

Civil war in the US?

By David Kilcullen, The Australian

Coronavirus is threatening to ignite a tinderbox of grievances in the US. The growing parallels with Iraq, Lebanon and Somalia are real and disturbing.

By DAVID KILCULLEN

The rise of militias and armed protesters across the US is sometimes seen as a fringe right-wing issue, but it is much broader. Armed groups have formed across the political spectrum, worsening divisions the coronavirus has exposed in American society.

As I write, there are 1.7 million coronavirus cases in the US and more than 100,000 deaths. The little county where I live — only a half-million people, in a part-urban, part-wilderness area of the Rocky Mountains — has a death toll higher than Australia and New Zealand combined. And this is one of the safe places, positively benign compared with hot spots such as New York or New Jersey with deaths in the tens of thousands.

Second to its health impact, the economic crisis wrought by government-imposed lockdowns has grabbed the most attention: 40 million Americans were forced on to the dole in the past 10 weeks. The job market, strong until mid-March, has fallen off a cliff. A flood of bankruptcies is sweeping US business; analysts expect a wave of municipal bankruptcies as tax revenue collapses. Congress has committed \$US2 trillion (\$3 trillion) in crisis spending, even as public debt nears \$US30 trillion, or roughly 120 per cent of gross domestic product. If the first wave of the coronavirus tsunami was its health effect, the second — economic devastation — may be worse. But there is a third wave coming: the possibility of armed conflict towards the end of this year, when the combined health and economic impacts of the crisis will peak amid the most violently contested presidential election in memory.

Protesters, some heavily armed, are out in force to demand reopening of the economy. The husband of one leader posted a Facebook video this week expressing his readiness to take up arms against the government to prevent a “new world order” being imposed through lockdowns.

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There were already many militias of varying political complexions across America — one pro-militia website lists 361 groups across all 50 states. Membership surged after the 2008 financial crisis, then accelerated as thugs from both political extremes fought each other with baseball bats, bicycle chains and pepper spray in the streets of Washington, DC, Seattle, Portland and Detroit. The deadly “Unite the Right” rally in the normally sleepy university town of Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017 brought the danger home to many Americans, but the trend was longstanding.

Rioting among groups such as Antifa (on the anarchist left), Patriot Prayer and the Proud Boys (on the alt-right) and mass demonstrations by issue-motivated groups such as Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion and the Women’s March kicked into high gear after Donald Trump’s election.

Far-left militias such as Redneck Revolt and the John Brown Gun Club emerged, copying the methods and military-style weapons of right-wing militias while opposing their politics. Both far-right and far-left armed groups were at Charlottesville, with cadres of gun-carrying militants guarding protesters on both sides and a third-party “constitutionalist” militia, the Oath Keepers — composed mainly of military and law-enforcement veterans — standing by as self-appointed umpires.

In the west, a separate rural militia movement had already coalesced around “sovereign citizen” groups that rejected federal authority. Despite media portrayals of its leaders as racially motivated, in fact the sovereign citizen ideology is neither left nor right in a traditional sense — it might better be described as a form of militant libertarianism with roots in the self-reliant cowboy culture of the old west. In April 2014, a dispute over grazing rights in Nevada triggered an armed stand-off between militia and federal agencies including the Bureau of Land Management and the FBI. This dispute — over federal attempts to impound the cattle of a rancher named Cliven Bundy — brought hundreds of militia members from across the country to Nevada where they surrounded federal agents, trained weapons on them and forced them to back down.

The 2014 stand-off ended in a bloodless militia victory, but almost two years later Bundy’s son Ammon led an armed occupation of the headquarters of a federal wildlife refuge in southeastern Oregon. This time, things went the other way. The occupation prompted a six-week siege by federal and state agencies in January-February 2016. It resulted in the death of LaVoy Finicum, a charismatic Arizona rancher whose killing, captured on government aerial-camera footage that appears to show him with hands raised in surrender before being shot, made him a martyr.

Though Trump is as much a symptom as a cause of America’s toxic polarisation, the passions he inspires among friend and foe alike have exacerbated it: during the 2016 election campaign, Arizona militias mounted armed patrols to support his border wall. In response, Redneck Revolt held a heavily armed show of force in Phoenix, Arizona, later posting a YouTube video showing members shooting semiautomatic rifles at targets displaying alt-right symbols. A few months later, Antifa convened an “anti-colonial anti-fascist community defence gathering” near Flagstaff, Arizona, that included weapons training and coaching in anti-police tactics. Today, far-left and far-right groups operate within close striking distance of each other in several border states and in “contested zones” including the Pacific Northwest, parts of Michigan, Pennsylvania, Virginia and the Carolinas.

A Youtube still of Neo-Nazi group Atomwaffen Division training outside Seattle.

The pandemic — and the grievances inspired by heavy-handed responses to it — have brought these tensions to a head. Camouflage-clad militia sporting semiautomatic rifles and body armour and riding in military-surplus trucks joined an armed protest against the governor of Pennsylvania in April. Similar protests took place in Ohio and North Dakota. A week later demonstrators, some carrying AK-47 rifles, swarmed into the state capital in Lansing, Michigan, to confront politicians.

A racial edge also emerged: a week after the Lansing incident a group of African-Americans, armed with AR-15 rifles and automatic pistols, mounted a show of force outside the Michigan State Capitol building to support a black member of the legislature. Class inequities, which track closely with racial disparities here, have prompted socialist groups —

notably Antifa but also traditionally nonviolent Trotskyist and anarchist networks — to arm themselves for an incipient revolutionary moment.

In Minneapolis, the killing by white police officers of an unarmed black man, George Floyd, brought thousands of protesters on to the streets for several nights of rioting, with multiple buildings and cars burned and shopping malls and restaurants looted. By Thursday, militarised police were on the streets firing tear gas and rubber bullets against vociferous opposition. At least one person has been killed in the riots and the Minnesota National Guard is expected to join the police in attempting to restore order.

Thus, far from being a purely right-wing phenomenon, rifts within US society that are most stressed by the coronavirus — urban versus rural interests, racial and class tensions, state overreach versus anti-government militancy, far left against alt-right, “collectivist” coastal elites versus rugged individualists in “flyover country” — align with pre-existing grievances. And heavily armed actors across the spectrum are poised to exploit them.

One reason for the overemphasis on right-wing extremism, I believe, is that analysts often mischaracterise armed actors as “hate groups”. It is absolutely true that the intense hatred from right-wing extremists dwarfs most other groups. But the focus on hate is a misunderstanding of what drives violence in internal conflicts.

As Stathis Kalyvas demonstrated a decade ago in *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, the worst atrocities are driven not by hate but by fear. Fear of other groups, encroachment of those groups into one’s territory and collapse of confidence in government’s ability to impartially keep the peace are the key factors that provoke communal violence. Hate follows and rationalises fear, not the other way around. And fear of the coronavirus, alongside the demonstrable inability of government to keep people safe, is driving today’s growth in armed militancy.

To me, current conditions feel disturbingly similar to things I have seen in Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia and Colombia. Indeed, the theory of guerrilla and unconventional warfare fits today’s situation all too well.

If we visualise an armed movement as a pyramid, then the thousands of protesters on the street (and the tens of thousands who support and sympathise with them but stay home) represent the mass base. A smaller group of organisers and support networks (physical and virtual) plays an auxiliary role further up the pyramid. The armed, gun-toting element is smaller still, but higher in skill, weaponry, organisation and motivation. It’s worth remembering that almost three million Americans served in Iraq and Afghanistan, coming home familiar with urban and rural guerrilla warfare to a country where 41 per cent of people own a gun or live with someone who does.

The US has no national firearms register, so only estimates are possible, but analysts believe around 100 million firearms are in private hands in the US, and hundreds of billions of rounds of ammunition. Given widespread combat experience from the war on terror, this reservoir of military potential sets the US apart from any other Western democracy.

The pandemic has seen a surge in gun purchases, with background checks spiking to their highest number. Many of these are first-time buyers from the progressive end of politics, who traditionally shun firearms and have little knowledge of weapon safety.

More worrying, on left and right, are underground groups including so-called “accelerationists”. These tend to be small, secretive and far more violent than the militias or mass movements. They follow a decentralised command-and-control philosophy known as “leaderless resistance” that was pioneered by far-right groups in the 1980s but has since been taken up by terrorists across the political spectrum, including jihadists. Their goal is to accelerate the collapse of a social order they see as doomed, by bringing on a racial war, a class war or both.

Underground networks operate using a clandestine cell structure, and communicate via the deep web and tools such as Telegram or RocketChat, secure-messaging apps that have become havens for extremists as more open channels, including chat rooms such as the neo-Nazi forum Iron March, have been shut down.

Language policing on social media has not only pushed accelerationist groups underground; it has created a whole new language.

The term “Boogaloo” is widely used for the coming civil war. Variants — coined to avoid Twitter censors — include “The Big Igloo” or “The Big Luau”, the last explaining why Hawaiian shirts are popular among militias. Memes from television (“Winter is Coming”, “Cowabunga”) are popular, as are meme-based references such as “Spicy Time” or acronyms such as BAMN (“by any means necessary”) and BFYTW (“because f.k you, that’s why”). Some call the urban guerrilla aspect of the Boogaloo “Mining”: Twitter threads seeming to discuss the game may actually refer to the coming conflict — context is everything. Some discussion hides in plain sight on social media: more open, practical and gruesome conversations are left to the deep web, Telegram or neo-Nazi sites such as Daily Stormer, which resides on the orphaned former Soviet “.su” internet domain as a way to avoid censorship. Doctoral dissertations could be written on the kaleidoscope of visual symbols used by groups, left and right, to signal allegiances.

Accelerationism has a long history on the Marxist left and among environmental activists such as Earth Liberation Front or Earth First! It has since been embraced by right-wing extremists including 2019 Christchurch killer Brenton Tarrant, whose manifesto included environmentalist ideology and was celebrated by neo-Nazi ecoterrorist group Green Brigade.

Other right-wing accelerationist groups include Atomwaffen Division (which has a presence in Australia) and The Base, a white-supremacist group founded in mid-2018 whose name is a play on al-Qa’ida (“the base” in Arabic). FBI agents targeted The Base after its members allegedly sought to attack a massive pro-gun rally outside the Virginia State Capitol building in Richmond in January. In a classic accelerationist move, they planned to infiltrate the rally, start shooting both protesters and law enforcement officers, provoke a massacre and thereby convert a peaceful (albeit armed) demonstration into a militant uprising.

The group’s leader, until recently known by his nom de guerre “Norman Spear”, was unmasked in January as Rinaldo Nazzaro, a New Jersey native based in St Petersburg, Russia, from where he directed cells in Maryland, Delaware and New Jersey. There is no public evidence of any relationship between Nazzaro and Russian intelligence, though his presence in Russia triggered speculation in the media and within The Base itself. But this highlights another risk factor for 2020: the possibility of foreign interference astride the upcoming presidential election.

The US and China are fast descending into a new cold war, as recriminations over the pandemic heighten conflicts that were already acute. Each is seeking to improve its military position against the other: the Chinese navy has ramped up activity in the South China Sea, for example, while US forces mounted more incursions into the area in the past three months than in all of last year. China's history of sponsoring agents of influence in the US and other Western countries (including Australia) and its track record of cyber-espionage and technology theft make it a reasonable assumption that some (with or without official backing) may be considering ways to exploit America's internal tensions. Indeed, it would be intelligence malpractice if they were not.

Likewise, Iran — which lost Qassem Soleimani, head of its Revolutionary Guards covert action arm, the Quds Force, to a US drone strike in January — has been on a path of military confrontation with the US for years. A series of incidents in the Middle East and the increasing pain of US economic sanctions motivate Tehran to create internal distractions for the US, relieving pressure on itself. The regime has a history of sponsoring lethal covert action inside the US — most recently in 2011, when Quds Force members recruited a criminal gang in an attempt to assassinate the Saudi ambassador by bombing an upscale Washington, DC, restaurant.

Again, there is no public evidence of such activity at present, but Iranian operatives watching the US today would be remiss not to consider it.

If interference does occur, US armed groups probably would not know it. Just as members of The Base were dismayed to discover their leader living in Russia, militant groups in the US — many of which are patriotic, albeit opposed to the current character of government — would likely spurn any overt foreign approach. But anonymous funding, amplification of online messaging, offers of training or equipment through “cut-outs” such as tactical training companies or non-government organisations, or “false flag” operations (where agents of one organisation pretend to belong to another) would allow hostile foreign actors to inflame tensions.

It is, of course, impossible to say with certainty whether significant violence will occur this year. All we can conclude from the available evidence is that the risk is real and growing. We can also make some judgments about where and when violence might break out and what form it might take.

Given the pandemic health crisis, widespread economic disruption over the northern summer, then a predicted second wave of infection in October-November, peak compound impact — when the combined health, economic and security effects of the coronavirus will be at their worst — will likely run from late October until March-April next year, astride the next election and transition to the next presidential term.

Even without the virus, the election was already set to be a flashpoint; the combined health, economic and security effects of the pandemic could make it far worse. If Trump is re-elected, mass protests are a given, while factions within the militant left might undertake what they term “direct action”. As The Base's targeting of January's Richmond rally showed, street protests are fertile ground for provocations. If Trump is defeated, elements of the militia movement or street protesters might also engage in violence.

In “contested areas” — where the territories of left and right-wing militants overlap — we can expect violence irrespective of the outcome. Whether it spreads will depend on level-headed political leadership — and today’s hyper-partisan coronavirus debate offers little hope of that. If violence does spread, it will not be a re-run of the American Civil War. Rather, given the multiplicity of groups involved, their geographical overlap and loose structure, we can expect something much more diffuse.

Perhaps the best analogy is Colombia, which saw 10 years of amorphous conflict from 1948 to 1958, a decade known as La Violencia. Starting as rioting in Bogota — driven by pre-existing urban-rural, left-right, class and racial divisions — violence spread to the countryside as the two main political parties, the Colombian Liberal Party and the Conservative Party, mobilised rural supporters to attack each other’s communities. Local governments weaponised police to kill or expel political opponents. Extremists joined in and “conflict entrepreneurs” emerged to prolong and profit from the violence. In the end 200,000 people were killed, two million were displaced and the Colombian Army — after initially staying out of the conflict — eventually stepped in to end the violence, seizing control in a coup in 1953. External actors, including the Cold War superpowers, also interfered.

Colombia is not the only precedent. Last month marked the 25th anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing, the deadliest domestic terrorist attack in US history. The bomber, Gulf War veteran Timothy McVeigh, claimed to be enraged by government overreactions at Ruby Ridge (1992) and Waco, Texas (1993), which between them saw law enforcement kill 78 civilians including 26 children. He bombed a building that housed the federal agencies he blamed, along with a childcare centre. His comment after his trial — that the 19 children killed, of 168 dead and 680 injured, were “collateral damage” — highlighted his military mindset and intent to trigger an anti-government uprising. There was indeed a huge rise in militia activity. But the callousness of McVeigh’s attack made most militias condemn him, and — by tarnishing the self-perceived righteousness of their anti-government cause — undermined the movement he hoped to inspire. He was executed a few months before 9/11.

In retrospect, the risk that Ruby Ridge and Waco would trigger a terrorist backlash seems obvious. Analysts warned this year that extremism poses as much risk today as it did in 1995. Ahead of time, McVeigh’s attack was far harder to foresee and its specifics impossible to predict. But far from a fringe issue of neo-Nazi nut cases, the pandemic has made the risk of violence in 2020 far more widespread, larger in scale and more militarily serious than we might imagine. America may well be in a “pre-McVeigh moment”.