How Do Civil Wars Happen?

UC San Diego Professor Barbara F. Walter, a leading expert on civil wars, political violence and terrorism, poses crucial questions in a time of national unrest

By Emerson Dameron | UC San Diego News

When governments are neither clearly democratic nor authoritarian, once-dominant groups lose political status, and politicians emerge to exploit their resentment, the risks of civil war increase. That’s the premise of “How Civil Wars Start and How to Stop Them,” a timely new book from Barbara F. Walter, the Rohr Chair in Pacific International Relations at UC San Diego’s School of Global Policy and Strategy.

The book draws on Walter’s foreign policy experience and her years of research into the societal breakdown that presages violent intranational conflict. It includes stories from Northern Ireland, Syria, Ivory Coast and other countries around the globe whose citizens have turned on each other, as well as some warnings for Americans.

In the process of researching the book, “the biggest surprise was how similar the U.S. is today to countries like the former Yugoslavia, Ukraine, Northern Ireland or
even Iraq that have experienced civil war,” said Walter. “You see the same elements: weak political institutions, ethnic entrepreneurs, a once-dominant group resentful of changing power and demographics, and extremists thinking that violence is the only way to maintain political power.”

**Life under anocracy: Neither democratic nor authoritarian**

When governments mix democratic and autocratic features, that ambiguity is often a recipe for trouble.

“For the average citizen, it just means that popular sovereignty isn’t really in the hands of citizens as a whole, but in the hands of a small subset of citizens, or in the executive branch,” said Walter.

Anocracy, sometimes referred to as partial-democracy, comes in different flavors and can sometimes be sustained peacefully for decades.

“Singapore is the longest-running anocracy,” said Walter. “It has elections in which almost all citizens participate, but there’s no real competition for political office. The ruling People’s Action Party always wins. But there are anocracies where different parties can compete for power but only a small percentage of the population can vote. And there are anocracies like Hungary, where most people can vote, and there is competition, but there are fewer and fewer constraints on the executive branch.”

From the perspective of preventing civil war, the most dangerous conditions occur when anocratic conditions are imposed on a disenfranchised, demoralized and factionalized population.

**Adding insult to injury**

In her book, Walter tells the story of nations where ethnic and religious identity groups declined in status or were actively humiliated or pitted against one another. In Northern Ireland, Catholics were cut off from power, tormented in their homes by parades of Protestants, and left to fend for themselves by United Kingdom law enforcement, leading to the start of The Troubles in 1969. In the Ivory Coast, a decades-long experiment with democracy went sour when
politicians stoked hostility between rival ethnic groups. In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad seeded false hope before crushing political protests with state-sanctioned violence.

“Protests per se don’t lead to civil war,” she writes. “In fact, protests are primarily about hope... It’s the failure of protests that eliminates hope and incentivizes violence.”

Much as Ernest Hemingway describes bankruptcy, civil wars tend to happen “gradually, then suddenly.”

“Scholars know where civil wars break out and who tends to start them: downgraded groups in anocracies dominated by ethnic factions,” Walter writes. “But what triggers them? What finally tips a country into conflict? Citizens can absorb a lot of pain. They will accept years of discrimination and poverty and remain quiet, enduring the ache of slow decline. What they can’t take is the loss of hope. It’s when a group looks into the future and sees nothing but additional pain that they start to see violence as their only path to progress."

Is America on the brink?

Due to the constraints of the project, Walter was not able to share all of her important ideas about civil wars in her book. Some of her most pressing concerns involve the lingering tensions in the wake of the Jan. 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol building led by supporters of outgoing President Donald Trump.

“The one big story that I didn’t tell is how a pseudo-oligopoly is forming, driven by some of the wealthiest Americans who are happy to undercut democracy, fool the white working class into supporting their greed and create racial enmity if it helps them hold on to their wealth,” said Walter. “It’s very, very cynical.”

Walter highlights racial tensions as an alarming factor on the American scene, as they were before its previous civil war.

“About 75% of right-wing militias today are white supremacist groups,” she says. “There are two ways for the far-right to ensure that whites continue to control the U.S. The first is by eliminating democracy and taking control of the federal government, extra-judicially or piecemeal the way Orban, Putin and Erdogan have. The second is to start an insurgency that either helps get a right-wing
president elected (violence tends to shift electorates to the right), intimidates minorities into submission (this was the strategy of the Ku Klux Klan), or provokes a harsh response from the government that radicalizes a significant subset of Americans against federal rule. The latter could be a first step in creating white ethnostates.”

How GPS supports groundbreaking research

A theme throughout Walter’s book is that we rely on the strength of our societies and institutions and must never take these for granted. For her part, Walter is grateful for the support she received from UC San Diego’s School of Global Policy and Strategy as she followed through on this ambitious and important project.

“The only way I could finish this book on time was to hide away,” said Walter. “My colleagues had to pick up the slack, students had to be more patient with turnaround times, and the staff had to put up with me being more absent-minded than usual. People had every right to be annoyed with me and instead, they were full of support and encouragement. I am so deeply grateful for that. I couldn’t have done this without them. I can’t wait to be on the other side of publication when life gets back to normal and I can return these favors.”