

Civil War Redux?

By Hans Binnendijk and David C. Gompert

Where will the deep divisions in American society lead? Violent acts of insurrection have already taken place, the most serious of which was the January 6, 2021, attack on the national capitol. Could violent civil war happen again in America? If so, what form might it take? Several recent publications have assessed the general causes of civil wars and seek to use these assessments to analyze the risk of large-scale armed civil conflict in the United States today.

A look back at the specific causes of the 1861–1865 American Civil War may shed additional light on these questions. Historians have long debated the causes of the American Civil War, focusing primarily on slavery and secession. The war clearly began in response to decisions by Southern states to secede from the Union and Abraham

Hans Binnendijk is a Distinguished Fellow at the Atlantic Council. He was previously NSC Senior Director for Defense Policy, Acting Director of the State Department Policy Planning Staff, and Director of National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies.

David C. Gompert is on the faculty of the U.S. Naval Academy and a senior advisor to Ultratech Capital Partners. He was Principal Deputy Director and Acting Director of National Intelligence, 2009-2010.

Both authors are on the Board of Directors of the American Civil War Museum.

Lincoln's decision to resist. Slavery was the key underlying issue, coupled with the South's fear that in November 1860 abolitionists had irrevocably turned the political tide against their slavery-based economic system by electing Lincoln, whose Republican Party was committed to stopping its spread to new states. Underlying this is a more complex set of interrelated factors that might help to assess whether another American civil war is possible. The road to the American Civil War might be analyzed as developing in three distinct stages. Those stages then can be used to contrast nineteenth-century events with unfolding events in America today.

In Stage 1 (from 1776 through 1850), systemic cultural divisions emerged between the North and South that can be traced in part back to early immigration patterns during the colonial years. For example, religious British Puritans populated the Yankee North and royalist Cavaliers populated the Tidewater region. While the 1787 Northwest Ordinance banned slavery in territories north of the Ohio River, the U.S. Constitution ducked most of the issues that eventually led to the Civil War, with many founding fathers believing that slavery would soon naturally fade away. But the invention of the cotton gin in 1793 and new textile manufacturing techniques in Europe created the potential for great wealth for plantation owners using slave labor to pick cotton. At the same time, the industrial



revolution was centered in the North and created wealth for manufacturers.

These divergent methods of wealth creation thus emerged between North and South, prompting differing lifestyles, cultures, views on free trade and tariff policies, and perspectives on the right of states to secede. Slavery was justified by Southerners as benign and benevolent while the abolitionist movement was still relatively nascent in the North. The states that shared similar views were within the same geographic region and were contiguous, creating potential for geographic division.

The Constitution was relatively silent on the right of states to secede from the Union. The prospect was raised frequently during the country's early history in various places: in the 1791–94 Whiskey Rebellion, in the 1798–99 Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, in Aaron Burr's 1804–07 Western conspiracy, in New England before and during the War of 1812, and in the 1832–33

Nullification crisis. The nominal right to secede was thus not solely a Southern concept.

Yet secession was kept in check during this stage by a combination of strong federal leadership and statesmen willing to compromise. During the Whiskey Rebellion and the Nullification Crisis, George Washington and Andrew Jackson respectively either used or threatened the use of force to maintain the Union. This was supplemented by a series of national compromises, designed by statesmen like Henry Clay and later Daniel Webster. These include the Missouri Compromise of 1820, the nullification compromise of 1833, and the Compromise of 1850 (which diffused secessionist fervor created by the 1846 Wilmot Proviso). In addition, the U.S. military during this stage was still fairly unified, fighting together in the War of 1812, the early Indian Wars, and the Mexican-American War.

It was during this first stage that the demand for cotton began to soar. With

Image: John Lewis Krimmel's Election Day in Philadelphia, 1815. Wikimedia Commons.

cotton-picking being a labor-intensive proposition, the Deep South's use of slaves enabled it to become the world's leading producer, and capital flowed into the sector to exploit phenomenal returns on investment. Trade in human beings from North to South swelled. Expectations that slavery would fade were shattered, and Southern states' economies, with some exceptions, became vitally dependent on slavery. At the same time, societal alienation remained subdued. Generally speaking, Southerners did not feel that the rest of the country seriously threatened their right to own slaves.

Stage 2 (1850 to 1860) began with the growing importance of cotton in the South and growing abhorrence of slavery in the North. It was an unstable period of growing distrust, but Southern elites still widely believed that their culture could survive within the Union. By 1850, the U.S. cotton trade accounted for 60 percent of all American exports and nearly all Southern exports. The slave trade became even more pronounced and atrocious, with families readily broken in order to single out the best potential to pick cotton. In addition, masters resorted to whipping field workers who failed to meet targets, which were as high as 200 pounds per slave per day. And newly acquired territories became more important to the South—not only to keep political balance in Washington, but also because Southern soil was faltering due to excessive use. The flagrantly inhumane treatment of slaves in the South stimulated the abolitionist movement in the North. Previous compromises on the territories that had kept the peace for decades were reversed with the Kansas-Nebraska Act and *Dred Scott* decision. Regional alienation grew and spread.

Notwithstanding these trends, events in the 1850s strengthened the South's political position within the Union. Four weak or pro-Southern U.S. presidents, brutal

enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act, the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the 1857 *Dred Scott* decision all gave Southerners the sense that the status quo could endure despite tensions. Jefferson Davis served as the American secretary of war under Franklin Pierce. Stephen Douglas tried another compromise with the Kansas-Nebraska Act, but repealing the Missouri Compromise and allowing popular sovereignty to decide whether slavery would be allowed in those territories ignited conflict there. At least initially, Southerners saw it as a victory. The *Dred Scott* decision favored the South: it denied Scott his freedom and also allowed for slavery in all American territories. Southerners did not see slavery as doomed, and interest in secession was inchoate.

These same events created outrage in much of the North. The abolitionist movement, which started around 1830, became a major regional force in the 1850s. Add to this the wide circulation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and effective abolitionist leaders like Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and William Lloyd Garrison, and slavery became a dominant moral issue in the North. But even as the North became more indignant and intolerant of slavery, the South grew more reliant on its extraordinary profitability.

Other factors led to the growing sectoral divisions during this stage. An extremist press on both sides exacerbated sentiments. Intra-regional cultural affinity increased as railroads stitched like-minded regions together. The Northern population grew rapidly due to immigration from Europe, creating demographic pressures disadvantageous to the South. The two-party system collapsed, causing wild political swings and a resulting shift in existing political orientations.

Limited violence was not uncommon between the sides during this stage. Bleeding Kansas saw atrocities on both sides. The 1856 caning of Senator Charles Sumner by Congressman Preston Brooks brought



violence into the U.S. Senate Chamber. And John Brown’s 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry stimulated admiration in the North and fear of slave revolts in the South.

Despite these hardening political positions, the lack of willingness to compromise, and growing contempt and political violence, most principal actors on each side in Stage 2 still saw a path for survival within the Union. Extreme leaders emerged, but moderates stayed in control. In essence, alienation had grown sharply, but Northern and Southern goals were not yet necessarily irreconcilable.

Stage 3 (November 1860 to April 1861) consisted of a rapid and decisive existential crisis for the South and North. Events reached a tipping point and quickly spiraled out of control. The fragmentation of the Democratic Party in particular led to the subsequent election in November 1860 of Abraham Lincoln by less than a 40 percent plurality, which

was considered illegitimate in the South despite a clear electoral college victory. Several last-minute compromise attempts failed. For example, a complex set of proposals designed by Senator John Crittenden failed because it permanently legalized slavery south of the Missouri Compromise line, reinforced the Fugitive Slave Law, and allowed the slave trade in the District of Columbia. The South’s winning political position from the 1850s shifted overnight, with no apparent prospect of a sustainable compromise. This created both panic and resolve in those Southern state economies most reliant on slavery. Lincoln’s position on the future of slavery in the territories (and thus subsequent states) appeared to threaten the long-term viability of the relatively secure national political position that the South had enjoyed up to that point. Suddenly, Southerners felt that they could no longer manage their future or preserve their way of life within the existing federal structure. Southerners, especially

Image: Abraham Lincoln and Hannibal Hamlin 1860 Election campaign poster. Wikimedia Commons.

cotton-growers, became acutely defensive, politically and psychologically.

The most radical Southern position suddenly became dominant. With that sense of rapid reversal of fortune, moderates in the South were quickly shunted aside by radical voices. Southerners now saw a threat to their political and economic existence, with secession the only way out. This existential crisis that led to secession, in turn, posed an existential threat to the Union and the North's commitment to it. Fort Sumter became a symbol of the South's claim of the right to secede and the Union's will to resist. Secretary of State William Seward's attempt to find a compromise failed. South Carolina, under orders from Jefferson Davis, fired on the fort, and many were surprised at Lincoln's subsequent resolve. Once the secession process and fighting began, even moderate states like Virginia were under unbearable pressure to join their neighboring states in the Deep South. Four border states, Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, and Missouri, stayed in the Union primarily as a result of federal occupation.

This three-stage analysis of the causes of the Civil War reveals accelerating deterioration in relations between North and South until reconciliation became impossible. For an extended period during the first stage, systemic conditions were inherently unstable but not spiraling inexorably toward war. The Constitution, the established federal-state political order, strong national leadership, and a willingness to find common ground enabled this instability to be managed. A series of compromises reassured Southerners that remaining part of the United States could be compatible with continuation of slavery.

In the next stage during the 1850s, soaring cotton profits had made the South vitally dependent on slavery and the increasingly inhuman treatment of slaves

stoked the demand for abolition in the North. Sectarian violence increased dramatically and the ability to compromise declined. But because political trends still favored the South, they continued to believe their livelihood and way of life were relatively secure within the federal union. This fragile stage ended abruptly in 1860 with a single event, the election of Lincoln, which precipitated an existential crisis for the South, secession, Union resolve to resist, and rapid decline into war.

Today's America echoes some of this tragic history.

The United States is beyond Stage 1 today. During the past several decades, the United States has already passed through a period with similarities to Stage 1. The nation during this period was increasingly divided on an array of issues but compromise was still possible as it was in the pre-1850 period. Compared with Stage 1 of the buildup to the Civil War, there is today no one overwhelming catalytic question like slavery that divides the nation. But issues like abortion rights, immigration, police reform, COVID-19 mandates, voting rights, gay rights, gun control, federal versus states' rights, and teaching critical race theory in schools are differentiated primarily by political party, by education, and geographic plus urban/rural divisions. These issues, taken together, do indicate sharp differences based on economic status and political philosophy. A telling example of this is that with the recent Supreme Court decision overturning *Roe v. Wade*, the expectation is that most Red states will ban or severely limit abortion while Blue states will continue to permit it. Although Red vs. Blue states are not as tightly aligned geographically as the South and North were in the nineteenth century, there are deep forces that point increasingly to a division.

As with Stage 1 in the first half of the nineteenth century, much of the division

today rests on differing economic predicates. Beginning around 1980, the digital revolution led to two transformations with profound repercussions. The first was the acceleration of corporate operations and investments abroad, mainly to take advantage of cheaper labor. This gave impetus to the negotiation of a more open global trading system. The effect for the U.S. economy as a whole was positive in the medium term: curbing inflation, maintaining low interest rates, and giving consumers more choice and value. However, as with any demolition of market barriers, this one would dislocate large segments of the American labor force, especially in high-cost, low-skilled sectors, like manufacturing. The second effect of digitization was automation, which corporations targeted especially on the high-cost, low-skilled work—the same socioeconomic group that was already hit hard by global trade. Again, this was good for most Americans, but very bad for some.

Then the 2008 recession hit the entire country hard, with the white male middle-lower class being hit particularly hard. The U.S. manufacturing sector lost some 5 million jobs since 2000, more than two-thirds of whom were men. About a third of American men were out of the labor force. The combined effects of these phenomena were increased unemployment, underemployment, digital divide, disaffection, opioid use, suicides, and the placement of blame on foreign workers (e.g., Chinese) and immigrants (e.g., Central Americans). Several administrations of both parties failed to recognize the problem and provide necessary economic adjustment programs.

Image: Then Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump appears at a campaign rally in Warren, Michigan. October 31 2016. Carlo Allegri/Reuters.

While many white working-class voters cast ballots for Barack Obama in 2008, because of the lingering recession their economic situation did not improve enough during his two terms in office. This opened the door for Donald Trump to make extreme claims in 2016 that attracted many in this neglected population away from the Democratic Party. But Trump's campaign also stoked an increased degree of racism in the nation.

Since at least the year 2000, electoral results have revealed a growing chasm between Blue states and Red states, leaving only about a dozen swing states to be political (as well as socioeconomic) battlegrounds. Red states exist primarily in the old cotton belt of the Confederacy plus much of the old Louisiana Purchase area, and some of the midwest. Blue states are primarily in the old Union area, the West Coast, some of the Southwest, and increasingly some southern states with shifting demographics like Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia. Unlike Blue states, Red states are geographically more contiguous. What is different from

Unlike Blue states, Red states are geographically more contiguous. What is different from 1860 is a corresponding divergence in views within these states between rural and urban Americans, leaving the suburbs also as battlegrounds.

1860 is a corresponding divergence in views within these states between rural and urban Americans, leaving the suburbs also as battlegrounds. Still, disputes were addressed—if often left unsettled—within the established political order.

The nation was able to pass through this contemporary Stage 1 without much violence because several unifying factors mitigated against national disunion. While political divisions mounted, legislators were still willing to compromise on at least some issues. The bloody history of the

Civil War remained a sobering reminder to most Americans of the cost of insurrection and secession. The sixteen decades that have passed since the Civil War have generally strengthened national bonds, with various civic and recreational associations acting as unifying factors—look no further than national sports organizations as an example. Geographic mobility across states over the decades has also tended to modify extreme concentrations of radical belief and to homogenize American culture. Allegiances to states rather than the nation as a whole are certainly less today than in 1860. The U.S. military and other national security institutions remain completely loyal to the federal government and have demonstrated willingness to act lawfully against insurgencies.

The United States is in Stage 2 today. In fact, the United States has arguably been in Stage 2 for the past half-decade. As was

the case in the decade before the Civil War, this period includes continued deepening political, economic, and cultural division: a greater willingness to use violence; greater vitriol against those with opposing views; less willingness to compromise on hot button issues; more loose talk about secession; and a media that fans these flames. But there is still continued adherence to the Union because those on the Right have seen that their interests could be protected by the federal government under Trump, a conservative Supreme Court, and under the power of state governments. Even with Trump's defeat, the Supreme Court and Red state governments tend to protect their interests. This period also includes a dramatic reaction on the Left to both Trump's policies and to recent Supreme Court rulings, much as the abolitionists reacted with indignation to Southern political victories in the 1850s.



Both political parties have found compromise very difficult for fear that such will help their opponents and find fault with their core constituencies. This trend began during Newt Gingrich's tenure as House speaker in the 1990s but has accelerated during the most recent decade. As a result, Democrats with very slim Congressional majorities have relied on the reconciliation process to pass legislation without Republicans. Republicans, in turn, have used their power to block Democrats when possible, and in the process have substantially shifted the balance of the Supreme Court in their favor. Presidents from both parties have made liberal use of executive orders to implement policy changes, with Trump notably doing so at twice the rate of his predecessors.

As was the case in the 1850s, extreme media views have further polarized the nation. Each side has its own cable news and talk radio outlets and follows its own social media leaders. There are two national echo chambers. These media leaders hold their audiences by taking increasingly more extreme positions, which many of their followers adopt as gospel. Conspiracy theories abound.

Lack of trust in government and a willingness to support state secession are increasingly worrisome signals. Even prior to the election of Trump, only 19 percent of Americans said they trust government "always or most of the time." Some 64 percent said their side loses more than it wins. The feeling of defeat was strongest among conservatives (81 percent). Recent polls also indicate that nearly 40 percent of Americans would support state secession should their candidate lose. The highest support for secession

is among Republicans in the South, with some 66 percent saying they would support their home state seceding from the United States. To underline this sentiment, the recent Texas Republican Convention in June declared that a state referendum should be held on whether voters favored Texas independence. Yet at the same time, some 41 percent of Joe Biden supporters were also at least in some agreement with the idea that "it's time to split the country."

The 2016 election of reality television personality Donald Trump over several establishment Republicans and a divided Democratic Party deeply split the nation.

As was the case in the 1850s, extreme media views have further polarized the nation. Each side has its own cable news and talk radio outlets and follows its own social media leaders. There are two national echo chambers.

Trump's campaign against elite/minority rule, open borders, pro-China trade, and Washington corruption resonated well. Promises that mines and mills would be reopened, though implausible, were accepted by voters who were glad their economic grievances were at last being recognized. Revelations and credible rumors of sexual misconduct, shady business practices, and racist tendencies glanced off the candidate when it came to his "core" followers—especially when the

accusations came from media outlets perceived to be (rightly or wrongly) out to get him. A sizable fraction of the public disbelieved any information its leader denied. The election of 2016 not only robbed the Democrats of some voters belonging to the Bernie Sanders wing of their party but also validated the political weight of the "Trump core," and gave anti-elite, anti-minority, anti-immigrant, anti-trade elements on both sides of the political spectrum hope. Popular media outlets and voices peddled the view that opposition to the president was unpatriotic, while simultaneously some

Democrats called Trump's 2016 election illegitimate due to Russian interference.

Within the core of Trump voters is a growing belief that the coalition of elites and minorities that determine national policies represents an existential threat to a basic creed that undergirds positions on gun rights, abortion prohibitions, immigration constrictions, and voting restrictions. Simply stated, important Red state elements see themselves and their values on the defensive against an encroaching federal/Blue political order. As we know from the American Civil War and other episodes, a segment on the defensive may turn increasingly militant.

In this regard, a worrisome reflection of the 1850s is the willingness and ability to use violence for political gain. One in three Americans now say violence against the government can be justified. Some 30 percent of Trump voters agree with the statement, "true patriots may have to resort to violence to save the USA." A report by the COVID States Project found that almost 25 percent of respondents indicated that violence was either "definitely" or "probably" justifiable against the government, and that a similar percentage of both conservatives and liberals agreed on this. Such political violence or threat of violence has already been used by both sides, for example in Charlottesville, in Lafayette Square, in Wisconsin, and against the national Capitol. This tendency is amplified when candidates pose with weapons and threaten members of their own party who are insufficiently radical.

Americans have the means and some are organizing to follow through on these beliefs. In 2021, about 42 percent of American households had at least one gun. U.S. civilians own nearly 400 million firearms. The greatest density of firearms ownership is in the deep South and Midwest. About 58 percent of conservative Republican families own at least one weapon while 29 percent of liberal Democrats own one.

And militant groups on both sides—like the Oath Keepers, the Proud Boys, and 3 Percenters on the Right, and Antifa on the Left—rally supporters around the potential for violence. In 2020, the Intelligence Project identified some 566 "extreme antigovernment or anti-New World Order" groups in the United States, of which 169 were militias.

An ominous development is the militancy surrounding the "replacement theory," the adherents of which are convinced that the elite-minority coalition intends to shrink the relative size and electoral importance of white Americans. This is a consequence of changing demographics and unaddressed socio-economic conditions. It is stoked by certain media voices. The fear is that the elites of the Democratic Party will use lax immigration controls, unregulated voting access, and fiscal policies to support and grow non-white America to the point that they, the elites, will have perpetual control. Replacement theory targets Blacks, Hispanics, and Asian Americans, Muslims, and Jews. This mindset of defensive desperation has contributed directly to mass shootings of "non-whites."

These accelerating national divisions in Stage 2 were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. President Trump's pronouncements making light of the dangers found resonance among his followers and others. Many grew tired of lockdowns and mandates and opted to put personal freedom above the health of their family and neighbors. President Biden's masks and vaccine mandates were denounced by many Trump's followers as totalitarian and have been modified since the vaccines have had a positive impact.

Despite these growing divisions in today's Stage 2, Trump's election did provide political comfort for his core supporters, much as the presidencies of Zachary Taylor, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, and James Buchanan provided a sense of security within

the Union for Southerners during the 1850s.

Political victories have extended beyond Trump's tenure for many in the Red states because the Supreme Court's conservative 6-3 majority has ruled recently in multiple cases which support their positions. This includes the dramatic reversal of abortion rights, restrictions on gun control, state financial support for religious schools, and federal enforcement of environmental policy. In the process, the Supreme Court has also strengthened states' rights within the federal system. Some have drawn an analogy to the divisive impact that the 1857 *Dred Scott* decision had on the nation. These recent decisions have, in effect, extended Stage 2 beyond Trump's tenure.

Stage 3 is pending today.

In 1860, Stage 3 was the tipping point when the Southern states felt that due to a national election, their secure position in the Union was suddenly and irrevocably reversed. Events then tumbled out of control in 1861.

In November 2020, America looked out over the precipice of Stage 3. Members of the Trump core felt that their secure position of the past four years had been reversed, just as Southerners in 1860 felt that they had lost their political advantage. Had Trump conceded, Biden might have had the opportunity to heal some of the national divisions as he had pledged during his campaign. By contesting the election results not only in the courts (as was legitimate), but also with threats to officials in the swing states and in the streets, Trump further divided the nation.

The election of Joe Biden had a traumatic effect on the Trump core which nearly tipped the country into Stage 3. The period

between the 2020 election and inauguration seethed with disbelief, denial, and defiance. Conclusive evidence that no fraud existed was summarily dismissed. Claims by Trump's political allies that the election was stolen produced a strong belief among many of his voters that the results were fraudulent.

The House January 6 Committee demonstrated that Trump used this strong belief among his core to orchestrate an effort by various armed groups to invade the Capitol and disrupt the official counting of electoral votes. As Jason Van Tatenhove, former spokesman of the Oath Keepers, stated before the Committee, "it was going to be an armed revolution."

As was the case in the 1850s, extreme media views have further polarized the nation. Each side has its own cable news and talk radio outlets and follows its own social media leaders. There are two national echo chambers.

Some Trump supporters still celebrate the insurrection of January 6, 2021, as just the beginning of armed resistance to the federal state. Their psychology has turned defensive: like knights defending the castle of their freedoms and communities. The ex-president's pledge to pardon the January 6 insurrectionists if he was re-elected sent a dangerous signal that violent insurrection is acceptable. As Van Tatenhove told the House January 6 committee, "I do fear for the

next election cycle because who knows what that might bring."

In this context, the Republican National Committee's pronouncement that the January 6 attack on the capitol was simply "legitimate political discourse" is particularly worrisome. The Right responded by referencing post-2016 election protests, including many Democrats insisting that Trump was an illegitimate president, and pulling up a now-infamous picture of a CNN correspondent in front of a burning building—a result of Black Lives Matter protests—with the chyron reading "Fiery



But Mostly Peaceful Protests After Police Shooting.”

The January 6 event could have been a Fort Sumter moment. The United States pulled back from the abyss because the courts, Republican state officials, and the vice president did their constitutional duty. The Capitol Police did their best to restore order and protect elected officials on January 6. And there were other national safeguards. The U.S. military and other federal security agencies remained calm, united, and devoted to the Constitution.

While some Americans may toy with secession, few really want the massive violence associated with civil war. There is still no sense of a single existential crisis at the state level. Few responsible senior political leaders have called for secession, and most condemned the violence. Republican minority leader Mitch McConnell eventually condemned the events of January 6 as an insurrection. Several of those who perpetrated violence on Capitol Hill are being charged by the Justice Department with “seditious conspiracy”—a notch beneath treason. Several of Trump’s senior officials are testifying against him at the January 6 Committee Hearings. And Trump himself

is under threat of possible indictment for his role in the January 6 insurrection.

Trump’s rejection of the 2020 election results could have been an opening event of some version of Stage 3. The nation was spared that by a few state, federal, and judicial leaders that put nation before party and by a military loyal to the Constitution. But the fact that several elements of Stage 1 & 2 of the pre-Civil War period are roughly analogous to today’s America indicates that a major disruptive event could still hurl the United States towards some limited version of Stage 3.

Particularly worrisome, another failed and allegedly stolen Trump presidential attempt in 2024 could still have a loosely comparable effect as Lincoln’s 1860 election. Whether denied his party’s nomination or, if nominated, denied electoral victory, Trump could issue a call to arms. A large segment of his base has a cult-like quality and will accept his word even if contradicted by factual reality.

By analyzing these three-stage narratives of the run-up to the Civil War of 1861–1865 and today’s upheaval, one can find both some important

Image: Supporters of President Donald Trump clash with police officers outside of the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, DC, January 6, 2021. Leah Millis/Reuters.

similarities and differences. First the similarities.

Our nation has already passed through uncomfortable similarities with Stage 1 of the buildup to the Civil War. These have been evident for several decades. Systemic conditions based on economic and cultural differences have divided the nation into roughly two camps. While there is no one divisive issue like slavery, there are multiple issues that generally relate to different approaches to moral values, personal freedom, and the common good. Divisions often fall along class, educational, geographic, and racial lines. The Red states are loosely contiguous. The history of the Civil War teaches us that systemic differences such as these can be managed for extended periods of time in this first stage if leaders of good faith on both sides seek compromise and urge reconciliation.

During the past decade, these divisions have magnified and there are now growing similarities to Stage 2 of the buildup to the Civil War. The election of Donald Trump did give conservatives a feeling that their interests could be protected, or at least their problems addressed, by the federal government. Yet underneath this sense of confidence in Trump, other troubling trends accelerated. Public willingness to support state secession is on the rise, especially among Republicans in former Confederate states. The willingness to compromise or seek reconciliation either in Congress or among the broader population is in marked decline. The willingness and ability to use violence is also on the rise. Armed groups, though relatively small, are becoming more active. Both cable news and social media have amplified these differing views and give extremists a bully pulpit. Ironically, the COVID-19 pandemic has further divided rather than united the nation based on differing attitudes towards mask and vaccine mandates and personal

freedoms. Civil War history also teaches that during this stage the weaker, more aggrieved, and more vulnerable party can become acutely defensive, politically and psychologically. Members may see themselves as heroic champions of a mortally threatened way of life. We see these phenomena today as well.

Most troubling in this assessment of similarities is the rejection by former President Trump of the 2020 election results. It was the election of Lincoln and its subsequent rejection by the South that led to a tragic tipping point in 1860, what we have called Stage 3. The reaction of many Trump supporters was a similar rejection of a sudden turn of fortune, with the most extreme reactions on display on January 6, 2021. At this tipping point in the case of the Civil War, moderates were silenced, violent events trigger more violent ones, miscalculations were made, red lines were created and crossed, and bluffs were called. Today, moderates in both parties are also too often silent. And yet luckily today the United States has looked out over this Stage 3 precipice and thus far recoiled. Why?

Despite several similarities in all three stages, there are important safeguards and mitigating factors that are likely to spare the nation a second violent civil war among organized states.

Most importantly, while there are deep differences on specific issues today, even taken together, for most Americans they do not rise to near the existential level that they did for the South in 1861.

Despite regional differences, the degree of national assimilation and social cohesion is also much greater today than sixteen decades ago. While there are still pronounced regional differences, they were mitigated by social and geographic mobility and by national patriotism. Those advocating violent insurrection exist primarily in small geographic pockets. Urban-rural

divisions are as great as divisions among states.

Related to this, despite some of the public's flirtation with secession, no serious political leader today has called for state secession. The lessons of the bloody Civil War have been absorbed by most. In 1869, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Texas v. White* that states could not unilaterally secede from the Union. While some advocate secession as a fantasy, very few would welcome another violent struggle akin to the Civil War to attain it. Should large-scale civil insurrection arise, state secession is unlikely to be a major part of that insurrection.

America's national institutions, both official and unofficial, have been weakened but still remain relatively strong compared to 1860. Many political differences are settled at the state level. The courts still remain a validated arbitrator on critical differences between states and the federal government. And the vast majority of those who command the armed forces, law enforcement, and intelligence capabilities today are squarely behind the established order.

Next, while many political leaders on the Right are afraid to oppose Trump outright, very few of them have endorsed political violence or directly advocate state secession. Recall that in 1860, most Southern political leaders favored secession in Stage 3.

Lastly, though bristling with weapons, today's Far Right militants are not well-organized or led, in contrast to the large numbers of experienced military officers who supported secession and could organize and lead rebel armies. Nonetheless, they could gain access to dangerous technologies and could start difficult to control insurgencies.

So, while a review of these three stages indicates that greater sectoral violence is quite possible today, secession by states and open civil war similar to 1861–1865 remains remote. Despite several similarities in conditions in the pre-Civil War period,

there are now mitigating factors and safeguards that are likely to prevent a national split. Nonetheless, militant groups require careful and continuous monitoring.

If—still, a big “if”—large-scale anti-government violence breaks out as a result of a triggering event, it would more plausibly be in loosely coordinated pockets of, say, hundreds of heavily armed and angry individuals led by one or another militant group. It would be most dangerous if supported by some extremist national leaders. This hard core is extremely well armed with combat-standard weaponry, and could readily accumulate high explosives or worse. The capacity for widespread significant violence is undeniable. January 6, 2020, could prove to be a rehearsal for coordinated attacks on federal symbols and properties, Blue state capitals, and minority assemblages. Should such violence break out, these groups would need to be disarmed. Quite possibly, assuming these circumstances, regular U.S. military forces might have to intervene, which could either squelch or stoke further insurrection.”

In conclusion, while civil war between two halves of the United States is highly improbable today, geographically scattered, loosely coordinated paramilitary violence by the Far Right and “replacement” militants cannot be deemed improbable.

This prognosis of loosely organized though dangerous civil strife and its possible escalation beyond that can be avoided if American leaders of both parties clearly recognize the dangers exposed here, put nation above partisan politics, control their constituents, speak out against violence, and seize the opportunity to compromise on as many national issues as possible. Strong and balanced leadership is essential. The pre-Civil War period had its statesmen like Henry Clay who sought to preserve the union and peace through compromise. Such leaders are needed again today. □