

“Civil War” Movie Missing Nuclear Threat

written by Stanley Heller | October 12, 2024



I don't get the fuss about the movie *Civil War*. Finally saw it on Prime when the price came down to a reasonable level. Is the shock about this film that a civil war could happen in the modern US, the “exceptional” USA? Time to wake up, America. The film is not about a civil war, per se, as much as it is about war photographers. What the film shows about them is pretty stereotyped when it doesn't show them as callous. Crucially it completely ignores one big facet of war in a major modern country, the nuclear aspect.

We follow a team of three photographers and a young newbie they pick up along the way as they try to go to Washington D.C. to interview the president. There's a rebellion going on with California and Texas in secession and Florida in its own rebellion. Because all the area around Philly is too dangerous their press car has to drive all the way to western Pennsylvania and then circle around to get to DC via Virginia.

After a few minutes of this crew on highways and empty roads I started feeling peculiar. Aside from one patch of burned-out cars they're driving through pretty countryside with mostly untouched houses. My image of civil war is far from this. It's of Syria with utter carnage and constant roadblocks and checkpoints manned by a myriad of forces.

[Plot spoilers ahead]

We never find out why this war is happening. If that's a technique to make a statement against “all war” it doesn't work. Civil war isn't a game of checkers. There are passions at play, especially to justify atrocities (of which there are many in the film). There's even a suicide bombing. We never find out why someone would be so angry or so self-sacrificing to do that. I guess we're supposed to think January 6, but those fellas had grievances, as unhinged as they were.

About war journalists we get the usual. The young war photographer Jessie follows in the footsteps of her idol, Lee. Several of the journalists get a “rush” from getting right into a fight and not getting killed. A couple of them take crazy risks jumping from car to car just for fun. We never get a sense that the journalists have any inner purpose other than to get “the story”.

At the end [huge plot spoiler] Lee, played by Kirsten Dunst, knocks aside Jessie because the latter is in immediate danger of being shot. Lee then kind of stands there for a while and *Jessie starts taking photos of her*. Predictably Lee is shot. Right after the shooters are killed *off Jessie just abandons Lee* and goes on to take more photos, not even taking a look at Lee to see if she's only injured.

One reason I wanted to watch the movie was to see if the question of nuclear power plants ever came up. We see in the Russian invasion of Ukraine the huge nuclear power complex at

Zaporizhzhia is not considered untouchable and fell after a fight to Russia. In this year's Ukraine strike into Russia in the Kursk region, Ukrainian forces are pretty near a nuclear power plant there, one without any concrete "cap". So far luck has kept Europe away from another Chernobyl. If the movie had shown a real battle around a nuclear power plant with the release of nuclear radiation it would have done the world a service. But the fighting we see is pretty low caliber, mostly rifle shooting with some shots from a tank or a helicopter. Nuclear never comes up (not even, shall we say, the interesting question of whether either side threatened to use a nuclear bomb against the other).

It seems strange to me that these journalists can wander around freely and are immediately allowed to go right to the fighting by whichever forces are shooting. After all this is a civil war. Most everyone looks "American". Anyone could be spying or gathering images for propaganda. From the little I know armies vet journalists and turn away those they think might be "trouble". Now this was made mainly in 2022, a year before the Gaza genocide, but I can't help thinking that journalists are nowadays are often killed on purpose. This brazen killing was pioneered by Assad and Putin in Syria around ten years ago. Certainly, the filmmakers should have known about that, but those shot or injured in the movie are only shot by accident or because they're right in the middle of a fight.

There is some blood and gore but only one scene that is really disturbing, when the journalists are captured by a couple of soldiers. These fellows have a pit where they're burying hundreds of bodies. That is shown graphically. Yet it's never connected to any side in the war. Is this a civil war or a post-apocalyptic landscape?

A much better movie about war journalists was the 1982 movie *Year of Living Dangerously*. Mel Gibson (before he became known as a political buffoon) stars as a journalist who joins a group of foreign correspondents in Jakarta, Indonesia during the weeks leading up to a supposed attempted Communist coup in '65 and the series of immense massacres by the Indonesian military. Initially apolitical, Gibson's character starts to care. There were plenty of problems politically and plot-wise with the film, but it involved movements and passions, things that are at the heart of a civil war.