

Civil War without politics or social context

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Civil War is an action film from A24 studios set in the near-future of an America in the midst of an ongoing internecine war between the federal government, several states and rival militia forces.

The nominal subject of the film—the United States in the last stages of a civil war that has brought society to the brink of barbarism—is clearly of immense relevance and interest. The film has been released in the midst of the 2024 election campaign and just over three years since the fascistic coup of January 6, 2021, in which the incumbent president attempted to overturn the election that he lost and stop the transfer of power.

No doubt this is behind the widespread popular interest in the film. *Civil War* was the number one movie at the North American box office this past weekend, surpassing *Godzilla x Kong*, with an estimated \$25.7 million in ticket sales.

However, *Civil War* provides in the end no explanation of anything. Indeed, it attempts to make a virtue of not even trying to do so.

The film focuses on the journey and internal struggles of a handful of reporters and photojournalists as they make their way from New York City to the besieged White House to get the last words and “final shot” of a president-dictator on his way out.

Civil War stars Kirsten Dunst as photojournalist Lee Smith, with Wagner Moura playing Lee’s reporter colleague, Joel. Cailee Spaeny plays Jessie Cullen, a young photojournalist who idolizes the Dunst character. The excellent character actor Stephen McKinley Henderson rounds out the main cast as Sammy, who we’re told is one of the few remaining journalists at the *New York Times*.

Along the journey, the journalists, with their press helmets, body armor and expensive cameras, witness and photograph scenes of summary executions, torture, firefights and other violence. For the first two-thirds of the film, the Dunst character coldly photographs the carnage while her aspiring protegee Jessie, apparently still clinging to her humanity, crumbles and cries. In the final third of the film, the pair reverse roles, before the deadly, and deeply unsatisfying, conclusion.

Nick Offerman, famous for playing a misanthropic libertarian bureaucrat on the comedy television show *Parks and Recreation*, has only a few minutes screen time as the unnamed President of the United States. His political motivations, his

policies, and what party he belongs to are unknown, although his persona is vaguely Trumpian and he is said to have run for a third term (which would violate the US Constitution). There are passing references to bombing his own people, executing journalists on the South Lawn of the White House, and disbanding the FBI (apparently something to be opposed!)

One other notable performance in the movie is that of Jesse Plemons, who makes an uncredited appearance as a racist and unnerving militiaman sporting rose-tinted glasses and an M-16. In his only scene, Plemons menacingly interrogates the journalists, asking them each, with potentially lethal consequences: “What kind of American are you?”

The film was written and directed by British author, screenwriter, and director Alex Garland. His previous writing credits include the gripping zombie film *28 Days Later* (2002) and the hyper-violent *Dredd* (2012). In 2015, Garland made his directorial debut with the interesting science fiction thriller *Ex Machina*. That movie centers around a computer programmer, his right-wing billionaire boss, and the lifelike and intelligent robots created by the company.

In interviews, Garland said he completed the script of *Civil War* before Trump’s failed coup of January 6, 2021. And while the film occasionally features images of protesters and riot police fighting in the streets (to be interrupted by a bomb explosion), what is most striking about it is what it does not do. There is no attempt to address in any fashion the political, social and historical circumstances that have produced the civil war that is the subject of the movie.

In an interview with the *New York Times* published over the weekend, Garland declares, “I think civil war is just an extension of a situation ... That situation is polarization and the lack of limiting forces on polarization.” As to what causes the polarization and why there are no limits on it, he is silent, and apparently entirely unreflective, as is his interviewer.

Civil War provides a series of images showing brutal violence exploding, not in some distant land, but in the city streets, leafy suburban neighborhoods and seemingly quiet rural towns of the United States. But there is no “why,” not even a hint as to the motives of the participants, let alone the more fundamental “why,” examining the social forces which generate the motives in the minds of men and women.

In one sequence, involving a sniper and two soldiers he has pinned down, Joel asks the soldiers which side they are on and

which side the sniper fights for. Garland narrates the sequence as part of his *Times* interview, quoting from the dialogue he wrote.

One soldier replies to the question, what side are they on, saying, “You don’t understand a word I say.” He turns to Jessie, “Yo. What’s over there in that house?” Jessie replies, “Someone shooting.” That answer satisfies the soldier.

Garland continues, in his own voice, “It’s to do with the fact that when things get extreme, the reasons why things got extreme no longer become relevant and the knife edge of the problem is all that really remains relevant. So it doesn’t actually matter, as it were, in this context, what side they’re fighting for or what the other person’s fighting for. It’s just reduced to a survival.”

Here, literal thoughtlessness is the intended effect.

In the course of the film, Dunst’s character explains that she sent back her photo images from overseas conflicts to tell Americans, don’t do this. Garland evidently adopts the same attitude to the film as a whole: “Don’t have a civil war because it would be terrible.” But without any examination of the causes, such a warning, however well-intentioned, has no substance.

Nor does the refusal to take sides, or the depiction of both sides as essentially equivalent, serve any purpose, artistic or otherwise. A civil war is not, contrary to Garland, just a matter of people being unable to control their disagreements. For society to split into warring camps, there must be more profound causes, and the filmmaker cannot avoid taking a position.

Imagine portraying the American Civil War of 1861-1865 without taking a position on slavery. There would be plenty of bloodshed, but it would all be pointless slaughter. Such an attitude would ultimately resolve into a description of the conflict as “The war between the states,” as the Confederate apologists have labeled it, in which there was no historical right and no moral high ground, occupied by Lincoln and the Union forces. Supposed neutrality would actually mask a pro-Confederate position.

Garland’s film has so many holes in the plot that it is more hole than plot.

There is no explanation why the “Western Forces,” apparently comprised of Texans and Californians of every race and class, decided to take up arms against the US government. There is likewise no explanation for the other factions which are briefly mentioned in the film, including the “Florida Alliance” which includes several southern states, and the “New People’s Army,” comprised of several states in the Pacific Northwest. There are apparently “Loyalist” areas stretching across the Midwest and into New England, although in that case, why does the president remain in Washington rather than retreat to safer territory?

In one scene, a gas station operator rejects American dollars as worthless but eagerly accepts Canadian bills. So evidently, a

civil war raging across the United States has had no significant effect on its northern neighbor. That is only the most obvious geopolitical absurdity in the presentation of an American civil war—in the 21st century!—as a purely national event.

The refusal to take a side or even provide a coherent description of the sides may have been, as Garland says, an artistic choice, however misguided. But it was likely embraced by producers and distributors for other, far more mercenary reasons. You don’t want to make a film which might alienate a portion of the movie-going, ticket-buying public, after all.

This unfortunate conclusion is reinforced when a character in the film says that Lee Smith (Dunst) first made her mark with photos of the “Antifa massacre.” The reference is so deliberately elliptical that the viewer has no idea if this was a massacre conducted by “antifa” or if the anti-fascists were themselves killed by fascist elements.

Crucially, the film gives not the slightest hint of the role of the vast American military machine in the civil war, which is conducted largely with small arms and hand-held rocket launchers, with a later addition of jeeps and helicopters. No artillery, no cruise missiles, no aerial combat, and, obviously, no nuclear weapons.

In contrast to the excellent 1964 American film *Seven Days in May*, which depicts a military coup in the US, *Civil War* does not delve into the critical role the US military would play in supporting a dictatorship in the US.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has previously analyzed, the main danger in Trump’s failed 2021 coup stemmed not from the few thousands fascists who heeded his call to attack the Capitol, but from the institutions of the capitalist state itself, including the Pentagon, which refused to deploy National Guard troops against the January 6 attackers for 199 minutes.

Instead of a serious examination of how democratic forms of rule can, and are, breaking down in the United States, the film alternates tense moments of extreme or potential violence, followed by travel scenes to the accompaniment of pop songs, and discussions about the role of “objective” photojournalism during war.

After six months of genocide in Gaza, in which heroic journalists have risked their lives to detail the daily crimes of the Israeli government, backed by the United States and its allies, the Dunst character’s claim of neutrality and objectivity while photographing civilians being buried in mass graves or blown up while begging for water wears thin.

Overall, *Civil War* fails completely to deliver on what could be a compelling premise.



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