

Gunnar Heinsohn (10 October 2020)

NO NEW CIVIL WAR IN THE USA

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Predictions of a new American civil war can be found in almost all Western media, as well as in the Russian and Chinese press. In the USA, even Thomas Friedman (*1953), the eminent columnist for the *New York Times*, has voiced his concern and despair about a possible civil conflict. In August, Friedman no longer excluded the possibility that America was headed toward the "end of our democracy" and a subsequent "[civil war](#)".¹

In September on CNN, four days before the crucial Biden-Trump debate, Friedman went even further: "You know, I began my career as a journalist covering Lebanon's second civil war [1975-1990] in its history, and I'm terrified to find myself ending my career as a journalist covering America's potential second civil war in its history."²

Could Friedman be right? Is there another Fort Sumter in America's future?

When making comparisons between events that are separated by more than 160 years, it's a good idea to check for similar conditions. Unfortunately, historians don't agree on the driving factors behind the Civil War. A moral struggle between abolitionists and slave owners defines the prevailing narrative. There is much to suggest, however, that if the South had renounced secession, a majority of Americans would not have wanted war. Moreover, there were advocates at that time who wanted to buy the freedom of slaves. That is, for compensating their owners. Thus, the emancipation movement was not without alternatives.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/18/opinion/2020-voting-postal-service.html>

² <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/politics/2020/09/25/tom-friedman-potential-second-civil-war-ac360-vpx.cnn>

Clearly, the situation was explosive. Scholars agree there was no lack of fighting spirit and brave young men on either side. Even before the war began, there had been violence, especially in Kansas. It is here that we find a clue to why political disagreement exploded into war.

The hero and martyr of the North was the Southerner John Brown (1800-1859). Among his twenty children he had eleven sons. The seven who reached adulthood helped their violently abolitionist father kill pro-slavery settlers in Kansas. Two years before the outbreak of the Civil War, Brown was hanged for murder and treason after seizing the federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. His honorary song "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah" became a second national anthem. To this day, this most noble Battle Hymn of the Republic also can be heard as a funeral march. It was played at the funerals of John F. Kennedy or Ronald Reagan. Even at the entombment of Winston Churchill the song of the slave liberator was performed.

Fast forward to September, 2020. For months now, there have been bloody clashes between BLM and Antifa activists and their opponents. Despite all the riots, arson, bloodshed and looting, 55 percent of adult Americans still support "Black Lives Matter/BLM". Among Whites, however, the figure is only 45 percent.³ This shows a veritable split in America's strongest ethnic group.

Parallels between then and now can definitely be found. However, one essential difference remains hidden. Today, the USA has a war index⁴ of only 1. In other words, 1,000 men between 55 and 59 years of age, who will soon retire, are followed by 1,000 young men who have to take up the struggle of life. Moreover, among 17-24 year old Americans, only 29 percent are considered physically and cognitively fit for military service.⁵ Of the approximately 34 million people in this age group, about 24 million would have to be rejected if they applied for the

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/16/support-for-black-lives-matter-has-decreased-since-june-but-remains-strong-among-black-americans/>

⁴ <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/afghanistan-russia-and-the-war-index>

⁵ <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/the-looming-national-security-crisis-young-americans-unable-serve-the-military>

military. Even the fiercest belligerent terminology, thus, finds itself in stark contrast with a ever more fragile military demography.

We do not know America's war index of 160 years ago. The reason for this is that the size of the total population can be reliably determined, but not the strength of the individual cohorts. But we can circumvent that problem by comparison with countries of the present, whose total populations are developing similarly to America's population in the past. Their age-group sizes for the period after 1950 can be called up at the UN with a few mouse clicks ⁶

We select the 65-year history of Iraq from 1950 to 2015 and compare it with American history from 1800 to 1965, during which the U.S. grew from 5.3 to 35.2 and Iraq from 5 to 35 million inhabitants. In the Civil War the USA suffered about 630,000 deaths. In Iraq, where the war index exceeded 3.5 in 1970 and was 5.8 in 2015, the losses in a whole series of wars – counted from 1961 onward – top 700,000.

With a mechanical 1:1 conversion, America would have achieved a war index of 3.5 in 1820 and 5.8 in 1865. However, one may assume that due to youthful immigration, the number of American births at that time was higher than in modern Iraq (7 to 5 in a woman's life from 1950). Nevertheless, John Brown's twenty children was not the norm even then. Iraq makes up for this deficit to some extent through better medical care, i.e. through lower infant mortality.

A round index of 6 during the US Civil War should be a reasonable approximation. So on both sides families can lose several sons without erasing their bloodlines. Accordingly, sons have little chance of becoming the family heir. Out of this population of young men, heroism recruits its personnel for victory or death on the battlefield.

⁶ <https://population.un.org/wpp/>

With a war index of 1 today against 6 back then, anyone who fears or even hopes for a massive outbreak of civil bloodshed in the America of 2020 should think again. The author is prepared to make a fool of himself with the prognosis that even among the 330 million Americans of today – regardless of all the shootings still to come – there will not even be a fraction of the victims of the Civil War when America had only 35 million inhabitants.

I would caution Thomas Friedman that – in the face of ever more brutal triggers – the danger of a new civil war in Lebanon is probably invoked even more frequently than for America. In this small nation of the eastern Mediterranean, the war index at the beginning of the fighting in 1975 was 5.1. Yet, today it is 1.8 and for 2030 only 1.1 is calculated. One should remain on guard about the possibility of civil wars in both nations, but we should not be overly pessimistic.

One does not wish to think that Friedman's alarm about possible civil war in America was merely intended to create a new kind of national fear of Trump. But after the president's withdrawal of troops from the Middle East and Afghanistan – Friedman could not very well portray Trump as an *international* warmonger.

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