

Democracy in Danger S4 E7 On Edge

Will Hitchcock [00:00:03] Hello, I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:04] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:06] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:11] Will, we've covered some pretty alarming topics on the show over the past two years. One thing we haven't fully discussed is a doomsday scenario. Imagine a situation in which political divisions in the United States take on the characteristics of a civil war. That's what we're considering on today's show. So hold on tight.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:31] Right. And to set this stage, Siva, let's hear a little bit from a leading analyst of world politics, Kevin Casas-Zamora. Our producer and I spoke with him recently. Kevin runs the think tank International IDEA – that's short for Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. It's based in Sweden, and late last year they released their biennial report on the global state of democracy. Here's Kevin.

Kevin Casas-Zamora [00:00:54] We tend to assume, particularly here in the West, you know, we're very much steeped in the notions of the Enlightenment, that progress is inevitable. Well, it's not when it comes to democracy.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:10] So around the world, the picture is not encouraging – no surprises. But get this. For the first time, International IDEA singled out the United States among a host of democracies that are, wait for it, backsliding. Backsliding away from democracy towards something much worse.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:01:30] So basically, they're worried about the same stuff we've been talking about on the show for almost two years.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:37] Right. And this designation of backsliding hinges on certain quite familiar shortcomings.

Kevin Casas-Zamora [00:01:43] What we saw in our measurements was a decline in the ability of Congress to investigate the executive branch, particularly during the administration of President Trump and then the widespread incidents of police brutality that took place during the Black Lives Matter movement in many cities across the U.S. But there are other centrifugal forces. The obscene levels of inequality that we're witnessing all over the world are also a very powerful force that conspires against any effort to build cohesive society. So all those forces are weakening democratic countries.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:02:27] So what he's saying here, straight up, is that a robust democracy depends on civil deliberation, on the ability to protest peacefully, on the operation of checks and balances, right? Some form of accountability. And, of course, a reasonably fair distribution of wealth and opportunity.

Will Hitchcock [00:02:46] Right. And another sign that things are going badly, Kevin said, is when big players institutions begin checking out of the democratic process altogether.

So in the case of the United States, again, this probably won't come as a huge shock, the Republican Party fits this bill. Kevin described the GOP as quote, Semi-loyal, a semi-loyal participant in the political process. And it reminded him of crises he saw and studied while growing up in Latin America.

Kevin Casas-Zamora [00:03:15] One of the really worrying things that we're seeing in the U.S. is that the 2020 electoral result did not change the fundamental trajectory of U.S. democracy. I mean, what we are seeing, sadly, is runaway levels of political polarization, the attempts to suppress participation, the increasing tendency towards questioning the credibility of electoral results, often without any kind of evidence to back up those claims. All those things are worse now than they were before the 2020 election.

Will Hitchcock [00:03:53] And what's so upsetting in Kevin's report is that when the international pro-democracy community looks to the United States for a model, what they find is a cautionary tale in some ways, an anti-model, the thing you don't want to emulate. So Kevin also pointed to some pretty scary consequences for countries once they start backsliding in a crisis atmosphere, just of the kind that we have been facing, a global pandemic and an economic downturn.

Kevin Casas-Zamora [00:04:23] I mean, I can think of the case of El Salvador, where they set up practically concentration camps for people that wouldn't abide by the rules of the lockdown. I can give you the example. In the case of Ethiopia. The decision to postpone the election that was due to happen in mid-2020 had a terrible political effect. I mean, and a lot of what ensued, the internal conflict, had to do with the postponement of that election. I mean, that's one case in which the decision to alter the electoral calendar had terrible effects on a rather promising process of political opening.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:05:05] Look, we're definitely seeing armed conflict emerge in younger and less stable democracies. That's one way of thinking about what's going on in Ukraine right now. Russia is taking advantage of a young democracy's relative weaknesses. And in Guatemala, as Kevin alludes to, we see state violence and gang violence ratcheting up in turn. Over in South Sudan, just to cite one more example, we saw a country slide into conflict not long after coming into existence. And on the heels of that civil war, there was a military coup last October.

Will Hitchcock [00:05:41] Yeah, and Siva, while it, it certainly might seem far fetched that the United States could descend into chaos like some of those countries that you mentioned, well, you'll remember what Barbara F. Walter told us recently that in fact, America could be heading directly into a civil war.

Barbara F. Walter [00:05:58] Yeah, so I'll tell you what we know – the people who study insurgency and violent extremism and civil wars...

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:06:04] Yeah. So look for our listeners, Barbara Walter is an eminent political scientist at the University of California at San Diego. She has been working since the 1990s on developing models that forecast when and where civil wars will break out. And she told us, after all, is said and done, only two factors have any predictive value.

Barbara F. Walter [00:06:27] And the first was this type of government we call anocracy. It's a fancy term for a partial democracy. It's a government that's neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic, it's something in between. And the governments that tend to be

anocracies, they get in this middle zone, either because they're autocracies that are trying to democratize or they're democracies that are backsliding. The second factor is in countries with these partial democracies, whether they begin to form political parties around identity and not around ideology. And then those political parties, they want political power not to share it, but because they want to exclude everybody else.

Will Hitchcock [00:07:13] Siva, when you put what Kevin and Barbara are saying together, it feels like we are in a tinderbox that could blaze up at any moment.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:07:23] Yeah. I mean, we definitely have the tinder. We don't know if we have a spark, right? And you never know when and where a spark might come from. Look, Barbara narrates this one story in the opening lines of her new book *How Civil War Start and How to Stop Them*. Let's pick up that conversation where you asked her about that episode and what it revealed.

Will Hitchcock [00:07:45] Barbara, you start your book with a chilling scene. It's early 2020, early in the pandemic. A dozen or so men have begun meeting in secret to plot a truly dastardly scheme, the kidnaping of Michigan's governor, Gretchen Whitmer. And these men are loosely organized in a self-described militia. They're angry about lockdowns and so on, and they plan not just to kidnap the governor, but to put her on trial and then execute her. Well, this is terrifying stuff. But before the plot can be launched, the FBI sweeps in and arrest the plotters. Now, it might seem to some of us that this is a case of a small group of crazy, misguided men and their dumb plot landed them in jail. But you see it as something much more sinister than that. Why does this particular case alarm you so much?

Barbara F. Walter [00:08:40] Yeah, so we actually know the stages that an insurgency goes through, and we know this because our own CIA has been studying insurgencies around the globe for decades. And I came across one of these manuals online, it's called something like the manual for insurgency, and I want to emphasize that this manual was written not considering the United States at all. It is considering what agents in the field have been seeing around the globe, but not in the U.S. As you're reading it, it's just shocking because you can't help thinking about what's been happening here in the United States over the last, you know, eight, five, eight years. And what for me, what was troubling about the Michigan militia was one how incredibly open it was, that it was beginning to draw in, you know, one of Michigan's biggest militia was involved in that. And, and the question was, you know, is this part of a sustained attack? You know, the big question violent extremist experts and civil war experts with insurgency experts were asking is, is this the start of the insurgency or is it still just isolated things. And you know, obviously it could, it could turn into guerrilla warfare, right? Like a version or even a bigger version of what we saw in Northern Ireland or what we saw in in the two intifadas in Israel. And, you know, in some ways, almost like the Revolutionary War was guerrilla warfare. It was not it was not like the Civil War, it was quite different. And you can imagine, you know, militias around the country who are operating in terrain that's difficult to access where they have a lot of local support, where they can hide from authorities, where they can meld in the population. And in fact, some of the, you know, law enforcement agents in those areas might be quite sympathetic to them.

Will Hitchcock [00:10:41] This is important, but it's, because it reminds us that it's not going to be, you know, Gettysburg. 1863, formal military is marching into battle under, under in different uniforms. I mean, what you're talking about is is a 21st century kind of

insurgency that could grind on for a generation that could be at times very bloody, at times a kind of slow burn. Northern Ireland is a very evocative image.

Barbara F. Walter [00:11:07] Yeah. And the way to think about this is if you were an unhappy group and you're beginning to, you know, try to grow your membership, you've created a military arm, you're training in the snowy hills of Michigan, you're doing all of these things, the last thing you want to do is engage the U.S. military directly.

Will Hitchcock [00:11:27] Unless they're full of sympathizers.

Barbara F. Walter [00:11:30] Yeah. But even so, even so, the U.S. military is so powerful. And so when you have insurgencies in countries with powerful governments and powerful militaries, like with the Catholics against the U.K., the British government or the the Palestinians against the Israeli government, these are powerful, powerful militaries. When that happens, you see a very different type of rebellion, and it's one that takes violence to civilians, it's one that targets infrastructure, it's one that tries to disrupt the economy. It's ones that that really try to sow chaos and inflict costs on society. It does not want to engage the military. That's a losing strategy.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:12:15] Right. It seems like the historical imagination that we have of a civil war is a bunch of men dressed in gray and a bunch of men dressed in blue lining up across a field, representing distinct states that have taken explicit political stands on the major issue of the moment. In that case, the expansion of slavery. So what you're saying is that was pretty much a one off. We are unlikely to see an American Civil War type civil war. We are more likely to see a slow burning insurgency like a Northern Ireland. And I mean, that makes sense to those of us who live in states that are full of such complexity, right? And that means that we, we have to maybe intervene to prevent that in very different ways.

Barbara F. Walter [00:13:05] Yes, yes. So again, a number of things that that listeners might, might not know. Back in 1860, the U.S. military was actually quite weak. It had 16,000 soldiers under arms. That's it, 16,000. They were deployed, most of them were deployed west of the Mississippi to fight Indian uprisings. And so if you were the south, and the south at the time, the Confederate states had their own militias. They had been around for decades. They were established to put down slave uprisings. And so when it became clear that Lincoln was not going to allow the states to secede, they could very easily bring these militias together to form a large conventional army. And it wasn't crazy for them to think that they could defeat the U.S. Military. That is absolutely not the case today, where the U.S. Military has over two million soldiers under arms and the capacity to transport them very quickly anywhere in the country. And the second thing that's really, really different today is demographics. In the south, the southern states were in agreement about secession. The only people who disagreed with that were enslaved people, and they had no rights and no voice. And so they didn't have to worry about large portions of the population within those seceding states who might try to fight against them. That is not the case today. Even the reddest of red states has urban areas with people who don't agree with, with them. And so there is no clear line that you would draw to secede. You would, in your midst, have people by definition who disagree with your goals and your aims.

Will Hitchcock [00:14:52] Well, let me ask you about those goals and aims precisely. So, it's true that the little militias here and they're scattered around aren't just, you know, cells that are unconnected. In fact, they do share a kind of, they're part of a movement. In your

view, what are the ideas that are bringing them together? And then second, what do they imagine winning a civil war to look like? How do they accomplish that?

Barbara F. Walter [00:15:18] So we know who they are. We know that over, about 65 percent of the militia groups are on the Right, actually, which is different from the past in the 60s and 70s. The majority of violent extremist groups here in the United States were on the Left. They were radical environmental groups, they were anarchists, they were animal rights extremists. They were on the Left. That is not the case today. Almost all of the growth has happened on the far-Right. And we know that they're really predominantly two types of violent extremist groups. A majority of them are white supremacist, about 75 percent, and the remainder are mostly anti-federal government groups, and there is overlap between the two. And so when people, people will often say, Well, what about antifa? And antifa does exist, it is a radical left group, but it is tiny. And if you look at the numbers of violent extremist groups on the Left, it absolutely doesn't compare to what's happening on the Right. Almost all of the growth is happening on the Right.

Will Hitchcock [00:16:27] But I mean, the Right. When you say the Right, what do we mean by that? I mean that, many people.

Barbara F. Walter [00:16:33] Yeah, I know I should be specific. Exactly.

Will Hitchcock [00:16:36] Well, I mean there are plenty of people who are conservatives who who accept the label that I'm on the Right. But, but I mean, I think you mean it in a much more radical sense.

Barbara F. Walter [00:16:44] Yes. The radical far-Right is what I mean when I when I say that. It's a particular type, it's people who really, truly believe that the United States is a white Christian country and should remain a white Christian country and its people who really feel that the federal government either shouldn't exist or is grossly overstating its constitutional powers. And they would be happy to get rid of it entirely.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:17:10] OK, so let's talk a bit about the benefits and dangers of hyperbole, right. We currently live in a culture in which hyperbole travels. Hyperbole goes viral. Hyperbole sells, right? So, you know, I mean, I'm struck by the fact that in 1995, when Timothy McVeigh tried to start a civil war, that was his goal, he failed. He failed. It was the notion, even among his confederates, that we were able to have a civil war, that a civil war was something within imagination was just absent. And that might be one of the reasons why very little followed on Timothy McVeigh's actions, right? Very little else happened immediately. In fact, we kind of had a lull for a while until very recently. Now, of course, look, you're talking to a couple of people who live in Charlottesville, Virginia, and after August of 2017, we were the one saying, hey, everybody, wake up. There's some serious stuff going down. And I, for one, was accused of hyperbole in that moment, right? And then we saw what happened in Pittsburgh, and we saw what happened in El Paso. Nonetheless, isn't there something to be said for the fact that resisting the imagination of a civil war is actually part of our defense mechanism against Civil War?

Barbara F. Walter [00:18:33] So I've thought about this question a lot. And I, you know, I study international security and, you know, one of the big concepts that we teach and that we truly believe in is called the security dilemma, where, you know, by beginning to arm yourself strictly for defensive purposes, you make your opponent feel far less secure. They begin to arm themselves more. You interpret this as if they are planning to attack you. You arm yourself more. And it becomes this spiral that leads you to war. And I don't think we're

in a security spiral or a security dilemma, and I don't think talking about it is going to create it. And I'll tell you why. There's really two reasons. One is that I've had the chance to interview a lot of people who lived through Civil War. So in places like Sarajevo and Baghdad and in Kyiv, and they all say the same thing, which is not what I thought they would say. You know, when I would ask them very specifically, tell me what those months leading up to the outbreak of violence were like. Tell me what you saw. Tell me the moment when you thought, oh my God, things have changed. And they all said the same thing. We didn't see it coming. We were surprised. You know, when we look back, we're still surprised that it happened in our cosmopolitan city, in our multicultural country. And they do talk about, oh, you know, we did hear that there is a bombing in the, or a shooting, in the, in the village 50 kilometers away. But we didn't think anything of it. And to be honest, we were busy with our lives. We had, you know, jobs to go to and kids to raise. And you know, we would listen to the radio, we turn on the television and there were explanations for everything that made it not seem so bad. And, and so like my first response is by, by us not talking about it, the problem doesn't go away. We know that these militias are growing. We know that they are expanding. They're very, actually quite upfront about what their intentions are. There were people at on January 6th who were at the Capitol who advertise, you know, Civil War 2.0. So they're, they're being very upfront as violent extremists often are. If you look at Hitler, he published Mein Kampf years before he actually implemented his plot. He was very clear what he intended to do.

Will Hitchcock [00:21:11] Barbara, you spent a lot of time talking about Yugoslavia, and it's a good example because it's so recent. It's fresh in our minds anyway, still. But you know, the bloody civil war in in the Balkans in the 1990s, I would argue, is quite different from the situation in the United States faces in the sense that, you know, Yugoslavia was a political fiction that was created in the early 20th century. You know, it went through a brutal civil war during World War II that led to perhaps a million or maybe even more deaths. It was held together under a communist rule for 40 years by a strongman, Tito. And of course, there were unscrupulous politicians in the 1980s and 90s, Slobodan Milosevic, who were, you know, demagogues and who triggered a lot of, of the violence, but if ever there was a civil war which was over determined it was in Yugoslavia. I know it's considered bad form to say, oh, these are ancient hatreds. But you know what? The ethnic, religious and geographic divisions of Yugoslavia were almost a millennium old. I mean, it was not created by Slobodan Milosevic. They were manipulated by Slobodan Milosevic. So all I'm saying is we could go back and forth on how we see the these individual cases. But is there a risk in your method of filing away some of the specificity of your examples because you see the continuities and the echoes so strongly?

Barbara F. Walter [00:22:29] Yeah. So I think there's actually two questions there. I'm going to take the first one, which is, you know, is the U.S. Different from some of the, you know, are we exceptional? And, and I do think everybody thinks their civil war is exceptional. Everybody thinks that other civil wars in other countries really can't inform anything about their case because, you know, their culture is different, their history is different. And in some respects, that's true. The cultures are different. The histories are different. But again, that's the beauty of statistics. It does show you the larger patterns that people often miss. I'm going to tell you a story. So when I was shopping around my proposal, one of the big publishing houses in Great Britain, they bought it and I had a very long conversation with their incredibly smart, well respected editor. And he said, Oh my gosh, just don't make this about the United States because everybody knows that, you know, the first Civil War was never resolved, that this is predetermined, that the United States is going to have a second civil war, that the racial animosity is still so deep and has never been dealt with. And so he said, exactly what you just said about Yugoslavia, about

the United States. And I do think if you talk to Europeans or you talk to people outside the United States, you know, what they see is that the U.S. is actually not exceptional in any way. They're just like, oh yeah, you know, the Americans like to think they're special. But you know, we see so many parallels with what we've seen, you know, even here, you know, pre-World War II or in Yugoslavia or in Ukraine or in Northern Ireland. And then to your second question, which is about the statistics, you know, you're absolutely right because we're talking about patterns, we're really talking about probabilities. We see this in many cases, in most cases, but obviously we don't see it in all cases, there's always going to be exceptions. And so like when I talk about these two conditions put the U.S. at high risk, right? It doesn't mean for certain that we're going to experience Civil War. It just means that we have the two conditions that we know in the past tend to proceed a lot of civil wars. Will the U.S. be an exception? We could be, but we're much more likely to be an exception if we take care of these two problems that we have.

Will Hitchcock [00:24:52] With that in mind. Let me ask you if there's a case that you can recall in which facing a lot of the kinds of, you know, anxious moments that you describe as being part of that tipping point stage, which managed to avoid the catastrophe of conflict and somehow managed to resolve at least enough of its issues so that it can maintain deliberation and a political life short of violence. Like give us a story of a country that matters to fix some of the worst problems so that they could avoid civil war.

Barbara F. Walter [00:25:21] Well, you know, Mexico is one. It had a long standing insurgency in Chiapas, in southern Mexico, a group that was deeply unhappy and had had mobilized. But it was never really, it never really spread. And Mexico is one of the success cases where it democratized. It went through this middle zone and it came out the other end without really significant political violence. Again, Mexico has issues, but it didn't experience, you know, a civil war that it could have, and experts attribute it to the slow speed that it democratized. It did it very incrementally so that there were really no big losers in the system that had an incentive to mobilize and to fight against it. So, you know, compare that to the rapid democratization that was attempted in Iraq in 2003, when the Americans went in and toppled Saddam Hussein. And they're just like, wow, we can just boom, put a democracy there right away. And instead, what you had was a power vacuum which incentivized all of these competing factions in society to try to grab power as quickly as they could. And then the classic case of avoiding civil war is South Africa, where you had a minority government going in the opposite direction, becoming more repressive, going into Soweto and mowing down children, school children who were peacefully protesting. You know, we thought this was just going to blow up violently and then it didn't. And what happened was the apartheid regime finally agreed to transfer power to the majority of the population, the black majority, and they didn't do this because they suddenly had a crisis of conscience or they suddenly became, you know, moral. They did this in large part because the white business community who was really hurting from economic sanctions placed on the country by the European community and Japan and the United States, their profits were being strangled. They eventually realized that they could either have white apartheid regime or they could have profits, but they couldn't have both. And they decided that they preferred profits and they they told the way government that they were no longer going to support it. And of course, if you lose the white business community and you're facing an enormous black population that wants a voice in government, you know you're becoming increasingly isolated. And they realized that they couldn't survive and they reformed instead.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:27:54] And look as angry as we are in America. Of course, none of us wish for the catastrophe. Now what can and should we do to avoid that fate?

Barbara F. Walter [00:28:06] Yeah, I think the most important thing is just let people know what puts us at risk. And if you're partial democracy, the most important thing you can do is strengthen your institutions, reform your system – that's exactly what they did in South Africa. We know, you know, that countries that have these two features are at a four percent annual risk of civil war. That seems low, but it's not. It means that every year that those two conditions exist, every year that you're a partial democracy and every year that you have, you know, at least one party that's, you know, racially, religiously or ethnically based and predatory, your risk goes up. So if you don't change those factors for 30 years, your risk of political violence and civil war is over 100 percent. So what this tells us is that we have time. We know, we know what matters. We have time to turn this around. And the Republican leadership expanding its tent to be representative of a wider swath of Americans is also critical. You do those two things. Our risk of civil war goes away.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:29:23] Political scientist Barbara F. Walter is a professor in the School of Global Policy and Strategy, and she's the Rohr Chair in Pacific International Relations at the University of California at San Diego. She's a leading expert on extremism and the author of the 2022 book *How Civil Wars Start*.

Will Hitchcock [00:29:42] We heard earlier from Kevin Casas-Zamora, Secretary General of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, based in Stockholm, Sweden.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:29:52] *Democracy in Danger* is part of the Democracy Group Podcast Network. Visit DemocracyGroup.org to find all our sister shows. We'll be right back after this message from our friends.

Justin Kemp [00:30:06] Hello, this is Justin Kemp with a brief thank you for listening to Democracy Group Network podcast. I host *Democracy Paradox*, where I talk to scholars and thought leaders about democracy and world affairs. This week's guest is the legendary, one of the kind, Moises Naim. You can learn more about my podcast at DemocracyParadox.com. Or check out our other great shows on the network at DemocracyGroup.org.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:44] So Siva, civil war in the United States, it has happened before. And what Barbara Walter said about Americans thinking themselves exceptional, different from all these other countries, you know, that is true. We have a long history of exceptionalism thinking we're never subject to the same tempests that other countries face. But I will say that I'm a little skeptical that the data line up right now for America slipping into civil war. We are backsliding, there is no question about that. Just what Kevin said. But the one thing that I think puzzles me and I want to talk about this more is there's not a lot of incentive right now for the party on the right to engage in civil war outside of the institutions of American politics because they are winning control of the institutions of American politics right now.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:31:32] And undermining the power of those they can't win control of.

Will Hitchcock [00:31:36] Right. The system's working for them perfectly. We heard from David Pepper about what they're doing in statehouses. We've heard from our scholars about what they're doing in the courts. We've heard from Carol Anderson about voter suppression, how effective that is at the local level. I mean, they have managed to achieve

control of institutions that have real power. And you know, you think about the militias in people's basements that are plotting to capture the governor. That's horrific. That's horrifying. That's terrorism. But you know what, the FBI found out about those guys and they're in jail now. But what about the seizure of the institutions that's happening within the framework of politics? That frightens me a lot more than the notional future idea of a civil war.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:32:16] I mean, let's also remember that the state Capitol in Lansing, Michigan, was invaded by armed hordes in a sort of preview of what we saw on January 6th in Washington, D.C. So all is not, well, right? The governor of Michigan is still the governor of Michigan and is not kidnaped, and that's lovely. But those institutions that they can't capture, they're trying to either undermine or overthrow. So there's a lot going on. Now, this question of civil war is one that, you know, look, political scientists and historians have been working through their own definitions of it. But you could look at American history, the history of American democracy, and say, we have had a number of low level, long-term civil wars. When I think of the era of intense lynching, frequent lynching roughly 1890 to 1920. You know what was that but a civil war? What was that but an armed effort to reinforce white supremacy? It was an armed conflict, citizen versus citizen. Only one side had arms. We have to remember that. So having a sense of mass violence in which one side has all the weapons and all the power doesn't mean it's not a civil war, right?

Will Hitchcock [00:33:34] But I mean, authoritarians can take power without a civil war. And they can hold power for a very long time. The classic case, and I hope that our listeners aren't tired of hearing about this, but the classic case Germany in the late-1920s and early-1930s.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:33:48] Or Russia in the 1990s.

Will Hitchcock [00:33:50] Or Russia in the 1990s and look where we are today. Exactly, I mean. So in those cases, you have a lot of vested interests that want the same thing, even though they might disagree about how to get there. So same thing on January 6th. You have the Oath Keepers climbing up the steps of the Capitol to try to look for Congress-people that they can lynch. But at the same time, within the institution, you still have a lot of powerful establishment figures who want the same objective, which is authoritarian permanent politics in America. But they're not going to embrace the Oath Keepers because they have another pathway toward that same goal. So they're working in tandem – wink, wink, nod, nod – without necessarily being an organized, unified opposition to the nation.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:34:31] I mean, look, we have so many of the problems that generate civil wars. We have so much violence already. It's a constant part of American life. It's been at a level that, you know, most days of the year, we don't have to pay a lot of attention to it. But even in the nonviolent realm, we see effort after effort, after effort to overthrow or undermine the will of the people and establish pure, unchecked power for certain forces.

Will Hitchcock [00:35:03] I mean, it's possible that what you're saying is that if we stretch our idea of what civil war might look like, right, we're already in one. And if that's the case, and I think that's what Barbara Walter is trying to urge us to think about, then the stakes are enormously high. It's not some future conflict that might happen, but it's trying to identify the crisis that we're in right now.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:35:28] That's all we have for you this week. Next time, we'll talk to historian Margaret O'Mara about the relationship between government and Silicon Valley.

Margaret O'Mara [00:35:36] We can't think about these companies and these people in these platforms, separate from the political economy in which there are growing and rooted.

Will Hitchcock [00:35:45] Stay in touch in the meantime, tag us on Twitter @dindpodcast. That's d-i-n-d podcast, and be sure to share this episode on social media.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:35:54] Our web page is DinDanger.org. It has show notes links to stuff we're reading and lots of related images. You can also take a peek at what's coming up on the show. And let us know what topics you think Will and I should cover before the end of this season.

Will Hitchcock [00:36:10] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol. Jennifer Ludovici is our associate producer. Sidney Halleman edits the show. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell, Jane Frankel and Elie Bashkow.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:36:21] Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. The show is a project of UVA's Deliberative Media Lab. We're distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:36:36] And I'm Will Hitchcock. We'll see you next time.