

BOOK REVIEW:

A Republic, If You Can Keep It: A Review of Barbara Walter’s “How Civil Wars Start”

Michael Brown

Barbara F. Walter, *How Civil Wars Start: And How to Stop Them* (Penguin, 2023).

As I was threading through the most recent book by Barbara F. Walter, which focuses on the harbingers of modern civil war in the United States, I couldn't help but think that I had seen her vision of America before. Walter – the Rohr Professor of International Relations at the University of California, San Diego, and who should not be mistaken for the late journalist Barbara Walters (1929-2022) – describes “anocracy,” factionalism, loss of status, and hopelessness as harbingers of Civil War. Her primary case studies involve conflicts in Yugoslavia, the Philippines, and Iraq, which she uses for comparison purposes in order to discuss modern American politics.

Yet it was hard not to notice parallels between the modern United States and Reconstruction-era, late-19th Century North Carolina that Walter omitted in her case studies. It was striking how much of what Walter sees in America's possible future was once our reality – a reality, moreover, that resulted in the only successful overthrow of an elected government in U.S. history, the Wilmington Insurrection of 1898.

Time and time again the reader is brought back to the primary theme circulating through-out *How Civil Wars Start*: the concept of “anocracy.” Walter describes anocracy as a political state that displays both authoritarian *and* democratic political characteristics, such as by permitting voting rights yet also failing to protect legal due process. Anocracy, she suggests, usually exists in the context of rapid democratization, such as in Iraq during and after the U.S. occupation, or in “back-sliding” strongman-democracies such as Viktor Orbán's

Hungary or Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey. Walter argues that as such decay spreads, the risk of civil war rises.¹

Not content to just define anocracy, Walter provides convincing modern examples of anocratic states that are experiencing democratic deterioration. This deterioration results from authoritarian leaders such as Orbán and Erdoğan consolidating their power by eroding democratic norms and the rights and procedural protections associated with liberal democracy, which is also what Walter argues is also beginning to happen in the United States, United Kingdom, and elsewhere in the West.² This occurs precisely because democratic and authoritarian values are in tension with each other. They coexist within an anocratic system as a result of deliberate strategies by strongman-politicians who come to power in a democracy and thereafter erode democratic values in favor of authoritarian ones for their own political benefit. This can lead to the creation of what Orbán himself has proudly called a "[new state concept, this illiberal state concept.](#)"

Where Walter really excels is in her exploration of the relationship between factionalism and the loss of power or status by an in-group. A once-dominant in-group facing such slippage can develop a powerful factionalism, which can ultimately result in the growth of militia-like movements increasingly inclined toward domestic socio-political violence. Walter, in fact, believes that the United States itself has already entered the late stages of what she provocatively calls a "pre-genocide cycle," in which such militias begin to "formulate plans to eradicate other groups."³

However, Walter's analysis suffers from two problems. One is her clear bias; Walter largely approaches the issue of a potential civil war in America with her eye firmly focused upon the far-Right as the proximate cause of the problem. Her book largely if not entirely omits mention of leftist-oriented violence in cities such as Minneapolis and Portland during 2020, or polling results suggesting that significant majorities of voters from *both* U.S. political parties [view members of the other party as "evil" and as a threat to the country,](#) and that if not stopped, [their political opponents will destroy America as we know it.](#)

When she addresses other potential threats, such as the [Socialist Rifle Association](#), or the [Not F*cking Around Coalition](#), their rise is largely framed as no more than a presumably non-blameworthy security dilemma response to rightist groups such as the [Proud Boys](#) and [Three Percenters](#). Walter is unequivocal about this, declaring that “it won’t be left-wing groups that instigate this ultimate clash [of civil war].”⁴ Her eagerness to assign responsibility to the rightists she despises, however, leads her to overlook the dynamic of reciprocally-inciting polarization in play in modern America – a process in which there is depressingly much blame to go around. (Indeed, Walter’s own rhetoric perhaps unwittingly parallels the abovementioned polling in which citizens of each political hue tend to believe that *the other side* is intent upon destroying American democracy and must be resisted at all costs. There is much to credit in Walter’s analysis, but her one-sidedness arguably also makes her part of the problem.)

A second challenge is that the book provides no new recommendations on how to prevent a civil war in modern America. One of her suggestions is to eliminate the Electoral College used for U.S. presidential elections in favor of a system tied only to the popular vote – and which, she says, would “make each citizen’s vote count equally rather giving preferential treatment to the white, rural vote.”⁵ Here again, however, there is some irony in her analysis, in that Walter warns against one alleged source of factionalism (*e.g.*, an Electoral College that gives disproportionate power to less populous rural areas) while simultaneously supporting a voting system that might encourage factionalism and extremism in other ways (*e.g.*, by allowing large, highly-concentrated masses of voters in major metropolitan areas to dictate terms to a rural minority by majoritarian *fiat*). It is for such reasons, for instance, that Berkeley Professor John Yoo argues that a national popular vote to decide the presidency could “deepen [candidates’] ideological commitment to the positions that most appeal to their voters ... and ignore regions where they have to moderate their views.”⁶

The American Founders were hardly ignorant of the trade-offs involved in creating the Electoral College, yet they opted deliberately against strict majoritarianism, which they felt capable of giving rise to oppressive governance by a triumphant faction just as easily as might

a selection mechanism insulated from democratic accountability at all. Walter might have been on stronger ground if she had merely quarreled with where they drew the line rather than rejecting it entirely.

Just as with the Senate filibuster, however - which Senate Democrats hated when it got in the way of their political agenda in the majority, but which may now seem much more attractive with Republicans having taken over the Senate under the second presidency of Donald Trump - where you stand on supermajority requirements and other mechanisms that check the ability of a majority to run roughshod over a minority can depend on where you sit. Nor should one forget that the phenomenon of constitutionalism itself is intended to provide such a check: one of the main reasons to have constitutional rights in a democracy in the first place is precisely to keep the majority from being able to just *anything* it wants to anybody.

Most importantly, for all her useful exploration of case study comparisons, Walter also arguably missed an opportunity to learn from the only successful domestic insurrection that ever occurred in United States history - the uprising that occurred in the anocratic and factionalized (politically polarized) state of North Carolina during Reconstruction. There, newfound democratic freedoms enjoyed by African Americans and protected in theory by Federal occupation forces presented a threat to a social system rooted in the antebellum years of chattel slavery.

In postbellum North Carolina, white Democrats, terrified of the new socio-political alliance between Republicans and Populists that threatened their domination of North Carolina state government, sought to prevent their social and political diminishment with politically motivated violence - that is, terrorism. Democratic politicians and media figures of the time capitalized on a perceived loss of status and honor by a once dominant in-group. This loss of status - and the weaponization of this grievance by populist agitators - was the proximate cause to the growth of Democratic-aligned militias that on two occasions tried to lynch the Governor of North Carolina.⁷

These events near the close of the 19th Century thus offer a strange and striking parallel to the 2020 plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer that Walter covers in her book. In the chaos of the withdrawal of Federal occupation forces, these militias engaged in attacks on the electoral process, resulting in the disenfranchisement and suppression of African American and White Republican voters ensuring Democratic consolidation of power in North Carolina. These actions – and the lack of an effective response by the Federal government – eventually emboldened an insurrectionist mob to overthrow the elected government in Wilmington, N.C.

This piece of history – which Walter never mentions – is important, and in some sense a precedent for election disruption efforts by some actors in the January 6, 2021, attack on the United States’ Capitol in an attempt to interfere with the electoral college certification vote of President-Elect Joe Biden. It is thus puzzling why, time and time again, Walter – in John Quincy Adam’s famous phrase – goes “abroad in search of monsters to destroy” instead of examining the more analogous case of postbellum North Carolina.⁸

In fairness, *How Civil Wars Start* provides important context for understanding civil unrest through Walter’s valuable exploration of foreign examples of civil wars. Her case studies are evidence-based and important insights into current American socio-political trends – including the growth of militias and the security dilemmas that can develop in a polarizing society. These phenomena are clearly dangerous challenges that we must understand and try to manage. But Walter falls short of producing a comprehensive picture of modern threats in America by her hyper-focus on the Right, and by missing the opportunity to examine a fascinating example right here at home. Despite these failings, however, hers is an important book.

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The views expressed herein are entirely those of the author, and do not necessarily represent those of anyone else.

Notes

- (1) Barbara F. Walter, *How Civil Wars Start: and How To Stop Them* (Penguin 2023), 15.
- (2) Walter, *How Civil Wars Start*, 13, 19.
- (3) Walter, 174.
- (4) Walter, 190.
- (5) Walter, 203.
- (6) John Yoo, "A Defense of the Electoral College in the Age of Trump," *Pepperdine Law Review*, vol. 46, no. 4, May 15, 2019, 833, <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2571&context=plr>.
- (7) Brown, Michael S. "Tell Me How This Begins: Insurgency in the United States." Master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2023.
- (8) Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, "Speech to the U.S. House of Representatives on Foreign Policy" (July 4, 1821), available at <https://loveman.sdsu.edu/docs/1821secofstateJQAdmas.pdf>.

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