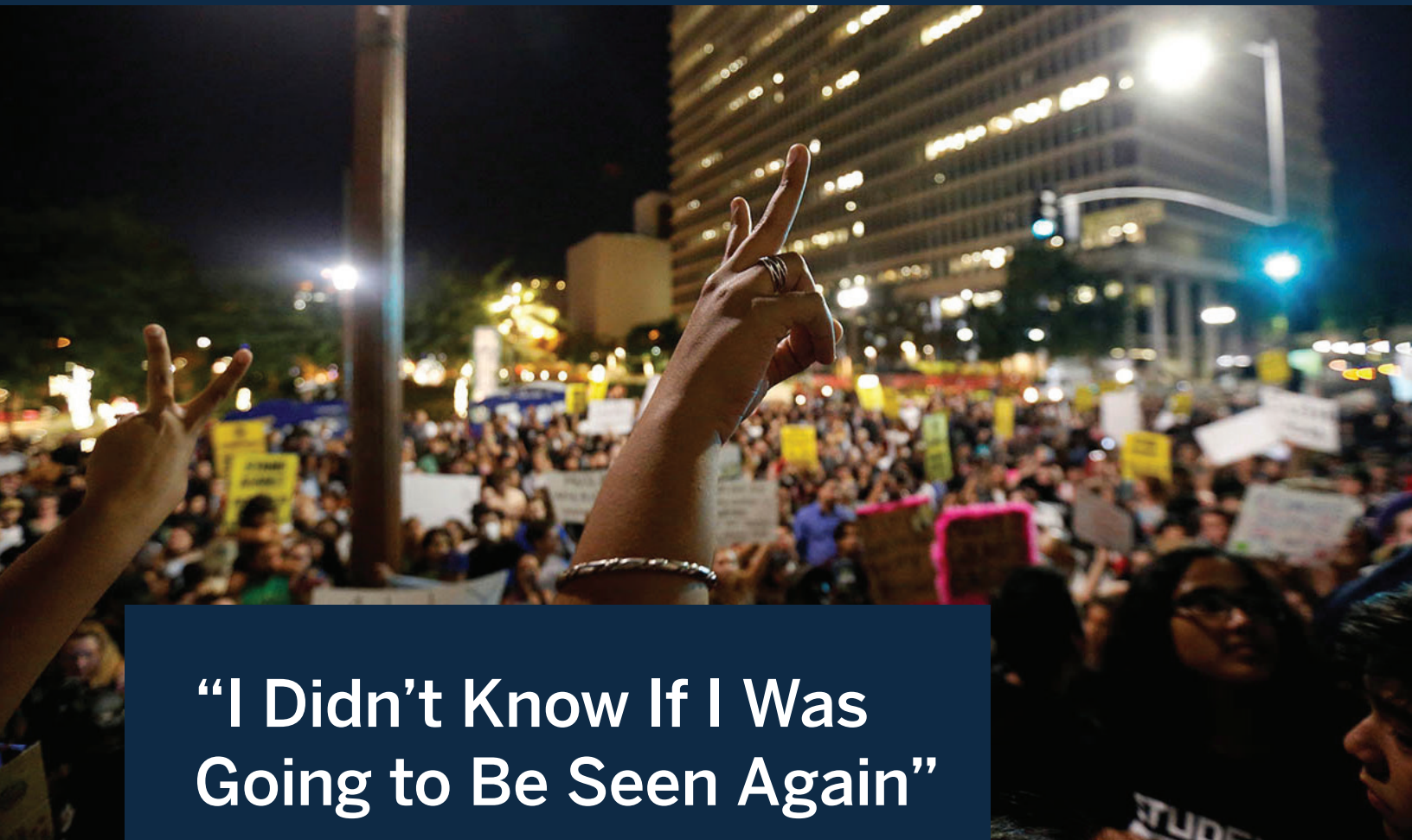# Stanley Center
FOR PEACE AND SECURITY

ANALYSIS & NEW INSIGHTS

"I Didn't Know If I Was Going to Be Seen Again"

The Escalating Risk of Mass Violence in the United States

James Waller, PhD | Cohen Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies | Keene State College, New Hampshire

Executive Summary

The purpose of this paper is to offer a nonpartisan, data-driven analysis of the structural risk factors, as well as the real-time accelerants and possible triggering events, that signal the potential for mass violence in the United States.

Previous research, drawn from a broad range of multidisciplinary analyses, evaluated the mostly widely utilized early warning systems for violent conflict. From that comprehensive review, the best-supported (quantitatively and/or qualitatively) risk factors were distilled and grouped into risk categories related to (1) how authority in a country is exercised through governance, (2) the interpretation and remembering of conflict history, (3) a country's susceptibility to social disharmony, isolation, and fragmentation, and (4) economic conditions. The comprehensive and data-driven risk factors in these categories are crosscutting and intersecting issues, not easily confined to one discrete category. Taken together, however, and placed in the broader context of real-time accelerants and possible triggering events, they offer a robust and reliable picture of a society's susceptibility to mass violence.

The longer-term structural risk factors reviewed in this paper related to governance, memory, social fragmentation, and economic conditions—along with the real-time accelerants and possible triggering events—indicate an escalating likelihood of an outbreak of mass violence in the United States. Whether instigated by right-wing or left-wing extremists, the most likely flashpoints center on the electoral period and run until Inauguration Day.

The risk trends are, however, severe and deep-seated enough to leave much longer-term concern. If left unaddressed, they will continue to undermine the structural integrity and stability of American society and potentially drag this deeply divided society into the abyss of mass violence. Were risk analysts noticing these same trends anywhere else in the world, the approaching storm would be clear and alarms would be raised by a range of international governmental and nongovernmental voices. While the United States is not a failed or failing state, it is a fragile and flailing one; closer to breakdown than a breakthrough. The risk of mass violence is progressively accumulating in a rising tide, and resilience is rapidly receding.

The existence of these risk factors, however, does not predetermine the eventuality of mass violence, even in the face of accelerating stressors and possible triggers. Rather than being understood in causal terms, it is best to think of the risk posed by these factors as probabilistic predictions, not infallible, that maximize forecasting power for mass violence. That is, a high prevalence of risk factors increases the preconditions of risk or susceptibility to mass violence but does not equate to its inevitable occurrence.

Mass violence is a human problem and, as such, offers hope for a human solution. There is no inevitability in human affairs. Every country has the capacity for possibility, every story the room for a better ending. For the United States to find its way to that better ending will require an adaptive resiliency in response to a climate of escalating risk. There is a mountain of hard work to be done to restore trust in America's democratic institutions, develop more inclusive narratives of memory, rebuild social cohesion, and nurture economic inclusivity.

> Were risk analysts noticing these same trends anywhere else in the world, the approaching storm would be clear and alarms would be raised by a range of international governmental and nongovernmental voices.

Introduction

Following the police killing of George Floyd in late May 2020, protests around police brutality, injustice, and systemic racism surfaced across the country and the globe. In the United States, the epicenter of these protests emerged in Portland, Oregon. In early July, the Trump administration, without request from state and local authorities, deployed federal border and immigration enforcement officers to Portland to quell the ongoing demonstrations in what the US Department of Justice singled out as an "anarchist jurisdiction."[1] On the evening of July 15, Evelyn Bassi, a transgender Portland resident attending one of the protests, was approached by two officers in camouflaged tactical gear with "Police" patches across their chest. She was forcibly detained, without explanation, in the back of an unmarked, dark gray Dodge Grand Caravan with tinted windows and driven away. "They never said who they were," Bassi said. "I didn't know if I was going to be seen again." Later, she was released after the agents realized she was not the person they were seeking but warned, "You know, bro, we have cameras everywhere."[2]

Deploying militarized federal forces that detain civilians without explanation and whisk them away in unmarked vehicles is a long-standing tactic of authoritarian regimes. Bassi's traumatic, even surreal, experience—"I didn't know if I was going to be seen again"—is emblematic of countless experiences suffered by civilians caught in the vise grip of regimes using an authoritarian law-and-order approach to quash dissent and protest. Across the globe, such heavy-handed approaches—indiscriminately targeting civilians who have been stamped by authorities as anarchists, extremists, fringe ideologues, radicals, or terrorists—have been seen, and are continuing to be seen, far too often.

It has been generations, however, since the United States has witnessed such scenes, and in such a scale, on the streets of its cities. American exceptionalism fed the belief its citizens lived in a dream and most of the rest of the world in a nightmare; only now do many Americans seem to be facing the unglazed realism that they do, in fact, live in a collective nightmare. In 2020, fault lines of division and exclusion and alienation have escalated to a dangerous degree. Whether instigated by right-wing or left-wing extremists, the potential for mass violence—be it political, racial, or class in origin—seems more probable than ever before.

Mass violence can take many forms, and there is no universal definition, but generally, most definitions focus on the number of deaths and/or injuries, methods, motives, or the identity of the victims. While the US federal government has at least three definitions of mass violence, the one most commonly cited comes from the Office for Victims of Crime, an agency of the Justice Department: "An intentional violent criminal act…that results in physical, emotional, or psychological injury to a sufficiently large number of people and significantly increases the burden of victim assistance and compensation for the responding jurisdiction."[3]

The purpose of this paper is to offer a nonpartisan, data-driven analysis of the structural risk factors, as well as the real-time accelerants and possible triggering events, that signal the potential for mass violence in the United States. The "black swan" metaphor, in this case the notion that mass violence is unpredictable and comes as a surprise, is demonstrably false. Comparative research clearly demonstrates the risk of mass violence is not unforeseeable, nor is it only visible in hindsight. The better metaphor, strategist Michele Wucker argues, is the "gray rhino." She writes: "The gray rhino is the massive two-ton thing with its horn pointed at you, stomping the ground and getting ready to charge—and, most important, giving you the chance to act."[4] If attention is paid, risk and vulnerabilities can be analyzed and weighed. And, fortunately, comparative research also provides insight into the chances to act on that risk and vulnerability—the mitigating points of resiliency that can head off the risk in front of us and help inoculate against the occurrence of mass violence.

> Deploying militarized federal forces that detain civilians without explanation and whisk them away in unmarked vehicles is a long-standing tactic of authoritarian regimes.

This paper will first offer an assessment of risk factors related to governance, memory, social fragmentation, and economic conditions in the contemporary United States. It then will scan the accelerants, and analyze the potential triggering events, that may turn the risk of mass violence into reality before assessing the likelihood for that reality to emerge in the United States. The paper will conclude with suggestions for whole-of-society strategies that increase the capacity and resilience of American society to stem the rising tide of risk for mass violence.

Risk Factor Assessments for the United States

The practice of risk assessment can be analogized by thinking of risk as stacks of wood in a bonfire. The larger the stacks of wood in these bonfires, the larger the risk posed to the community where the bonfire is located. If the risk is not addressed by removing at least some of the pieces of wood, and bystanders passively wait for the wood to be soaked in an accelerant and then set alight, the greater potential there is for a large, perhaps even uncontrollable, bonfire. Similarly, risk factors are the longer-term and slower-moving structures, measures, conditions, and processes that leave a society vulnerable to fragmentation and strife. The more risk factors present in a society, and the less they are attended to, the greater the potential for a large, perhaps even uncontrollable, violent conflict.

A periodic scan based on background risk factors allows for the monitoring of at-risk countries for future signs of instability before a crisis fully develops. Regular monitoring of risk provides an ongoing situational awareness that allows for response to potentially violent conflict before it becomes deadly. Understanding how, why, where, and when these factors place a society at risk for mass violence also throws light on the forms of resilience and countering influences that can be fostered to keep them in check.

Previous research, drawn from a broad range of multidisciplinary analyses, evaluated the most widely utilized early warning systems for violent conflict. From that comprehensive review, the best-supported (quantitatively and/or qualitatively) risk factors were distilled and grouped into risk categories related to (1) how authority in a country is exercised through governance, (2) the interpretation and remembering of conflict history, (3) a country's susceptibility to social disharmony, isolation, and fragmentation, and (4) economic conditions.[5] The comprehensive and data-driven risk factors in these categories are crosscutting and intersecting issues, not easily confined to one discrete category. Taken together, however, they offer a robust and reliable picture of a society's susceptibility to mass violence.

Governance
Governance refers, broadly, to the ways authority in a country is exercised. How are governments selected, monitored, and replaced? What is the capacity of the government to develop and implement sound policies? To what degree do the citizens respect the state and the institutions that govern them? Nearly all risk assessment systems for mass violence include various traits of governance as risk factors. Examples of risk factors related to governance include an autocratic or anocratic regime, a deficit in the degree to which the state is perceived by its citizens to be a legitimate actor representative of the people as a whole, weakness of state structures, political contentiousness born from identity-based polar factionalism, and systematic, state-led discrimination against a minority group.

Globally, democracy is declining in the face of a burgeoning movement of right-wing, antiestablishment populism. The notion that countries should privilege democracy over all else is no longer unquestioned, and support for autocratic alternatives continues to rise. A 2020 report by Freedom House, a nonpartisan American organization, documented the 14th consecutive year of a global decline in democratic governance and respect for human rights.[6] In fact, for the first time since 2001, democracies are no longer in the global majority (now representing only 48 percent of the countries in the world).[7]

A diverse set of research suggests that states with a lower degree of democratization are at greater risk for the onset of mass violence. Why? Generally, it stems from the fact that states with a lower degree of democratization have fewer institutional constraints on executive power and state security, effectively leaving power holders unaccountable for their decision making, policies, and behaviors. As genocide scholar Barbara Harff argues, "Democratic and quasi-democratic regimes have institutional checks on executive power that constrain elites from carrying out deadly attacks on citizens...the democratic norms of most contemporary societies favor the protection of minority rights and the inclusion of political opponents."[8] In regimes with a lower degree of democratization, the institutional constraints on power holders are compromised by the lack of an independent and impartial judiciary, media, or police. National civil society, as well as international civil society, is muzzled, and there is limited cooperation of the regime with international and regional human rights mechanisms. Restrictions on freedom of speech, expression, association, or assembly for the country's citizens lead to a loss of political space and voice for opposition.

Over the history of the United States, democratic challenges of fairness, equality, and representation have plagued every presidential administration. Corruption, nepotism, cronyism, economic and social inequalities, polarization, and divisive nationalism are threaded throughout the fabric of America's still-maturing democracy. Even as voting rights were broadened to be more inclusive of marginalized groups, voter suppression remains an ongoing concern, and felon disenfranchisement laws continue to prohibit over six million Americans from voting.[9] Moreover, the structural peculiarities of American democracy still left, and leave, many feeling as if they have no voice in an allegedly representative government. For example, the impact of long-standing statewide winner-take-all election laws, as pointed out by commentator Jesse Wegman, makes "tens of millions of Americans' votes magically disappear"

when members of the Electoral College convene to cast their votes for president.[10] In fact, according to the Pew Research Center, Americans' trust in government has been declining for six decades and is now near a historic low. A September 2020 survey by the center found only 20 percent of US adults reporting they trust the federal government to "do the right thing" just about always or most of the time.[11]

The erosion of public trust and the undermining of confidence in democratic institutions are accelerated when political leaders poke and prod at the limits of constitutional democracy. A very particular constitutional crisis, for example, would arise from illegally removing the constitutional limits of a presidency. In a regression to the heavy-handed authoritarian "big men" who so often dominated politics on the African continent, political observers have seen, and are continuing to see, such machinations play out in Uganda, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Eritrea, Togo, Gabon, Chad, Cameroon, and Djibouti as constitutional challenges to presidential term limits effectively allow those in power to stay in power indefinitely. Similarly, in March 2018, Russia's Vladimir Putin, after sidestepping term limits, won his fourth term as president. That same month, China's Community Party abolished the two-term limit for its presidency. In direct response, President Donald Trump, at a closed-door meeting, said, "I think it's great. Maybe we'll want to give that a shot someday."[12] While some Republicans were quick to portray the comments as only made in jest, Trump's admiration for authoritarian autocrats—including accolades afforded to Xi Jinping (China), Putin (Russia), Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Turkey), Juan Orlando Hernandez (Honduras), Rodrigo Duterte (Philippines), Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (Egypt), Hun Sen (Cambodia)—is deadly serious and has further undermined America's global voice on the issues of human rights and democratic values.

More disconcertingly, in repeated instances, Trump has undercut democracy by discrediting the election process in ways that disenfranchise American voters. He has floated groundless allegations about election fraud and even posed the notion, without legal authority to do so, of delaying the November election, an idea roundly criticized by Republicans. By late-July 2020, Factbase, a searchable database of Trump's tweets, speeches, and public statements, had recorded 713 references by Trump questioning the voting process or outright alleging election fraud, and that figure continues to escalate as the November election draws nearer.[13] The hobgoblin of voter fraud is routinely trotted out by Trump as a thinly veiled tool of voter suppression.

Empirically, however, the evidentiary support for any voter fraud, let alone widespread voter fraud, is practically baseless. For instance, an extensive research project by the Brennan Center for Justice, a nonpartisan law and policy institute, concluded "fraud is very rare, voter impersonation is virtually nonexistent, and many instances of alleged fraud are, in fact, mistakes by voters or administrators. The same is true for mail ballots, which are secure and essential to holding a safe election amid the coronavirus pandemic."[14] The center's meticulous review of data found incident rates for voter fraud between 0.0003 and 0.0025 percent. Benjamin Ginsberg, who has served as counsel to Republican national party committees and legal representative for four of the past six Republican presidential nominees, similarly concluded: "The truth is that after decades of looking for illegal voting, there's no proof of widespread fraud. At most, there are isolated incidents—by both Democrats and Republicans. Elections are not rigged."[15] Likewise, the conservative-leaning Heritage Foundation's Election Fraud Database lists a minuscule 1,298 proven instances of voter fraud over the nearly four decades since 1982.[16]

Despite the nonpartisan clarity of this data, however, a September 2020 poll found that nearly half of Republicans agree with the president that election fraud is a major concern, particularly associated with expanded mail-in voting during the pandemic. Few respondents identifying as Democrat shared that belief. Harvard University's Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society has analyzed the disinformation campaign

The impact of this "elite-driven, mass-media led" disinformation campaign, along with the uneven enforcement of hate speech on social media, almost certainly will be compounded by potential attacks on the election process by foreign actors— particularly Russia, China, and Iran—that could further open windows of doubt over the legitimacy of the results.

leading to this partisan distribution pattern and argued that it "was an elite-driven, mass-media led process" in which social media "played only a secondary and supportive role." In its extensive analysis of over 55,000 online media stories, five million tweets, and 75,000 posts on public Facebook pages, it concluded "that Fox News and Donald Trump's own campaign were far more influential in spreading false beliefs than Russian trolls or Facebook clickbait artists."[17]

That is not to underplay, however, social media's "secondary and supportive role" in the disinformation campaign. On September 27, 2020, for instance, Project Veritas, a right-wing activist group, released a video alleging illegal collection of ballots in Minnesota. While the baseless allegations were roundly refuted by election experts, the link to the video was quickly tweeted by eight conservative influencers, each with large audiences. The video, and the narrative surrounding it, generated millions of impressions and made Twitter's Trending page within two hours of its initial launch. Donald Trump Jr. had independently uploaded the same video within seven minutes of the original post, raising questions of coordination between the Trump campaign and Project Veritas.[18]

The impact of this "elite-driven, mass-media led" disinformation campaign, along with the uneven enforcement of hate speech on social media, almost certainly will be compounded by potential attacks on the election process by foreign actors—particularly Russia, China, and Iran—that could further open windows of doubt over the legitimacy of the results. On September 22, 2020, the FBI and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency released a public service announcement warning, "Foreign actors and cybercriminals could exploit the time required to certify and announce elections' results by disseminating information that includes reports of voter suppression, cyberattacks targeting election infrastructure, voter or ballot fraud, or other problems intended to convince the public of the elections' illegitimacy."[19]

As confirmed by a variety of measures, these attacks—both internal and external—already have had a demonstrably disfiguring impact on the degree of democratization in the United States over the past few years:

– The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project collates data distinguishing between five high-level principles of democracy: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian. With a team of over 50 social scientists on six continents and more than 3,000 country experts, V-Dem has a database containing over 28.4 million data points covering 202 countries from 1789–2019. Its most recent report included the United States as part of an accelerating "third wave of autocratization," along with Brazil, India, and Turkey, as countries experiencing substantial democratic regression. In 2020, the United States stands as the only country in Western Europe and North America registering a substantial decline in democracy.[20]

– The Democracy Index from the Economist Intelligence Unit is based on 60 indicators within five categories: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture. Based on its scores, each country is then classified as one of four types of regime: full democracy, flawed democracy, hybrid regime, or authoritarian regime. In 2019, the Democracy Index classified the United States as a "flawed democracy," a classification which it has held since 2016.[21]

– Bright Line Watch is a group of political scientists that monitors US democratic practices, their resilience, and potential threats through expert responses to 28 statements of democratic principles thematically organized around elections, voting, rights, protections, accountability, institutions, and discourse. Its most recent report, in August 2020, found ongoing and considerable declines for protections of free speech, toleration of peaceful protest, protection from political violence, and limits on government power and accountability for its misuse in the United States.[22]

The gravity of these trends is heightened with the recognition that democratic backsliding is very difficult to reverse; research shows that "only 1 in 5 democracies that start down this path are able to reverse the damage before succumbing to full-blown autocracy."[23] Indeed, the hue and cry being raised over America's democratic future is considerable. "For the first time in my life, and maybe for the first time since the Civil War, the fate of constitutional democracy in the United States is on the line, and it's on the line because the president has put it there," said William A. Galston, chair of the Brookings Institution's Governance Studies Program, in late September 2020. "It is a clear and present danger."[24] Similarly, Rachel Kleinfeld, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, asserted, "America's democracy is ailing, and its immune system is on life support."[25]

It is dangerous to dismiss these concerns, and the high stakes to which they are tied, as alarmist exaggerations of small risks. The guardrails built into America's constitutional democracy have eroded and been degraded under years of partisanship, polarization, and the pursuit of power. This has led to a widespread climate of "hostility, skepticism and outright contempt" for the federal government.[26] And the resultant sustained anger—from both sides of the political divide—has brought a disintegration of trust and faith in US democratic institutions that directly elevates, and escalates, the risk for mass violence.

Memory
The long-running history of intergroup conflict in the United States is a nonmodifiable risk factor—what happened cannot be unhappened. What can, and often is, modified, however, are the ways that history is remembered, taught, processed, and understood. As novelist Jonathan Safran Foer argues, memory is not simply "a second order means of interpreting events."[27] Rather, memory is an active past that gives shape and meaning to the present. Memory changes the tense from past to present. In that

regard, the past continually intrudes on the present, and unresolved issues from that past can become potent risk factors for the present. Examples of risk factors related to memory include a history of identity-related tension, prior episodes of mass violence, past cultural trauma, legacies of vengeance or group grievance, and a record of serious violations of international human rights and laws.

The messiness of the past will be attended to—whether a collective makes an active decision to agree on it or not. To attend to the past constructively can build bonds of social cohesion. To leave it unattended, however, as the United States has so often done throughout its history, is to leave space for the sparring, and scarring, narratives that feed deep social divisions. As historian Jill Lepore argues: "Nations are made up by people, but held together by history, like wattle and daub or lath and plaster or bricks and mortar. ... Nations, to make sense of themselves, need some kind of agreed upon past. They can get it from scholars or they can get it from demagogues, but get it they will."[28]

In a sense, memory runs parallel to the late historian and geographer David Lowenthal's conception of "heritage." "Heritage," he writes, "should not be confused with history. ... Heritage exaggerates and omits, candidly invents and frankly forgets, and thrives on ignorance and error. ... Heritage uses history traces and tells historical tales. But these tales and traces are stitched into fables closed to critical scrutiny."[29] Memory makers compete to construct these fables by accommodating only those memories that suit their agenda. This is a struggle for power rather than truth; a mobilization to control a master narrative that fits a group's subjective interests rather than an objective account of historical processes. In this sense, memory makers use memory the way a drunk uses a lamppost: for support rather than illumination. In such cases, collectives live by memory rather than truth, and such "memory is never shaped in a vacuum," and its motives "are never pure."[30] Of the myriad memory makers in US society, the most relevant for understanding issues related to escalated risk of mass violence are the media, government leaders, and the memory wars playing out in the field of education.

The power of the media as memory makers is revealed in how frequently the Trump administration tweets and comments about "fake news" in order to steer the narrative in a particular direction. During his 2017 inauguration, the Committee to Protect Journalists already was expressing concern that Trump had "obstructed major news organizations, vilified the press and attacked journalists by name with unrelenting hostility."[31] Those behavioral patterns have only increased, in frequency and intensity, since then. Even Chris Wallace, a conservative-leaning journalist from Fox News, admitted in a December 2019 address at the Newseum: "President Trump is engaged in the most direct sustained assault on freedom of the press in our history. He has done everything he can to undercut the media, to try and delegitimize us, and I think his purpose is clear: to raise doubts when we report critically about him and his administration that we can be trusted."[32]

On a public level, polarized media diets enforce, and expand, the partisan divide. Liberals and conservatives are left living in alternate realities, self-perpetuating as they avoid information contrary or threatening to their beliefs and attend only to information that reinforces those beliefs. The vocabulary used by media further intensifies this meaning struggle. A 2020 quantitative analysis of 1,088 program transcripts from right-leaning Fox News and left-leaning MSNBC, for example, found Fox News up to five times more likely to use the word "hate" in its programming. And the word most frequently paired with "hate" was "they," as in "they hate." Lumped together as "they" by Fox News were Democrats, liberals, political elites, and the media. The average usage of "they hate" by Fox News significantly escalated after Trump's presidency began with the alleged target of that hatred most often being Trump, but also being "you," "us," and "Christians." The impact of such polarized media on the making of memory is significant for the present as well as the future. As the researchers conclude, "these language patterns construct a coherent but potentially dangerous narrative about the world."[33]

On a public level, polarized media diets enforce, and expand, the partisan divide. Liberals and conservatives are left living in alternate realities, self-perpetuating as they avoid information contrary or threatening to their beliefs and attend only to information that reinforces those beliefs.

The danger of that narrative is reinforced when government leaders, as memory makers, use inflammatory language. As political scientist James Piazza describes, hate speech targeting minority groups has figured prominently in the recent rhetoric of political leaders in Russia, Colombia, Israel, Egypt, Ukraine, the Philippines, Italy, Greece, Sri Lanka, Iraq, and the United States. His research shows that when government leaders use hate speech, incidents of domestic terrorism increase. The United States, for example, averaged 26.6 incidents of domestic terrorism per year during the two terms of Barack Obama's presidency. During the first two years of Trump's presidency, there were 66 and 67 attacks, respectively—more than doubling Obama's overall average. As Piazza concludes, "What public figures say can bring people together, or divide them. How politicians talk affects how people behave—and the amount of violence their nations experience."[34]

Finally, memory wars also are playing out in the field of education, particularly as related to the interpretation of prior episodes of mass violence in American history. The United States is a nation born from the genocidal destruction of Indigenous peoples and the enslavement of Black people. Those dual original sins predate the founding of the United States and, in fact, the United States would not exist without the land stolen from those who already were on it and the backbreaking and soul-crushing work of those enslaved to tame that land and build this new country. The "extraction of profit" from theft and enslavement laid the foundations for what would become the world's largest economy.[35] The false narrative created at the country's birth—a celebration of democracy, freedom, and equality for all—erased those historical realities of destruction, and that willful amnesia continued, and continues, through today. As a result, as criminal justice reform advocate Bryan Stevenson argues, "I don't think we're free in America. I think we are burdened by our history...a kind of smog, and we have all been breathing in it."[36]

In August 2019, the *New York Times* published a collection of essays and literary works titled "The 1619 Project" to mark the first arrival of Africans in Virginia in 1619. It was hoped the project would help "reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative." [37] While a small group of historians took issue with some of its specific claims, and right-wing commentators were quick to paint it as revisionist history, the project, overall, has been well-received as a more inclusive version of US history, spawning a podcast and a high-school curriculum, forcing some important national conversations, and earning a Pulitzer Prize for its creator, Nikole Hannah-Jones.

For Trump, however, it was yet another example where "the left has warped, distorted, and defiled the American story with deceptions, falsehoods, and lies...[rewriting] American history to teach our children that we were founded on the principle of oppression, not freedom." He went on to decry the "toxic propaganda, ideological poison that, if not removed, will dissolve the civic bonds that tie us together. It will destroy our country."[38] In response to this alleged menace, Trump, along with Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.), has

threatened to prohibit the use of federal funds to schools using the "The 1619 Project" curriculum.[39] In a September 17, 2020, White House Conference on American History, Trump announced his counterattack to create a national commission, called the 1776 Commission, "to promote patriotic education" and "teach our children about the miracle of American history."[40]

In response, the American Historical Association, supported by 39 other organizations, released a statement deploring "the use of history and history education at all grade levels and other contexts to divide the American people, rather than use our discipline to heal the divisions that are central to our heritage. Healing those divisions requires an understanding of history and an appreciation for the persistent struggles of Americans to hold the nation accountable for falling short of its lofty ideals. To learn from our history we must confront it, understand it in all its messy complexity, and take responsibility as much for our failures as our accomplishments."[41]

These memory wars are certainly much more than academic. How the narrative—the messiness of the past—is remembered, taught, processed, and understood directly intrudes on the present. As a 2019 study argued, "Narratives highlighting America's path toward, if not achievement of, racial equality dominate national discourse, are widely communicated in both literature and popular culture, and are strongly endorsed in attitude surveys. ... [As a result] we have a strong and persistent belief that our national disgrace of racial oppression has been overcome, albeit through struggle, and that racial equality has largely already been achieved."[42] This collective willful ignorance—manifest through decades of presidential administrations on both side of the political divide—soothes the national conscience and preserves the founding myth while, at the same time, marginalizing and minimizing the generational impacts—socially, spiritually, economically—of genocide and systemic racism. In constructing memory in this way—purposefully blind to the tensions, violence, trauma, grievances, and egregious violations of the past and its direct impact on the present—the need for policies and practices to redress the social and economic inequalities of contemporary America is dangerously underestimated and, in so doing, leaves the country at increased risk for future episodes of mass violence.

Social Fragmentation

Negative trends among risk factors related to governance and memory shackle a society in the bonds of fragility. This can lead to, as well as be the result of, an increased susceptibility to social disharmony and isolation. This state of disconnect between the larger society and the groupings of some members of that society is known as fragmentation. While fragmentation can manifest itself along many lines, of greatest relevance for the risk of mass violence is social fragmentation. Social fragmentation is defined "as a process in modern society by which different groups form parallel structures within society, which have little or no consistent interaction between them over the full spectrum of the social experience."[43] Where intergroup social cohesion can unite a people and strengthen a society, social fragmentation splinters

a people, reduces the resiliency of a society, and places it at increased risk for violent conflict. Examples of risk factors related to social fragmentation include identity-based social divisions, disruptive demographic pressures, unequal access to basic goods and services, gender inequalities, and political instability.

Socially fragmented societies often manifest as what academics refer to as "deeply divided societies." A central defining feature of deeply divided societies is binary division: two contrasting segments of a population that represent a cleavage significant enough to impact a wide range of issues. These binary fault lines can arise from class, caste, religion, language, race, ethnicity, clan, or political identity. The destabilizing polarization that is so typical of deeply divided societies is embedded in an "us" and "them" binary division.

The binary divisions inherent in deeply divided societies breed communities of fear and isolation. In a deeply divided society, incentives for trust, cooperation, dialogue, and long-term social exposure are reduced. The nature of human relations shifts "from *inter-personal* (interaction between people is determined by their personal relationship and their respective individual characteristics) to *inter-group* (the behavior of individuals towards each other is determined by their membership of different groups)."[44] When that relational shift happens—from interacting with someone based on who they are as an individual to interacting with them based on the group to which they belong—it can move groups in societies along a continuum of tension with the "other" from group comparison to group competition to group hostility to, possibly, mass violence.

Moreover, the binary identities often are manipulated by power holders to exacerbate social dismemberment and advance their own partisan interests. These divisions become particularly destructive when paired with differential access to "power and wealth, services and resources, employment, development opportunities, citizenship and the enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms."[45] It is discrimination based on the binary differences, and a persistent pattern of it, that dictates inequities in quality of life and entrenches the segmentation in a deeply divided society. The discrimination becomes both a cause of, and a justification for, the walls that divide the two groups.

Today, while the United States is rife with identity-based issues grounded in gender, ethnicity, class, religious, and political differences, it remains plagued by its longest-standing, and seemingly most intractable, binary division: race. Woven into the threads of America's founding were the racial divides—the skin tones of "us" and "them"— that determined differential access to wealth and power and led those with the wealth and power to see "them" as an intractable existential threat to their economic, social, racial, national, and political standing. Founded on a conception of white supremacy, US political discourse often has relied on law-and-order rhetoric to maintain that supremacy and the unearned privileges that go with it. As political scientist Austin Sarat summarizes, "Throughout this nation's history, appeals to law and order have been as much about defending privilege as dealing with crime. They have been used in political campaigns to stigmatize racial, ethnic and religious groups and resist calls for social justice made by, and on behalf of, those groups."[46]

While racial polarization preceded his administration and will endure long after it, Trump's rhetoric, policies, and practices have clearly indicated an intentional minimization of the perceived impact of racism on American life. Beginning with his 2016 campaign, Trump has weaponized race by stoking white supremacist ideals and exacerbating America's long-standing racial divide. While the responses were predictably divided along party lines, a May 2020 survey found that most Americans "think that President Trump is a racist."[47] And the policies of his administration, among the least racially diverse in recent US history, unambiguously reflect those leanings. As journalist Greg Miller catalogues, "Over 3 ½ years in office, he [Trump] has presided over a sweeping U.S. government retreat from the front lines of civil rights, endangering decades of progress against voter suppression, housing discrimination and police misconduct.

> In constructing memory in this way—purposefully blind to the tensions, violence, trauma, grievances, and egregious violations of the past and its direct impact on the present—the need for policies and practices to redress the social and economic inequalities of contemporary America is dangerously underestimated and, in so doing, leaves the country at increased risk for future episodes of mass violence.

His immigration polices hark back to quota systems of the 1920s that were influenced by the junk science of eugenics, and have involved enforcement practices—including the separation of small children from their families—that seemed designed to maximize trauma on Hispanic migrants."[48] He has referred to Black Lives Matter as a "symbol of hate" and retweeted video of a man, who appears to be a Trump supporter, shouting "white power" to a group of protestors.[49] After a summer of police brutality and the largest civil rights protests in decades, the Trump administration continues to deny the existence of systemic racism in US society. Despite pledging to be "a president for all Americans" in his election night victory speech, Trump, by his words and actions, has clearly indicated he is president for only a few.[50]

For antiracist scholar Ibram X. Kendi, Trump "has held up a mirror to American society, and it has reflected back a grotesque image that many people had until now refused to see: an image not just of the racism still coursing through the country, but also of the reflex to deny that reality."[51] Under the Trump administration, that reflex of denial has become a well-honed policymaking practice. On September 4, 2020, for instance, a memorandum from the president's office required that federal agencies cease and desist from using taxpayer dollars to fund the liberal indoctrination allegedly inherent in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Deprecated as "divisive, un-American propaganda training sessions," such initiatives were accused, without basis, of engendering "division and resentment within the Federal work force."[52] Later that month, in an executive order of September 22, Trump extended the ban to federal grantees and government contractors. Attacking the "pernicious and false belief that America is an irredeemably racist and sexist country; that some people, simply on account of their race or sex, are oppressors; and that racial and sexual identities are more important than our common status as human beings and Americans" as a "destructive" and "malign" ideology, he decreed "it shall be the policy of the United States not to promote race or sex stereotyping or scapegoating in the Federal workforce or in the Uniformed Services, and not to allow grant funds to be used for these purposes."[53]

In response to this inimical policy, the National Association of Diversity Officers argued: "At this time of racial reckoning with our past, the president deepens the divide and eliminates any possibility that individuals within the federal government can learn the consequences of racism and its deadly effects. Worse yet, it is a signal to our citizens and the world that racism does not exist and never existed. Eliminating these critical conversations on race is an erasure of history at a time when we need this understanding more than ever to transform our society into a just one."[54]

Intractable identity conflicts, while not literally unresolvable, are stubbornly resistant to resolution. Often enduring and existing over generations, such conflicts are fanned by the flames of "hot, direct, unambiguous prejudices" that "advocate segregation, containment, and even elimination of outgroups."[55] There is an "ascendancy of military terms," or "war-talk," which dehumanizes the "other," mitigates against resolution, and even justifies

(and often glorifies) harm-doing.[56] Indeed, it is the escalating potential for violence, born not simply from incompatibility but from a deep sense that each group is an intractable existential threat to the other, that is the flesh-and-blood consequence of living in a deeply divided society. As Adrian Guelke, a professor of comparative politics at Queen's University Belfast, writes, "in a deeply divided society conflict exists along a well-entrenched fault line that is recurrent and endemic and that contains the potential for violence between the segments."[57] A World Bank policy research report found compelling evidence of the realization of this potential: "A completely polarized society, divided into two equal groups, has a risk of civil war around six times higher than a homogenous society."[58]

Economic Conditions

While, relative to the other risk factors, there is less quantitative support for understanding how economic conditions impact the potential for mass violence, economic data can reflect helpful longer-term and slower-moving trends of development, stability, and deterioration. Understood in interaction with risk factors associated with governance, memory, and social fragmentation, economic conditions can impact the degree of susceptibility to mass violence. Examples of risk factors related to economic conditions include low level of economic development, economic discrimination, lack of macroeconomic stability, economic deterioration, and the growth of informal economies and black markets.

From 1871 through today, the United States has held the position of the world's largest economy. The size of the US economy was $20.58 trillion in 2018 and was expected to reach $22.32 trillion by the end of 2020. These figures constitute almost a quarter of the global economy.[59] By early 2020, unemployment in the United States, at 3.6 percent, was near a 50-year low, with women making up more than 50 percent of the nonfarm labor force.[60] These data points showed the resilience of a national economy whose recovery from the 2008 Great Recession was driven by the diversified strength of the health and technology sectors, construction, retail, and nondurable manufacturing (that is, commodities with a lifespan of less than three years).[61] Globally, the impact of that same recession was blunted, in large part, by emerging markets that were able to provide a buffer of resiliency.

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, is so pervasive as to elude any such buffers. The World Bank has predicted that the global economy will shrink by an astounding 5.2 percent in 2020.[62] The president of the World Bank, David Malpass, warned of the pandemic's human impacts: "Our estimate is that up to 60 million people will be pushed into extreme poverty—that erases all the progress made in poverty alleviation in the past three years."[63] Many countries in the world do not have the short-term, or even long-term, economic fundamentals necessary to rebound from the costly devastation of the pandemic. As economists Carmen Reinhart and Vincent Reinhart conclude, "The shadow of this crisis will be long and dark—more so than those of many of the prior ones."[64]

For all of its economic strength, even the United States cannot evade the shadow of this particular crisis. The unemployment rate of 14.7 percent posted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in April 2020 was the worst monthly unemployment figure in the 72 years for which the agency has data.[65] While the September 2020 data indicated a decline in the unemployment rate to 7.9 percent (primarily due to job gains in leisure and hospitality and retail trade), it is anticipated that a seasonal surge in cases will continue to push the unemployment rate near the double-digit mark until at least the middle of 2021.[66] Job growth has stalled, and a fresh round of corporate furloughs and layoffs in early October continued to strain the pandemic-wracked US economy.

From the most recent peak in the fourth quarter of 2019, the United States experienced two consecutive quarters of declines in gross domestic product (GDP), recording its steepest quarterly drop in economic output on record—a decrease of 9.1 percent in the second quarter of 2020. To put that precipitous drop in context, there has never been a drop greater than 3 percent in quarterly GDP since record keeping began in 1947.[67] "The decline was more than twice as large as in the Great Recession a decade ago, but occurred in a fraction of the time," according to the *New York Times*. "The only possible comparisons in modern American history came during the Great Depression and the demobilization after World War II, both of which predated modern economic statistics."[68] As a September 2020 report concluded, "The economic crisis [in the United States] is unprecedented in its scale: the pandemic has created a demand shock, a supply shock, and a financial shock all at once."[69]

But the economic shock of COVID-19 in the United States has been differentially, and unequally, felt across American society, "delivering a mild setback for those at or near the top and a depression-like blow for those at the bottom."[70] An extensive *Washington Post* analysis concluded, "Low-wage, minority workers, Black women, Black men and mothers of school-age children are taking the longest time to find new jobs after the steep job losses in the spring."[71] A September 2020 poll found 72 percent of Latino households, 60 percent of Black households, and 55 percent of Native American households facing serious financial problems since the pandemic began. Those figures, reflecting long-standing racial inequalities rooted in systemic racism, stand in stark contrast to the 36 percent of white households reporting similar problems.[72] The fact that minority groups are also experiencing higher rates of COVID-19 infections only exacerbates the financial problems and disparities.

The initial federal response—including enhanced unemployment benefits, low-interest loans, and payroll protection assistance—dedicated trillions of dollars of aid to help fend off an economic collapse in the face of the initial shock of the pandemic. Nevertheless, unemployed US residents are now having to exhaust whatever remains in their savings accounts, and there has been a tidal wave of small business closures. With most of the federal aid programs expired or expiring, and another federal stimulus package likely on hold until after the election, those most in need of economic relief remain mired in that need, prisoner to the political divide gripping the nation's capital. Economist Ernie Tedeschi has warned of the long-term impact: "Without another aid package, the economy will regain four million fewer jobs through the end of next year than it would have if lawmakers had struck a deal."[73]

Exacerbated by the pandemic, such long-standing economic discrimination—often referred to as horizontal inequalities—escalate the risk of mass violence, as deprived groups can resort to violence to redress the inequalities, or privileged groups can mobilize with violence to preserve their privilege. As peace researcher Jonas Claes writes, "Horizontal inequalities serve as a risk factor that may increase the likelihood of mass violence, particularly when embedded in local narrative or manipulated by the political elite. Actual or perceived horizontal inequalities allow conflict entrepreneurs to mobilize ethnic, religious, political, or geographical community members around a subjective

Exacerbated by the pandemic, long-standing economic discrimination escalates the risk of mass violence, as deprived groups can resort to violence to redress the inequalities or privileged groups can mobilize with violence to preserve their privilege.

motive and justify extreme violence against an identity-based or political group."[74] In point of fact, research consistently reveals that the probability of violent conflict is higher in areas with greater economic inequality.[75]

Accelerants and Triggers of Mass Violence

In the work of risk assessment, regardless of how many risk factors any particular model relies on, no one risk factor or set of risk factors is taken as predominant in their contributing importance. Rather, they are contextually understood, in conjunction with the presence of other risk factors, as associated with increasing the probability of mass violence. It is clear that the cumulative impact of the risk factors this paper has surveyed for the United States—some generations in the making and others exacerbated by the current social and political climate—is a creeping, erosive rot that continue to undermine the structural integrity and stability of American society. If left unaddressed, it can drag this deeply divided society into the abyss of mass violence.

To return to an analogy used previously, risk assessment helps us identify where the wood is stacked for risk of mass violence. But to understand the matches that may be struck to set that wood afire requires an analysis of accelerating factors that lead to an escalation of crisis and the triggering factors that spark the onset of conflict itself. Accelerants and triggers help explain the transformation of possibilities into probabilities—where into when. An at-risk society with accelerants is like a stack of dry wood doused in gasoline; the outbreak of a fire is likely and unavoidable unless preventive measures are taken. Accelerants multiply risk by increasing incentives for, or the feasibility of, violent conflict. Arson investigators use the term "flashover" to describe the point at which radiant heat causes a fire in a room to become a room on fire.[76] Similarly, triggers are those flashover points at which a society at risk for violent conflict becomes a society caught in the lethal grip of that conflict. Sensitivity to the accelerating or triggering events—the environmental stressors—that could lead to the onset of mass violence gives us an advocacy tool to provide relevant actors with significantly more lead time to take preventive structural action before conflicts actually erupt.

Generally, accelerants are identifiable and, to some degree, modifiable. Accelerants may unfold slowly or, in some cases, rapidly. Accelerants can be internal to the state (for example, postconflict peace-stabilization programs that are poorly designed or implemented, major governance or legal reforms, release of political prisoners, failed ceasefires or peace agreements, or actual outbreaks of limited violence) or external (for example, the impact of externally imposed structural reforms, illicit trade, an international financial crisis, or climate change). Accelerants, whether internal or external to the state in question, aggravate preexisting conditions of structural risk and open windows in which triggers can instigate the onset of violent conflict.

In the United States, summer 2020 saw the risk of mass violence being significantly accelerated by incidents of police brutality and the subsequent protests. After the police killing of George Floyd on May 25 in Minneapolis, protest marches broke out in all 50 states (as well as around the world). These protests, markedly interracial, quickly expanded to remember and mourn other recent victims of anti-Black violence, often at the hands of police—Philando Castile, Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor, and Michael Brown among those most often cited. In a deadly, and predictable, reflection of a history of white supremacy that has condoned anti-Black violence, Black people represented 28 percent of the 831 people killed by police in 2020, even while making up only 13 percent of the US population. Their death rate at the hands of police is three times that of white people, with over 98 percent of the killings not resulting in police officers being charged with a crime.[77]

Across the globe, the manifestation of state or political misconduct is often seen in rallies, peaceful demonstrations, mass protests against national authority or policies, uprisings, or even riots. As researchers Monty Marshall and Benjamin Cole write, "Mass protest should not be viewed as an exercise in democracy, but, rather, as a signal that the political process, whether democratic or autocratic, is failing to adequately recognize the levels of discontent and dissent and properly address an important and valued issue in public policy."[78]

Between May 24 and August 22, nearly 11,000 demonstrations of discontent and dissent were recorded in the United States. About 73 percent of those were associated with the Black Lives Matter movement and 7 percent with the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly 95 percent of these events involved peaceful protesters, leaving only 5 percent involving demonstrators engaged in violence. Despite that low figure of recorded violent behavior, armed individuals are becoming more common at these events. Even if they are not engaging directly with demonstrators, their presence is openly intimidating. Many are from nonstate militia groups from both the left and right side of the political spectrum. With government forces already intervening actively in many of these demonstrations, the presence of armed civilians threatens to further escalate tensions and confrontations between protestors and counterprotestors.[79]

The range of triggers is broad and diverse, but generally they are discrete events, or chains of events, that transition a tense situation into a crisis. Triggers are the dynamic, real-time stressors, often the outgrowth of one or more accelerants, that can make the outbreak of violent conflict likely or imminent. In situations of underlying structural vulnerability, exacerbated by internal or external accelerants, triggers are the spark that precipitate violent conflict by pushing an at-risk state over the brink. Some triggers are difficult to predict or identify in advance (for example, coups, political assassinations, natural disasters, contested succession or secession, social media attacks, closure or liquidation of large employers, epidemics or pandemics, acts of incitement, or terrorist attacks). Other triggers are more easily predictable

and identifiable (for example, the taking of a census, legal judgments, anniversaries of highly traumatic and disputed historical events, or elections).

The year 2020 finds the United States caught in the grip of one trigger—a global pandemic—and anticipating the compound impact of another—a national election. As of this writing, COVID-19 had led to over 7.8 million diagnosed cases in the United States with more than 216,000 deaths attributed to the virus.[80] The pandemic has impacted every part of American life and revealed, once again, some of its deepest racial and socioeconomic inequities. An August 2020 assessment of government responses to the pandemic ranked the United States 31st out of 36 countries, coming in below Brazil, Ethiopia, India, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and Russia. The index cited the federal government's inability to mount a scientifically informed response as well as America's limited emergency health-care spending, insufficient testing and hospital capacity, and limited debt relief as factors influencing its markedly poor ranking.[81] In October, William Foege, who led the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention under Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, wrote a blistering critique of "the incompetence and illogic" of the White House in dealing with the pandemic. Describing the pandemic as "an unacceptable toll on our country," Foege said "public health texts of the future will use this as a lesson on how not to handle an infectious disease pandemic."[82] Days later, the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the world's most prestigious medical journal and staunchly nonpartisan historically, said the Trump administration's "dangerously incompetent" response to the pandemic had "taken a crisis and turned it into a tragedy."[83]

In the run-up to the November election, compounding the social and political stressors posed by the ongoing pandemic, Trump has openly suggested he is unlikely to accept the results of the election if he loses. At the Republican National Convention in August 2020, for instance, he asserted, "The only way they can take this election away from us is if this is a rigged election."[84] Moreover, and certainly more likely to instigate episodes of mass violence, he has refused on several occasions to commit to a peaceful postelection transfer of power if not reelected. The possibility that Trump would would refuse to concede or to leave office if the November election does not bring an authoritative result could lead to a cascade of emergency motions in state and federal courts. It could even be that the election is only settled by the Supreme Court or House of Representatives—where Trump is pushing to have strategic advantages in both. Despite how it plays out, this protracted postelection struggle will likely be reflected in the streets of America. Social nerves already frayed by the summer of unrest over police brutality, aggravated by lives lived under a pandemic, would be stretched even further by the reality of a constitutional crisis.

Assessing the Potential for Mass Violence in the United States

In response to Trump's refusal to commit to a peaceful transfer of power if he loses the election, Douglas Brinkley, a presidential historian, said, "This may be the most damaging thing he has ever done to American democracy."[85] Even if it does not occur, the refusal itself already has raised the unnerving prospect of a volatile political transition. Not respecting the results of an election and not committing to a peaceful transfer of power are how authoritarian dictators rule. As election-monitoring expert Judith Kelley of Duke University has said of these practices, they are "the kind of stuff that [international election] observers would go to countries and write up huge reports about and say 'Red flag! Red flag!'"[86] These red flags are particularly concerning as they relate to the potential for electoral violence in the 11-week interregnum between the November 3 election and the inauguration on January 20.

Not respecting the results of an election and not committing to a peaceful transfer of power are how authoritarian dictators rule. … These red flags are particularly concerning as they relate to the potential for electoral violence in the 11-week period, or interregnum, between the November 3 election and the inauguration on January 20.

Relatively speaking, electoral violence around the globe is not an infrequent occurrence. According to the African Electoral Violence Database, for instance, nearly half of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa regularly experience some form of election violence.[87] While generally short-lived, electoral violence has a seismic impact, as it generates a deep distrust in democratic governance and further destabilizes polarized and socially fragmented societies. In many cases, electoral violence may become an impetus for mass violence, civil war, and even the commission of atrocities.

Moreover, electoral violence is far from unheard of in US history. In fact, the United States has had electoral violence since its beginnings as a country. While the deadliest violence was associated with the Civil War—triggered, in part, by the refusal of Southern states to accept the outcome of the 1860 election—each era of US history has played host to its own episodes of electoral violence. In the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, political scientist Jesse Rhodes advised, "As a general matter, elections in more recent decades have been characterized by greater civility. However, the long history of violence in American elections should caution citizens against undue optimism about the continuation of this recent favorable trend."[88] In June 2020, an electoral "war game" simulating what might happen after Election Day in the United States warned that in every scenario but a massive win for former Vice President Joe Biden, "the potential for violent conflict is high."[89] Reflecting this concern, for the first time in its history, Crisis Group, an independent nongovernmental organization committed to preventing and resolving deadly conflict around the globe, decided to focus on the risk of electoral violence in the United States. As CEO Robert Malley argued, the surging threats were "enough to convince us to turn our gaze to a country far more accustomed to issuing warnings than to receiving them."[90]

Despite this history, and the escalating tensions of the present, mass violence following the US election is far from a certain outcome. As researcher Ore Koren argues, the United States still retains strong democratic institutions that can maintain order in the midst of crisis, has the capacity at both the federal and state levels to deter and prevent violence, and does not have a recent history of deadly political violence. While admitting that "making accurate predictions about potential post-election bedlam is impossible," Koren concludes that research based on "a large number of historical cases across multiple countries" suggests that electoral violence between armed pro-Trump militia groups and leftist protesters, however real, remains unlikely.[91]

While Koren is right that electoral violence may remain unlikely in an absolute sense, he is remiss in downplaying the reality that there is significant escalation that considerably raises concern about the relative likelihood of electoral violence. Even in the run-up to the election, the visible presence of armed paramilitaries on America's streets, as well as flashes of violence, have been seen time and again. Inflaming the tensions, on September 13, Michael Caputo, the top spokesperson for the Department of Health and Human Services, outlandishly warned in a 26-minute live Facebook video of left-wing "hit squads being trained all

over this country" to mount armed opposition against Trump's reelection.[92] At the September 29 presidential debate, Trump, still refusing to explicitly condemn white supremacist ideology and violence, told the Proud Boys, a far-right extremist group, to "stand back and stand by" in preparation for left-wing violence. Immediately on social media, the Proud Boys celebrated Trump's words as a call to violence and reiterated their allegiance to him with numerous effusive posts and by incorporating "stand back and stand by" in their logo on at least one of their social media accounts. Proud Boys organizer Joe Biggs posted, "President Trump told the proud boys to stand by because someone needs to deal with ANTIFA ... well sir! We're ready!!"[93] Later, a Proud Boys supporter, advising people to stock up on guns, warned of "civil war" if Trump was not reelected in November.[94]

While Trump backtracked the day after the debate and said he meant the group should "stand down," academics with expertise in extremism research were quick to affirm that Trump's comments would "be taken quite literally as a call to prep with civil war" and send "emergency signals about increasing violence from now through the election, and after, regardless of winner."[95] While violence could come from either the left or right wing of the ideological spectrum, an October 2020 threat assessment by the Department of Homeland Security warned that white supremacist extremists "remain the most persistent and lethal threat" inside the United States.[96] In the run-up to the election, Megan Squire, a computer scientist who tracks far-right extremists on social media, described a "prepper mindset," or "simmering kind of feeling," that suggests plans for unrest and violence.[97] On October 8, 2020, the violent potential of this far-right extremist mindset was unmasked when law enforcement officials in Michigan charged 13 men with a violent plot that included storming the state capitol and kidnapping Governor Gretchen Whitmer to place her on "trial." Members of the group, whose ideas often percolate online in a poorly moderated social media ecosystem, also were accused of collecting addresses of police officers in order to target them and threatening to start a civil war "leading to societal collapse." The aborted plot was the physical manifestation of Trump's April tweet to "LIBERATE MICHIGAN!"[98] from the alleged state government overreach of restrictions in reaction to the pandemic.

These events exemplify what criminologists Matt Clement and Vincenzo Scalia have described as a "strategy of tension." They define this strategy as the use, or even the threat, of violent criminal actions by state agents, or its associated actors (such as corporate media and extremist groups aligned with the state), deliberately deployed to produce a climate of fear within communities. In so doing, control is maintained through fear of the consequences of challenging the state. Violence is justified on the basis of a dangerous "public enemy," escalating the tensions and fear and using that escalation to delegitimize dissenters and opponents. Tensions, rather than defused, are manipulated in order to further destabilize and justify more heavy-handed tactics of repression. Now isolated even more from power, activists respond with more radical militancy, which in turn leads to even more violent responses of repression.[99]

Nor are the debilitating and destabilizing tensions of a deeply divided society confined only to extremist groups. Researchers surveying political attitudes and engagement recently reported an upswing in the number of Americans—Democrats and Republicans—who said they think violence would be justified if their side loses the presidential election. A staggering 41 percent of Democrats and 44 percent of Republicans surveyed said there would be at least "a little" justification for violence if the other party's nominee wins the election. Moreover, 19 percent of Democrats and 20 percent of Republicans surveyed were even willing to agree to either "a lot" or "a great deal" of justification for violence if their party were to lose the election (and the figures were even more pronounced at the ideological extremes).[100] These findings take on a potentially deadly resonance in light of the skyrocketing gun sales over the past several months of pandemic and social unrest. The sale of 3.9 million firearms in June 2020, for instance, were the highest on record since data collection began in 1998.[101] This is particularly concerning because political instability increases as the proportion of a population under arms increases. Such enhanced accessibility to weapons can be an important enabling factor for mass violence.[102]

Even when the election concludes, there is little about the inauguration that will mitigate the escalating risk of mass violence in the United States, regardless of who is left standing on the inaugural platform. If he remains in office, Trump has consistently shown his willingness to use a strategy of tension, and, unencumbered by the prospect of reelection, it is likely such tension will only increase. Even if Biden takes office, as journalist Alex Yablon warns, "to many on the armed far right, it might appear that their work will only have just begun. … They've got everything they need to continue operating as a domestic stay-behind network to antagonize, suppress and isolate the left—most valuable of all, permission from above."[103]

Conclusion

The longer-term structural risk factors reviewed related to governance, memory, social fragmentation, and economic conditions—along with the real-time accelerants and possible triggering events—indicate an escalating likelihood of an outbreak of mass violence in the United States. Whether instigated by right-wing or left-wing extremists, the most likely flashpoints center on the electoral period and run until Inauguration Day. The risk trends are, however, severe and deep-seated enough to leave much longer-term concern. Were risk analysts noticing these same trends anywhere else in the world, the approaching storm would be clear and alarms would be raised by a range of international governmental and nongovernmental voices. The misplaced fear of being labeled "alarmist" must be displaced by the cold recognition of the reality in which the United States finds itself. While it is not a failed or failing state, it is a fragile and flailing one; closer to breakdown than a breakthrough. The risk of mass violence is progressively accumulating in a rising tide, and resilience is rapidly receding.

In the face of the immediate threat of electoral violence, federal and state law enforcement officials have begun coordinated preparations: conducting drills, running table-top exercise scenarios, setting up command centers, and issuing public warnings. It is the longer-term destructive legacies of flawed governance, contested memory, divisive social fragmentation, and economic disparities, however, that require whole-of-society strategies to increase the capacity and resilience of American society to inoculate itself against the risk of mass violence. Recognizing the accelerants and potential triggers that may intensify risk and incapacitate resilience should alert us to possible, and necessary, interventions by government, media, civil society, and the security sector.

The existence of these risk factors, however, does not predetermine the eventuality of mass violence, even in the face of accelerating stressors and possible triggers. Rather than being understood in causal terms, it is best to think of the risk posed by these factors as probabilistic predictions, not infallible, that maximize forecasting power for

The longer-term structural risk factors reviewed related to governance, memory, social fragmentation, and economic conditions—along with the real-time accelerants and possible triggering events—indicate an escalating likelihood of an outbreak of mass violence in the United States.

mass violence. That is, a high prevalence of risk factors increases the preconditions of risk or susceptibility to mass violence, but does not equate to its inevitable occurrence.

Mass violence is a human problem and, as such, offers hope for a human solution. There is no inevitability in human affairs. Every country has the capacity for possibility, every story the room for a better ending. For the United States to find its way to that better ending will require an adaptive resiliency in response to a climate of escalating risk. Regardless of who wins the election, there is a mountain of hard work to be done to restore trust in American's democratic institutions, develop more inclusive narratives of memory, rebuild social cohesion, and nurture economic inclusivity. That adaptive resiliency can be fostered by:

– Transitioning to systems of federal, state, and local governance that elevate inclusion, representativeness, power sharing, and cross-identity coalition building over winner-take-all majority rule. Policies and practices that nurture an independent and impartial judiciary, media, police, and military—alongside a robust and engaged civil society—also are important democratic safeguards against mass violence and can help restore public trust in governance.

– Encouraging media, government leaders, and educators to reclaim memory as a unifying rather than dividing influence within society. Policies and practices related to the remembrance, teaching, processing, and understanding of American history, in all its messiness, can be used to extend, rather than bound, social solidarities and, in so doing, reduce the risk of identity-based mass violence.

– Constructively managing diverse identities in ways that decrease social fragmentation by focusing on a more inclusive superordinate identity of "us" rather than the more divisive subordinate identities that leave antagonistic clusters of "them." Particularly crucial are policies and practices aimed at redressing the systemic racial inequalities embedded throughout American society.

– Focusing on the sustainability and growth of economic conditions in ways that reduce economic discrimination and enhance economic inclusivity. Notably relevant are economic policies and practices addressing previously marginalized groups—including, for example, redistribution mechanisms, fiscal reform, employment programs, antidiscriminatory initiatives, women's economic empowerment, and safety net programs.

Such policies and practices, aimed at reducing risk and cultivating resiliency, are long-sighted measures, often underappreciated or even unrecognized because they have led to a nonevent: the absence and avoidance of mass violence. It must be understood that the presence of a positive and sustainable peace *is* the event. Indeed, the most important work in the contemporary United States is the work of peace, the work of turning strangers and enemies into friends and allies. The hard work of preventing mass violence is not what makes headlines, but it is what prevents the worst of headlines from being made.

Endnotes

1 Rebecca Ellis, "Justice Department Labels Portland 'Anarchist Jurisdiction,' Threatens Cuts to Federal Funding," OPB (September 21, 2020), accessed October 9, 2020, https://www.opb.org/article/2020/09/21/justice-department-labels-portland-anarchist-jurisdiction-threatens-to-cuts-federal-funding/.

2 Shawn Boburg, Meg Kelly, and Joyce Sohyun Lee, "Swept Up in the Federal Response to Portland Protests," *Washington Post*, September 10, 2020, accessed September 25, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/investigations/portland-protesters-federal-response-trump/.

3 Office for Victims of Crime, "Glossary," *Office of Justice Programs*, accessed September 25, 2020, https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/pubs/mvt-toolkit/glossary.html.

4 Michele Wucker, "No, the Coronavirus Pandemic Wasn't an 'Unforeseen Problem,'" *Washington Post*, March 17, 2020, accessed May 20, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/03/17/no-coronavirus-pandemic-wasnt-an-unforseen-problem.

5 See James Waller, *Confronting Evil: Engaging Our Responsibility to Prevent Genocide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

6 Sarah Repucci, "A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy," *Freedom House*, accessed June 9, 2020, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2020/leaderless-struggle-democracy.

7 Anna Lührmann, Seraphine F. Maerz, Sandra Grahn, Nazifa Alizada, Lisa Gastaldi, Sebastian Hellmeier, Garry Hindle and Staffan I. Lindberg, *Autocratization Surges—Resistance Grows: Democracy Report 2020*, Varieties of Democracy Institute, accessed September 30, 2020, https://www.v-dem.net/en/.

8 Barbara Harff, "No Lessons Learned from the Holocaust? Assessing Risks of Genocide and Political Mass Murder Since 1955," *American Political Science Review* 97 (2003): 63.

9 Jean Chung, "Felony Disenfranchisement: A Primer," *The Sentencing Project*, June 27, 2020, accessed October 13, 2020, https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/felony-disenfranchisement-a-primer/.

10 "The Electoral College Will Destroy America," *New York Times*, September 8, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/08/opinion/electoral-college-trump-biden.html; Jesse Wegman, *Let the People Pick the President: The Case for Abolishing the Electoral College* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020).

11 Pew Research Center, "Americans' Views of Government: Low Trust, but Some Positive Performance Ratings" (September 14, 2020), accessed October 11, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/09/14/americans-views-of-government-low-trust-but-some-positive-performance-ratings/.

12 Jane Perlez, "'President for Life?' Trump's Remarks about Xi Find Fans in China," *New York Times*, March 4, 2018.

13 "Donald Trump Unabridged—Speeches, Tweets, Interviews." Factbase, accessed September 24, 2020, https://factba.se/.

14 Brennan Center for Justice, "The Myth of Voter Fraud," accessed September 24, 2020, https://www.brennancenter.org/issues/ensure-every-american-can-vote/vote-suppression/myth-voter-fraud.

15 Benjamin L. Ginsberg, "Republicans Have Insufficient Evidence to Call Elections 'Rigged' and 'Fradulent,'" *Washington Post*, September 8, 2020, accessed October 1, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/09/08/republicans-have-insufficient-evidence-call-elections-rigged-fraudulent/.

16 The Heritage Foundation, "A Sampling of Recent Election Fraud Cases from across the United States," accessed October 1, 2020, https://www.heritage.org/voterfraud.

17 Yochai Benkler, Casey Tilton, Bruce Etling, Hal Roberts, Justin Clark, Rob Faris, Jonas Kaiser, and Carolyn Schmitt, "Mail-In Voter Fraud: Anatomy of a Disinformation Campaign," working paper, Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society, Harvard University, October 2, 2020, accessed October 4, 2020, https://cyber.harvard.edu/publication/2020/Mail-in-Voter-Fraud-Disinformation-2020.

18 Isabella Garcia Camargo, Alex Stamos, Elana Cyst, Joe Bak-Coleman, Kate Starbird, and Joey Schafer, "Project Veritas #BallotHarvesting Amplification," Election Integrity Partnership, September 29, 2020, accessed October 8, 2020, https://www.eipartnership.net/rapid-response/project-veritas-ballotharvesting.

19 Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency and The Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Foreign Actors and Cybercriminals Likely to Spread Disinformation Regarding 2020 Election Results," Internet Crime Complaint Center, public service announcement dated September 22, 2020, accessed September 24, 2020, https://www.ic3.gov/media/2020/200922.aspx.

20 Lührmann et al., Autocratization.

21 The Economist Intelligence Unit, "Democracy Index 2019," *Economist*, accessed October 13, 2020, https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index.

22 Bright Line Watch, "Democracy in the COVID-19 Era: Bright Line Watch August 2020 Expert Survey," accessed September 30, 2020, http://brightlinewatch.org/bright-line-watch-august-2020-expert-survey/.

23 Christopher Ingraham, "The United States Is Backsliding into Autocracy under Trump, Scholars Warn," *Washington Post*, September 18, 2020, accessed October 6, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/09/18/united-states-is-backsliding-into-autocracy-under-trump-scholars-warn/.

24 Philip Rucker, Amy Gardner, and Annie Linskey, "Trump's Escalating Attacks on Election Prompt Fears of a Constitutional Crisis," *Washington Post*, September 24, 2020, accessed September 29, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-election-transition-crisis/2020/09/24/068d2286-fe79-11ea-8d05-9beaaa91c71f_story.html.

25 Rachel Kleinfeld, "The U.S. Shows All the Signs of a Country Spiraling toward Political Violence," *Washington Post*, September 11, 2020, accessed October 9, 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/11/u.s.-shows-all-signs-of-country-spiraling-toward-political-violence-pub-82707.

26 Steven Webster, "Angry Americans: How Political Rage Helps Campaigns but Hurts Democracy," *Conversation*, September 10, 2020, accessed October 1, 2020, https://theconversation.com/angry-americans-how-political-rage-helps-campaigns-but-hurts-democracy-145819.

27 Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Illuminated* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), 198.

28 Jill Lepore, *This America: The Case for the Nation* (New York: Liveright, 2019), 15, 19-20.

29 David Lowenthal, "Fabricating Heritage," *History and Memory* 10, no. 1 (1998): 7-8.

30 James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 2.

31 Jonah Engel Bromwich, "Felony Charges for Journalists Arrested at Inauguration Protests Raise Fears for Press Freedom," *New York Times*, January 25, 2017, accessed October 1, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/25/business/media/journalists-arrested-trump-inauguration.html.

32 David Smith, "Fox Host Lambasts Trump over 'Most Sustained Assault on Press Freedom in US History, *Guardian*, December 11, 2019, accessed October 1, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/dec/12/fox-host-lambasts-trump-over-most-sustained-assault-on-press-freedom-in-us-history.

33 Curd Knupfer and Robert Mathew Entman, "Fox News Uses the Word 'Hate' Much More than MSNBC or CNN," *Conversation*, September 28, 2020, accessed October 5, 2020, https://theconversation.com/fox-news-uses-the-word-hate-much-more-than-msnbc-or-cnn-145983.

34 James Piazza, "When Politicians Use Hate Speech, Political Violence Increases," *Conversation*, September 28, 2020, accessed October 5, 2020, https://theconversation.com/when-politicians-use-hate-speech-political-violence-increases-146640. See also James Piazza, "Politician Hate Speech and Domestic Terrorism," *International Interactions* 46, no. 3, (2020) 431-453, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03050629.2020.1739033.

35 Nikole Hannah-Jones, "What Is Owed," *New York Times Magazine*, June 30, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/24/magazine/reparations-slavery.html.

36 Bryan Stevenson, "On America's Racial Terrorism, 'Our Silence Has Condemned Us,'" PBS, accessed September 27, 2020, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/brief/212727/bryan-stevenson.

37 "The 1619 Project," *New York Times*, August 14, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html.

38 National Archives Museum, "Remarks by President Trump at the White House Conference on American History," White House, September 17, 2020, accessed October 5, 2020, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-white-house-conference-american-history/.

39 US Congress, Senate, Saving American History Act of 2020, S 4292, 116th Cong., 2nd sess., introduced in the Senate July 23, 2020, accessed October 5, 2020, https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/4292#:~:text=%2F23%2F2020)-,Saving%20American%20History%20Act%20of%202020,its%20teaching%20in%20public%20schools.

40 National Archives Museum, "Remarks by President Trump."

41 American Historical Association, "AHA Issues Statement on the Recent 'White House Conference on American History,'" accessed September 29, 2020, https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-statement-on-the-recent-white-house-conference-on-american-history-(september-2020.

42 Michael W. Kraus, Ivouma N. Onyeador, Natalie M. Daumeyer, Julian M. Rucker, and Jennifer A. Richeson, "The Misperception of Racial Economic Inequality," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 14 (2019): 899, 900.

43 Eric Sean Williams, "The End of Society? Defining and Tracing the Development of Fragmentation through the Modern and into the Post-Modern Era," February 24, 2010, 47, accessed February 20, 2015, http://hdl.handle.net/1961/9237.

44 Jolle Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 43.

45 United Nations, "International Day of Commemoration and Dignity of the Victims of the Crime of Genocide and of the Prevention of this Crime," accessed September 8, 2014, https://www.un.org/en/events/genocidepreventionday/background.shtml.

46 Austin Sarat, "Trump's Law-and-Order Campaign Relies on a Historic American Tradition of Racist and Anti-Immigrant Politics," *Conversation*, September 8, 2020, accessed October 6, 2020, https://theconversation.com/trumps-law-and-order-campaign-relies-on-a-historic-american-tradition-of-racist-and-anti-immigrant-politics-145366.

47 Andrew Romano, "New Yahoo News/YouGov Poll: Most Americans Say Trump Is a 'Racist' and Want Him to Stop Tweeting," June 1, 2020, accessed October 6, 2020, https://news.yahoo.com/new-yahoo-news-you-gov-poll-most-americans-say-trump-is-a-racist-and-want-him-to-stop-tweeting-160841770.html.

48 Greg Miller, "Allegations of Racism Have Marked Trump's Presidency and Become Key Issue as Election Nears," *Washington Post*, September 23, 2020.

49 Barbara Sprunt and Kelsey Snell, "America Reckons with Racial Justice," NPR, July 1, 2020, accessed October 6, 2020, https://www.npr.org/sections/live-updates-protests-for-racial-justice/2020/07/01/885944289/trump-painting-black-lives-matter-on-5th-avenue-would-be-symbol-of-hate.

50 *Los Angeles Times*, "Transcript of Donald Trump's Election Night Victory Speech," November 9, 2016, accessed October 6, 2020, https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-election-night-speech-20161108-story.html.

51 Ibram X. Kendi, "Is This the Beginning of the End of American Racism?," *Atlantic*, September 2020, accessed October 6, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/09/the-end-of-denial/614194/.

52 Russell Vought, *Training in the Federal Government*, memorandum M-20-34, Washington DC, US: Office of Management and Budget, Executive Office of the President, September 4, 2020, accessed September 25, 2020, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/M-20-34.pdf.

53 US President, Executive Order, "Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping," Executive Order 13950 of September 22, 2020, accessed September 25, 2020, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/09/28/2020-21534/combating-race-and-sex-stereotyping.

54 National Association of Diversity Officers, "NADOHE Statement on DEI Training," September 14, 2020, accessed September 25, 2020, https://nadohe.memberclicks.net/assets/PressReleases/_NADOHE%20Statement%20on%20DEI%20Training.pdf.

55 Susan Fiske, "What We Know Now about Bias and Intergroup Conflict, the Problem of the Century," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 11, no. 4 (2002): 127.

56 John Agnew, "Beyond Reason: Spatial and Temporal Sources of Ethnic Conflicts," in *Intractable Conflicts and their Transformations*, ed. Louis Kriesberg, Terrell Northrup, and Stuart Thorson (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1989), 51.

57 Adrian Guelke, *Politics in Deeply Divided Societies* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), 30.

58 Paul Collier, V. L. Elliott, Haard Hegre, Anke Hoeffler, Marta Reynal-Querol, and Nicholas Sambanis, *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2003), 58.

59 Caleb Silver, "The Top 20 Economies in the World," *Investopedia*, updated March 18, 2020, accessed September 27, 2020, https://www.investopedia.com/insights/worlds-top-economies/#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20has%20retained%20its,reach%20%2422.32%20trillion%20in%202020.

60 Eli Rosenberg and Heather Long, "The Economy Added 225,000 Jobs in January, Showing Continued Strength," *Washington Post*, February 7, 2020, accessed October 7, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/02/07/february-2020-jobs-report/.

61 Alison L. Deutsch, "The 5 Industries Driving the U.S. Economy," *Investopedia*, October 6, 2020, accessed October 7, 2020, https://www.investopedia.com/articles/investing/042915/5-industries-driving-us-economy.asp.

62 World Bank, press release, June 8, 2020, accessed October 2, 2020, https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/06/08/covid-19-to-plunge-global-economy-into-worst-recession-since-world-war-ii.

63 BBC News, "Coronavirus: World Bank Warns 60m at Risk of 'Extreme Poverty,'" May 20, 2020, accessed October 2, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/business-52733706.

64 Carmen Reinhart and Vincent Reinhart, "The Pandemic Depression: The Global Economy Will Never Be the Same," *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 5 (September/October 2020): 93.

65 US Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Unemployment Rate Rises to Record High 14.7 Percent in April," May 13, 2020, accessed October 2, 2020, https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2020/unemployment-rate-rises-to-record-high-14-point-7-percent-in-april-2020.htm?view_full.

66 US Bureau of Labor Statistics, *The Employment Situation—September* 2020, October 2, 2020, accessed October 2, 2020, https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf.

67 Lauren Bauer, Kristen Broady, Wendy Edelberg, and Jimmy O'Donnell, *Ten Facts about COVID-19 and the U.S. Economy*, Hamilton Project, September 2020, p 2, accessed October 7, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/FutureShutdowns_Facts_LO_Final.pdf.

68 Ben Casselman, "A Collapse That Wiped Out 5 Years of Growth, with No Bounce in Sight," *New York Times*, July 30, 2020, accessed October 7, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/business/economy/q2-gdp-coronavirus-economy.html.

69 Bauer et al., *Ten Facts*, 1.

70 Heather Long, Andrew Van Dam, Alyssa Fowers, and Leslie Shapiro, "The Covid-19 Recession Is the Most Unequal in Modern U.S. History," *Washington Post*, September 30, 2020, accessed October 7, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/business/coronavirus-recession-equality/?itid=hp-banner-low.

71 Rachel Siegel, "Powell Warns of Severe, Ongoing Risks to the Economy Hours before Trump Ends Stimulus Negotiations Until after Election," *Washington Post*, October 6, 2020, accessed October 7, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/10/06/powell-recovery-stimulus/.

72 *The Impact of Coronavirus on Households by Race, Ethnicity*, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Harvard University, September 2020, accessed October 7, 2020, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XoV6pqzvtag4E9YQeLRTvHaWAlN-s830/view.

73 Ben Casselman and Jim Tankersley, "Anxious for a Lifeline, the U.S. Economy Is Left to Sink or Swim," *New York Times*, October 7, 2020, accessed October 8, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/07/business/second-stimulus-bill-fails-impact.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage.

74 Jonas Claes, *Atrocity Prevention at the State Level*, Peace Brief 144, United States Institute of Peace, April 23, 2013, 3.

75 See, for instance, Gudrun Ostby, "Inequalities, the Political Environment and Civil Conflict: Evidence from 55 Developing Countries," in *Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict: Understanding Group Violence in Multiethnic Societies*, ed. Frances Stewart (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

76 David Grann, *The Devil & Sherlock Holmes: Tales of Murder, Madness, and Obsession* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 84.

77 Mapping Police Violence, "Police Violence Map," accessed October 8, 2020, https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/.

78 Monty G. Marshall and Benjamin R. Cole, *Global Report* 2014: *Conflict, Governance, and State Fragility* (Vienna, VA: Center for Systemic Peace, 2014), 21.

79 Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Program, *Demonstrations and Political Violence in America: New Data for Summer* 2020, September 2020, accessed October 8, 2020, https://acleddata.com/2020/09/03/demonstrations-political-violence-in-america-new-data-for-summer-2020/.

80 Center for Systems Science and Engineering, "COVID-19 Dashboard," Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, accessed October 14, 2020, https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html.

81 "The COVID-19 Global Response Index," *Foreign Policy*, August 6, 2020, accessed September 30, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/06/the-covid-19-global-response-index/.

82 Pien Huang, "Past CDC Director Urges Current One to Stand Up to Trump," NPR, October 8, 2020, accessed October 8, 2020, https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/10/08/921872526/past-cdc-director-urges-current-one-to-stand-up-to-trump.

83 The Editors, "Dying in a Leadership Vacuum," *New England Journal of Medicine* 383, no. 15 (October 8, 2020), accessed October 13, 2020, https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMe2029812.

84 Barton Gellman, "The Election That Could Break America," *Atlantic*, November 2020, accessed September 24, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/11/what-if-trump-refuses-concede/616424/.

85 Reid J. Epstein, Emily Cochran, and Glenn Thrush, "Trump Again Sows Doubt about Election as G.O.P. Scrambles to Assure Voters," *New York Times*, September 24, 2020, accessed September 29, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/24/us/politics/trump-republicans-election-transition.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage.

86 Editorial, "Let the World Watch the 2020 Election," *Boston Globe*, August 9, 2020, accessed October 6, 2020, https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/08/09/opinion/let-world-watch-2020-election/.

87   United States Institute for Peace, "Questions and Answers with the Editor," September 25, 2020, https://www.usip.org/publications/questions-and-answers-editor.

88   Jesse Rhodes, "Violence Has Long Been a Feature of American Elections," *Conversation*, November 7, 2016, accessed October 9, 2020, https://theconversation.com/violence-has-long-been-a-feature-of-american-elections-67688.

89   Transition Integrity Project, "Preventing a Disrupted Presidential Election and Transition," August 3, 2020, accessed September 29, 2020, https://paxsims.files.wordpress.com/2020/08/preventing-a-disrupted-presidential-election-and-transition-8-3-20.pdf.

90   Robert Malley, "Crisis Group Turns Focus to Risk of Electoral Violence in the U.S." *International Crisis Group*, October 2, 2020, accessed October 13, 2020, https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/crisis-group-turns-focus-risk-electoral-violence-us.

91   Ore Koren, "Election Violence in November? Here's What the Research Says," *Conversation*, September 28, 2020, accessed September 29, 2020, https://theconversation.com/election-violence-in-november-heres-what-the-research-says-146548.

92   Sharon LaFraniere, "Trump Health Aide Pushes Bizarre Conspiracies and Warns of Armed Revolt," *New York Times*, September 14, 2020, accessed September 30, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/14/us/politics/caputo-virus.html. As of this writing, Caputo remains on medical leave.

93   Ben Collins and Brandy Zadrozny, "Proud Boys Celebrate after Trump's Debate Callout," NBC News, September 29, 2020, accessed September 30, 2020, https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/proud-boys-celebrate-after-trump-s-debate-call-out-n1241512.

94   Ewan Palmer, "Proud Boys Supporter Warns of 'Civil War' If Donald Trump Loses Election," *Newsweek*, October 12, 2020, accessed October 12, 2020, https://www.newsweek.com/proud-boys-trump-civil-war-qanon-1538208.

95   Aviya Kushner, "Why We Should Fear Trump's Call to 'Stand Back and Stand By,'" *Forward*, September 30, 2020, accessed September 30, 2020, https://forward.com/culture/455448/why-we-should-fear-trumps-call-to-stand-back-and-stand-by/.

96   US Department of Homeland Security, *Homeland Threat Assessment*, October 2020, accessed October 12, 2020, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/2020_10_06_homeland-threat-assessment.pdf.

97   Michael Balsamo, Michael Kunzelman, and Colleen Long, "Federal, State Law Enforcement Prep for Potential Election-Related Unrest," Huffpost, October 9, 2020, accessed October 9, 2020, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/law-enforcement-prep-for-potential-election-related-unrest_n_5f804543c5b664e5babc5700.

98   Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, Shaila Dewan, and Kathleen Gray, "F.B.I. Says Michigan Anti-Government Group Plotted to Kidnap Gov. Gretchen Whitmer," *New York Times*, October 8, 2020, accessed October 9, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/08/us/gretchen-whitmer-michigan-militia.html.

99   Matt Clement and Vincenzo Scalia, "The Strategy of Tension: Understanding State Labeling Processes and Double-Binds," *Critical Criminology* (March 2020).

100   Larry Diamond, Lee Drutman, Tod Lindberg, Nathan P. Kalmoe, and Lilliana Mason, "Americans Increasingly Believe Violence Is Justified If the Other Side Wins," *Politico*, October 1, 2020, accessed October 7, 2020, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/10/01/political-violence-424157.

101   Phillip B. Levine and Robin McKnight, "Three Million More Guns: The Spring 2020 Spike in Firearm Sales," Brookings, July 13, 2020, accessed October 11, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/07/13/three-million-more-guns-the-spring-2020-spike-in-firearm-sales/.

102   Waller, *Confronting Evil*, 191-192.

103   Alex Yablon, "America Is about to Enter Its Years of Lead," *Foreign Policy*, September 30, 2020, accessed October 2, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/30/america-years-of-lead-political-violence-trump-election/.

About the Author

Dr. James Waller is Cohen Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies and chair of that department at Keene State College in New Hampshire. He is the author of six books, most notably the widely acclaimed *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 2007), *Confronting Evil: Engaging Our Responsibility to Prevent Genocide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), and *A Troubled Sleep: Risk and Resilience in Contemporary Northern Ireland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021). His fieldwork has included research in Germany, Israel, Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Guatemala. Waller also completed certification work in safety and security after violent conflict at Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland (2016).

Waller has held numerous visiting professorships, most recently as an honorary visiting research professor in the George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Justice and Security at Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland (2017). As Senior Director of Academic Programs with the Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities, Waller serves as curriculum developer and lead instructor for the Raphael Lemkin Seminars for Genocide Prevention. These seminars, held on-site and in conjunction with the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, introduce diplomats and government officials from around the world to issues of genocide warning and prevention. Waller also has delivered invited briefings on genocide prevention and perpetrator behavior for the US Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, the CIA Directorate of Intelligence, the International Human Rights Unit of the FBI, and the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center.

In 2017, Waller was the inaugural recipient of the Engaged Scholarship Prize from the International Association of Genocide Scholars in recognition of his exemplary engagement in advancing genocide awareness and prevention. He is frequently interviewed by broadcast and print media, including PBS, CNN, CBC, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Salon*, *National Geographic*, and the *New York Times*.

The author expresses grateful acknowledgment for the research assistance of Cathleen Klem in the preparation of this Analysis and New Insights.

Analysis and New Insights are thought-provoking contributions to the public debate over peace and security issues. The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Stanley Center for Peace and Security. (Cover: A demonstrator gives peace signs while protesting the election of the President of the United States in downtown Los Angeles, California, USA. Reuters/Mario Anzuoni)

About Us

The Stanley Center for Peace and Security partners with people, organizations, and the greater global community to drive policy progress in three issue areas—mitigating climate change, avoiding the use of nuclear weapons, and preventing mass violence and atrocities. The center was created in 1956 and maintains its independence while developing forums for diverse perspectives and ideas. To learn more about our recent publications and upcoming events, please visit stanleycenter.org.