

Nygaard Notes

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Crime. Fear. Us. Them.

Violent crime in the United States went up quite a bit in the first year of the pandemic. But the rate is still pretty low if you look a little further back than two years.

The Brennan Center reported in July that “Between 1991 and 2014, the national murder rate plummeted by more than 50 percent, from 9.8 to 4.4 killings per 100,000 people. By comparison, the murder rate for 2020 stood at around 6.5 — a rate last seen in the late 1990s but still well below the high point of the last quarter century.”

A couple of weeks after that, the NYT echoed the statistic about violent crime falling by 50 percent over a quarter century, and pointed out that “for most of that time, a majority of Americans told Gallup that crime was up compared to the year before.”

This inflated fear of crime is due in part to the intentional inflating of that fear—and the anger that often accompanies it—by politicians who know that fearful, angry people often vote for leaders who appear to be “tough,” and who promise to protect them from crime.

And so it has been for many, many years. Crime goes up,

crime goes down—for a million reasons—and people vote their fear and anger, electing leaders who divide the world into victims and perpetrators, good guys and bad guys, the deserving and the undeserving. Into Us and Them.

Like a campfire in a drought-stricken forest, the lighting of a “vote for me” fire can be the spark that ignites a conflagration that imperils us all.

In the age of election denial and the myth-making known as social media, we are careening into uncharted—and dangerous—territory. The familiar fear of crime is increasingly metastasizing into a terror of disaster. The threat of physical harm to someone we know becomes an existential threat to all that we hold dear. Voting becomes increasingly pointless, as any government that we might elect is seen to be too weak to act or too corrupt and tyrannical to act in the right way. And, in any case, elections are fixed, rigged, designed to benefit Them no matter how many people vote for Us.

And if you don’t know who “Us” is, you must be one of “Them”! So watch your back. ♦

Heading Toward Civil War?

“More than 40% of Americans Think Civil War Likely Within a Decade; More than Half of ‘Strong Republicans’ Think Such a Conflict Is at Least Somewhat Likely, Poll Finds.”

That was the headline in the London Guardian on August 30. But one needn’t go across the Atlantic to hear such alarming comments. Aiming one’s search engine toward “civil war 2022” will bring up 46 million hits. So, something is going on.

During the summer the folks over at The Violence Prevention Research Program (VPRP) at the University of

California, Davis decided to look into headlines like this. Alarming? Or alarmist? They decided to team up with the research firm Ipsos to ask people not just about civil war, but how they feel about political violence in general, and the feelings that might lead someone to go there. To employ or endorse political violence, that is.

The results “went beyond my darkest expectation,” said Dr. Garen J. Wintemute, the director of the VPRP and an emergency room physician.

What were those dark results? Here are some of the

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Greetings,

This issue of Nygaard Notes explores the possibility that we are on the brink of a new Civil War in this country. It's Part One of a who-knows-how-many-part series in which I'll be looking at public attitudes about political violence, the power of symbols, the nature and causes of white terror, and what a 21st-Century Civil War might actually look like. I hope to talk about the first Civil War in the United States, about the period known as Reconstruction, and about the backlash known as Redemption. I'll likely mention the Ku Klux Klan, the Proud Boys, scalawags and carpetbaggers, President Andrew Johnson and President Donald Trump. I've uncovered quotes galore from experts who have studied the history of the Civil War and the myth of The Lost Cause.

I'll be talking about the Colfax Massacre of 1873, which was sparked by a disputed election in 1872, exactly 150 years ago. What, you've never heard about the Colfax Massacre? I hadn't either, until I started researching what can happen in a racially-stratified "democracy" when its elections are delegitimized. Well, that's for a future Nygaard Notes. Right now, let's have a look at the increasing acceptance of violence as a way to resolve political differences in the 21st-Century USA.

Peacefully yours,
Nygaard

Civil War *from page 1*

highlights (if one can call them that) from their survey of 8,620 people, a summary of which was released to the public on July 18:

- 67.2% of respondents perceive there is "a serious threat to our democracy."
- 50.1% agree that "in the next several years, there will be civil war in the United States."
- 42.4% agreed that "having a strong leader for America is more important than having a democracy."
- 41.2% agreed that "in America, native-born white people are being replaced by immigrants."
- 18.7% agreed strongly or very strongly that violence or force is needed to "protect American democracy" when "elected leaders will not."
- 20.5% think that political violence is at least sometimes justifiable "in general."

What is "political violence," you may wonder. The definition I like is "physical harm or intimidation that affects, or is intended to affect, who benefits from or can participate fully in political, economic, or sociocultural life." That's according to Rachel Kleinfeld, senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, about whom we'll hear more in a little bit.

Among participants who considered political violence to be at least sometimes justified to achieve a specific objective, 12.2% were willing to commit political violence "to threaten or intimidate a person," 10.4% "to injure a person," and 7.1% "to kill a person."

Among all participants, nearly 1 in 5 thought it was at

least somewhat likely that within the next few years, in a situation where political violence was justified, "I will be armed with a gun." Four percent thought it at least somewhat likely that "I will shoot someone with a gun."

I mentioned political scientist Rachel Kleinfeld; she testified a few months ago before the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, where she put these survey results in context. She said, "Acceptance of political violence has been rising sharply over the past five years. The acceleration in violent incidents from 2016 to 2020 – and their probable fall in 2021 – does not mean the threat has receded. Instead, it tells us something about the nature of the threat and its causes. The trends we see in the spring of 2022 are indicative of violent behavior in the U.S. that can be motivated spontaneously by social events and can be directed purposefully for political goals. Politically-catalyzed violence should be expected to rise with the election calendar and to fall between campaigns. The damage that this violence itself, and the conspiracies driving it, are causing to our democracy are already substantial and are likely to produce significant democratic decline if not arrested soon."

Is Dr. Kleinfeld being alarmist? After all, people say things to poll-takers that they may never actually act on. But still, when two-thirds of respondents think that "democracy" is under serious threat, when that threat is racialized, and when half of all respondents expect a civil war to break out, the conditions are right for formerly-fringe ideas to move into the mainstream. And that—as the following article will indicate—is exactly what is happening. ♦

“It’s Very Easy to Pick a Side.”

On New Years Day 2022, the lengthy headline in the Washington Post read, “1 in 3 Americans Say Violence Against Government Can Be Justified, Citing Fears of Political Schism, Pandemic; The Washington Post-University of Maryland Poll, Coming a Year after the Jan. 6 Attack on the Capitol, Marks the Largest Share of Americans to Hold That View since the Question Was First Asked More than Two Decades Ago.” The Post quoted a 32-year-old Republican who said “I don’t want to sound like a conspiracy theorist but sometimes it feels like a movie. It’s no longer a war against Democrats and Republicans. It’s a war between good and evil.”

In July the NY Times Magazine ran a story headlined “How ‘Stop the Steal’ Captured the American Right.” Reporter Charles Homans wrote about what he saw and heard when he attended a number of right-wing political rallies, including a Trump rally in Greensburg PA in May. There he encountered “muddy pop-up boulevards with TRUMP WON flags and kiosks selling LET’S GO BRANDON T-shirts that had been following Trump’s rallies from state to state, on and off, for months or years.” (“Let’s Go Brandon” is MAGA Republican code for “Fuck Joe Biden.” If that seems impossibly weird, go online and look up “Let’s Go Brandon” to find out how this came to be.)

Homans asked attendees “what they thought about the last election or the next one.” To which a rallygoer from Ohio named Jill Wood responded “It starts with the British royal monarchy and the Vatican that are controlling everything. There’s only two teams: Team Jesus and Team Lucifer. And it’s very easy to pick a side.”

It’s not just the bewildered herd who believe such things. Consider a candidate for Congress named Joe Kent.

Kent is the Republican nominee for Congress in the Third Congressional District in Washington State, which is south of Seattle and just across the Columbia River from Portland Oregon. One week after he won the nomination, Kent spoke at a meeting of Clark County Republicans, where (according to KGW-TV in Portland) he “claimed that the stakes would be high in the coming election because ‘the far left, the globalists, the administrative state’ were unified against conservatives. ‘Because it’s clear right now, there’s two sides—one side wants complete and total control and will do anything to get it,

and then there’s us.”

The Associated Press reported in July that Kent “has also courted prominent white nationalists and posed recently for a photograph with a media personality who has previously described Adolf Hitler as a ‘complicated historical figure’ who ‘many people misunderstand.’”

Back in January, NPR reported that The COVID States Project had conducted a survey in which 23,000 people across the country were asked whether violent protest is ever justifiable. “Nearly 1 in 4 said violence was either definitely or probably justifiable against the government. A similar percentage of liberals and conservatives agree on this point.”

Reporter Matthew Schwartz noted “a more striking finding from that same poll: One in 10 Americans say violence is justified right now. And among Republican men, it’s nearly 1 in 5.”

(The COVID States Project is a pretty interesting bunch. Go look: <https://www.covidstates.org/>)

Poll results on this topic are remarkably consistent. Here are a couple of lines from a CBS News Poll conducted in August. The poll asked, “In America today, do you think it can be acceptable for people to use force or violence to try to achieve political goals, if they feel it is necessary, or are force and violence always unacceptable?” 14 percent said it “can be acceptable.”

And to this question—“Right now, would you favor or oppose dividing the United States into two separate countries where one is made up of ‘blue’ Democratic states and the other is made up of ‘red’ Republican states?”—nearly 1 in 4 (24 percent) either “strongly” or “somewhat” favor disunion. So much for E Pluribus Unum.

Which reminds me of that other survey I mentioned, the one where 50.1 percent agree that “in the next several years, there will be civil war in the United States.”

Is the mainstreaming of such formerly-fringe ideas—“Team Lucifer” and secession and the OK’ing of anti-government violence and the rest—no more than bluster, bravado, or propaganda? Or is the increasing acceptance of such ideas a warning of things to come?

To be continued... ◆

“Quote” of the Week

“They don’t see their privilege, but they do see their own social decline.”

Last January the University of California’s Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation (IGCC) interviewed Barbara F. Walter, author of a book called *How Civil Wars Start – and How to Stop Them*. Here’s a taste of what she said:

Most people think that civil wars are started by the poorest groups in society, the most discriminated groups, the immigrants, the people who are abused. That’s generally not the case. Civil wars are often started by groups that political scientists call ‘sons of the soil.’ These are groups who have historically been dominant politically and economically, but have either lost power or believe they will lose power. These are the groups that feel they’re the rightful heirs to a country.

One of the interesting things about sons of the soil across the world, is that they don’t see their privilege. To them, the fact that the country’s official language is their language is the way it should be. The fact that they celebrate their holidays is the way it should be. They don’t see their privilege, but they do see their own social decline. They see other groups in society who are doing better than them, and that creates a lot of resentment.

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