

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

THE AMERICANS PREPPING FOR A SECOND CIVIL WAR

Many now believe that the U.S. could descend into political violence. Some are joining survivalist communities, canning food—and buying guns.

By Charles Bethea

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When Drew Miller established Fortitude Ranch, a network of survivalist compounds, foreign terrorist attacks were at the top of people's minds. "Now, for many, it's civil war," he said. Photographs by Brian Finke for The New Yorker



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“Did he say *fight*?” Drew Miller asked me. It was July 13th, and we were in rural Colorado, near an outpost of Fortitude Ranch, a network of survivalist retreats that Miller has constructed in anticipation of civilizational collapse. News of the attempted assassination of Donald Trump—the first one—had just pinged: a young man named Thomas Crooks had shot at Trump from a rooftop near a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, striking his right ear. Trump had stood, with blood on his face, and shouted to his crowd, “Fight, fight, fight!” The shooter’s motives were unknown, but Republicans were blaming Democrats. “File charges against Joseph R. Biden for inciting an assassination,” Representative Mike Collins posted on X. Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene accused the “evil” Democratic Party of attempting “murder.” Miller’s phone began to make the sound of a dog barking—his ringtone—as members and employees of the ranches sent texts and e-mails.

A salesperson in Nevada was seeing a sudden increase in requests to join: “Member interest. I’m already getting previous leads texting me.”

A member in Colorado wondered if it was time to mobilize: “Should we do an alert?”

As the barking continued, I asked what Miller thought. “This could stir things up,” he said, after a heavy pause. “Things could escalate.”



"You play it all day, every day, until you can't anymore."

Cartoon by Suerynn Lee



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Miller, a fit and unnervingly analytical sixty-six-year-old, was wearing a Fortitude Ranch T-shirt and had a handgun holstered on his cargo pants. He grew up in Nebraska, and served as an intelligence officer in the Air Force for thirty years before retiring as a colonel, in 2010. He has long maintained a fixation on disaster. A "Unabomber-type person," he told me, could release a bioengineered virus to kill off "mammalian weeds," as one prominent scientist has called humans; an

electromagnetic-pulse attack could cause months-long blackouts. After retiring, Miller had an idea that combined his interest in readiness for such events with an entrepreneurial streak: establishing a survival community that was both comfortable and armed to the teeth. He reached out to real-estate agents in West Virginia. “I just said I wanted a remote location with year-round water, off the beaten path, accessible in all kinds of weather,” he told me. “The first one said, ‘Oh, you’re looking for a survival location.’ ” After several more agents had the same response, Miller asked one how they knew what he was after. The agent replied, “We have people from every three-letter agency in D.C. with little places out here.” Miller told me, “She even showed me a few! I thought, God dang it, people, you shouldn’t do that!” In 2015, Miller opened the first Fortitude Ranch in the mountains a couple of hours outside D.C. Its proximity to the capital was strategic. “That’s the obvious big target,” Miller told me. At the time, foreign terrorist attacks were at the top of people’s minds. “Now, for many, it’s civil war,” he said.

According to an analysis of FEMA data, some twenty million Americans are actively preparing for cataclysm—roughly twice as many as in 2017. Political violence, including the spectre of civil war, is one of the reasons. A recent study conducted by researchers at U.C. Davis concluded that one in three adults in the U.S., including up to half of Republicans, feel that violence is “usually or always justified” to advance certain political objectives (say, returning Trump to the White House). In May, Ray Dalio, the billionaire founder of Bridgewater Associates, one of the world’s largest hedge funds, told the *Financial Times* that he believed there was about a thirty-five-per-cent chance of civil war breaking out in America. “We are now on the brink,” Dalio said, noting that a modern civil war—though it might not involve muskets—would see the fracturing of states and widespread defiance of federal law. In June, Dalio upped his estimate to “uncomfortably more than 50 percent,” predicting “an existential battle of the hard right against the hard left in which you will have to pick a side and fight for it, or keep your head down, or flee.”

Fortitude Ranch has more than a thousand members of all political persuasions, including doctors, engineers, restaurant workers, pilots, and entrepreneurs. “I’m not some hard-core prepper survivalist,” George, a retired C.I.A. officer in Texas, who asked that I use only his first name, told me. “I don’t want to live without running water or air-conditioning or run around in the woods for long. But it’s like the old saying goes: When trouble is on the horizon, a wise man takes precautions. Civil war is a definite possibility.” A man named Pat, who works as a computer scientist in Colorado, agreed. “The potential for violence across the country scares us,” he told me. “Fortitude Ranch is insurance.”



Where possible, ranches have farm animals, fishponds, fruit trees, edible bugs, and “survival crops,” including Jerusalem artichokes, which yield roughly sixty times more calories per acre than beef.

Miller’s goal is to open dozens of ranches around the country. There are currently seven, which range in size from ten to a hundred and sixty acres. Their precise whereabouts are officially secret, but all are strategically remote. The Colorado ranch, I can confirm, is a few hours from the closest Home Depot. On the drive in, Miller had stopped there to buy drywall for the ranch’s quonset hut—a three-

story structure with a galvanized steel roof, bullet-resistant walls, and enough underground rooms to cozily house a hundred new neighbors. We pulled into a clearing with a view of the ranch: a scattering of structures on a dozen acres of arid, rocky land beneath snow-dusted peaks. There were some penned-up dogs and chickens, a greenhouse, a broken tractor.

Forty years ago, for a Ph.D. at Harvard, Miller wrote a dissertation on “underground nuclear defense shelters and field fortifications,” so I’d expected the ranch’s living quarters to look formidable, if not fancy. But as I stepped inside the quonset hut, which Miller had dubbed the Viking Lodge, my first impression was of a hastily erected college dorm. There were three dozen rooms, and half had been claimed. Members had paid between four thousand and sixty thousand dollars to join—depending on time frame (five to fifty years), group size, and amenities (en-suite toilets cost extra)—plus annual dues of up to fifteen hundred dollars. Inside the rooms, I saw bare mattresses, stacked furniture, a PlayStation, sacks of rice, pallets of canned tuna, boxes of Pop-Tarts, Costco emergency food buckets (potato potpie, vanilla pudding), packs of D batteries, pairs of snake boots, reams of toilet paper, some Dan Brown novels, and containers of coffee.

“My wife says my espresso is a religious experience,” Larry, the ranch’s assistant manager, told me, as we examined some coffee beans he’d stockpiled. “I’ve got enough dark roast here to keep us all going for six months at five cups a day.” Larry, who is sixty-nine, explained that his full-time job is with a “three-letter government agency” that deploys him to war zones. Like most Fortitude Ranchers, Larry could foresee society breaking down in a number of ways: a nuclear detonation, another pandemic, or rising political violence that could split the country into warring factions. He drew a crude map of the U.S. on scrap paper. Two squiggly lines partitioned off the east, the west, and the middle. “I can see three different Americas,” he said. Miller had told me earlier that day that he thinks Texas, where he lives, will likely secede if Trump loses again. If Trump wins, states such as Oregon and Colorado could break apart along political lines. War

might follow, even accidentally. “Maybe someone shoots Governor Abbott and then other nuts start shooting at Fort Hood,” Miller said. “The media misreports it and some militias form and fight. It would be irrational, but irrational wars are perfectly normal.”

So what then? When disaster nears, Larry told me, an alert will go out to members via an app. (If messages can’t be sent, “it’ll be pretty obvious you should go to the nearest ranch,” he added.) Only paid-up members will be allowed in. Pets are welcome, though they might be consumed in a pinch. Each ranch, Larry explained, has a natural water source and a year’s worth of food per member. But, because that food may run out, there are also—where possible—farm animals, fishponds, fruit trees, edible bugs, and “survival crops,” including Jerusalem artichokes, which yield roughly sixty times more calories per acre than beef. But the tuber, I learned, can also be hard to digest. “Constipation in a SHTF ain’t going to be pretty,” one commenter, using prepper shorthand for “shit hits the fan,” posted on a Reddit thread about Fortitude Ranch. Larry reassured me, “Coffee helps.”

After walking past a reading nook, Larry and I climbed a spiral staircase to a roof deck with a grill and solar panels. During a collapse, ranch members would come here to survey for threats. There were waist-high walls, which, Larry told me admiringly, “can sop up an AK round.” He gestured out at the wilderness. “A thousand-yard shot? I own you.” Earlier, Miller had casually remarked that members would “shallow-bury dead marauders”—his preferred term for attackers—“to produce worms for our chickens.” I’d seen the chickens, but I asked Larry where the weapons were. He led me to a neighboring log cabin and opened a hidden door. Shotguns, pistols, AR-15s, and boxes of ammo sat by a bunk bed, along with a crossbow. “There’s enough here for at least a month of fighting off marauders,” Larry said. One member of another ranch, he added, has cached nineteen guns and thirty thousand rounds just for himself.

Back at the Viking Lodge, I met Benjamin, a middle-aged restaurant manager, who was hanging around the ranch, as members sometimes do. He was marinating lamb in a subterranean kitchen. Lunchtime. “You want to be a minimum of five miles off pavement,” Benjamin said. “We’re ten and a half.” I asked about the possibility of marauders. “We’ve got plans to contend with them from the time they get to the gate,” he said. “There’s a lot of ambush spots.” Military know-how distinguishes Fortitude from “your average prepper bugout setup,” Miller had told me. “Solo preppers will mostly get wiped out.” Most of the ranches have a few members with medical training, which will help, too. “We don’t recruit for skills,” Miller said. “But it’s nice when members are useful.” Before I left, Larry had me do some target practice. From various distances, I fired an AR-15 at a paper plate pinned to a tree. Members would soon gather for preëlection firearm trainings of their own.

Larry and Miller have their quarrels—for example, over whether to raise tilapia in a cattle trough inside the hut. (Larry thinks it would require too much energy; Miller wants fresh fish.) But they agree that the period between now and the Presidential Inauguration is a time of especially high risk. The morning after my visit, Miller sent out his monthly newsletter early. “Trump assassination attempt moves us closer to Civil War,” he wrote. “We are of course monitoring this situation, and will issue an alert if irrational violence erupts, bad people and looters exploit it, and law and order breaks down.” The ranches would be prepared during Election Day and the uncertain period to follow. Miller told me, “Trump is still dodging the question of whether he’ll accept the results. We’ll be ready.”

There has been a growing understanding, felt on a sensory level, of what the World Economic Forum recently referred to as the “polycrisis.” A warming planet does not exist in a vacuum, separate from global pandemics and widening wealth gaps; crises amplify one another. Still, some stand out. A recent study found that half of Americans expect a second civil war to happen “in the next few years,” even if the specifics vary according to one’s politics and imagination. A

liberal writer in Los Angeles recently told me that he imagines “duelling militias, like the Lebanese civil war,” following a “fascist takeover” in January. A family member of mine who supports Trump told me that she believes a more traditional civil war will begin, “if they kill Trump.” She wasn’t clear who “they” are. But she reminded me that, like many of her friends, she is well armed. (I was aware; I’d once stumbled upon one of her guns hidden behind a toaster.) A progressive lawyer I know in Atlanta, who is Jewish, bought an AR-15 after January 6th as a hedge against antisemitic and political violence. “If Harris wins, tensions could escalate,” he said. “The divisions in the country are so strong, and they’re not going to go away.”

Some politicians are even speaking about civil war publicly. In July, after Trump selected J. D. Vance as his running mate, George Lang, a Republican state senator in Ohio, told a crowd at a campaign rally, “I’m afraid if we lose this one, it’s going to take a civil war to save the country.” He went on, “And if we come down to a civil war I’m glad we got people like . . . Bikers for Trump on our side.” Lang later apologized for the incendiary remarks, but he is hardly alone in expressing such sentiment. Kevin Roberts, the president of the Heritage Foundation, recently referred to a “second American revolution,” now under way, “which will remain bloodless if the left allows it to be.” The pro-Trump commentator Tim Pool has invoked “civil war” dozens of times on X, where he has more than two million followers. Marjorie Taylor Greene prefers calling for “a national divorce.” Trump increasingly refers to the “enemies within.” It’s not just rhetoric. A Reuters investigation identified more than two hundred cases of political violence between January 6, 2021, and August of last year, and noted that “America is grappling with the biggest and most sustained increase in political violence since the 1970s.”



Each of Fortitude Ranch's compounds has enough food and provisions to sustain members for a year.

Last year, Michael Haas, a former political-science professor at the University of Hawaii, published a book titled “Beyond Polarized American Democracy: From Mass Society to Coups and Civil War.” Haas, who is now eighty-six and has retired to Los Angeles, told me that he, too, is more concerned than ever about the threat of civil war. He thinks that it could begin with an armed attempt to stop

the counting of electoral votes in December. “They’ll start shooting,” Haas told me. “And in the chaos they—these pro-Trump anarchists—become the party of power. That’s where Sinclair Lewis hit it right on the button.” (Lewis’s novel “It Can’t Happen Here,” from 1935, imagines a fascist leader imposing totalitarian rule over the United States.) “The reason they want anarchy is they will be in charge. They have the guns.” I asked Haas what preparations he’s made for such a conflict. He seemed to be relying mainly on topography. “I live on a hill with a gate that’s usually closed,” he told me.

Barbara Walter, a professor at U.C. San Diego and an expert on civil war, recently detailed a worst-case election scenario. Trump loses, and protests of the result, inflamed by the former President, turn into riots. What’s left of the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys join in. Assassinations first target Republicans deemed traitorous. “The Adam Kinzingers and Liz Cheneys of the world,” Walter said. The mob turns on minorities, immigrants, and other scapegoat communities. Judges are shot. The worst of this violence occurs in fairly diverse states—Georgia, Nevada, Arizona—as it did during Reconstruction in places where whites felt their privilege endangered, such as Birmingham and Memphis. An economically powerful red state, perhaps Texas, attempts to secede. Ignoring the lessons of Ruby Ridge and Waco, the Harris Administration uses disproportionate force to deter other states from following suit. Innocent people die. Everyday Americans are radicalized by the apparent validation of the extremists’ claim that federal power is the enemy. Civil war is on its way. Walter’s scenario gets foggy from there, but we know that economic growth declines during civil wars, as do health outcomes. Travel is hard. Most troubling to Walter, outside actors get involved. “China, Russia, and Iran would want to help Texas militias,” Walter told me. “Texas could become a dictatorship run by some crazy guy whose best friends are Putin and Xi Jinping.”

Such a chain of events still seems unlikely. But Anna Maria Bounds, a sociology professor at Queens College, told me that people are already “taking sides and

prepping for violence.” Mark Zuckerberg has reportedly spent more than a hundred million dollars building what *Wired* called “an opulent techno-Xanadu” on a Hawaiian island, “complete with underground shelter and what appears to be a blast-resistant door.” Average Americans are preparing in less costly ways. Some are stocking up on toilet paper, or buying Taser guns or fish antibiotics. (They’re cheaper than human antibiotics but lack F.D.A. approval.) Others are getting Lasik, filling gas cans, or withdrawing “go money” from the bank. A Utah company called Armormax has been bulletproofing vehicles for three decades. Until recently, most customers were foreign dignitaries with fancy cars. Now many Americans are armoring normal ones. Protecting a vehicle’s glass from .44-calibre or 9-millimetre fire starts at around forty thousand dollars. For twice that, an entire vehicle, including its tires, can be made AR-15- and M16-proof. Domestic demand for these services is nearly seven times what it was in 2020. “We’re selling as many as we can build,” Mark Burton, the C.E.O., told me. On the company’s blog, he recently wrote a post with a section called “How to Survive a Civil War.” (Advice: “Make sure that the gas tank is full.”)



“Don’t worry—if we miss the curtain we’ll just fumble our way to our seats while noisily complaining about the unreliability of the subway.”

Cartoon by P. C. Vey



[Open cartoon gallery](#) 

In late September, the *Wall Street Journal* published a story titled “The Most Surprising New Gun Owners Are U.S. Liberals.” It noted the recent creation of gun groups marketed to Democrats, including one in Los Angeles called L.A.

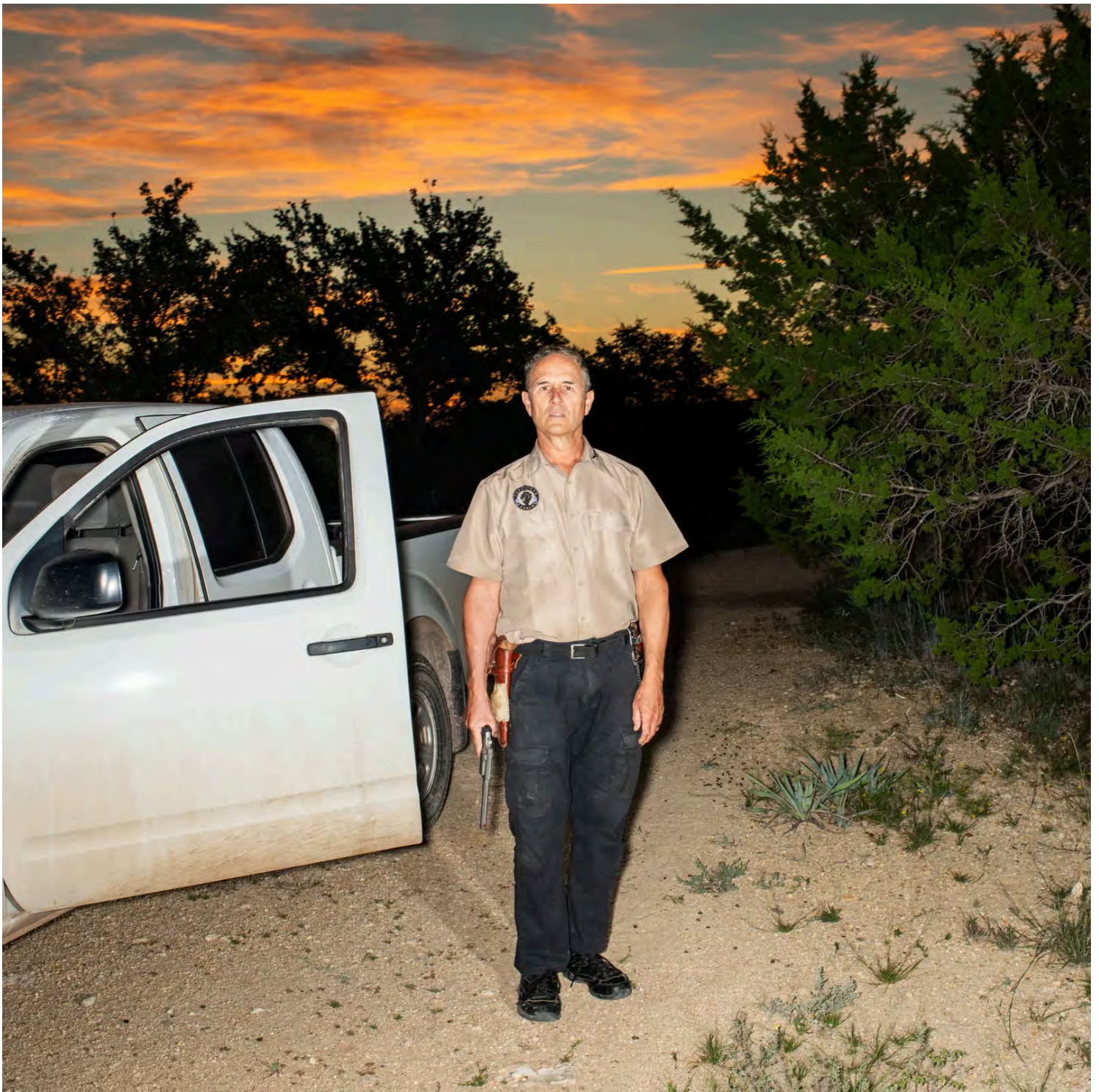
Progressive Shooters. Nearly three in ten liberals now own guns, according to a University of Chicago survey; researchers at Johns Hopkins have determined that more than half of Democratic gun buyers since 2020 are first-time owners. One of them is Bradley Garrett, a forty-three-year-old academic and the author of “Bunker,” an account of Americans planning for the end times. This sort of prepping seems to have increased in the run-up to the election, he said. “You can imagine infighting breaking out in pockets of the United States, and progressives would be at a severe disadvantage,” he told me. “They don’t have the weapons or the preparation.” Garrett, who lives in Southern California, bought a shotgun this spring: “I’m on a five-acre ranch pretty far out. But, if things devolved in L.A. very quickly, I can imagine people fleeing to the desert and looking for a refuge—and that’s not gonna be at my house.” Others are taking less militaristic measures. A recent attendee of a Homesteaders of America event where participants preserved food told me that some were preparing provisions in case of political violence. “They kept talking about being ready for when ‘they come,’ ” she recalled. “Just ‘they.’ ”

In May, I spoke on the phone with a man named John Ramey, who was vague about his location. “I’m at the homestead of someone who hired me to help him choose where and how to build a home to deal with the full range of threats,” he said. The panhandle of Idaho and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan are both good places to weather the worst of climate change, he explained, “but, depending on your politics, you’re very clearly going to choose one over the other for the threat of civil war.”

Ramey has done as much as anyone to help the act of prepping trade its tinfoil hat for an Eagle Scout badge. He worked as a Silicon Valley investor and entrepreneur, and then as an “innovations adviser” in the Obama Administration. In 2018, he launched a Web site called the Prepared, a resource for people interested in disaster packing lists, gear reviews, and emergency plans, offered in a

refreshingly measured tone. Readers can learn how to use two-way radios, safely store water, and obtain body armor. Also, where to buy the best wet wipes. When Ramey sold the site, in 2022, it had eight million annual readers. “Preparedness is now part of modern adulting,” he said.

Today, Ramey is a disaster consultant who, among other services, helps clients build fortified homesteads in rural areas. His own politics seem to lie in a no man’s land: he’s a supporter of both expansive gun rights and expanding the number of Justices on the Supreme Court. But, like Drew Miller, he doesn’t particularly care who hires him. “There’s the guy quoting a bullshit Newsmaxy thing about how ‘eight hundred thousand illegals have a voter I.D.,’ ” he told me of his customers. “Then, there’s a Silicon Valley leader, a blue-hearted liberal, who’ll point to what the Supreme Court is doing with Roe. They’ve both concluded the system is broken.” Twice during our recent conversations, Ramey quoted a grim Thomas Jefferson line: “The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.” He told me, “It’s proven in human history that you create an institution, you create rules, and they’ll eventually reach their endgame. Things become unrepairable. The only answer is to build a new house.” He meant this both metaphorically and literally. “A client worked for an elections bureau in a blue state during the last cycle and the MAGAs wanted to kill him,” he said. “So he sold his house and left.” (Such threats have since become commonplace. In Georgia, election officials have started keeping Narcan beside voting tabulators, after receiving a spate of fentanyl-laced letters. In Pennsylvania, a building that houses an elections office is now encircled by a barricade of protective boulders.)



Miller with a pistol for killing snakes on the property.

In early August, I met Ramey in the mountains of central Colorado. He is a tall, languid man in his late thirties who sometimes lapses into tech-bro speak, as when referring to his “founder” pals. A few weeks earlier, a federal judge had dismissed Jack Smith’s classified-documents case against Trump, in a move that many considered partisan. “Our society put a lot of effort into building systems for

redress, like the justice system,” Ramey told me. “But when they fail—as they are now—we go back to the only tool available: violence.” He showed me around the remote mountain home of one of his family members, for whom he had created an elaborate prepping setup. Cisterns held three thousand gallons of water; solar panels and batteries stored three weeks of power; dehydrated food was stacked high in a barn. “The people talking about civil war are not pariahs anymore,” he said.

We sat down on a porch with a friend of Ramey’s, Chris Ellis, who’d just come from a cold swim in a nearby alpine lake. In the course of a decade, Ellis conducted military operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kosovo and then earned a Ph.D. in political science from Cornell. In 2023, he became the chief of future operations for the United States Northern Command, which is in charge of assessing disaster threats to the U.S. “We look at everything from fentanyl to nuclear threats and wildfires,” he said. “The only conversation I have not had is zombie apocalypse.” (Ellis spoke to me as a private individual, not on behalf of the Department of Defense.) Ellis and Ramey diverge on the likelihood of civil war. “Are there concerning things happening? Yes,” Ellis said. “But I don’t like ‘civil war’ being thrown around.” Still, he acknowledged a real fraying of the social fabric.

Most people, Ellis and Ramey concede, can’t afford a worst-case homestead. But they can make their current homes more resilient by tightening the screws on the front door, adding window bars, securing a backup power source, and getting to know their neighbors. “The people around you are often your best protection,” Ellis said. “Say hello.” And, if all else fails, drive. Ramey took me out to his Ford F-350. “I’ll show you my bag in the back seat,” he said. Bugout bags are an essential prepper accessory, subject to endless dissection and debate. Dion Coleman, who goes by Marine X on his YouTube channel, recommends packing pepper gel in anticipation of political unrest, to “disengage the enemy and get away,” as he put it to me recently. Coleman said that a Bic lighter offers a cheap combat hack: “Hold it in your fist and you’re less likely to break fingers when you

throw a punch.” Bugout stashes are ultimately idiosyncratic. “I have guns, gold, potassium iodide, antibiotics, batteries, water, gas masks from the Israeli Defense Force,” Sam Altman, the C.E.O. of OpenAI, has said. The writer Walter Kirn recently told his hundred and seventy thousand followers on X that, along with Oreo cookies and a multi-tool, his car’s bugout kit has “an emergency library of essential world literature,” including “The Arabian Nights” and “old copies of Norton Anthologies.” These, he explained, are to “restart civilization.” Reached by phone, Kirn noted a number of other books in the trunk—“Moby-Dick,” Sherlock Holmes, and a compendium of Oxford philosophy—and joked that, using the contents of his car, he could “probably found Christ Church college again.” He went on, “In a real breakdown, I might be able to trade them or teach. Prepping is really a meditation on what you value.”

wouldn't cause thirst or require cooking ("compressed bricks of carbs held together by coconut"), a butane stove, a lightweight sleeping bag, a set of clothes, a water filter, two water bottles ("Two is one, and one is none"), a waterproof deck of cards ("mental health"), a wad of cash, and—without comment—a 9-millimetre pistol. Ramey asked how I was feeling. I was, to use a phrase he likes, somewhere near "the bottom of the ladder in the pit of despair." He nodded. Time to climb out. Start by stockpiling two weeks of food, water, and power, he advised, calling this "turtle mode." He also suggested learning new skills. Knowing how to use a gun is good, he said, but so is being able to make a fire and read a map. Ramey repeated a prepper truism: "The more you know, the less you need."

I called up some survival schools, which are now catering to a new clientele. "It used to be mostly soldier-of-fortune and doomsday-prepper guys who took the courses," Shane Hobel, who runs Mountain Scout, in East Fishkill, New York, told me recently. "Now it's women. Even Democrats. People who used to make fun of my school." He said that he's noticed a "quiet desperation building into a slow hum: people concerned about political unrest, the dollar dropping." He teaches how to improvise rustic shelter, use tools and weapons, rely on camouflage, and administer first aid. Dave Canterbury, the founder of the Pathfinder school, in Ohio, and the author of the popular Bushcraft book series, told me that his courses are gaining popularity, too, though most of his students aren't specific about why they've come. "They probably don't want to end up on watch lists," he said. "And, anyway, it's nobody's business."

Anamaria Teodorescu, who immigrated to the U.S. from Romania twenty-two years ago and now lives in New Jersey, decided to pursue survival education last year because, she told me, "America is dying." She sees food shortages and election malfeasance on the horizon. "I lived through it in Romania," she said. "Hungry people won't ask for bread—they'll kill for it." She's taken ten of Hobel's courses, bringing her six-year-old daughter along. "She learned camouflage a couple of

weeks ago,” Teodorescu said. Hobel shared other stories. The parents of a group of homeschoolers had signed up because, they said, the government can’t be trusted. An elderly Jewish couple in Greenwich Village had learned how to repurpose sidewalk detritus (cardboard can be used for warmth; scraps of clothing can filter water or mark trails), but “they wanted more,” Hobel said. He helped them plan an escape route from their home. Among Hobel’s special offerings is a course on the “art of invisibility”—also helpful, he said, in times of unrest. “Never walk down the street with your viewpoint,” he told me. “Always walk with the viewpoint of the person who wants to attack you. When he turns around to look at you, you’ll already be behind the dumpster.” I tried this while walking my dog.



Miller at Fortitude Ranch's compound in Texas. "Solo preppers will mostly get wiped out," he said.

At Fieldcraft Survival, a training outfit in Provo, Utah, students study jujitsu and firearms. The school recently debuted Program 62—a reference to the Homestead Act of 1862, which was designed to grant land to Americans who hadn't fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War—in which online students create personal preparedness plans and learn about things like ballistic sunglasses, conflict code

words, canning, and sealing chest wounds (cost: eight hundred and fifty dollars). Greg Lapin, an instructor at Fieldcraft, told me that most clients “can’t do ten burpees in a row or run up two flights of stairs” and will be “dead within the first five minutes of a gunfight.” He added, “What you should be doing now to prepare is get a gym membership.”

I already had one. So, in September, I visited Sarcraft, a survival school closer to my home, in Atlanta. Alex Bryant, a thirty-three-year-old Eagle Scout, started it in 2017. For the first few years, his students mostly were white outdoor enthusiasts and military types, but lately he’s had an influx of newcomers “who’ve never hunted, fished, or started a fire,” he told me. “They realize that we have the markers of a very tumultuous time.” He will soon begin teaching a course related to civil unrest, in which students pack “get home” bags. In the meantime, they continue to learn the essentials: shelter, fire, foraging. A wealth-management adviser who lives in an Atlanta suburb told me that he took Sarcraft’s introductory navigation course this summer to prepare for “some militant right-wing nutjobs pulling off acts of violence around the election.” He added, “Some people just buy guns. I wanted to know how to get home, too.”

Another Sarcraft navigation seminar recently took place in the hills of northern Georgia. Eight of us sat on wooden benches in an open-air shelter, including Ray and Rachel, a father and daughter from Braselton, who had just stocked up on emergency food from 4patriots.com; a young woman named Valerie, from Sharpsburg, who works in finance at a Fortune 500 company and had recently taken up archery; and a middle-aged scientist from Atlanta who was considering buying a gun. Our instructor was a stout, silver-haired veteran of the 82nd Airborne Division named Buck Freitag. “Nobody is shooting at us yet,” Freitag deadpanned, when an acorn smacked the metal roof. “If it’s gunfire, I’ll tell everyone to get down.” The second assassination attempt on Trump in a little more than two months had taken place only a few days earlier. A man named Ryan Routh had allegedly set up an SKS-style rifle in the bushes lining the Mar-

a-Lago golf course. The Secret Service spotted his weapon before he could fire. “I tried my best,” a note that he’d reportedly left behind read. “It is up to you now to finish the job.” He offered a hundred and fifty thousand dollars to anyone who did so. At the navigation course, a tattooed mechanic named Mark, sitting next to me with his notebook open, shook his head. “Now they’re going to start talking about taking our guns again,” he told me. “That could start a civil war.”



Miller shows some of the munitions stockpiled at one of his compounds.

Shaun, a bearded fifty-nine-year-old insurance-claims adjuster and a Sarcraft graduate, who was assisting Freitag, nodded. “We’re heading for a societal upset,” he said. “I look at what Scripture says about what’s coming, and I believe it.” Moments later, Mark showed me his Glock, tucked in his belt. “It’s already happened,” he said. “Revolutionary War. Civil War. No society lasts. We’re on the edge again.” When society collapses, the biggest threat, he figures, will be “the ex-Navy SEAL that’s come out of retirement. The government is paying him. All this guy knows is blood. He’s Rambo. And if he’s got a killing itinerary and they’re paying the bill, that’s all he cares about.” Mark had seen something about this on YouTube. At the moment, he felt reasonably prepared. He can shoot, ride a motorcycle, and administer first aid. He has a bugout bag in his truck. But he wanted to know how to “read the squiggly lines on a map.”

Freitag passed out compasses and demonstrated how to plot a precise path. We split into groups, each with a handful of navigation targets: metal posts with buckets on them, labelled with a letter indicated on our map. I was partnered with Mark, who decided to pretend that we were fleeing government troops. “*Federales*,” Mark exclaimed. “We’re trying to get free from *federales*!” We reached the first target, a bucket marked “Q”—for “Quebec,” Mark determined, a safe haven from the authorities coming for our guns. After pausing for a moment, we headed to the next target and stumbled off course into someone’s yard. A Confederate flag was visible on the porch. “See, that wasn’t so long ago,” Mark said.

Most experts think that another full-scale American civil war is highly unlikely in the near term. Ellis, the future-operations director, explained that it would take leadership, funding, and a singularly explosive disagreement to start such a conflict. “The eighteen-sixties had slavery,” he said. “You may despise your uncle at Thanksgiving. But do you disagree about something enough to get in a gray coat, he gets in a blue coat, and you meet on a field of battle to shoot at each other?” And if so, he said, who are the opposing generals? Could Erik Prince—the founder of Blackwater, who recently said, “Maybe it’s worth going to war

over defining what a gender is”—command a MAGA army? Would an Antifa member lead a coalition of the left? America has periodic eruptions of political unrest, Ellis argued, but none has come close to a civil war. “It’s not Black Lives Matter protests, or January 6th, or Thomas Crooks,” he said. Even the hypothetical secession of Texas might fall short of provoking civil war. “President Harris would have a decision,” Ellis theorized. “Am I going to commit federal forces to bring a rebellious state to heel through war? Or am I just going to send in the military and treat it more like a civil criminal action and arrest Governor Abbott and the legislature that voted for this to happen?”

Garrett, the author of “Bunker,” thinks that there is still too much fellow-feeling in America for a civil war—a conclusion he reached while witnessing surprising moments of coöperation and camaraderie between militaristic MAGA types and back-to-the-land hippies at bunker communities that he has visited in recent years. Some recent research can be read optimistically, too: only three per cent of U.S. adults—around eight million people—are “very or completely willing to threaten, injure, or kill to advance a political aim,” according to the U.C. Davis study. Sarah Kreps, a professor of government at Cornell, pointed me to another reason for hope. “I’ve heard about the ‘cyber 9/11’ or the ‘cyber Pearl Harbor’ for at least two decades,” she said, referring to the possibility of a large-scale hack that causes national paralysis. “Nothing remotely of that magnitude has happened. So it’s this question of whether these were just fearmongers, or whether that prediction of an apocalyptic scenario was, in fact, a reason why it didn’t happen.” The more we discuss threats, Kreps said, “the more we guard against them.” In this way, the civil-war talk of late has, counterintuitively, given her reason for optimism. “As these scenarios get gamed out, the political space has more capacity to anticipate and guard against them,” she told me. Still, our deepening obsession with civil war points to something real. “It’s not 1861,” Bounds, the sociology professor, said. “But there’s a hostility growing in this country.”



Members of Fortitude Ranch pay thousands of dollars to join, plus annual dues.

For those who remain concerned about civil war but can't leave the couch, there are apps. Earlier this year, Drew Miller, of Fortitude Ranch, released one called Collapse Survivor, whose full suite of features costs ten dollars a year. In addition to helping users assemble survival supplies, and alerting them to impending disasters "before the government will," the app allows users to play out a number

of disaster scenarios, including “AI Uranium Enrichment Terrorist Nuclear Attacks,” “Grid Down, Cyber,” and “End of Earth Asteroid.” (Pro tip: gather bugs.)

This summer, I spent an hour going through one of Miller’s civil-war scenarios. It had several precipitating events, according to the troubling text that filled my smartphone’s screen: killings at Democratic events and offices; attacks on judges and courthouses; a proposed AR-15 ban.

A Democratic congresswoman announced, “This is a civil war, and if we don’t start fighting fire with fire, we will lose.” There was widespread looting and home invasions. Police quit. Prison inmates escaped. A neglected nuclear reactor released tons of radiation. Members of Greenpeace killed climate deniers, and police shot curfew breakers. Millions of residents fled New York and other cities after they were suddenly seized by gangs. Militias spread. Food dwindled. Biden died of a stroke after winning a close election—this was before he dropped out—and Kamala Harris was sworn in, prompting Trump to announce, “If she stays on as an unelected President you’re really going to see violence, this country truly ripped apart.”

I was prompted with questions as the crisis worsened. If there was a ten-per-cent chance of being shot or severely injured at a voting precinct, would you vote? A private militia is forming in your neighborhood—will you join? Where is a safe location to bug out? Some of the questions, I noticed, seemed to point to the wisdom of joining Fortitude Ranch. For most of them, I had no answer. At the end of the simulation, Texas seceded in what was dubbed Texit, and various counties in Oregon and Colorado did the same, creating “American Oregon” and “Real Colorado.” The narration concluded, “The POTUS election collapse is over, but the U.S. breakup and civil war has just begun.” Suddenly thirsty, I went to the sink.

A post-simulation summary appeared on my screen: I was among the survivors. I plugged the phone into an outlet and went for a long walk. It was a late summer day in America. I smiled at my neighbors and wondered what plans they'd made. I considered the lay of the land more closely now, and noted what was edible, and what would be edible soon, in the parks and the public spaces I passed. When I got home, I did something I'd been putting off: I began to pack a bag. ♦

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