Prof. David Betz: The West's Legitimacy Crisis & the Path to Civil War

Davis Betz is a Professor of War in the Modern World at King's College London. Prof. Betz discusses how the West is accelerating on its path to civil war. Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: https://glenndiesen.substack.com/ X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: https://www.patreon.com/glenndiesen Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glenndiesen Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: https://gofund.me/09ea012f Buy Diesen merchandise: https://diesen-shop.fourthwall.com/en-nok Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL

#Glenn

Welcome back, everyone. We are joined today by Professor David Betts, Professor of War Studies at King's College London, whose research focuses on military affairs, civil war, insurgency, and information warfare, among other topics. Thank you for coming back on the program.

#David Betz

Yeah, you're welcome. I'm glad to be here.

#Glenn

So you have researched civil wars and why they emerge. But as you and I have discussed in a previous talk, there's an increasing chance that civil war will also come to the West. And there have seemingly been some concerning developments in this regard over the past year. But I guess I wanted to start at a more general level, in terms of your research into why civil wars actually develop. I mean, what are the causal variables you look at? What are the red flags?

#David Betz

Well, you know, over the last while, I have got a lot of attention for my writing on civil wars, but I do other things as well. But my basic argument is that the primary threat to the security and prosperity of the West is not external. It is internal. And that's been the argument of my work on the coming civil wars. And I think the evidence for that has hardened even since we last had a discussion. I feel what we face now is not just a single crisis, but a confluence, or a polycrisis, as the writer Adam Tooze put it. A kind of perfect storm, in layman's terms, in which the structural conditions for war—large-scale internal conflict—have been compounded by strategic self-harm on multiple fronts at once.

I'll give further examples, but if I were to point to one thing specifically, I would say that at the center is a brazenly post-national elite. And these are people whose primary attachments are to one another rather than to the populations that they nominally govern. These are people who regard talk of the national interest as morally suspect, who treat demographic change as an unalloyed good, and who have systematically closed the avenues of normal politics to those who disagree with them. In Britain, which is the case I'm most familiar with because I live here, the Brexit vote really crystallized matters. And that's because it wasn't about the economy. It was about the fundamental question of who governs this country.

Is it the people, or is it the post-national cartel of anywheres? And it turns out it is the latter. The evidence is absolutely clear. When it comes to a disagreement between the elite and the street, the elite wins every time. Moreover, if the street doesn't like it, if the people don't like it, then they'll just replace the people with a different and more compliant people. It is as simple and as open as that. And if I were to point to one cause, that's it. You have a classic expectation gap. Large sections of the formerly dominant majorities in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States, for that matter, no longer believe that peaceful political amelioration is available to them.

When that belief takes hold, the civil war literature is pretty unambiguous about what follows. Those conditions are widely present. So, you know, if I were to narrow it down to the most fundamental factor, it is the collapse of the mainstream belief in the ability of normal politics to solve collective action problems at a time when the number and scale of those problems have metastasized into something people regard as essentially existential for their nations. They expect their national governments to do something and realize that the basic problem is their national governments.

#Glenn

If we take a step back and address this concept of the perfect storm, I can see a lot of variables at play. It feels that, in the liberal democratic state, liberalism has divorced itself from the nation-state, which was kind of the balance between conservative and liberal ideas. As you said, the political elites have already distanced themselves to a large extent from the public. The economic problems we're seeing feed into social problems, which then create a crisis of political legitimacy and a collapse in trust in institutions. How would you describe this perfect storm, as you termed it?

#David Betz

Yeah. So the domestic rupture that I've been predicting is not occurring in an otherwise temperate climate. Quite the opposite. The external picture is also dire, and that must be admitted. For you and me in Britain and Norway respectively, but both in Western Europe, it's astonishing, but it needs to be recognized that the Atlantic alliance is coming apart. Even before the Ukraine war, NATO was more dead than alive. It was like the Emperor in Warhammer 40,000, kept on his Golden Throne. But now it's just gone. American retrenchment to the Western Hemisphere is perfectly rational from

Washington's perspective. Europe's response to it has been pusillanimous, which I think is probably the best way to describe it. Europe's leaders are quite openly ridiculed on the world stage, which is fair because they are ridiculous people.

They're grossly unserious and incompetent. Von der Leyen, Kallas, the "Europe is a garden, the world is a jungle" numbskull whom she replaced. These are unserious people, but also insufferably arrogant, and the world is fed up with them. All the progressive pretensions effectively are failing. The European Union's so-called garden has turned out to require constant external labor and constant external protection, neither of which it is able to provide for itself. And the consequence of this is a zombification of the post-1945 security architecture: NATO and the EU persist as institutional forms, but the strategic credibility that once underpinned them has been spent. In fact, I think both institutions are rather Soviet—rather late-stage Soviet, in my view. They exist kind of on inertia. Nobody believes in them much anymore.

#David Betz

Britain, you know, as an example, is arguably Europe's preeminent naval power, but it has a navy which can only be described today as a shambles. It is basically inoperable. Germany, arguably Europe's greatest land power, has an army which is a shambles. France, as little as two weeks ago, couldn't police its own streets, let alone any place else. So what we've got is a house of cards. Nowhere is that fact more visible than in the Ukraine war, which is the stupidest war the West has fought since 1945. It was unnecessary, irresponsible, and badly managed from the outset.

Britain and the United States, along with other countries, supplied weapons. They supplied rhetoric in quantities that could not alter the military balance without a direct intervention that they were not, and remain, prepared to risk. At the same time, they accelerated the de-dollarization of the global economy at a rate that no one would have believed possible five years ago. Then there are the energy price shocks that have undermined Western economies. Casualties include not only Ukrainian and Russian soldiers, but a generation's worth of Western strategic credibility, which has been shot to pieces.

And it must be said, too, that the casualties have been greatly exaggerated on the Russian side and greatly underestimated on the Ukrainian side. The simple fact of the matter is this: if all you do is listen to legacy media recycling the narratives of Western politicians, then you've been lied to about the war's causes, its conduct, and its increasingly obvious, inevitable outcome. For that matter, punditry, particularly that part of punditry that comes out of the name-brand think tanks, has also been... I don't know how else to describe it. So I think defeat, when it is finally acknowledged, will not be a local setback.

It is going to confirm to every actor inside and outside the West that the institutions and alliances which once constrained conflict no longer function. And the damage done to the West's strategic credibility, which is already severe, is going to get very much worse. All of that defeat—that

unnecessary, irresponsible defeat—arrives on top of financial and economic precarity that was already acute before the war started, has been since COVID, and, in fact, has been since 2008. The West has reached the end of the line on debt-financed consumption, deindustrialization, energy price spikes, and the progressive erosion of the social compact.

These have all opened up expectation gaps that no amount of bread and circuses can now close. One further thing to add, I guess, is on the energy crisis. Like the strategic defeat we now face, the energy crisis is no act of God. It wasn't an accident. It's the product of an idiotic energy and industrial policy: the deliberate suppression of baseload power generation in the name of climate targets that the rest of the world is not pursuing because they think they are bogus. This has been compounded by a stupid war with Iran, yet another stupid war that has further disrupted the supply chains that Europe and other countries depend on. The result?

You can see it on the shelves of your own supermarket. Higher costs for basic goods that underwrite social peace, higher costs for energy, higher costs for housing, higher costs for transport, higher costs across the board. When those costs rise while, at the same time, the political system is perceived as being closed to the people—in fact, contemptuous of the people who pay those costs—then the conditions for revolt, quite obviously, are magnified. Sorry, I said that was one other thing. There is one other thing I would add, and that is the still-metastasizing migrant crisis from the South, which is running through all this and, in fact, accelerating it. Ceuta this summer is just the most recent and, I think, most literal demonstration of this. You'll recall that in late July, you had tens of thousands crossing the border in a matter of days.

By some accounts, the number approached or exceeded 80,000 in three days, into a city that was about the same size. Hundreds died, and thousands of them are still there. And the thing is, this isn't just some isolated failure of border management. There is no properly managed border anywhere on the European frontier. So I think that was a harbinger: a mass movement that obviously exploited the gap between the legal rhetoric about how we run our borders and the physical capacity that we possess to do so. A gap between elite rhetoric—elite declarations that migration is some kind of moral imperative—and the material reality that European societies are already factionalized, low-trust, and economically strained at the same time. That's what I mean by a perfect storm.

These are multiple interlocking factors—economic, social, political, strategic, military—all pushing in one direction. Moreover, when you try to solve one of them, it worsens the situation with another. So there's no obvious solution to them. The post-national elite refuses to treat territorial control as a core function of the state anymore. And that has turned migration into essentially a solvent of social capital, which is, above all, a quality of a high-functioning economy. So these elements of collapse don't just coexist. They're all reinforcing each other. Domestic factionalization and elite estrangement weaken the capacity for coherent external action against increasingly aggressive external powers who feel that they have perfectly logical reasons for payback.

#Glenn

How do you see this happening so fast, though? Because in 1992, the Cold War was over. The amount of confidence was remarkable. In the political West, we conceptualized ourselves as civilizational teachers. We'd kind of solved the riddle in terms of how society should be organized, how governments should govern, and the institutions seemed to be so strong. And essentially, diplomacy meant for other countries to become more like us. And at the same time, you know, within a few years, it all became hollowed out. If you look at how many in the public now approve of political violence—I mean, basic political rights, which we thought were written in stone, kind of withered away. We've got diplomats who don't believe in diplomacy, journalists who don't believe in free speech. And as you said, leaders have become a joke in the international sphere. How did we go that quickly? Because I thought this was quite remarkable.

#David Betz

Well, do you think that was quick? I mean, I don't think it was. I think things feel quick at the moment because I think we're accelerating now. But I wouldn't characterize what you just described as quick. I think it was like the old cliché of how one goes bankrupt: at first very, very slowly, and then very, very quickly. You started your peroration there in 1992 with the end of the Cold War and the attitude of the time. And I think that is probably a very good place to start. And it is pretty obvious of me to point to the end-of-history thesis and its failings, and the era of hubris that led to a range of policies, both economic and military, that brought us to where we are now. I suppose maybe it's just because it's the end of the week and I'm feeling a bit reflective.

I almost would want to start the story further back and just say that what we're talking about is not just the deflation of the hubristic beliefs of the Western world in its permanent triumph over other narratives in the wake of the end of the Cold War. It goes deeper than that. What we're seeing is essentially the end of the modern project, understood in the sense of the idea, stemming back to the late 18th and early 19th centuries, that man could create a kind of utopia on Earth through scientific rationalism. And, you know, for a long time we believed that. And then we hit the First World War, and then the Second World War, and then the Holocaust. And, you know, our sense that this could be done drained away. Having defeated the old beliefs, we still haven't come up with anything to replace them.

And so we have not just the current generation of leaders, but actually probably multiple generations now who really haven't believed in much of anything for quite a long time. And so if you don't really believe in anything very deeply, then probably strategies of managerial containment make a lot of sense to you. And, you know, I think fundamentally what we see from the existing elite is really just containment of the problem, just a kind of managerialism—managerial containment, I would say, or managed decline, as others have described it. And I think basically you have an elite which is comprised of people who've never thought any differently their whole lives. They were brought up in

that environment. They were taught by people who offered nothing different, and now they're in leadership positions. And, you know, the fact is that, for members of that elite, actually, the period of decline is pretty comfortable. Its costs are felt.

#David Betz

And so it's not all that bad, I think, for them. It's kind of dismal for everyone else.

#Glenn

I feel sometimes like we have to revive some of the 19th-century sociology that is not just about institutions and beliefs, but, as you say, about the crisis in modernity itself: this mass standardization, the over-rationalization, the individualism. You know, if you go back to Max Weber and Émile Durkheim and all, I mean, their key concern was: where is the meaning? What is transcendent? Again, it becomes a crisis of meaning as well as a crisis of institutions. What group do people belong to? Where is the collective consciousness? I mean, these used to be key questions, which we don't really discuss anymore.

#David Betz

You're right. I often have the same thought. I'm a lifelong reader of C. S. Lewis, both his fantasy novels, of course, which I read as a child, and, more so, his scholarship in later life. Already, when he's writing in the early 1940s, actually in the middle of the Second World War, in The Abolition of Man and other works, C. S. Lewis is seeing where these processes of deracination, of rational management of populations, were leading us. And, you know, it's sad because, you know, where have figures like that gone? What does scholarship do now? It feels to me as though it used to try, at least, to deal with these issues. But it doesn't seem that it does now.

#Glenn

Well, that used to be a key theme, though: what made Western civilization so profoundly strong was, again, rationality and scientific and technological advancements. But at the same time, people like Max Weber would always be worried that they would come at the expense of culture and spirituality. And, well, again, the crisis in culture—I mean, people use the word "culture" kind of loosely, but, you know, culture is supposed to be what ties current society together. It's what ties us to those who came before us or those who come after us. It's essentially what's worth giving to the next generation here.

You know, his point was that a lot of what we define as culture often doesn't fit in the rational realm. That is, it's not always overly pragmatic. And I don't know, it just seems like some of these ideas could be revived to explain what's happened. But I did want to ask: you discussed some of the causes, what creates this rot within the system, which can trigger a civil war or lead to one. But

what is the actual trigger here? Because we do have all this political polarization. We have a crisis of meaning, political illegitimacy, mass protests, riots. But it hasn't descended into civil war yet. What is the usual spark, you know, historically?

#David Betz

There isn't any usual spark. That's the thing. It is impossible to predict the trigger. You think of the Arab Spring, for example. You know, many people, I think, before the Arab Spring occurred, would have told you that the Arab world was in a state of intense frustration. There was a kind of pent-up political energy in the form of a range of social pressures, expectation gaps, and so on and so forth across a range of countries that made it feel very possible that there was going to be some very volatile period of change. But nobody could say, well, specifically, it was going to happen because an Algerian fruit seller would be so frustrated with local bureaucracy and local policing that he poured kerosene on himself and set himself on fire in the market.

So the specific triggers of these events are basically unpredictable in their nature. We can, I think, say that really the major issue is not the spark but the tinder, right? So you look around and say, well, you know, is this a society in which there is a great deal of pent-up, frustrated energy? Is there a lot of volatility in the system? Are there a range of expectation gaps in that society? Is it a society that is functioning normally politically, or is it one that has already tipped over into factionalism? And the answer to those questions is yes, it is already factional. It is already economically precarious. It is very apparent that the titular majority population feels that its status is being downgraded.

And if the standard measures of social trust, of social capital, or of perceptions of legitimacy in that society are all saying, well, you know, people think that politicians are in it for themselves, that it doesn't matter which way you vote because voting doesn't matter, then you can say, well, there's a lot of tinder in this situation. Add to that some event. I don't know what it might be. Perhaps someone else chops up a kindergarten dance class or blows up a concert, or there's another Bataclan-style attack. Perhaps further revelations around the rape gangs crisis, for example, here or in the UK. Perhaps it might be that someone is killed in prison, right?

Our government is jailing people for all kinds of things at the moment. What happens if one of these people, who a large part of the population feels has been unfairly imprisoned, is then murdered in prison? The latter point is probably the key one I would end on in this. One of the consistent failures of weak governments, when faced with the kinds of situations I've just described, is their almost irresistible propensity for creating martyrs. They overreact. And so, if I were to pick, you know, for what it's worth, what I think the trigger is going to be, I think you're going to have one or more states in Europe—actually, it really only needs to be one, because once this kicks off in one place, it's a very connected environment.

#Glenn

It's very likely to propagate.

#David Betz

And what's going to happen is the state is going to overreact. It's going to throw its weight around too much. Someone will be killed in prison or in police custody, or in some way the state will show itself to be significantly out of order in that respect.

#David Betz

So I think that's a very likely possibility. Although, as I said, as a big caveat, it's really impossible to predict what the trigger might be. It's just a really good idea not to configure your society like a bomb. But that's what we've done. And so, you know, you're going to get a spark somewhere, at some time, sooner or later.

#Glenn

Yeah, the fact that this happens, you know, along this boiling frog scenario is interesting, because I recently went to China and I was a bit taken aback by all the optimism. And, you know, they've got their own set of problems, of course. They're not perfect. But there's this optimism: things are going well, and they're positive, thinking, "Oh, you know, the future is going to be great." And they have this optimism: "How can we, you know, harmonize relations?" All of these things. It was almost more of a shock because of where I had departed from. It was such a contrast that I almost got a new perspective on it. You know, when you come back home, you have the whole political and media establishment, everyone looking for enemies around every corner—foreign enemies, but also enemies within—all the censorship, distrust, the language they use.

It's just, I don't know. My point is, it's a bit surprising how far things have already gone. But one thing that kind of stands out, I guess, as an interesting variable or indicator to look at would be the extent to which political violence becomes normalized—again, violence against opponents. And you see, I guess, the United States has plenty of those cases where both Democrats and Republicans can see themselves using violence against the other side. And indeed, a lot of these politicians believe their own rhetoric.

That is, they say, you know, “The Democrats want to destroy America,” and they say, “Trump is the new Hitler.” You know, if you genuinely believe this, why wouldn't you use political violence if you think that the political opposition, or those who disagree with you, want to destroy your country—that they're traitors? Why not? I mean, it's not illogical. I'm just wondering, how do you assess this kind of proclivity towards political violence? Because I guess that's a very conservative version, at least.

#David Betz

Excuse me. Okay. Well, before I get to your question, it's interesting to hear your reflection on the mood when visiting China and comparing that to back home. I think I've had a similar experience, not in China, but, surprisingly enough, in Uzbekistan. I mean, Uzbekistan is not the kind of place that you imagine in the same discussion as China in terms of great world powers. But funnily enough, spending time there was interesting because it actually felt like a more ambitious place. I was talking to young people there who just came across as more optimistic than many of the young people with whom I work on a practically daily basis at the university.

And that was, you know, just very striking. There was, you know, a bit of research on this, I guess. I recall a book published quite a few years ago now. I think it was called The Geopolitics of Emotion. Dominique Moïsi, I think, was the author. Very interesting book, kind of airport political science, if I'm honest, but it was quite popular, and I probably did read it on a plane. But in there, he talked of the dominant emotion of Asia, of the rising powers, as being basically a kind of positive ambition. The West, he said, was dominated by a mood of fear, essentially of status loss, whereas the Middle East was dominated by a kind of frustrated resentment, frustrated ambition.

#Glenn

And I think, actually, that's still...

#David Betz

I think that still holds, actually, for me. Now I've just lost track of what your question was.

#Glenn

The normalization of political violence.

#David Betz

Sorry, yes, the normalization of political violence. Yes. Well, this is a perfectly obvious calculation. I mean, the fact of the matter is, you know, if you look at the way Western governments have responded to Islamic terrorism over the last 40 years, then the lesson is pretty obvious: they listen to violence. Violence, you know, is very effective in getting governments to listen and to do things that you want. Like Salman Rushdie, right? Which is why I'm going back 40 years.

If I recall correctly, The Satanic Verses was published in the late 1980s. Must have been, right? So we're talking almost 40 years since the Rushdie affair. And the lesson of that was, you know, if you want to create conditions where people are afraid to exercise their right to free speech, to write, to make jokes, to create art, to do all the things which, in the Western world, we believe that people should have the right to do in a completely unfettered way—if you want to restrict that, then, you know, violence works.

I think empirically this is perfectly obvious. As far as the normalization of it is concerned, that's, I think, also very apparent. I'm trying to think of the American, this kind of B-list celebrity—Kathy Griffin. That's it. Dredged that memory up. This is going back a few years now, but she brought a model of the severed head of Donald Trump into a TV studio, basically displaying the severed head of the president of the United States. That's normalization of political violence. Of course there was controversy.

But most people on one side said, "Well, you know, of course, that's what he deserves." And on the other side, you know, people were tremendously upset. So you get act after act like that. The reaction of people to the murder of Charlie Kirk is another example, I mean, of this widespread reaction on the left to the effect that, "Well, not just that he deserved it, but we're happy about it. We'll make jokes about it. We're going to have a Charlie Kirk assassination anniversary party." These are things which occur in a society which is not just factionalized but polarized, in which people regard their ideological enemies in a zero-sum manner.

They are already locked into a zero-sum kind of security dilemma in domestic terms. And that sort of behavior has been, I think, more obvious, say, in the United States. Both those examples I just gave were American, but it's not uncommon here in Europe either. Practically every week, you have another incident in which there have been efforts to cancel, or you've got black bloc Antifa types beating up people trying to attend lectures by so-called far-right speakers who need to be canceled and whose audiences need to be beaten up or shamed or fired or all of those things. So, you know, I think the normalization of violence is pretty obvious.

And the fact of the matter is that it happened because governments incentivized it by caving in to such tactics in the past. And so people have learned that that's what matters. They believe that voting doesn't matter, but clearly they understand that turning out on the streets and smashing things up and beating people and terrorizing them does produce effects. Then, you know, people take the lesson. The anti-migrant riots in Northern Ireland this summer, for example, are indicative of this too. I mean, if you're looking around for examples of what works, then there's a sobering lesson for you. But certainly protesting hasn't done much good. If it did, then the village of Pittington wouldn't be receiving 1,500 migrants on its doorstep right now.

#Glenn

Well, I keep hoping your predictions will be wrong, but it seems we're on a troubling path. So I can't help but agree with your assessment. Thank you so much for taking the time, though. You're welcome. Thanks for having me on.

#David Betz

And I hope all goes well, too.