

Taking warnings of civil war seriously

*Elon Musk's comment about the inevitability of civil war in Britain might have been flippant. But similar concerns have been raised by journalists and academics within established democracies that over the possibility of civil conflict escalating to civil war. **Bill Kissane** examines these concerns and questions whether liberal democracies have found a way to repress the possibility of internal violent conflict.*

By saying “civil war is inevitable” in Britain [Elon Musk](#) is stirring the pot. But this social media tycoon has not been the only one to bring warnings of civil war to western democracies. Journalists, soldiers, and political scientists have done the same. Their intentions are pure: none can be accused of using disinformation to fan the flames of racial violence. Their interventions raise questions about the supposed immunity of western democracies to civil war, about a form of conflict that has occurred throughout human history.

The twentieth century was one of total war. But while much of Europe had been, from Finland in 1918 to Greece in 1949, convulsed by civil war, the post-war order was more peaceful. The stability brought by the Iron Curtain, affluence, and the growth of international institutions could explain this. And since most of Western Europe was democratic in this period, another explanation suggested itself. Historically, civil war had taken place in all eras, and in all forms of polity, but not, thus far in a “consolidated democracy”. Had humankind finally stumbled upon a regime form immune to civil war?

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Concerns about civil war in the US and Europe

Enter Barbara Woodward. In [How Civil Wars Start: And How to Stop Them](#) she argued that the civil strife and polarisation in American politics today does have the potential to lead to civil war. A key factor, she believes, is the decline of American democracy: “the best predictor of whether a country will experience a civil war is whether it is moving

toward or away from democracy". The storming of the Capitol Building in Washington D.C. on January 6 2021 suggested as much.

Between 1861 and 1865 however, the USA experienced a real civil war, between North and South. The country was torn into two over the issue of slavery; but the south was able to use its territory to accomplish a massive military mobilisation against the Federal government. Such a territorial division is absent today. Woodward's suggestion seems to be that random, decentralised violence, if it drags in groups with different ethnic, religious, and racial identities can still produce a powder keg.

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A sceptic might reply that there can be no civil war while the state apparatus remains intact. What about France? On April 21 2021, in a letter also signed by a group of retired officers, a former officer in France's Ground Force, Jean-Pierre Fabre-Bernadac, made a stark warning. Published in the magazine [Valuers Actuelles](#) it denounced the growing chaos of French life, and warned of 'racial' and 'civil' war if nothing is done to prevent it. Another warning was issued by serving soldiers on May 11. Asked his opinion, the philosopher Guillaume Barrera, author of [La Guerre civile: Histoire, philosophie, politique](#) brought up the question of the state. In a world shaped by the thought of Jean Bodin, Thomas Hobbes, and Max Weber, can there be a civil war if the state is not involved? But [Barrera](#) was insistent: civil war is (by definition) a form of warfare waged by the citizens. Indeed in Greek political thought *stasis* referred to divisions among different groups within the polis, or the city. There was no state to speak of.

Between 2013-2017 Turkey was a powder keg. On October 10 2015 the bombing of a peace protest in Ankara resulted in over 100 deaths. An attack on Atatürk airport in Istanbul on June 28 the following year saw 45 people killed. At the beginning of 2017 another ISIS attack, this time on a new year's party in a nightclub in Istanbul saw 39 people killed. Not for the first time in Turkish history terrorism raised fears of civil war. In her work, journalist Özlem Özdemir interviewed a group of artists and intellectuals about the state of the Republic. All were worried about the direction of travel; some spoke of civil war. While the collapse of the Iron Curtain in 1989 had opened up Turkey to Europe, by 2017 the fear was of being dragged into the politics of the Middle East (*via* neighboring civil wars, refugee flows, sectarianism, ethnic conflict, and Islamic *jihad*). A

critical factor was the border with Syria. In May 2013 two car bombs in Rehanli, a town near the border, had killed more than 50 people. In July 2015, in Suruç, also near the border, a suicide attack killed 34 (mainly young) people.

Then there was the failed *coup d'état* which took place on July 15 2016. While previous coups (1960, 1971, 1980) had seen the army act in concert, this attempt could have involved the breaking of the state apparatus. In ancient Rome civil war – a war fought by civilians – was feared because it disturbed the military hierarchy on which the Roman system was based. The 2016 coup attempt in Turkey saw civilians and soldiers together fighting other soldiers. The government's subsequent plans to arm civilians, so as to insure itself against another coup attempt, was criticized by Merel Akşener, leader of the *İyi* party as setting the stage for civil war. In the end Turkey has experienced crisis after crisis, but not civil war. The state seems to have got on top. On May 3 2015 then prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu had remarked that the country (or nation) was in a state of peace not chaos: he was not worried by the civil war predictions. The language of civil war has not gone away: but no civil war has emerged.

Civil strife as a feature of liberal democracy?

Elon Musk's warning of civil war has been condemned by Prime Minister [Keir Starmer](#) for being unjustified, and for taking the possibility of conflict in Britain to its most extreme logical conclusion. Since civil war suggests an all-out conflict, it is hard to see how the mob violence and racial intimidation on British streets will escalate into something of this sort. Violence and polarization are not sufficient conditions for civil war. Variables such as state strength, political legitimacy, and territoriality also matter.

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For the American case however, Woodward's emphasis on the importance of democratic decline seems justified by the attempted assassination of Donald Trump at an election rally on July 13 this year. It raises the question of whether the USA, (or Britain or France for that matter), ought still be classified as consolidated liberal democracies.

For Barrera, however, there need be no contradiction between liberal democracy and the

existence of civil strife. As an intellectual tradition which includes John Locke and David Hume, liberal thought has its historical origin in civil war, and has retained this conflictual character since then. The argument is that liberalism had found a way of domesticating war, containing its dynamism without fully repressing the possibility of conflict. A similar hope for the USA is found in the subtitle of Woodward's book, "*And How to Stop Them*". Have recent years disproved the thesis that there is a regime form immune to civil war? Time will tell.

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