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Book Review: How Civil Wars Start and How to Stop Them

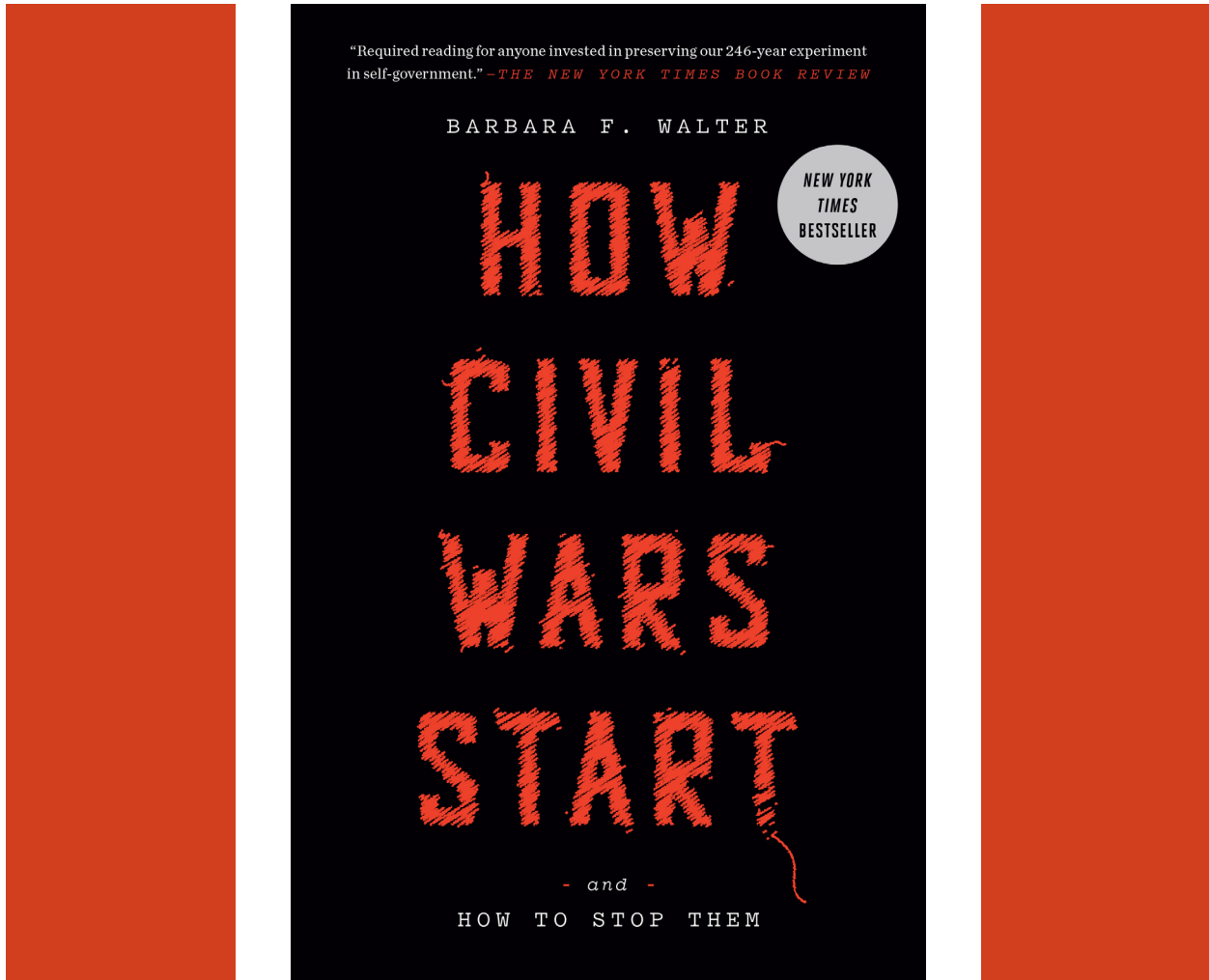
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— PARAMETERS BOOKSHELF —



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Barbara F. Walter is the Rohr Professor of International Relations at the University of California, San Diego, a life member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and a co-moderator of the blog *Political Violence at a Glance*. A subject matter expert on civil war, internal conflict, and insecurity, Walter states that the purpose of *How Civil Wars Start* is to “acquaint [readers] with the conditions that give rise to, and define, modern civil war” to “[understand how] close modern America is to erupting into conflict” (xviii).

The variables *anocracy*, a deinstitutionalized zone between democracy and autocracy, and *factionalism*, the outcome of identity-based political parties, underpin this study. Walter views these two variables as the best predictors of “where civil wars were likely to break out” (36). When heavily factionalized nations transition to anocracy, the probability of civil war greatly increases. The Political Instability Task Force views the January 6 US Capitol attack as having placed the United States in the “anocracy zone” for the first time since 1800 (138).

The work discusses the “Five W’s” (who, what, when, where, and why) of patterning civil war and analyzes them in relation to America after January 6, 2021, with its increasingly polarized political factions. Walter bases general guidance for an American response to a “budding insurgency”

on political reforms and active measures such as “leadership decapitation” of extremist factions, counter-intimidation, counter-foreign agents, and counternarrative actions (209–26). As with most authors of national security-focused works, Walter spends more time on problem identification and discussion than solution sets. In her defense, and to her credit, she is explaining a multi-decade, still-unfolding domestic political crisis.

The book has many fascinating, historically grounded, and well-argued chapters. Walter’s discussion of declassified CIA insurgency report findings from 2012 highlights insurgency phases (156–59) along with the identifiable ethnic-cleansing stages and compares these phases to America’s contemporary stance (172–75). She interweaves this context and analysis with civil war examples from the Ivory Coast, Myanmar, Northern Ireland, Syria, and others, juxtaposed with the rise of white nationalism (which she likens to the nativist “sons-of-the-soil” movements), populism and autocratic leadership traits, and other disturbing domestic trends.

American military officers, sworn government agents, and officials will find the work troubling. The domestic (as opposed to foreign) focus and its civil war implications raise the specter of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and their personnel being dragged into a political crisis. For a professional military whose members swear to “support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic,” a standing president’s refusal to leave office after losing an election or street battles between fringe groups have chilling implications for domestic involvement.

I have only minor to moderate criticisms of this streamlined, readable, and well-edited work. The emboldened fragments in endnotes corresponding to referents make it difficult to locate sources. Another shortcoming is the lack of figures. Additional figures would make the text more user-friendly in conveying concepts and approaches such as the Polity Score dataset (13), later visualized (22). Further, Walter insufficiently explains her determination that the United States is now in the anocracy zone for the first time since 1800, given the conditions at variance leading to the American Civil War in 1861. Without going into metrics-scoring specifics, this inconsistency weakens the utility of the Political Instability Task Force data, since the United States fell into civil war without first entering the anocracy zone, upon which the work partially bases future US insurgency and civil war potentials. Perhaps these issues relate to publisher requirements for greater mass-market appeal—to the detriment of more scholarly requirements, including an in-depth methodology explanation, data interpretation, and ease-of-reference access.

This engaging work holds great relevance for the evolving security environment. Its positives far outweigh its negatives. Frankly, given ongoing trends, we may witness civil war-like strife in America in our lifetimes. Walter provides an articulate, nonpartisan exploration and objective analysis of a taboo subject and gives readers the opportunity to come to their own conclusions about the ongoing integrity of our democracy.

New York: Crown, 2022 • 320 pages • \$27.00

Keywords: civil war, anocracy, factionalism, January 6, insurgency, Political Instability Task Force

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