

# Are We Headed For A Civil War?

---

September 15, 2024

Steve Ramer, Pastor

## Scriptures: Luke 6:27 - 37 (Ramer International version)

*"If you're really listening to me, you will love your enemies and you will even do favors to those who hate you! I want you to bless those who curse you and to pray even for those who abuse you.*

*"If you have extra, then give it to those in need and if anyone takes your stuff, don't ask for it back.*

*"Treat others as you want them to treat you. You won't get any extra credit if you only love those who love you back. Don't even those "other folks" whom you despise manage to do that? And doing favors only to those who do favors for you, is no different that what your enemies do.*

*"Instead, you must love your enemies, expecting nothing in return. That is the stuff the children of God are made of. You need to be merciful, compassionate, and forgive others just as your Devine Parent has shown you mercy, compassion and forgiveness. And don't be stingy, 'cause God has never been stingy with you!"*

## Sermon

In a recent Op-Ed piece in the Washington Post, John Paul Lederach, professor emeritus of international peace building at the University of Notre Dame, senior fellow at Humanity United, and a self-described practitioner who has been engaged with peace processes around the world for the past four decades said, "Such a question isn't preposterous."

Lederach also just happens to be a cradle Mennonite and author of "The Pocket Guide for Facing Down a Civil War." In his Op-Ed he opined that, "In other places I have worked, deliberate toxic polarization — exclusion, political control and the dehumanizing of adversaries — has contributed to repeating cycles of armed conflict. Once unleashed, wars become very hard to end." And he adds, "We are not exempt."

While the divisions in our country are not at all new, it does seem that in recent years, we have witnessed a significant fraying of our social fabric. Lederach points out that, "Public officials and their families have come under assault, as have many civil servants and even ordinary folk. Indeed, a survey in May found that nearly half of Americans think a civil war in our country is either likely or very likely." But, he adds, "not all the news is bad." "I've worked in war-torn countries, and I've seen what works. People need to leave their bubbles."

He also refers to results of new research published in late July by the organization, "More in Common, US" that discovered, that across partisan divides, Americans greatly overestimate the willingness of their adversaries to use violence. This means, according to their conclusions, we have a rare

opportunity, right now, to de-escalate the situation before more violence can occur. They titled their study, "We should not allow violence to be our answer."

When societies are polarized, election seasons are times when, according to experts, the risk of civil violence is magnified. Even so, the image of a bloodied presidential candidate being pulled to the ground by their Secret Service detail is still chilling. In the aftermath of that shooting, conspiracy theories flew, investigations were launched, Americans of all political tribes expressed deep concerns and many public officials quickly began pointing fingers at who was to blame. Many of us are also likely asking whether this may be an indication of more violence to come and a needed wake-up call to tone down the rancor?

More In Common's interviews resulted in three key insights. First, support for political violence in the US is overestimated. In the wake of the recent assassination attempt, they asked Republicans if they felt justified in using violence against Democrats. They also asked Democrats what percentage of Republicans that they thought would feel justified in resorting to using violence. The study found that 13 percent of Republicans agreed, either strongly or somewhat, with the statement, "Violence against Democrats is now justified." Democrats, on the other hand felt that 47 percent of Republicans would agree with that statement - almost four times higher! Independents believed that 38 percent of Republicans would feel that violence was justified.

Second, after the assassination attempt, 71% of all their respondents expected more civil violence. And since many Americans have been feeling the impacts of political division for some time, researchers have consistently found that a strong majority of Americans feel exhausted by political divisions. Past studies show that 65% of Americans are concerned about extremists in both parties and 86% of Americans think that the greatest threat to the US is coming from within.

Third, Democrats and Independents with larger perception gaps are more likely to be concerned about future violence. Democrats and Independents with the highest gap in inaccurate perceptions of the level in Republicans' support for political violence also were more likely to believe that civil violence is inevitable. In deeply polarized societies, individual acts become more dangerous because of their potential to cascade into something far worse. Rumors and disinformation can spread instantly through social media and agitators can exploit these moments to create a sense of immediate threat, chaos and the need for retaliation.

And sadly, many of the risk factors for outbreaks of civil violence here in the US are now in place. That means it's imperative that even everyday citizens take action! We must first prevent violence from becoming normalized, as well as take action to reduce misperceptions. It matters when we accept the worst caricatures of each other. When one side thinks the other side is willing to engage in political violence it actually becomes more tolerant of violence.

But the experts also say that there is no inevitability that violent political acts will have to escalate. We can pause the escalation and our society can pull back from the brink. In fact, in the days after the assassination attempt in Pennsylvania, a lightning-fast study found support for partisan violence

actually decreased among both Democrats and Republicans. Many saw this event not as a moment for retaliation but an opportunity to unite with one voice against political violence.

Lederach believes that what has worked in other places can also work in the U.S. First, he says, we need to reach beyond our isolated bubbles. In other places, reaching out frequently started with a few people who had imagination and the willingness to take a small risks by daring to start a conversation with their perceived enemies. Second, we have to “re-humanize” our adversaries. We must have the courage to confront dehumanizing language and behavior, especially when it comes from within our closest circles. And he adds, we must refuse to belittle others and stay curious about other folks and their lives. We can and must speak about our own deeply held convictions but without blame, retreat or demonization.

Finally, he says, we need to stick with it. We can’t just pull away when difficult issues emerge or the conversations get harder. We must engage in policy but also acknowledge deep-seated fears, historic wrongs, and identity differences. People who learn to stay the course know that politics without violence is possible, but only when we stay connected.

All this may be extremely difficult, but it is not nearly as difficult as ending the circle of violent retaliation or stopping a war. After all, Lederach reminds us, “The best way to end a civil war is to stop it before it happens.” He ends his piece however with a tough question, “Will Americans have the courage to nurture these initiatives, demonstrating that politics — honest partisan politics — can thrive without violence? I believe we can, and we must.”

As Mennonites, I believe that we might just be uniquely equipped to be of crucial service in helping our nation avoid political violence. After all we have always supposedly embraced what the MIC study states as the crucial starting point, that: “We should never allow violence to be our answer.”

We are, I think, uniquely positioned to advocate for, and express thorough actual experience and to prophetically preach as well, that violence is never the answer even to genuine grievances or the very real experience of harm done to us by others.

By taking the option of a violent response off the table we can then put into practice those things that we all know can both repair our social fabric and build true and lasting peace. But it may require us to take some risks!