



FEATURES

Alex Garland Says Criticisms of Civil War's Politics Are 'Complete Bullsh**'

Exclusive: Alex Garland and Cailee Spaeny discuss their provocative dystopian epic, Civil War.



By [David Crow](#) | April 10, 2024 |

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Alex Garland's *Civil War* is not an easy movie to quantify or grapple with, including for the folks who were there when it was made. An intentionally provocative film that is as much speculative fiction as it is a dystopian thriller about the United States descending into chaos, it is an immensely disquieting experience, and one which is being hotly debated even before its wide release on Friday.

While most of the press that saw the film during its SXSW premiere were impressed by the experience—including admittedly us—there has been a vocal counterpoint in some reviews and social media posts which criticize Garland's intentional lack of context while immersing viewers into a dark possible future. The critique, generally speaking, is that the film “has nothing to say” about the American political climate of today or that it “doesn't engage the current moment.” Ever an economist with his words, the writer and director of the film does not equivocate when asked if he'd like to respond to those who suggest the film refuses to make a political statement.

“It's just complete bullshit,” Garland says. “The thing is the film may be political, it just may not be political in the way they want it to be political. But those are two completely different things... When people say [the film refuses to make a statement], I would be interested to have that conversation one on one with them and challenge it, and see how they responded. To me, it involves implicitly a degree of contempt, a sort of built in degree of contempt for other people. It's a slightly misanthropic statement to make, but to really unpack that, I would need to be sat with them and discussing it. But it's not an assertion I think is correct, and I think I could make a good case against it”

Of course much of the point of *Civil War* appears intended to invite conversation, which has only become increasingly relevant since Garland first attempted to mount the film in 2020 before COVID scuttled the production. In the interim, insurrectionists flooded the halls of Capitol Hill on Jan. 6; political violence went on the rise; and new polls showed that more than a third of Americans would be happy if their state seceded from the Union. Garland hopes *Civil War* can spark a reaction from folks who feel that way.

“I think that one of the features of modern life is that public discourse is not intending to have a conversation with anybody that disagrees with them,” says the filmmaker.

“They're intending to have a conversation primarily with people that already agree with

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their position. I've put that starkly, and it's more nuanced than that, but that is the underlying tenor of it. People are less interested in changing minds and more interested in reinforcing their own minds or reinforcing the opinions of people like them... But I would hope [the movie is] conversational."

It certainly triggers a visceral reaction, even for the cast members who were there on the set. Cailee **Spaeny**, for one, is no stranger to Garland's penchant for ambitious, big swing storytelling. She even laughs while recalling her reaction to receiving a screenplay with the words "Civil War" on the cover.

"Oh boy, this is very Alex Garland to take this on," she thought at the time. She would know as the two worked together on the similarly ambitious *Devs*, an FX limited series about tech gurus creating cults of personalities around an A.I. they come to revere like a god (so maybe also a look two minutes into our future). *Civil War*, in fact, makes for something of a mini-*Devs* reunion, as in addition to **Spaeny**, the new film also features Stephen McKinley Henderson, Sonoya Mizuno, Karl Glusman, Jin Ha, and Nick Offerman, now as an unnamed President of the United States who's driven the nation toward fascism.

"He does this with casts and crew, and he was really interested in the idea of bringing some *Devs* cast back," **Spaeny** says. "There was another project in mind where he was trying to get everyone back in, but then that one ended up not working out. So this is the one that he chose."

Still, despite understanding where Garland was coming from in a film which tracks the fall of the U.S. with all the detachment of an AP stylebook, **Spaeny** was still left unnerved by the finished product.

Says the actor, "When I walked out, Alex was like, 'What do you think?,' and the first thing I said was 'what the fuck was that?!'" After another moment to process, the only additional words she could articulate is that the film is "very effective." Not exactly the effusive superlative a director immediately wants to hear.

“But I really mean that,” Spaeny explains now. “Like I think it did what it set out to do. And at the same time, it’s highly entertaining and it shakes you up. I’m so, so proud of it.” For the star, the political subtext is loud and clear; it is a piece of cinema that made her “work through my fears as an American.”

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While *Civil War* generally remains as coolly observant as its core set of journalistic protagonists, Garland does tip his hand in our conversation about what the film is saying to him.

“The film is essentially substantially about journalists,” Garland explains, “but it’s also about fascism and it’s about if you erode a system of checks and balances, which includes the fourth estate, it puts you on a road to fascism. I think for me, fascism is not a distant prospect. It’s something that people can drift towards.” He points to a scene in the movie where characters contrast Offerman’s fictional strongman with recent examples in the real world: Benito Mussolini; Muammar Gaddafi; Nicolae Ceausescu.

“It’s not distant,” Garland says. “[Those men] are real people that came out of different sorts of contexts. But you could add another whole bunch to that list and you can see these people emerge from communism, from democracy, from theocracies, all sorts of different spaces. So for that reason, the threat they pose is shared.”

The threat may come into sharper relief when moviegoers at large get to see *Civil War* for themselves on Friday, April 12.

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