

A House Aggrieved Cannot Stand

Our rulers stoke a civil conflict because they want to win it.

[Adam Ellwanger](#)

Over the course of history, societies have chosen different forms of moral currency. In Rome, your virtue was determined by your nobility of ancestry and comportment. In Medieval Europe (and the first two centuries of the American republic, perhaps) piety was the determinant of moral virtue. Today, grievance is America's moral currency. Understanding this is key to understand exactly what a civil war would be about.

January 6, 2022 brought the first anniversary of the turmoil at the Capitol. In addition to neurotic public remembrances, the date brought with it a wave of [hand-wringing](#) furor over whether we are [approaching another civil war](#). The prospect of a civil war is more than clickbait. The acrimonious division that was previously contained to the political realm now sets the terms of social interaction everywhere: in [schools](#), [restaurants](#), the [workplace](#), [the grocery store](#), [the church](#). It is the price our establishment pays for its own radicalization. Confronting the civil strife that this rolling revolution creates is a dangerous thing to even *talk* about—when respected voices broach the subject, this signals to the masses that such a conflict is a possibility, and that increases the possibility of it occurring.

The coverage from outlets such as [Politico](#) and [The New Yorker](#) displays two types of "civil war" articles. In one, the author pretends he

[has no idea what such a war would even be about](#). In the other type, the risk of conflict is [attributed wholly to the alleged delusions and purportedly violent tendencies of the political right](#). The former embodies a lame attempt at obfuscation; the latter suggests that one side of the conflict holds all the culpability for the rising aggression. But in their dissembling, both types inadvertently show that the true cause of the conflict would be a battle over the legitimacy of mass grievances and the deliberate refusal of those in power to address—or even *acknowledge*—them. Through their incessant denial that the public's concerns have any merit, the media is fanning the coals that would ignite such a war.

Politico exhibits the idea that there are no grievances: “One side unreasonably believes that President Joe Biden’s 2020 presidential victory was stolen, and the other side reasonably fears that former president Donald Trump’s followers are so slavishly under his spell that they are willing to hijack the legal apparatus guaranteeing free and honest elections in order to facilitate his return to power in 2024.” It’s that simple: one side is full of unreasonable, hypnotized conspiracy theorists, and the other side is rational, patriotic defenders of Democracy who would have *no problem at all*, if not for the threat posed by the yokels who unjustifiably oppose them.

The New Yorker's reporter [believes](#) the civil war might occur because troglodytes and bigots have given up on democracy: put differently, they have grievances, but not ones that deserve any attention. For example, David Remnick claims the current strife exists because people were worried about what Obama’s 2008 victory represented: it “vividly underlined the rise of a multiracial democracy and was taken as a threat by many white Americans who feared losing their majority

status." Remnick goes on to say, without evidence, that the conflict is fueled by "the consuming resentment of many right-wing, rural whites who fear being 'replaced' by immigrants and people of color, as well as a Republican Party leadership that bows to its most autocratic demagogue and no longer seems willing to defend democratic values and institutions." The institutional left is entirely innocent in deepening these divisions: "The battle to preserve American democracy is not symmetrical. One party, the GOP, now poses itself as anti-majoritarian and anti-democratic."

Moral Currency and Political Power

When "grievance" is mentioned on the right, it is often invoked derisively to refer to today's fetishization of "systemic injustices." Throughout the late twentieth century, as the left became increasingly dependent on the votes of racial, linguistic, and ethnic minorities, [Democrats encouraged](#) those groups to understand historical hardships and injustices as debts that had to be paid in the present, perpetually. The paying of these debts took the form of many legal, economic, and educational reforms aimed at addressing these grievances, reforms which also served to justify the expansion of the state. Over the decades, many Americans logically came to the realization that leveraging these grievances (a way of calling in a debt) was a way to reap sociopolitical rewards.

[Joshua Mitchell's recent book](#) ably demonstrates how these realities establish a moral economy. Grievance becomes currency—it can buy things. Like a kind of money, people are incentivized to collect and spend their grievances. I do not mean to suggest that certain minority—or majority—groups do not have some legitimate grievances; they do. Minorities and majorities both know well what can be gained from

leveraging their grievances. When grievance serves as *the* moral currency in a society, it is natural that every individual will seek to realize whatever gains can be had from demanding satisfaction. The problem today isn't the existence of grievances, or even a will to redress them. The problem is the fetishization and commodification of grievance.

Today's populist discontent is a byproduct of the grievance economy—and a backlash against the unfair rules by which it operates. When moral virtue is determined wholly by the grievances held by a particular individual or class, this encourages an endless deliberation about which grievances are legitimate (and thus, embody real debts), and a toxic calculus to determine *who* has *more* grievance (and therefore, a more compelling demand for redress). In short, the people with the most grievances become the *good* people—people whose concerns are granted a disproportionate weight in public life. The people who purportedly have fewer grievances are implicitly marked as *bad* people—people whose demands for political satisfaction can be safely ignored.

The effect of this grievance economy is that you have an entire nation of people who have been *trained* to be aggrieved, but the regime rules by ensuring that certain grievances will be routinely dismissed. These are deemed to have arisen from historical "privilege"—privilege that must be surrendered so as to pay the debt to the aggrieved. Many people who seem to have little privilege are nevertheless deemed as beneficiaries of it. These are the rural, white members of the working class who have been [abandoning the Democratic party](#) at a rate identical to the one at which the left has fetishized minority grievance. When a society implicitly states "grievance is what matters," but tells

certain aggrieved groups that their gripes are illegitimate, it is no surprise that this creates alienation. Because a large government like ours is justified precisely on the grounds of its responsiveness to all the needs of its citizens, this alienation is understandably directed at the regime and its clients. As a result, our leaders' dismissal of public grievances leads to *one more grievance*.

The irrepressible question is whether the citizens the media blames for our nation's intensifying conflict have legitimate grievances, and, if so, why?

A Long Train of Grievances

Over the last 50 years, our leaders progressively outsourced our manufacturing, which had served as the backbone of middle-class economic stability. Not only did the government *not* incentivize companies to stay in America—[the state actively accelerated the departure](#). This loss of millions of middle-class jobs finally produced a generation with [significantly less wealth than their forebears](#)—something that hasn't happened since before World War II.

For a half century, the state refused to secure the border. Amnesty was [periodically provided](#) to those who had entered illegally, which incentivized others to come. Non-enforcement of labor laws that would bar illegal immigrants from working put low-skilled American workers in direct competition with foreigners, who would accept lower pay, making low-wage jobs harder to get. By the arrival of the Obama era, [our elites were moving from a mere tolerance of illegal immigration to an endorsement of it](#): after all, many of the new arrivals were ethnic minorities—an aggrieved class in need of deference.

The influx of illegal immigrants has flooded the nation with drugs: notably, the often-fatal opioid fentanyl, almost all of [which comes from our geo-political rival China](#). This results in an epidemic of addiction and drug death among the very groups most impacted by the betrayals referenced above.

To make matters worse, the monetary policies of the Federal Reserve and the flood of government spending have further [undermined the purchasing power](#) of what little money the working class is able to earn. The endless printing of money only increases [a stupefying national debt](#). Of course, Americans' diminished purchasing power is increasingly irrelevant, [as a supply chain crisis](#) (an effect of our [dependence on foreign manufacturing](#)) ensures that many needed goods are not available.

Moreover, a complete lack of accountability among our leaders fuels the alienation of typical American citizens. Obama's IRS worked to combat conservative fundraising to minimize its influence in the 2012 election. [No one was held accountable](#). States like [California](#) and [Colorado](#) are allowed to enact policies that directly subvert existing federal law—and it is tolerated. Obama admitted he had [no legal authority to act unilaterally](#) to address immigration—then he [ordered DACA](#) anyway, an effective amnesty for millions of people who entered the country illegally. The [courts affirmed it](#).

Hillary Clinton [illegally used a private server](#) to conduct her business as Secretary of State and deleted over 30,000 emails from those servers, [in direct violation of a subpoena](#). Not only was no one held accountable for the violation of data security protocols, but no one was held accountable for the destruction of evidence.

With the 2020 election on the horizon, all the institutional powers in America colluded to undermine and sabotage the Trump reelection campaign: [creating misinformation disguised as news stories to damage Trump](#), while [censoring any damaging stories](#) to the Biden campaign [by labelling them "misinformation."](#) This is to say nothing of the [litany of procedural abuses](#) that were implemented at the state and federal level to weaken the Trump vote, increase the Biden vote, and loosen rules to ensure election integrity in ways that would favor Biden. Much of this activity [was patently illegal](#). Weeks later, after the inauguration, the media [gleefully admitted to this malfeasance](#). But no one was held accountable.

All of this is to say nothing about the misery inflicted on the middle class by authoritarian lockdowns and the medical establishment's unconstitutional political power during the Covid-19 pandemic.

These examples point to two compounding injuries. Affected citizens suffer the indignity of a government that routinely denies their grievances a place in the political process by ruling through policies it sets against them. It was this hostile disregard that led to the rise of a figure like Trump, an outsider who promised to address their concerns. The second injury did even more to amplify the current opposition to the regime: when the people elected Trump, the elite powers ensured that he would not be able to govern, and then ensured that he would not be reelected. Essentially, the state told Americans: "Not only will we *not* address your grievances, we will also enact safeguards so that you may *not* elect someone who will." Thus, the people who claim to be defending American democracy have negated what little democratic power many citizens actually held.

As a coda to this litany of abuses, the elite institutions tell these citizens

not only that their grievances are illegitimate, *but that [those grievances are imagined](#)*.

Then they pretend they have no idea why Americans are angry.

Sovereignty on Its Head

Today, the United States government has inverted the idea of sovereignty: it carefully takes account of the *external* demands made upon our nation by [foreign powers](#) and [peoples](#), while it sees itself as internally sovereign in relation to the people it rules. The state [does not recognize its obligation to respond to certain classes of citizens](#)—and when the people use their vote to register their discontent with this abdication of duty, the state ensures that this discontent will be contained and neutralized.

In a democracy, the regime itself is not meant to be sovereign in relation to the citizens it governs: that's authoritarian autocracy. Democratic government is not independent from the will of the people—on the contrary, if it won't address their grievances, then it must yield to a majority of citizens' decision to install officials who will. Ultimately, grievance is also the political capital of our society—the state holds sole power to decide *whose* grievances are legitimate and whose are not. The resolute rejection of the grievances claimed by half the country has understandably provoked an enormous anger. The continued refusal of elites to acknowledge these grievances only accelerates our cultural fragmentation—and thus increases the chances of what would surely be a catastrophic “civil war”—one that they claim they do not want.