

# The Coming Age of American Lead

by [Benjamin Welton](#) (August 2020)



*The Night*, Max Beckmann, 1912

**For many normal Americans**, the prospect of a second civil war, which once seemed remote, now feels dangerously close. A poll conducted by Rasmussen reports between June 11 and June 14, found that 34-percent of US voters believe that a second civil war was “likely” over the next five years, a three-percent increase from a 2018 survey.<sup>[1]</sup> The poll was taken during the

heart of the massive rioting all across the country following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25. The riots in Minneapolis alone damaged some 400 businesses at a cost that could ultimately exceed \$500 million.<sup>[12]</sup> The riots also required the government of Minnesota to shell out \$4.6 million to the State Patrol and Minnesota Department of Transportation for their work in quelling the violence.<sup>[13]</sup>

Minneapolis was not the only city to be hit hard by left-wing violence. Chicago, an already dangerous metropolis, had one of its deadliest Memorial Day weekends in history when forty-nine were shot and ten killed across the city.<sup>[14]</sup> Seattle briefly hosted the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ), which lasted for twenty-four days and was only demolished when the protestors got too close to the private home of Mayor Jenny Durkan (D).<sup>[15]</sup> New York City, under the morally and intellectually barren leadership of Mayor Bill de Blasio (D), responded to several nights of rioting and vandalizing by slashing the New York City Police Department's budget by \$1 billion all the while the city experiences a dramatic increase in gun crime. Arguably no city has been harder hit by the summer rioting than Portland, Oregon, where Antifa and Black Lives Matter members have carried out over fifty straight days of disturbances.<sup>[16]</sup> As in Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Seattle, and New York, the Democratic leadership in Portland has expressed more outrage at President Donald Trump and the intervention of federal law enforcement than the actual destruction eating their cities whole.

For those who believe that a second civil war is possible, the riot summer of 2020 has provided a convincing dress rehearsal of what a full-blown insurrection might look like. Rather than a war between uniformed forces akin to the US Civil War or the Spanish Civil War, or even a conflict between well-armed non-state actors like the ongoing conflagrations in Syria and Yemen, the Second Civil War in the

US would look like the so-called “years of lead” that existed in modern capitalist democracies during the 1970s and 1980s. Here, radicalized individuals and small cells carried out targeted assassinations, bank robberies, and acts of terrorism on an ever-increasing scale.

Beginning in 1968, Brazil, the most reliably pro-US state in South America, was wracked with internal violence. Four years after a military coup removed the democratic socialist President Joao Goulart from power, President General Artur da Costa e Silva issued Institutional Act Number 5, or AI-5. This pronouncement gave the military government extraordinary power, such as the ability to shut down Congress as well as all state and municipal legislatures.<sup>[71]</sup> In order to combat the growth of armed left-wing urban guerrilla movements like National Liberation Action and the 8th October Revolutionary Movement, Brazilian state authorities implemented torture and summary execution as standard operating procedure. Scholars disagree, but it is generally accepted that AI-5 directly led to the death or disappearance of some 434 people.<sup>[81]</sup> The heavy-handed approach seemingly worked, as the Brazilian military government lasted until 1985. Current President Jair Bolsonaro has expressed support for the military government, and his electoral victory in 2018 signaled that a large percentage of Brazilians hold similarly warm feelings towards the military government.

South of Brazil, Argentina experienced its own “years of lead” between 1970 and 1983. In truth, Argentina’s internal problems began during the Peron era (1946-1955). The charismatic populist Peron, himself an officer in the Argentine Army, ruled the wealthy nation with a dictatorial hand thanks to his overwhelming support from the working class. After a military coup removed Peron from power in 1955, his supporters, known as “Peronists,” stayed behind in order to agitate for his return to power. This occurred in March 1973 when the Peronist Justicialist Party won the general

election. That same September, following another general election, Peron was voted back into power. His death in 1974 handed power over to Isabel Peron, the demagogue's third wife. Isabel proved a weak executive incapable of dealing with a civil war within the Justicialist Party's left- and right-wing factions. On the streets, political violence increased destabilizing levels. The left-wing Peronist Montoneros and the Marxist PRT-ERP guerrilla movements fought running battles with right-wing groups such as Anti-Communist Alliance (AAA) and some Peronist labor unions. Argentina's left and right conducted tit-for-tat assassinations and bombings against each other, as well as assassinations against economic leaders like FIAT executive Oberdan Sallustro. All told, some 700 people were killed within the first fifteen months of Isabel Peron's administration. The terrorist groups controlled everything—the universities, the streets, and even some political factions within the Isabel Peron government.<sup>[9]</sup> The Argentine military realized that civilian officials were incapable of suppressing revolutionary violence, so the National Reorganization Process military coup was carried out in 1976.

The most infamous “years of lead” occurred in Italy between 1969 and 1988. As previously [covered](#) in the *New English Review* by Guido Mina di Sospiro, the Italian “years of lead” pushed the country close to the brink of civil war. In his book *Anatomy of the Red Brigades*, Italian sociologist Alessandro Orsini notes that between 1969 and 2007, 333 people were murdered by acts of political violence, 144 of which were carried out by members of the extreme left.<sup>[10]</sup> Italy's violent epoch saw several high-level assassinations, including the abduction and murder of former prime minister Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades in 1978. Two years later, the crescendo of bloodletting reached its apex when eighty-five people were killed and over two hundred injured when far-right extremists detonated a bomb at Bologna's Centrale railway station.

As Orsini's book makes clear, Italy's internal

insurgency was the result of a religious mind-set, or what the author dubs the “pedagogy of intolerance.” The Red Brigades and other far-left guerrillas were weaned on the Marxist-Leninist “education” of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), which advocated for violent upheaval in the name of the country’s working class. Much like today’s Antifa, BLM, or their left-wing sympathizers, the Red Brigades claimed that their revolution supported “love” and “solidarity,” when in reality their movement was based on hatred, a refusal to see their political opponents as fully human, and a desire to “cleanse” this world of oppression at the point of a gun. Like the Puritans, Jacobins, and Bolsheviks before them, the Italian Left of the “years of lead” used the supposed threat of an imminent reactionary coup as justification for liquidating class enemies, whether they were police officers, politicians, or even members of the working class. As Marx once said, “We [Communists] are ruthless and ask no quarter . . . . When our turn comes we shall not disguise our terrorism.” The Red Brigades and others lived this credo to the full.

They were not the only ones, either. The Italian “years of lead” saw a political violence from the far-right as well. Neofascist and Third Position guerrillas carried out assassinations and bombings because, like their Marxist-Leninist foes, they too hated capitalism and modernism and saw their mission as “freeing the world from suffering and unhappiness”.<sup>[111]</sup> Instead of historical materialism, the Black Brigades worshipped at the altar of race and nation.

The synchronicity between the extreme left and right in postwar Italy was the result of multiple factors. On the social level, Italy’s rapid and imbalanced modernization after World War II saw the once-agrarian economy transformed almost overnight into a industrial and capitalist one. Millions of rural migrants from the south relocated to cities like Turin, Milan, and Genoa, where many wound up living in filthy and flimsy public housing known as “Koreas.” For millions of

Italian workers, the predictable ebb and flow of seasonal work and a patriarchal household was replaced by individualistic anomie. On an intellectual level, the unsatisfied and socially marginal children of the PCI sought and found solidarity in the binary thinking of Marxist-Leninism, which also helped to repair the bruised egos of the many failed humanities graduates who turned to revolutionary politics because of their liminal utility in a capitalist marketplace.<sup>[12]</sup>

Working behind the scenes too was the so-called “strategy of tension,” a catch-all term for the Western and Warsaw Pact intelligence services that sought to capitalize on the violence for political ends. The strategy of tension ideal lay at the heart of Operation Gladio, a controversial NATO/CIA program that funded paramilitary groups all across Europe for the purpose of carrying out “stay behind” operations in case of a Soviet invasion or local Communist coup.<sup>[13]</sup> Italian neofascists latched onto the strategy of tension as a way to pave the path for a future military or police coup. This was far from far-fetched: a neofascist coup was attempted in Rome in 1970, while in 1960 sixty-two of sixty-four of the highest-ranking police prefects were former Fascists, with many later openly claiming their allegiance to neofascist parties or at least sympathy with the neofascist militias.<sup>[14]</sup> As in Argentina, the strategy of tension for both the Italian far-right and far-left was designed to show the vulnerability of the democratic state.

It does not take much imagination to see the American summer riots as a direct threat to the central state. Of course, for the rioters, the central state is represented by President Trump, a man called everything from a traitor to a fascist by the American left. For Antifa and BLM, constant conflict on big city streets is designed to drain municipal and state money and threaten the basic safety of the general public. The Democratic Party uses Antifa and BLM as their

progressive vanguard, much like the PCI used the student rebels of the late 1960s as their vanguard to push Marxist ideas into the public square. The Democrats have already garnered some success with the rapid deployment of the "Defund the Police" proposal. Using the radical fringe as a vanguard only became a problem in Italy when the PCI failed to win the 1968 election; Democrats in the US failed too in 1972 and may fail again in 2020. The PCI was forced to denounce the Red Brigades after creating their ideology; the Democrats might have to do the same when Antifa and BLM begin attacking them or become so repugnant to the general American public that the Democratic Party becomes noxious by association.

The more worrisome aspect of a possible American "years of lead" is the fact that the "pedagogy of intolerance" is not only supported by large portions of the American youth, but is funded by most of the country's major corporations and HR departments. Rather than Marxist class warfare, America in 2020 is in the grips of an intolerant ideology that uses race as its fulcrum. "White fragility," "white privilege," "white supremacy," and other neo-Marxist terms present a binary worldview wherein white Americans and Western culture are always presented as racist and therefore irredeemable. The *1619 Project* gives intellectual backing to the Jacobin assault on statues and American history. The idea at the heart of the violence in the streets and the increasingly strident anti-Americanism coming from academia is the desire to cleanse and purify the US of its "origin sin": racism. Such ideas always end in wholesale violence. In Italy, low-scale civil war came about because of such binary thinking. However, a "years of lead" epoch is preferable to other cleansing faiths such as Bolshevism, Mao Zedong Thought, and the Khmer Rouge, all of which murdered untold millions of their own citizens in work and re-education camps. As the Red Brigades found volunteers from the atomized lower middle class of urban Italy, so too does Antifa and BLM find their street soldiers from Millennials and Zoomers, the two American generations must be

afflicted with anomie, hyper-individualistic atomization, and cynicism in regards to their future prospects. (To say nothing of record-breaking mental health issues and the coddling of therapeutic civilization.)

An American “years of lead” will also cause powerful institutions to support revolutionary movements, even past the point of violence. Again, academia, media, and the corporate world have already chosen the side of the rioters. This cannot help but create a reaction. It is unlikely that this reaction will embrace a military junta solution as in the case of Brazil or Argentina, but it is not impossible. All wars, especially civil wars, create possibilities, few of which can be predicted before the shooting starts.

---

[1] Bryan Brammer, “Poll: 34% of U.S. voters think 2nd civil war ‘likely’ within next 5 years,” [dsrn.com](https://disrn.com/news/poll-34-of-us-voters-think-2nd-civil-war-likely-within-next-5-years), 18 Jun 2020. <https://disrn.com/news/poll-34-of-us-voters-think-2nd-civil-war-likely-within-next-5-years>

[2] Jeffrey Meitrodt, “For riot-damaged Twin Cities businesses, rebuilding begins with donations, pressure on government,” *Star Tribune*, 6 June 2020. <https://www.startribune.com/twin-cities-rebuilding-begins-with-donations-pressure-on-government/571075592/>

[3] Theo Keith, “Cost of Minnesota’s response to civil unrest in wake of George Floyd’s death grows,” [fox9.com](https://www.fox9.com/news/cost-of-minnesotas-response-to-civil-unrest-in-wake-of-george-floyds-deathgrows). <https://www.fox9.com/news/cost-of-minnesotas-response-to-civil-unrest-in-wake-of-george-floyds-deathgrows>

[4] Matt Masterson, “49 Shot, 10 Killed in ‘Alarming’ Memorial Day Weekend Violence,” <https://news.wttw.com/2020/05/26/49-shot-10-killed-alarming-memorial-day-weekend-violence>



[5] Christopher F. Rufo, "The End of Chaz," *City Journal*, 1 Jul. 2020. <https://www.city-journal.org/end-of-chaz>

[6] Caroline Linton, "Riot declared in Portland after fire lit at police union building on 51st day of protests," *CBS News*. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/portland-protests-riot-declared-after-fire-lit-at-police-union-building-on-51st-day-of-protests/>

[7] Andre Pagliarini, "The Coup Within the Coup: 50 Years After the Darkest Days of Brazil's Dictatorship," *NACLA*, 6 Dec. 2018. <https://nacla.org/news/2018/12/07/coup-within-coup-50-years-after-darkest-days-brazil%27s-dictatorship>

[8] Ibid.

[9] Patricia and William Marchak, *God's Assassins: State Terrorism in Argentina in the 1970s* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999): 283.

[10] Alessandro Orsini, *Anatomy of the Red Brigades: The Religious Mind-Set of Modern Terrorists*, Trans. Sarah J. Nodes (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011): 1.

[11] Orsini, *Anatomy of the Red Brigades*, 267.

[12] Orsini, *Anatomy of the Red Brigades*, 67.

[13] Clare Pedrick, "CIA Organized Secret Army in Western Europe," *Washington Post*, 14 Nov. 1990. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/11/14/cia-organized-secret-army-in-western-europe/e0305101-97b9-4494-bc18-d89f42497d85/>

[14] Orsini, *Anatomy of the Red Brigades*, 103.

«[Previous Article](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Next Article](#)»

---

**Benjamin Welton** is a freelance writer based in New England.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](https://twitter.com/NERIconoclast)