

VOICES

Our anxious house

Summertime, sweltering and stressful, makes our cold civil war feel hot. The madness and violence of last year crested in the summer, with the shootings of cops in Dallas and Baton Rouge. Now the dog days are here again, and with them a new spasm — white supremacists with tiki torches, antifa and the alt-right going at it, a white nationalist running down protesters, a little Weimar re-enactment in the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia.

So while the president blathers about how some of the torchbearers were fine people, other people are talking about whether we could have a civil war for real. In *The New Yorker*, Robin Wright quotes a State Department expert on internecine conflict whose personal estimate is that “the United States faces a 60 percent chance of civil war over the next 10 to 15 years.” Lest you doubt his science, he was part of an informal poll by the military journalist and historian Tom Ricks earlier this year, which produced the lower but still notable consensus estimate that we have a 35 percent chance of falling into civil war.

What do these bets mean? Their language evokes our own 1860s, 1930s Spain or contemporary Syria. But Ricks says he means something narrower — a period more like the late 1960s and early 1970s, with serious and sustained political violence and widespread resistance to political authority, but without Chancellorsvilles. That seems more plausible than what people usually mean by civil war.

The underlying reason people are worried is a plausible one: America’s divisions are genuinely serious, our cold civil war entirely real.

Our divisions are partisan: The parties are more ideologically polarized than at any point in the 20th century, and party loyalty increasingly shapes not just votes but social identity, friendship, where you live and whom you hope your children marry.

Our divisions are religious: The decline of institutional Christianity means that we have no religious center apart from Oprah and Joel Osteen, the metaphysical gap between the secularist wing of liberalism and religious traditionalists is far wider than the intra-Christian divisions of the past, and on the fringes you can see hints of a fully post-Christian and post-liberal right and left.

Our divisions are racial and ethnic and class-based and generational, conspicuously so in the Trump era. And they are geographic: The metropolis versus the hinterland, the coasts against the middle of the country. It would not be hard to sketch lines on a map partitioning the USA into two or three or four more homogeneous and

perhaps more functional republics.

Our divisions induce a particular anxiety because each of our two main factions reigns supreme in one particular arena. Conservatism is (somehow) politically dominant, with control of the legislative and executive branches and a remarkable power in the states. Meanwhile liberalism dominates the cultural commanding heights as never before, with not only academia and the media but also late-night television and sports-writing and even young-adult fiction more monolithically and — to conservatives — oppressively progressive.

So both sides have reasons to feel threatened, disempowered and surrounded; both can feel as though they exist under a kind of enemy rule.

Thus described, it may sound remarkable that we haven’t plunged into domestic chaos and civil strife already. But not every American is a partisan, there is still more to life than politics for most of us, and under the right circumstances people with deep differences can live together in peace for a great while — so long as events do not force a crisis.

If you asked me to script a path from where we are today to a period of violent division or disunion, I would invent a character with some of the qualities of a Trump and some of an Emmanuel Macron — a charismatic leader who appeals not just to the extremes but to some populist or technocratic center, and who promises an escape from polarization and division and from the gridlock that those divisions have induced.

Then I would have this character retain his mystique more successfully than usual for recent presidents, and use it to pursue an agenda at once extra-constitutional and fairly popular, so that institutions would either struggle to contain him or simply surrender in a way they won’t for our current chief executive. Then add the right crisis, or the right cascade of them, and imagine one side or the other in our current cold civil war seeking actual “Second Amendment remedies” or forming a for-real Resistance against presidential tyranny — and suddenly you could have the kind of strife that the experts cited by Wright and Ricks seem to be envisioning.

But watching Trump stagger and Macron’s poll numbers sink, I would still judge my imagined scenario remote.

Things are getting worse in many ways, and the rest of the Trump era does not promise much in the way of healing and reconciliation. But despite what scripture tells us, in politics a house divided against itself can sometimes stand for quite a while — so long as most people prefer its roof to the rain and wind, and relatively few have a clear and pressing incentive to start knocking down the walls.

The tedious task of controlling the oxeye

After a restless, cold and rainy night, my dazed mind is occupied by the thought of the seemingly inevitable future of our environment. I have been pulling the noxious weed oxeye daisy for hours. Now, fields of white, consumed by the invasive species, haunt my conscious. End to end, it looks as if an early fall snow has dusted the field, every inch of every foot being robbed of its nitrogen by the relentless weed. Unfortunately, my nightmare isn’t far from true. The pretty little flowers, native to Asia and Europe, now take over entire fields in much of North America, New Zealand and Australia.

Because the flower is invasive, it prevents other species from growing near it, forming what is called a monoculture. Where hundreds of species once thrived, three or four now remain because of the domination of the oxeye. As a result, many government agencies control the weed with pesticides and other means of removal.

After finding the daisy all the way from Silverton to Telluride, I wonder how this species was originally spread. The answer appears

in someone’s flower box. That’s right, people still grow these daisies as pretty little flowers. In fact, this is how the outbreak on the Telluride Valley Floor started. After someone decided to plant it in Mountain Village, the seeds

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GEORGE THORNEYCROFT

were able to travel down into the valley through rainfall. So while the government spends large amounts of money on removing oxeye, people continue to plant them and introduce them into ecosystems across the country.

Employees and interns from Mountain Studies Institute, the nonprofit research and education center based in the San Juans, spend many hours removing the flowers from the surrounding landscape. As an intern myself, I have experienced the overwhelming sense of looking out at a field of white oxeye and thinking there is no way to remove the entirety of the weeds. And then I think, this is one field, one of the millions spreading across the country. The idea is soul crushing.

Although making even the smallest dent in a population of oxeye daisies is incredibly tedious, it is the effort that is needed to control the noxious weed. By pulling one flower, one

is actually keeping thousands of its seeds from entering the seed bank. It is this knowledge that creates the motivation for me.

Simply getting out there and pulling as many as I can for one afternoon, contributing to the greater effort to remove the plant, can get me the satisfaction that outweighs the hopelessness of the invasive plant’s situation. If everyone got out there and pulled the weed, oxeye would no longer be the daunting problem they are now.

Our environment is filled with enormous issues that can seem endless and unwinnable. Problems such as conservation and climate change can seem distant — as if no one person can do anything to contribute. But in reality, the hardest part is understanding that you can do something to help. Get out there and remove a few invasives if you want to help. The satisfaction is there.

On this particular night, I sleep soundly in my tent, dreaming about a field only half full of oxeye, trash bags packed full with pretty little flowers behind tired interns.

George Thorneycroft is a Norwood resident and a student at Telluride Mountain School.



DOONESBURY GARRY TRUDEAU

Trump’s about-face on the opioid crisis

President Trump’s “major briefing” recently on the opioid epidemic — held the same day the federal government reported record-high overdose deaths — spurns his own commission’s public health-oriented recommendations in favor of tough-talking, enforcement-centered policies that have already been shown not to work.

In 2015, we lost about 142 Americans every day to overdoses, “a death toll equal to September 11th every three weeks,” notes the July 31 report from the president’s panel — and the toll is still climbing. The fatal overdose rate in 2016 reached a record 19.9 deaths per 100,000

population between July and September, compared to 16.7 per 100,000 over the same period in 2015, according to federal estimates released Aug. 8.

On the heels of this devastating news, the president announced his new policies.

Instead, he doubled down on ineffective current ones, calling for more abstinence-based addiction treatment and vowing to ramp up drug prosecutions and tighten drug sentences.

The president’s tragically shortsighted proposals are at odds with the recommendations of his Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis, which formally urged Trump to take steps that could make a real difference, like de-

claring a state of emergency — which would allow states or communities deemed addiction “disaster zones” to use federal funds for things like addiction treatment or the overdose-reversal medication naloxone.

The panel also called for equipping all police officers in the U.S. with naloxone; increasing the use of medication-assisted treatment; expanding the number of treatment beds; cracking down on synthetic opioids, and broadening legal protections for people who seek help for overdose victims.

As a presidential candidate, Donald Trump pledged to help those struggling with addiction. As president, he’s squandering an opportunity to follow through on his promise.

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