

This model forecast the US's current unrest a decade ago. It now says 'civil war'

[abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/model-predicting-united-states-disorder-now-points-to-civil-war/12365280](https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/model-predicting-united-states-disorder-now-points-to-civil-war/12365280)

In the early 1990s, when Bill Clinton was in the White House and the United States looked unshakeable, the administration appointed Jack Goldstone to study how states fail. They meant other states; not the US. Few expected that his model would later predict their country's collapse.

In an unpublished paper submitted for peer review, Professor Goldstone, who is a sociologist, and Peter Turchin, an expert on the mathematical modelling of historical societies, have concluded that the US is "headed for another civil war".

The conditions for civil violence, they say, are the worst since the 19th century — in particular the years leading up to the start of the American Civil War in 1861.

The reason for this are trends that began in the 1980s, "with regard to inequality, selfish elites, and polarisation that have crippled the ability of the US government to mount an effective response to the pandemic disease," they write.

This has also "hampered our ability to deliver an inclusive economic relief policy, and exacerbated the tensions over racial injustice."

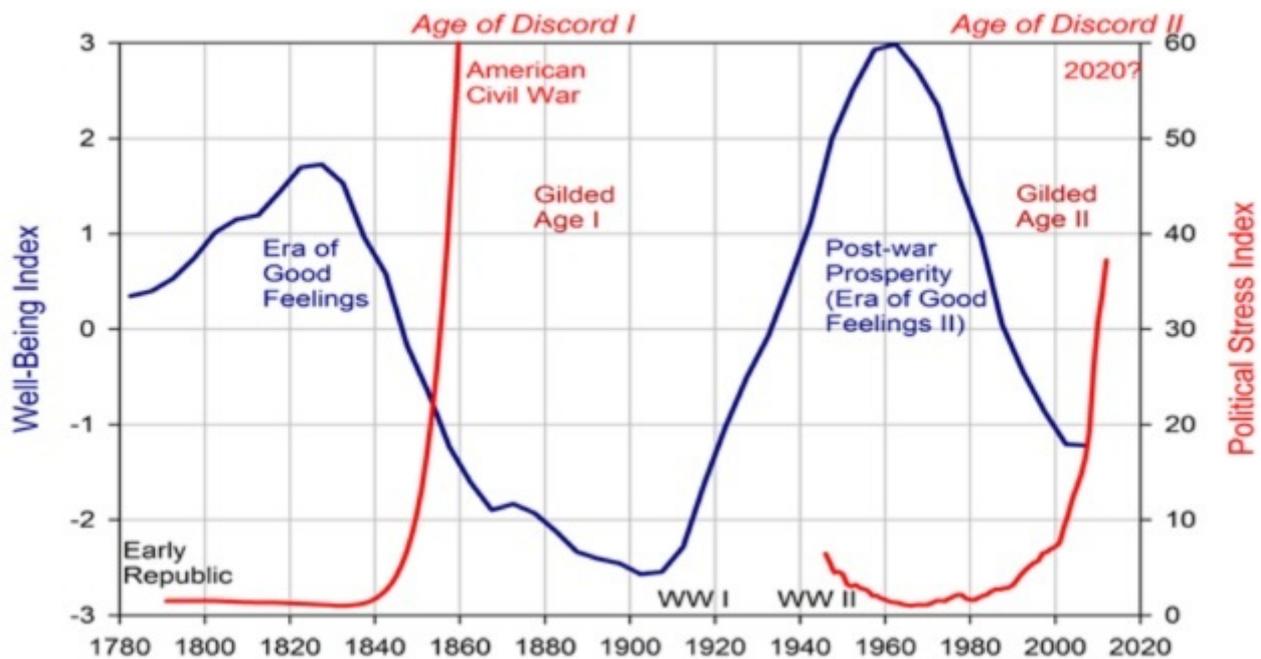
"Is the US headed for another civil war? In a word, yes."

Professor Goldstone is a leading authority on the study of revolutions and long-term social change at George Mason University. The model developed by him and Peter Turchin tracks such data as the ratio of median workers' wages to GDP per capita, life expectancy, average heights, and the number of new millionaires. It also measures political polarisation or the degree of overlap between the parties.

Applied to US history, it 'predicts' the 1861 Civil War and the unrest of the 1930s — a time of Jim Crow segregation, Gilded Age inequality, and fascism.

Ten years ago, Professor Turchin pointed his model towards the future, and made an uncannily accurate prediction. Just like in the 1850s, crisis indicators were rising, he wrote in the journal *Nature*. They could be a reliable indicator of looming instability and "look set to peak in the years around 2020," he wrote.

link



The Political Stress Index combines three crisis indicators: declining living standards, increasing intra-elite competition/conflict, and the weakening of the state. Growing PSI indicates likelihood of political violence. The Well-being Index indicates greater equality, greater elite consensus, and a stronger, more legitimate state.

Speaking from his home in Virginia on Monday — the day before a member of an armed militia shot a protester beneath a statue of a conquistador in New Mexico — Professor Goldstone described these predictions as "scary as hell".

"The general feeling is horror," he said.

'Collapse happens slowly and then very suddenly'

In fact, the present disorder was forecast as far back as 1991. In the book *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World*, Professor Goldstone used an early version of his model to predict the rise of a leader similar to President Trump.

It came down to population changes, Professor Goldstone argued. The American population surged after World War II — the Boomer generation born in a time of relative peace and plenty. As this massive cohort aged and accrued wealth, they could make the country vulnerable to political crisis. But this would only happen, he wrote, if the elites did three things: tighten up the path to mobility to favour themselves and their children (like increasing the cost of university); dampen wage growth and claim a greater share of economic gains for themselves; and resist taxation so that government is starved of needed revenues.

As it turned out, this is exactly what would happen over the following three decades.

At the non-profit Fund for Peace in Washington DC, the Fragile States Index tracks data such as the state of public services and income inequality and assigns countries a score indicating its resilience or ability to cope with shocks. It's been running the index since 2000, and in the last few years the US's

position has steadily worsened. Charles Fiertz, a programs manager at the fund, told *Hack* that, although the index was not designed to make predictions, he had noticed some interesting correlations.

"In 2016, when the Trump election and the Brexit referendum happened, we looked back and found that the US, along with the UK, was actually one of the most worsened countries in the world over the preceding several years in the indicators of group grievance and factionalised elites," he said.

These trends in the indicators have continued in recent years, Mr Fiertz says. Looking at other countries that have collapsed, he sees a pattern of several indicators steadily worsening before a sudden shock "overwhelms the system".

"It could be a pandemic or a loss in a war or perceived abuse by public security forces," he said.

"And normally, prior to this worsening process, a country would be able to adapt to, to deal with that. But because of this long-term buildup of vulnerabilities, it cannot."

"It happens slowly and then very suddenly."

Whichever side loses could dispute election outcome

Professor Goldstone predicts the real problems will begin after July 31, when Americans' \$600 a week COVID-19 unemployment welfare expires.

"Social tensions likely continue to grow as we move to November," he said.

"The risks of violence in November are very high."

November is the US presidential election — now less than five months away. As the big date nears, the tone of predictions are darkening. Both Republicans and Democrats see a loss as a cataclysm — not just a setback, but the end of America. Four more years of Trump would 'destroy democracy', one side says. The other claims that Biden would destroy the economy as well as 'law and order'. The Trump campaign has launched an 'Army for Trump' website to "recruit and mobilise Americans ... committed to fighting to re-elect President Trump."

"There's a real risk that, if the election is close, whichever side loses will be strongly motivated to mobilise people to challenge the result," Professor Goldstone said.

"That could mean putting people in the streets."

There's another scenario: The protests calm down, Biden wins easily in November, Trump accepts the result, as do his supporters, and the country makes a peaceful transition to Democratic Party leadership. Unfortunately, this is "low probability", Professor Goldstone says. The chances of violence are higher.

"The fissures in our society that led to the last outpouring of protest are deep-rooted and have been around for a long time," he said.

"The concerns about racial injustice, gender discrimination, and severe economic and material inequality have been building for many decades.

"COVID-19 like the 2009 housing crisis has exacerbated these differences."

Could this mean a revolution? No, he says. The population of the United States is relatively aged and unlikely to be carried away by ideological fervour. Enough people would prefer to have leadership settled by election results rather than battles in the street. There's a chance, he says, of something like Ukraine's Orange Revolution. In 2004, after an election perceived to be marred by fraud and corruption, huge peaceful protests occupied central areas of the major cities and demanded a revote. When this took place, and the election was declared fair and free, the bloodless revolution was over.

This has never happened in the US. A presidential election has never been re-run.

"If we see an upsurge of violent protest and the election results are disputed the Democratic and Republican congressional leaders may try and get together across the party lines and maybe even justices of the Supreme Court," Professor Goldstone said.

"They'll say that, 'We feel that we need to stop a popular battle in the streets over who will lead our third branch — the Executive — and we need to have a new election to satisfy everyone that the government is legitimate.'

"Then they'd schedule an election in January."

Can it be turned around?

Some fragile states are able to turn themselves around, Charles Fiertz says.

"It requires a lot of investment over a long time and across a whole bunch of different areas, but it can be done," he said.

Professor Goldstone points to the 1930s, when President Herbert Hoover was leading the US at a time of growing fascism and democratic failure around the world. In the midst of the Great Depression, he was succeeded by Franklin D. Roosevelt, who tilted the economic balance away from the corporations and the wealthy.

"It wasn't easy and it didn't all magically go away in one term," Professor Gladstone said.

"He put the US in a position of global leadership rather than isolation — and led the defence of democracy around the world."

The professor, who grew up in the 1950s, in the shadow of Roosevelt's achievement, sees a "new wave of progressivism" in the mass peaceful protests of the Black Lives Matter movement. He believes the present has also brought out the best in some Americans.

"There's something good in America that's still very much alive," he said.

"There's good as well as bad going on at the same time — and we always hope the good will win."