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What are you willing to do?

James Meek

How Civil Wars Start – And How to Stop Them
by Barbara F. Walter.
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Though Barbara Walter frames her book as a warning to America, her staccato forays into recent civil wars in dozens of countries only gradually accustom the reader to her habit, after recounting a number of fratricidal horrors, of pointing a dreadful finger at the United States. Beware! You too may one day poke your cellphone through the curtains to film shaky clips of fires and explosions on the horizon of your suburb, it may be your feet crunching on the bloodied glass of a bombed café, it may be your loved one taken away by masked good old boys with customised AR-15s, death's head armbands and Ford F-150 technicals.

Walter's act of homebringing also involves a more subliminal journey from the past back to the American present. After all, to Americans, the country's own four-year 19th-century shriek of bifurcated patriotism, murderous ingenuity and suicidal mass charges over open ground is *the* civil war, and it is the prospect of a 21st-century rerun that gives the book its kick. Even in her denials that a new American civil war would look anything like the first, Walter links the two, with the future version trailed in dire precursors like the storming of the Capitol by Trump supporters on 6 January 2021. It's from among such riled-up conspiracists and militiamen, according to Walter, that the next American civil war will come, as home-grown bands of right-wing terrorists and xenophobic guerrillas infest the democratic liberal order of the United States. This scenario doesn't allow space for an alternative fracture in society's representation of reality, one that is possibly more likely: that the nativist champion really does steal an election, with a victory endorsed by the institutions of power (Congress, the courts, the military), even as his liberal enemies treat it as fact that he has engineered an administrative putsch.

If civil war hadn't begun in America in 1861 hundreds of thousands of people wouldn't have died, and Atlanta would have gone unburned. But the Confederacy would have gone on slaving, and tried to spread slavery to a new, wider empire. As in Walter's scenario for the next civil war, the rebels were the patriarchal white supremacists, the federal government the (marginally more) progressive side. But these roles could switch. This is an imaginative realm progressive America seems reluctant to enter, where Albany or Sacramento audition as the future Richmond, and a future Fort Sumter must be triggered by liberals, or not at all. It's not unreasonable for Walter and many others to see a future civil war in America taking the form

of a smouldering, uncoordinated insurgency by pro-Trump conspiracists against a liberal reigning order of corporations, media, government, academia and metro society. But the real danger might be that Trump and Republicans loyal to him cheat and lie their way to a victory that is accepted by Congress, federal power passes to an autocrat, and, after a period of mass protest, most liberals just put up with it, judging it not worth the blood and damage to fight for democracy. If it is a real danger that civil war may threaten democracy, it is also a real danger that democracy may die because its defenders refuse to start one.

Here's something that actually happened in a civil war in my lifetime. A man and a woman were driving around a city centre on a Saturday night, looking for somewhere to park near a popular bar. After a while they found a space. It was tight, but the woman, who was driving, managed to squeeze the car in. The man left her there and walked round the corner to where a second man was waiting in another car. They drove back to where the woman had parked. She pulled out and double-parked a little way down the street while the men put the second car in the space. The first man reached through a hole in the car's rear arm-rest and tugged out a piece of black flex. It had the safety pin of an explosive device hanging off the end: the tug had started the timer. The men got out and walked slowly to the other car. The first man sat in the back and told the woman to go to a nearby petrol station, then drive up the hill. They pulled up opposite a cemetery, high above the city. Only then did the woman find out she'd helped position a car bomb which was bound to kill civilians. Committed to the cause though she was, she was appalled. But by this time the bomb had gone off.*

The explosion killed three and injured at least 69. A worker in one of the venues near where the car was parked described it.

> What I remember is seeing flashing lights of all colours: red, blue, green and a horrendous noise that actually went right down into your body. But there was like a vacuum after that, there was silence and then all of a sudden there was this swishing sound and everything just went berserk … and then we saw it in its full colours. It was a massive bloodbath with flesh and blood dripping from the walls. I remember seeing half a head … I remember smelling burning flesh. And dragging people out. There were people walking round in circles, they had splinters of glass, enormous, through their heads, through their backs, they didn't know what had happened.

A few people, reading this, might recognise the event, but most will find the description too generic. Belfast during the Troubles? Beirut? Baghdad? Israel? The action of a small extremist group in Europe or North America in the 1970s, aiming to smash the system? There have been so many terrorisms, so many insurgencies, so many civil wars. Whether this bomb and this bloodshed, in 1986, helped the cause it was meant to help is an open question. The attackers believed the bars they hit were frequented by off-duty police officers, and that there weren't likely to be any children nearby, but that doesn't really change the moral context. What is certain is that the bombers' cause, the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, was just and necessary. The group that carried out the Magoo's Bar bombing in Durban was led by Robert McBride, a senior commander in uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress. After the end of the apartheid regime, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission stated that attacks like this one were 'gross violations' of the human rights of the people killed and injured, but still granted McBride and his fellow attackers amnesty. MK had agreed to relax its rules forbidding attacks on civilian targets at a conference in Zambia in 1985, but many in the ANC came to feel that its subsequent bombings went too far, morally and politically, and reined them in. The ANC leadership had

always agonised over the use of violence. But against that was the structural and literal violence of an entire ruling culture, the crushing weight of South African white supremacy, which embodied racial violence deeply and explicitly in its laws, semiology and institutions.

As Nelson Mandela explained in Pretoria in 1964, in his statement from the dock, it had taken the ANC almost half a century, from its founding in 1912 to the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, to accept that its non-violent methods weren't getting results; that if the ANC didn't come up with a plan for controlled violence, the wider Black community would use violence without a plan; that 'the country was drifting towards a civil war' between the races. 'We did not want to be committed to civil war,' he said, 'but we wanted to be ready if it became inevitable.' In the US, the Civil Rights Act was about to be passed as a result of non-violent action; nothing similar was going to happen in South Africa. Mandela's preference for non-violence had to yield. 'It was only when all else had failed, when all channels of peaceful protest had been barred to us, that the decision was made to embark on violent forms of political struggle,' he said.

When Mandela and the other ANC leaders set up MK in 1961, they considered four forms of violence: sabotage, guerrilla warfare, terrorism and 'open revolution'. At that point, shortly before Mandela began his long imprisonment, they decided to carry out sabotage only, but to train volunteers for guerrilla war. It's a long way from bombing an unmanned electricity substation, the kind of sabotage that happened on Mandela's watch, to bombing a busy seaside bar, but, like the sniper in a 'proper' war who shoots a civilian who moves in front of his target, they're on the same spectrum. The choice between non-violence and violence is more significant than the choice between acceptable and unacceptable violence. For an overseas opponent of apartheid to abhor the structural violence of South African white supremacy, while denying its opponents the moral right to use violence against that institution, is unjust; to accept that moral right, on the other hand, is to accept complicity, however faint and remote, in the spilling of innocent blood. Robert McBride, sentenced to death by the apartheid regime's security-judicial system, rose to high office in the security-judicial system of post-apartheid South Africa; at least some of the people who lost loved ones in the attack have not forgiven him.

Walter treats South Africa as a paradigm of the way civil wars should be headed off. In her telling, civil war in South Africa was prevented by the country's 'most important trading partners', the US, Europe and Japan, which imposed sanctions in 1986 'in response to the escalating oppression by the apartheid government', and by the far-sighted pragmatism of the country's last white leader, F.W. de Klerk, who ended minority rule after he became president three years later. Mandela's main role, in this version, was emollience: 'Mandela … 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.' She doesn't play down the horrors inflicted by white minority rule on Blacks, from the killing of 176 children in Soweto in 1976 to the 'indiscriminate arrests, police killings and torture' under the state of emergency in the mid-1980s. But her rapid sketch of the end of apartheid gives the impression that the Black majority and its white sympathisers were passive in the face of oppression, and that there was nothing resembling a civil war in South Africa. In fact, as well as bombings, there were strikes (more than a thousand in 1987 alone), civil disobedience, boycotts of fake elections, sabotage, attacks on people seen as collaborators. In their *History of South Africa* Leonard Thompson and Lynn Berat write that between 1986 and 1988 'more than a hundred explosions caused 31 deaths and 56 injuries in streets, restaurants, cinemas, shopping centres and sports complexes in the major cities.' The army said the country was at war and deployed

thousands of troops to the townships. The struggle extended far beyond South Africa: in its effort to crush sources of anti-apartheid activity the government attacked neighbouring countries, invaded Angola, occupied Namibia and destabilised Mozambique, leading, according to a Commonwealth committee, to the deaths of a million people. Walter's brisk reference to South Africa's 'most important trading partners' glosses over the difficulties and risks anti-apartheid activists faced in forcing European and American leaders to impose sanctions when Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher sympathised with the Pretoria regime.

Walter's attribution of the fall of apartheid to pity, white-collar public outrage, elite wisdom, capitalist pragmatism and demographic determinism is odd in a book about civil war. Her text struggles to contain the tension between the view that civil war is an absolute evil, and the possibility that in some civil wars one side is right and the other is wrong. It is as if cherished liberal causes – democracy, equal rights, tolerance – should not be associated with the grubbiness of inter-communal violence; as if the fact that the partial victory of these causes in certain countries had to be fought for, in the literal sense of the word, is a dangerous secret.

Walter, a professor of international relations at UC San Diego, offers a quantitative approach to the study of civil wars, identifying common factors and packing them into databases to create a kind of world conflict alert dashboard. She presents this as a scientific consensus, as if civil wars were viruses or hurricanes. Like a medical professional writing for a public health website, she lets you know that the detail of the underlying science has been settled but is too fiddly to share with a general audience. Phrases like 'researchers found' and 'what experts call' are sprinkled throughout. Not that she discourages the keen from digging more deeply. 'Today, anyone can access dozens of high-quality datasets (the results are triple checked) related to how civil wars start, how long they last, how many people die, and why they fight … Civil wars ignite and escalate in ways that are predictable; they follow a script.'

The number-crunching core of her case is the work done by a Virginia-based non-profit called the Centre for Systemic Peace, which gives countries a 'polity score' on a 21-point scale ranging from minus 10 to plus 10. Any country that scores plus 6 or more is deemed democratic, minus 6 or less, autocratic. Countries in between are categorised as 'anocracies'. After the storming of the Capitol in 2021, America's polity score slumped from 7 to 5, making it a non-democracy. Walter treats this as a fact. 'The United States,' she writes,

> 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 honour is now held by Switzerland … We are no longer a peer to nations like Canada, Costa Rica and Japan.

Systemic Peace hasn't publicly updated its ratings for most countries since 2018, but for reference, the eight countries rated 5 that year were Ecuador, Haiti, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Papua New Guinea, Somalia and Suriname. The ways Systemic Peace's data diverge from what a lay person would expect of a democracy-autocracy scale are interesting. The US is rated as a sound democracy from 1829 until just before the Civil War, despite its embrace of slavery in that period. Belgium scores a solid 6 for much of its brutal rule over Congo. The UK gets a perfect 10 rating from 1922, despite being, at that time, at the head of a racially organised, exploitative empire that denied democratic rights to millions. Walter claims that a polity score is the best predictor of a country's instability, but Systemic Peace gives Britain a 10 throughout the period of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, which Walter uses elsewhere as an example of an actual civil war.

Walter's insistence that predicting civil wars is a hard-edged science that can be used as a warning system, a geopolitical smoke alarm, distracts from the value of her global approach, which challenges any country's claim to be uniquely democratic by nature, or to have reached a level of democracy from which there can be no falling back. She offers a set of concepts for analysing civil strife that are useful in themselves and as markers of the universality of societal change. Anocracy is the most unstable polity; unlike democracy or autocracy, it tends not to last. The journey from autocracy to democracy, when freedom of expression and action burst out ahead of reasonable restraints like honest judges, fair taxation and non-governmental interest groups, is a dangerous time. 'A painful reality of democratisation,' Walter writes, 'is that the faster and bolder the reform efforts, the greater the chance of civil war.' Change can also go the other way. After half a century when it appeared democracy was spreading, more and bigger countries are using the mechanisms of democracy to choose leaders who love elections only when they win them, and reject them if they seem about to lose.

As she puts together her case that America is in peril, Walter uses the former Yugoslavia and Sri Lanka to illustrate the dangers of factionalism and its even more dangerous cousin the superfaction, created by a strong leader who rallies supporters around identity, shared history, language and symbols, rather than policies. She characterises Yugoslavia as a country with two superfactions, Serbs and Croats, divided by alphabet, place of habitation, religion and standard of living. She uses Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Sudan to exemplify the rise of the ethnic entrepreneur, who persuades people they're menaced by 'an out-group, and must band together under the entrepreneur to counter the threat'. In India, Modi uses this technique to harness the support of Hindus; in Brazil, Bolsonaro exploits the disgruntlement and unease of a white population which may recently have become a minority not simply because of demographics but because fewer people self-identify as white. The Serbs of Yugoslavia, the Sunnis of Iraq, the Muslim Moro of Mindanao and the Assamese of India are used as examples of 'sons of the soil' groups who feel they deserve better treatment than incomers and outsiders, and are psychic casualties of the perilous mood Walter calls 'downgrading':

> People may tolerate years of poverty, unemployment and discrimination. They may accept shoddy schools, poor hospitals and neglected infrastructure. But there is one thing they will not tolerate: losing status in a place they believe is theirs. In the 21st century, the most dangerous factions are once-dominant groups facing decline.

There are too many ethnic entrepreneurs around the world to list: Nigel Farage and Tommy Robinson in the UK; Vladimir Putin, the Russian Milošević; Pauline Hanson in Australia; Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour in France. But Walter holds course to her principal target, the ethnic entrepreneurs of anocratic America: Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity, Alex Jones, Josh Hawley, Tom Cotton and 'the biggest ethnic entrepreneur of all' – Donald Trump (you imagine he would relish the superlative). Like his counterparts around the world, Trump built a superfaction from sons of the soil who feel downgraded. 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 … where is the United States today? We are a factionalised anocracy that is quickly approaching the open insurgency stage.'

Walter's book shifts between a mode of neutrality, where factions emerge and clash deterministically out of human weakness and past circumstance, and a mode of morality, where Trump and his militant supporters are wicked and his opponents, at least by implication, more worthy. In between, Walter evokes an overarching, global liberal system – liberal in both the economic and societal senses – that stands outside and above the degrading squalor of civil war. Paradoxically, in this most uncomplacent and superficially cosmopolitan of books, she suggests the existence of a Western civilisation that is the most powerful and violent of forces, yet is at the same time set apart from its own violence, too pure for the great majority of its constituent peoples ever to sully themselves with the bloody practicality of their own defence, let alone with the systemic oppression they have outsourced.

This eerie dual vision is displayed in Walter's account of what she calls Iraq's civil war after the US-British invasion in 2003. She tries to draw us in through the perspective of an Iraqi girl called 'Noor'. Noor is described as a 'typical teenager'; the test of typicality is how American her outlook is. 'She loved Britney Spears and the Backstreet Boys and Christina Aguilera. She would watch Oprah and Dr Phil in her free time, and one of her favourite films was *The Matrix*.' When US troops arrived in Baghdad, Noor tells Walter, 'everybody was so happy.' Rapidly, this typical – in fact, highly atypical – teenager turns into 'most Iraqis'. 'With Americans in charge, most Iraqis believed that their country would be reborn and that they would experience the freedom and opportunities available in Western countries,' Walter writes. 'Families dreamed of experiencing true democracy.'

It's not that Walter ignores the role of the invaders in what happened in Iraq, rather that she creates cordons sanitaires between the act of violence represented by the invasion, acts of violence directed by Iraqis against the invader, and acts of violence carried out by Iraqis against other Iraqis, as if they were not all part of the same complex. 'The United States and the United Kingdom thought they were delivering freedom to a welcoming population,' she writes. 'Instead, they were about to deliver the perfect conditions for civil war. Iraq was a country plagued by political rivalries, both ethnic and religious.'

In reducing the invading countries to groupthinking monocultures – 'the United States and the United Kingdom thought' – Walter cuts across her warnings elsewhere about the divides within these countries. The polities that dispatched the invading armies, and the individuals who served in those armies, were riven with disagreement. Both the US and the UK were starting to experience the division – nativist traditionalism v. liberal idealism – that is Walter's main subject; and that imported Western schism deeply affected the actions of the occupying armies in Iraq, both on an individual and a strategic level. Liberal idealism hitched a ride into Iraq on the back of revenge-hungry, racist isolationism. At times it seems Walter is going to integrate the invasion, mistakes by the occupiers and the subsequent 'civil war', but she doesn't. The closing paragraph of her Iraq narrative is a marvel of subtly reassigned agency, where Americans are attached to good intentions, while Iraq itself – 'the country' – is attached to failure: 'It had taken American forces only a few months to remove Saddam Hussein from power and set Iraq on the path to a democracy. But almost as swiftly, the country descended into a civil war so brutal that it would last for more than a decade.'

Walter is less protective of Britain's virtue in her retelling of the story of Northern Ireland. But in her desire to portray the conflict between Protestant and Catholic communities as an exemplary civil war, with superfactions, downgrading and loss of hope leading to violence, she plays up the notion of London as an incompetent, careless, detached warden of the six counties, rather than as a participant in a geographically confined civil war on British soil.

She makes a good implied case that the Troubles were a British civil war (even if to say so directly would contradict the UK's plus 10 polity rating). 'The Catholics of Northern Ireland lost hope for peaceful reform,' she writes, 'when British soldiers treated them as intruders on their own soil.' In concisely and eloquently recounting the injustices faced by Catholics in the 1960s, Walter's intention is to point out the missteps that could have been avoided to prevent civil war: the IRA, in her view, were 'extremists' who took advantage of Protestant intransigence. But her sympathetic account of the Catholic position does not reinforce the idea that there's no excuse for violence. It suggests that, sometimes, there really is one, not necessarily to win 'victory', but simply to have one's grievances and demands taken seriously.

How Civil Wars Start was published just before Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but Walter devotes several pages to the conflict that preceded it. She describes the fall in 2014 of the country's president, Viktor Yanukovych, who fled after violent protests in Kyiv by liberals and nationalists united against his corruption, his brutal methods and his abrupt pivot from the EU to Moscow. Soon afterwards, the Ukrainian parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, voted to remove Yanukovych from office in absentia on the grounds that he was no longer fulfilling his duties; MPs appointed a temporary leader, and held new presidential elections. A large minority of Ukrainians in the Donbas region in the east of the country, where Yanukovych came from and where close ties with Russia were most valued, reacted with protests of their own against the new government. Walter describes the conflict that followed as a civil war. It would be more accurate to describe it as a hybrid of civil war and invasion, given that it would almost certainly have fizzled out without Russia's annexation of the Ukrainian region of Crimea and its subsequent military support for the Donbas rebels.

Walter describes the Rada vote to dump the runaway Yanukovych, who was by this time in Russia, like this: 'At first, it seemed that democracy had been saved.' Her point is clear. Civilised, democratic processes seemed to have triumphed over violently clashing factions. Democratically elected representatives from the whole of Ukraine met, debated how to proceed, and chose a reasonable way to replace an absent head of state: new presidential elections. At the same time, Walter's sentence, in the passive voice, ignores the means that enabled the Rada to get to that point: an escalating spiral of repression and resistance, with vast medieval battles of clubs, helmets, shields and stones across central Kyiv between security forces and protesters, escalating to tear gas, rubber bullets, Molotov cocktails and burning tyres, ending in gunfire and the deaths of more than a hundred people. Yanukovych was a thug, a thief and a bully who played up his pro-European credentials for years before selling out to Moscow. But, despite having once tried to steal an election in 2004, he had been legally elected. The Rada's vote to remove Yanukovych was fair, democratic, and justifiable on moral and practical grounds, but it wasn't in the rules. Civil war had begun before the Rada vote. Sometimes, the extremists who start civil wars, or revolutions, or rebellions, have right – or some version of it – on their side.

When thousands of people broke through light police defences and into the US Capitol on 6 January last year they meant to disrupt the certification by Congress and the vice-president of the results of the presidential election, normally a formality. They were supporters of the loser in the election, Donald Trump, who had encouraged them to believe that Congress and the vice-president, Mike Pence, had the power to reject the election results and hand victory to him. Many of the rioters were long-standing captives of internet-propagated conspiracy theories, including the QAnon conspiraverse, where Trump was cast as a hero battling satanic forces, and they embraced Trump's lie that he was the victim of a conspiracy to steal the election. Some were members of radical right nationalist militias. Had they got hold of any of the people they regarded as enemies and traitors, such as Pence or Nancy Pelosi, the day could have ended very grimly. But they didn't. A single protester was shot dead by a Capitol defender, and hundreds of people were injured. Windows were broken and limitless images spilled into the world of red-faced, rage-blind middle-aged men in scrimmages. We saw the desecration of the temple of democracy by an amiable-seeming guy in a shamanic buffalo hat. As insurrectionists, the Capitol mob were ineffectual. They had no plan; if they had proper weapons, they never showed or used them; when police reinforcements arrived, they were easily dispersed. In hindsight the storming of the Capitol seems less like the first chapter of a new civil war and more like a disastrous policing operation. Within seven months, four of the police officers involved had killed themselves.

The shock of the live-streamed event, feeble as it was compared to the promised 'coming storm' of QAnon, was a distraction from other more significant and ominous events in the same location. The mob that tried to take over the Capitol had a more effective team on the inside, wealthy, educated and successful, dressed in business wear, taking a premeditated stance against democracy from the benches of Congress itself: 139 Republican members of the House of Representatives, more than half the party bloc and just shy of two-thirds of the number needed for a majority, voted to reject the presidential election results from one or both of Arizona and Pennsylvania – two states that had swung for Joe Biden. Eight of the fifty Republican senators also voted against certifying all state results. No evidence has been produced to show that the election results in those states, or any states, were fraudulent or mistaken. And yet the sitting president – the defeated candidate – refused to accept them, and a sizeable chunk of his party went along with him. The votes in Congress and the Senate didn't take place before the mob stormed the Capitol, but immediately afterwards; like their leader, who sent the rioters there, the Trump Republicans were openly declaring their disdain for the rule of law. Having obstructed the functioning of democracy for years, the Republican Party and its bouffant-haired figurehead turned decisively against it. Now it was only democracy if they won.

There are sound arguments against the idea that American democracy was ever at risk on 6 January. The Republicans didn't have the votes in Congress to get their bullshit objections through, and they knew it. They could demonstrate fealty to Trump without destroying the republic. Even if they had been able to get Arizona and Pennsylvania's votes excluded from the count, Biden would still have had more votes than Trump, and would still have had more than half the electoral college votes. The arcane law governing the process is so shot through with holes, particularly over who has final say on the integrity of the vote, the states or Congress, that any attempt to change the outcome would have ended up in the courts.

The greater danger lies in the precedent set. Vulnerabilities have emerged in the system that could be manipulated by the placement in lower-tier office of people who value winning over democratic integrity. Voter suppression and gerrymandering (the Democrats are also guilty of

this) were baby steps. The 6 January Congressional votes were a signal that a large number of Republicans were open to the naked systemic lie, willing to be complicit in moves that show contempt not only for the opposition but for the overarching structure of rules and precedent. In the baroque flow chart of American post-election procedure, there are myriad forks and loops between polling station and inauguration, and many theoretical opportunities for sabotage. Partisan local election officials can try to reject county totals. State election officials have considerable power over the numbers. (At least Team Trump believed they do. See his unsuccessful plea to the Georgia secretary of state, Brad Raffensperger – 'I just want to find 11,780 votes' – a few days before the Capitol riot.) There are blue, thoroughly Democratic states, and red, thoroughly Republican ones, but there are also purple states, with Democrat-leaning presidential electorates and Republican-controlled legislatures. There has been much speculation that key purple states like Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, which have Democratic governors and Republican legislatures, might end up sending rival sets of electoral college votes to Congress for certification: one chosen by the people, the other in the state capitol. Local laws to enable rogue state legislatures to countermand the popular vote have yet to get off the ground, but the pathway exists. Then there is Congress itself, perhaps controlled, in 2025 or 2029, by anti-democratic Republicans; and a conservative Supreme Court that has yet to demonstrate how much of a bulwark against autocracy – or theocracy – it will be. In 2025, the Pence role of counting the electoral college votes will belong to a Democratic vice-president. A hostile Congress, or fraudulent multiple slates of electors, or both, would put Kamala Harris in an impossible bind.

One possible outcome of the next presidential election is that a Democratic candidate wins a dispute-proof victory and is straightforwardly inaugurated. Another – perfectly likely – is that Trump runs again and is unambiguously re-elected in line with the law, even if most Americans don't vote for him. But what if he, or a candidate like him, were to cheat, and he and his party threaded the needle to a victory endorsed by the key national institutions? Instead of today's situation, in which there is a Democratic president and – to use Walter's terminology – a downgraded superfaction of Trump supporters convinced by the lie that he was defrauded and should have won, you would have a Trump base accepting their champion's fraudulent victory, and a liberal superfaction aware that the Republican head of state had stolen the presidency, that politicians, bureaucrats and lawyers had seized the apparatus of the American state, and that democracy had been killed.

One of the strange things about the reaction to the invasion of the Capitol was how few of those dismayed by it speculated that they might one day long for just such an assault to succeed. Might a different mob storm into Congress to save democracy, rather than attack it? If an autocrat who has stolen an election is about to have his trashing of American democracy hallowed by Congress, all other recourse having failed, shouldn't Democrats – or democrats, at least – take direct action? Liberal opinion in North America and Western Europe has tended to be gung-ho about pro-democracy protesters storming ruling institutions in other countries, notably Ukraine in 2014. But it's one thing to imagine, as Walter encourages her readers to do, the gradual spread of white supremacist, anti-government terrorism across America against a democratic framework, until one day the progressive left, and the people of colour she suggests are likely to be targets of violence, arm and organise for self-protection. It's another to wake up one morning and find that without any bloodshed or violence, without any seeming change in the smooth running of traffic signals and ATMs and supermarkets, without, even, an immediate wave of arrests or a clampdown on free speech, your country is run by somebody who took power illegally. Something must be done! But what, apart from

venting on social media? And by whom? Me? In Ukraine, students and the liberal middle class found fighting allies among football ultras, small farmers and extreme nationalists. Such an alliance would be hard to pull together in the Euro-American world. Describing liberal protests against government corruption and malfeasance in Bulgaria in 2013, Ivan Krastev spoke of 'the frustration of the empowered' and an urban middle class that 'risks remaining politically isolated, incapable of reaching out to other social groups'.

In autumn 2019, when Boris Johnson got the queen to prorogue Parliament, avoiding scrutiny of Brexit by the absolutist expedient of shutting the legislature down, I thought I glimpsed, far in the distance, the vaguest outlines of the foothills of civil war. In the end, the courts intervened, before the then MP Rory Stewart had a chance to convene an alternative parliament which, he admitted, 'sounds quite Civil War-ist'. Watching the Capitol riot a year and a bit later, the pro-lie votes of the pro-Trump Republicans were more troubling than the conduct of the rioters. The protesters were deluded; many seemed to have been driven over the edge of sanity by Trump and other forms of internet-borne conspiracism. There was a lot of malice, aggression, hate, bitterness and ignorance in the mob. There was also a wasted sincerity, ruthlessness and will. Who, I wondered, would do for the truth what these people were ready to do for a lie?

Footnotes

* This account is from the testimony of the group's leader; according to the woman's version of events, she only found out about the bomb on the news the following day.