategy at the University of California at San Diego. [3] She is “one of the world’s leading experts on civil wars, political violence, and terrorism.” In addition to *How Civil Wars Start*, her many books include *Reputation and Civil War: Why Separatist Conflicts Are So Violent*; *Globalization, Territoriality and Conflict*; *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars*; and *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention* (edited with Jack Snyder). Along with Erica Chenoweth, she founded the award-winning blog *Political Violence @ a Glance*. [4] As she notes in the “Introduction” to *How Civil Wars Start*, she first began to study civil wars in 1990 at a time when “there was very little data to work with.” [5] Lacking organized data and a resulting overview, as she notes, “everyone thought their civil war was unique.” [6] Working with data collected by Sweden’s University of Uppsala and the Peace Research Institute in Oslo, Norway, she, and other researchers, began to notice patterns of similarity between various civil conflicts.

It turns out each civil war was not unique. There are definite patterns of similarity. In a parallel universe to the work Walter and other researchers were conducting, the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) convened a task force – the Political Instability Task Force – in 1994 to collect data from around the world to build “a model that could predict where instability was most likely to occur.” [7] In 2017, Walter was asked to join the group. A few years later, after the aborted plot by white nationalists to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, Walter had her “Aha” moment. The patterns of behavior identified by the Political Instability Task Force were beginning to manifest themselves in the United States.

As said earlier, not everyone was happy to hear it. Nonetheless, Walter pressed on. In almost the entire first half of *How Civil Wars Start*, using the model the Political Instability Task Force created, Walter meticulously analyzes the Balkan civil wars of the late-1980s and 1990s, the Iraq civil war following the American invasion of 2003, the on-again, off-again civil war in the Philippines, and several others. Based on that analysis and using the task force’s model of key indicators of political instability, Walters detected disturbing similarities to conditions in the United States in the 20-teens and early 2020s.

What were the patterns of political instability Walter saw emerging in the United States?

They are “anocracy,” factionalism, and insurgency.

One of the task force’s most disturbing discoveries was that the probability of civil war increased as a country moved towards or away from democracy. It turns out that at the pole points – a strong democracy on one end, a strong autocracy on the other – civil wars almost never happen. They occur in the middle as an autocracy seeks to become democratic or vice versa. As long ago as 1974, a professor at Northwestern University, Ted Robert Gurr, named this ambiguous middle zone an *anocracy*. It describes countries that are neither full democracies nor full autocracies, but unstable entities oscillating between the two. [9] Gurr started the Policy Project at the Center for Systemic Peace that developed a Polity Score “which captures just how democratic or autocratic a country is in any given year.” It ranges from a +10 for most democratic to a -10 for most autocratic. North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain rate at -10, while at +10 one finds Denmark, Canada, and “until recently, the United States.” [10] Anocracies are in the middle between a -5 and +5. This is the danger zone where competing forces meet.

The danger zone is in the precise middle of -1 to +1. What are the signs? In an autocracy moving towards democracy, the prime movers towards insurgency

and civil war are the former autocrats and their supporters who fear they are losing power. In deteriorating democracies, the prime movers are elected officials who begin to ignore or rewrite the systems guardrails designed to protect democratic institutions. They begin to challenge the legitimacy of elections they lose; they begin to attempt to corrupt the governmental structures designed to protect democracy and the rule of law; and they begin to attempt to use the structures of government to preserve their own power at the expense of the democratic polity. They also, like rebellious autocrats, are driven in part by a spirit of resentment, feigned or real, at their and their followers' perceived lack of cultural influence.

The latter then gives rise to factions, the evil feared by American founders like James Madison that would undermine the entire American experiment. Madison had in mind what we would call political parties, but in today's America both political parties have become factionalized in a way that did not occur to Madison. Walter says, "countries that are considered 'factionalized' have **identity-based** (emphasis added) political parties that are often intransigent and inflexible." [11] These positions often assume polar-opposite positions not amenable to compromise. They lead to a symbolic politics about competing tribal values.

As anyone who has been following *The American Tapestry Project* knows, that is one of the key characteristics of America's culture wars. Contemporary American politics is no longer largely about economics, the size of government, whether or not to build this highway or some other, but about intangible cultural issues. Issues such as religion, ethnicity, immigration, women's rights, abortion, contraception, gender identity, and minority rights. All of which are really questions about intangible values. During a period of rapid change, these values can seem fluid and unstable. When combined with perceived (and often real) grievances about winners and losers in a changing economy, with perceived grievances (and often real) about loss of respect and communal standing because of urban/rural, college educated/non-college educated divides and myriad other socially defining issues, they can lead to conflict.

The potential for conflict grows if the competing factions are of relatively the same size with relatively the same access to the levers of power. As Walter's says, because the socio/cultural/political stakes are so high, it is this very balance in competing strength and intensity that leads "to such fierce rivalry." [12] As in Slobodan Milosevic's Serbia, this often leads to a personalistic leader emerging saying, "Only I can fix this." Factionalism's emergence follows a strict pattern. First, elites and supporters of a party see an opportunity to grab power, either a weak opposition leader or a demographic shift causing a sense of resentment. Seeing this opportunity, they encourage party loyalty through identity symbols, such as religious phrases and historical rallying cries (think Confederate flags).

“Ethnic entrepreneurs” and “sons of the soil” making nativist claims and seeking to sow division then escalate their rhetoric to reinforce group separateness from those they oppose, which increases fear and distrust escalating tensions, which then exerts themselves in the political arena. [13]

Does any of this sound familiar?

Walter’s thinks so and I agree.

The third and most dangerous period emerges when one or the other of the competing groups feels that they are losing. They define this defeat as a loss of hope. And while the most dangerous person one can encounter is someone who is fearless, their close cousin is someone who feels hopeless. For a person who thinks they have no hope often resorts to violence directed either against themselves or against others. This can lead to insurgency, which is the third variable. Insurgency emerges in three stages. And it is in identifying insurgency’s stages that Walter sees the most danger to the American democratic experiment.

In the first stage, which is labeled pre-insurgency, “a group begins to identify a set of common grievances and builds a collective identity around a gripping narrative – the story or myth” that helps them recruit and rally supporters. [14] Walter suggests America probably entered this phase as long ago as the 1990s with the deadly confrontations at Ruby Ridge in Idaho and Waco, Texas. By the mid-1990s, militias were sprouting in all 50 states. They began to grow again in 2008 with the election of Barack Obama, America’s first African American president. Prior to 2008, there were only about 43 such groups, but by 2011 they had grown to 334. Today, the political and cultural landscape is littered with proliferating militias, such as Oath Keepers and Three Percenters, others in the “sovereign citizen movement” that denies the legitimacy of all government. A new addition is the anti-immigrant, all-male Proud Boys, who former President Donald Trump famously told to “stand down and stand by” during a 2020 presidential debate. [15]

Insurgency’s second phase, which in the study noted above “the CIA calls the ‘incipient conflict stage,’ is marked by discrete acts of violence.” It can be said to have begun with Timothy McVeigh’s 1995 murder of 168 people in Oklahoma City, which remains America’s deadliest act of domestic terrorism. [16] In this phase, the insurgents’ goal is to provoke an overreaction by the government inspiring others to join their cause. Such attacks are growing in number and frequency; in 2012 there were 14, but by August 2020 there were 61. [17] The final and most ominous stage is “open insurgency” which is “characterized by sustained violence as increasingly active extremists launch attacks that involve terrorism and guerilla warfare, including assassinations and ambushes, as well as hit-and-run raids on police and military installations.” [18] More ominously,

there is also evidence of insurgent penetration of the police and military. During this stage, “the insurgents’ goal is to incite a broader civil war by denigrating the state and growing support for extreme measures.” [19]

So, given all of that, what was Walter’s “Aha” moment? While I don’t agree with her that we are in the stage of “open insurgency,” her “Aha” moment was the January 6 attack upon the Capitol of the United States in which MAGA supporters and others violently demonstrated their opposition to the United States government and wore T-shirts declaring “MAGA Civil War January 6, 2021.” [20] As she says, “we are a factionalized anocracy that is quickly approaching open insurgency stage, which means we are closer to civil war than any of us would like to believe.” [21]

Before answering what can be done about all of this, what would such a civil war look like? As I noted at the beginning, one of the reasons even very astute observers of the American political scene recoil at the mention of civil war is that they conceive of it as a replay of America’s 19th century civil war. Walters says that is not likely to happen. Even with the urban versus rural divide and a disconcerting similarity in our political maps to the maps of the Union and the Confederacy, as factionalized as American society has become it does not divide along neat geographical lines. So, no, we are not likely to see large-scale military actions. What we might see are scenes out of *The Turner Diaries*, “which the FBI has called the ‘Bible of the racist right.’” [22] Fueled by endless social media interactions, we would see guerilla attacks upon government installations and civilians; terrorist attacks upon both; political assassinations; even random acts of genocide directed against competing “out” groups; guerilla and militia movements turning on each other for not being properly aligned with their side’s doctrines.

In short, it would be a decentralized, “leaderless” uprising awaiting a dominant leader or faction to take control of it and move it to a coherent conclusion.

Sound fanciful? One can only hope, but bits and pieces of it have already occurred, from the plot to kidnap, submit to trial, and then execute Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer to the random attack on Congressman Steve Scalise to the antisemitic slaughter of innocents at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh to – well, to a disturbing number of other such incidents these past 10 years.

Perhaps Walter is wrong. But what if she’s right? What can be done? Well, the weakest part of her book is her suggestions for how to avoid such a civil war. They are bland and politically plausible, although unlikely. She argues, who can tell her she is wrong, that we need to somehow rein in social media by restoring the editorial function without trashing the First Amendment rights of free

speech. She suggests we need to strengthen voting rights to protect democracy, to work to include all of America's citizens in the bounty that is American life, with a particular emphasis on those who lost out during the past 40 years due to technological advances and globalization, and to reassert the rule of law. All of these are sound; all of these in one form or another have been attempted or are being attempted. Only those who want to feed demagoguery argue against reining in social media, but no one has yet found the path to that end. Voting rights are under assault by the United States Supreme Court and many state governments, but people are finding ways to vote. Recent federal spending bills, like President Joe Biden's infrastructure bill, seek to repair some of the damage technology and globalization did to America's working class. And the rule of law remains tattered but still functioning.

So, one asks oneself, in the near term is there anything tangible that can be done to prevent America's factionalized politics and socio-cultural values from leading us into a civil war as the two meta-threads of *The American Tapestry* compete for the soul of America? Is there any way to avoid the struggle between the exclusionary and the inclusionary American stories from devouring all of us?

I think there is a way. It is to follow the courageous example of Liz Cheney, which is to put aside for the moment one's partisan disagreements and come to the defense of America's core, foundational values. Which values might those be? It's simple, really. They are first and foremost to respect the rule of law, for without lawful order all the rest will be futile. Second, it is the American Creed – those truths in the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence we say we hold to be self-evident. And, although it is in need of some serious tweaking, it is to defend the Constitution as amended after the Civil War ended. In particular, to strengthen the 14th Amendment's provisions for equality before the law.

Now, how can that be done? Well, Walter doesn't say it in her book, but she did in an interview she gave *The Washington Post Magazine*. She said to avoid another civil war in America we need to "strengthen our democracy," and the Republican Party needs to decide "it's no longer going to be an ethnic faction that's trying to exclude everybody else." [23] I know I will hear howls from my Republican friends, but sometimes, as Liz Cheney has demonstrated, you just need to recognize the reality in front of you.

I have repeatedly said over the years that I am a centrist, which can be an uncomfortable place to be. On some issues, I am very conservative; on others, more than a bit progressive. I try not to be a doctrinaire.

But on one issue, I am a doctrinaire.

And that issue is support for America's core, foundational values. Values which are currently under assault by the dominant right-wing of the Republican Party.

As I see it, if the American experiment is to be saved, it will be by one or both of two groups that sometimes overlap, sometimes not.

One group is American women, supported by American men, standing up for women's rights.

The other is center-right Republicans of both genders who need to set aside for the moment their zeal for business deregulation and low taxation rates, and take a stand with Liz Cheney for that great experiment begun 246 years ago.

Both Republicans and Democrats need to make a stand for America's core, foundational values – America depends upon us!

If we do our duty, we might still make it to 250 years in 2026!



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"Barbara F. Walter" at [UC San Diego School of Global Policy & Strategy Faculty Directory](#) available at [Barbara F. Walter \(ucsd.edu\)](#) accessed October 10, 2022.

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