

James Waller, “The Escalating Risk of Mass Violence in the United States”

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Escalating political violence in the United States raises red flags regarding the erosion of democratic ideals and reveals growing distrust in political and governmental processes. Had these symptoms developed elsewhere, risk analysts would have instituted precautions and the international community would have increased surveillance of the situation. Governance in the US has become increasingly fragile and, while not yet a failing state, its democratic institutions are in decline according to James Waller, an expert on genocide prevention and Cohen Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Keene State College. Invited to deliver the annual Asher Family Lecture, Waller addressed the causes and factors for mass violence.

Waller identified four major categories for assessing risk: governance, memory, economic conditions, and social fragmentation. Governance assesses regime type (democracies tend to be the most stable form of governance), determines whether there is a state legitimacy deficit (the belief, positive or negative, that the citizenry acknowledges the authenticity of governing agencies), and evaluates weaknesses in state structures that include infrastructure, education systems, and government institutions. Democracies around the globe are in the midst of a steady, albeit slow moving, decline. The gap between those who believe in government and those who do not in conjunction with the decline and breakdown of infrastructural systems can predict the likelihood for mass violence to escalate in a given country.

Waller's second risk category encompasses memory and identity. History education, especially in regions where violent conflicts remain unresolved, influences how states and their citizens act in times of uncertainty and crisis. Identity tensions can further threaten governments that are already at risk. Past genocides, as well as sociocultural trauma, are often a significant predictor of future genocidal conflicts. As an example, Waller cited the "soul trauma" experienced by Native Americans caused by, among other things, the US government's forcible removal of children and the concentration of Natives onto reservations. Waller also highlighted the digital shaping of memory and its exponential reach, as well as the advent of social media and the ways in which it lowers trust in community and can incite violence (as was proven at the U.S. Capitol on 6 January). In these instances, memory is weaponized by using the past to intrude on the present.

Economic uncertainty triggers the third risk category. The lack of macroeconomic stability can weaken societies as is seen in states that rely heavily on one major source of capital to support their economies. The coronavirus pandemic has impacted the economy across many sectors but played a major role in curbing the hospitality and tourism industries. Yet, the financial consequences are not equally distributed and the impact has widened existing societal divides. In the United States, economic inequality has often sparked violence, whether as a response to inequality or in an effort to reinforce it. Social fragmentation, the fourth category, addresses unequal access to basic goods and services and the centrality of social identity. Inequality sharpens social and cultural differences, especially during crises, further deepening the divide between various members of society.

Waller concluded by stressing the importance of acknowledging that “this is who we are.”

Instances of violence in the United States, such as occurred during the 6 January storming of the capitol, are symptoms of a larger societal problem. Rising polarization in the US population will continue until we recognize and acknowledge its ever-growing presence. There was a certain naivety in thinking that political violence would never happen in the United States and we can no longer ignore the ongoing threat. It is imperative to understand the risk factors and to take steps designed to improve the political, economic, and social conditions in the United States and beyond.

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