

# On Tyranny



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TIMOTHY SNYDER

Timothy Snyder was born and raised near Dayton, Ohio. He studied political science and European history at Brown University, then completed his PhD as a Marshall Scholar at the University of Oxford. Snyder's research ranges from intensive biographies to broader histories of 20th-century Europe (like *Bloodlands: Eastern Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, which brought him to international prominence), and popular bestsellers about the present-day. Snyder has won dozens of scholarly awards, including the literature award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Hannah Arendt Award for Political Thought. He has played an important part in leading a number of prominent American scholarly and historical organizations, including the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. In addition to his academic work, popular bestsellers, and YouTube lecture series "Timothy Snyder Speaks," Snyder also writes frequently for the *New York Review of Books* and has lectured and fielded interviews in French, German, Polish, Ukrainian, and English about his recent work. Beyond these languages and the several other Eastern European languages that Snyder can read, his books have been translated into dozens more. Although he has held several fellowships in Europe and the United States, he has been a history professor at Yale University since 2001, where he researches and teaches on the political history of 20th-century Eastern Europe (especially Ukraine and Poland), and he also holds a permanent fellowship at the Institute for Human Sciences, in Vienna, Austria. His wife, Marci Shore, is also a Yale professor specializing in European history.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *On Tyranny*, Snyder covers a wide swath of 20th-century European history in order to help make sense of 21st-century America. Namely, he worries about the unprecedented election of Donald Trump, a businessman and television star with an authoritarian populist style and no previous political experience, as the president of the United States in 2016. Snyder cites three crucial moments in the formation of 20th-century European democracies: 1918, 1945, and 1989. The years around 1918 were significant because 1918 marked the end of World War I, when the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and German empires fragmented. Various new nations were born (like Finland and the Baltic states) and several others became democracies (like the United Kingdom and Germany). Similarly, 1945 marked the end of World War II

and the liberation of several Nazi-occupied nations, many of which soon fell from democracy into authoritarianism. And finally, 1989 marked the beginning of the end of the Cold War: following Poland and Hungary, a number of communist Eastern Bloc nations began turning to democracy, initiating the process that eventually led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Of course, Snyder conveniently omits the rest of the world beyond Europe, where decolonization has led to the formation of democracies (with varying degrees of success), especially from the 1940s through 1960s. In *On Tyranny*, Snyder focuses particularly on Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, two of the most extreme and murderous authoritarian regimes in history. He specifically focuses on the early period of Nazi rule, when Hitler was elected to power and then began consolidating his rule by undermining Germany's democratic institutions, its citizens' freedoms, and its independent civil society and professional organizations. He notes that popular resistance during this period could have stopped the Nazi regime before it became overwhelmingly powerful, just as resistance in the late 2010s can prevent Donald Trump's regime from turning the United States into a "fascist oligarchy." He also describes the Soviet Union's early campaign of terror against its citizens and totalitarian attempts to make Marxist-Leninist communism a universal ideology and stamp out all dissent and emphasizes that, although the fascist Nazis and communist Soviets had opposite political ideologies in theory, both used the same authoritarian tactics.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Timothy Snyder's early work focused primarily on the intellectual and political history of 20th-century Poland and Ukraine. Since 2010, however, he has started to focus more on the implications of 20th-century authoritarianism for the present day, especially as right-wing nationalism rapidly expands around the globe. His other recent works include *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (2010), a wide-reaching study of Eastern Europe during World War II, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (2015), in which he analyzes Hitler's genocidal ideology in depth and connects it to the dangers of contemporary xenophobia, and *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (2018), which focuses on Russian attempts to destabilize democracies around the globe. In the ninth chapter of *On Tyranny*, Snyder argues that citizens must read in order to think independently and avoid simply regurgitating the common narratives that push society toward authoritarianism. Both to provide suggested reading and offer a bibliography, he lists several works that influenced his writing, including Victor Klemperer's *The Language of the Third Reich* (1947), Albert Camus's *The Rebel* (1951), and Timothy Garton

Ash's *The Uses of Adversity* (1989). He also cites dystopian novels like Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949) as sources of valuable insight into totalitarianism. He references classic novels like Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) and Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) as catalysts for analytical thinking. And as specific warnings about the danger of fascism in the United States, he cites more political novels like Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* (1935) and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004). Since the publication of *On Tyranny*, which was published just after Donald Trump's inauguration, more recent analyses of Trump's ideology and presidency through the lens of history include *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (2018) by Jason Stanley, Snyder's colleague at Yale; *How Democracies Die* by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2019); and William E. Connolly's *Aspirational Fascism: The Struggle for Multifaceted Democracy under Trumpism* (2017).

## KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*
- **When Written:** 2016-2017
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** February 17, 2017
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Political History
- **Genre:** Political Theory, Political History, Current Events
- **Setting:** Europe in the 20th century, the United States in the 21st century
- **Antagonist:** Tyranny, Donald Trump
- **Point of View:** Third-Person Historical

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Real-World Change.** Beyond simply pointing out that studying the past can help citizens responsibly address the political challenges of the present, Snyder has actually played a key part in pro-democracy efforts in the 21st century. His work has been used and cited in diverse political struggles around the world—for instance, in 2019, pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong used quotes from *On Tyranny* on their protest signs.



## PLOT SUMMARY

In *On Tyranny*, a short guide to 20 different strategies that citizens can use to defend democracy against an authoritarian government, historian Timothy Snyder looks to 20th-century Europe in an effort to help 21st-century Americans cope with Donald Trump's presidency. Indeed, this bestselling book began as a Facebook post after Trump's election, when many

Americans were starting to worry that Trump's political ideology and rhetorical style closely resembled those of 20th-century fascists and contemporary dictators around the world. In his Prologue, Snyder echoes this fear and notes that democratic regimes have always fallen to tyranny ever since the very concepts of democracy and tyranny were invented in ancient Greece. And while Americans tend to assume that democracy is inherently stable and their government institutions are strong enough to withstand antidemocratic attacks, this is not true. In fact, people throughout history have made this same mistake, wrongly assuming that their democracies will survive, only to watch authoritarian governments destroy them in as little as a few years and set their nations on a path toward ruin and, in extreme cases, horrific campaigns of violence like the Holocaust. Snyder argues that American democracy now faces the same threat of collapse, and he offers Americans 20 ways to help preserve it.

Snyder's first rule is "Do not obey in advance." Throughout history, not only have significant portions of the public generally *supported* tyrants like Adolf Hitler, but most of the rest of the population has simply put their personal disagreements aside and reluctantly obeyed the government. This is essentially the worst thing people can do, because tyranny functions by winning obedience and then implementing oppressive and antidemocratic policies that harm the same people who are passively obeying.

Secondly, Snyder implores reader to "Defend institutions." Institutions are only as strong as the people who make them up, and authoritarians always try to dismantle democratic institutions in order to avoid checks and balances on their power. On a similar note, Snyder's third rule is "Beware the one-party state." An effective multi-party system ensures that no one group will be able to completely turn the state into a machine for advancing their own private interests. According to Snyder, despite its famous two-party system, the United States is already on the brink of falling into one-party oligarchy because the Republican Party uses techniques like voter suppression and gerrymandering to gain and hold power, even though in reality only a minority of Americans support them and only a very small group of economic elites actually benefits from their policies.

Fourthly, Snyder asks citizens to "Take responsibility for the face of the world." Specifically, he means they must refuse to display the **signs of hate, exclusion, and loyalty** that tyrants and their supporters ask them to put up. These symbols of obedience—like swastikas and gold stars in Nazi Germany, or pro-government propaganda signs in communist Eastern Europe—allow tyrants to bring their agendas even into people's private lives. Next, Snyder implores his readers to "Remember professional ethics" when the government starts claiming that they no longer apply. He points out that, when the Nazi government demanded obedience, doctors, lawyers, and

businessmen all made an exception and put their usual ethical obligations aside. As a result, they ended up directly participating in the Holocaust. When the government asks people to put professional ethics aside, they must do the opposite: these moral commitments are unwavering and uncompromisable, and they must be put first.

Snyder's sixth and seventh rules concern the use of military force. In the sixth, he tells readers to "Be wary of paramilitaries," like secret police forces and death squads, which tyrants use for their own private ends. And in the seventh chapter, Snyder asks readers to "Be reflective if you must be armed"—the Nazis and Soviets roped normal police officers and soldiers into their mass murder campaigns, and these individuals willingly chose to participate despite knowing that they were being asked to attack the same populace that it was their job to defend.

In the eighth chapter, Snyder insists that readers must "Stand out." Just like Winston Churchill's gave the Allies the upper hand in World War II by defending Britain against Hitler, and a Polish teenager named Teresa Prekerowa refused to abandon her Jewish friends when the Nazis ordered them into the Warsaw ghetto, contemporary people can also provide a counterexample to the status quo and help remind others of the moral principles and obligations that tyrants are asking them to abandon.

In the next three chapters, Snyder starts looking at the rhetorical and psychological strategies that authoritarian governments, and particularly extreme totalitarian ones, use to repress dissent and control the populace. In chapter nine, he tells readers to "Be kind to our language." While tyrants strategically change the meaning of words like "*the people*" in order to make citizens think that everyone agrees with and will benefit from their policies, citizens must remember that these words have real meanings and refuse to join everyone else's "collective trance." Rather than simply watching the nightly news, contemporary Americans must read books in order to refine their capacities for analysis and build "a mental armory" of ideas about politics and history. In chapter ten, Snyder argues that it is essential to "Believe in truth." He asserts that Donald Trump never distinguishes between truth and fantasy, makes obviously contradictory promises (like lowering taxes, increasing spending, and reducing debt all at the same time), and bases his politics on loyalty and emotion rather than reason and policy. This strategy allows him to win people's support without actually needing to help them in any way. In order to support the truth, Snyder asks readers to "investigate" in chapter eleven. Specifically, they must fact-check what they read online and try to support high-quality investigative journalism rather than simply sticking to opinion writers who are already on their side.

In the next four chapters, Snyder shows how citizens can preserve freedom in their everyday lives. First, they must

simply "Make eye contact and small talk" in order to remind their neighbors that they will not let politics invade and destroy the private sphere. Next, they should "Practice corporeal politics" and actively protest together in the streets rather than sitting at home and simply hoping that the government will change. Thirdly, citizens must "Establish a private life," most of all by guarding their digital privacy, in order to set a line that government cannot cross and ensure that future authoritarians cannot use their data against them. And fourthly and finally, citizens should "Contribute to good causes" by dedicating both time and money to supporting organizations that matter to them. This allows citizens to both specifically fight oppressive policies and exercise their freedom of association to sustain *civil society*—or the sphere of collective life that is separate from formal government control.

In his sixteenth chapter, Snyder asks his readers to look outward to the rest of the world and "Learn from peers in other countries." Americans tend to forget that other countries are tackling problems similar to theirs, and most Americans do not even have passports. This is a problem because it limits Americans' perspective and political imagination—it's also part of why they tend to arrogantly assume that American democracy cannot collapse. In fact, Snyder notes, Russian and Ukrainian journalists were able to analyze Trump's campaign more accurately than American ones, because Russia and Ukraine have already seen their democracies toppled by Trump-style propaganda and nepotism.

In the last four chapters, Snyder warns citizens about a key turning point on the road from freedom to tyranny: at a certain point, authoritarians stop gradually accumulating power in the background and instead start taking huge steps to topple democracy all at once. In chapter seventeen, "Listen for dangerous words," he points out how the Nazis and other tyrannous governments have used propaganda words like "*extremism*," "*terrorism*," "*emergency*," and "*exception*" to suspend the rights and freedoms that allow democracy to function. In the face of a terrorist attack or other national **emergency**, for instance, they will declare that all citizens must give up their rights for the sake of the nation as a whole. But this is usually a trap, and authoritarians usually never give these rights back, even long after the emergency has passed.

In chapter eighteen, Snyder looks at the most famous example of such a power grab: the mysterious fire at the Reichstag (Germany's parliament) a month after Hitler came to power. Hitler declared a national emergency, started suspending citizens' rights and jailing his opponents, and then convinced the parliament to give him absolute dictatorial power. He never gave any of these powers up—ultimately, the fire (which historians think the Nazis probably set) give Hitler a pretext for completely dismantling German democracy in a matter of days. Russian dictator Vladimir Putin used a similar tactic several times in the late 1990s and early 2000s, exploiting terrorist

attacks launched by his own secret police in order to destroy institutions and opposition groups. Donald Trump has openly declared his admiration for Putin and his intention to use the same “terror management” strategy, so citizens must be ready and vigilant. In other words, as Snyder argues in the next chapter, every American must try to “Be a patriot.” They must remember what is *really* in the national interest—the preservation of democracy—and refuse to let Trump’s government convince them that whatever he happens to want for himself is best for the country as a whole. Patriotism can even mean self-sacrifice: in his brief final chapter, Snyder tells citizens to “Be as courageous as you can” because “If none of us is prepared to die for freedom, then all of us will die under tyranny.”

In his Epilogue, Snyder warns against two political tendencies that he calls the “politics of inevitability” and the “politics of eternity.” Ignorant the past, many Americans simply assume that history is consistent progress and democracy will never fail them. This is the “politics of inevitability.” Recognizing that things seem to be getting worse, other Americans start fixating on an idealized past that never existed. This is the “politics of eternity,” which Trump exemplifies with the slogan “Make America Great Again.” But, both of these ideologies rely on a misunderstanding of the past and a mistaken assumption that the future is already determined and outside citizens’ control. In reality, Snyder concludes, people’s political choices *do* have the power to shape the future, and Americans must step up to defend their democracy unless they want to see it disappear.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Timothy Snyder** – The author of *On Tyranny*, Timothy Snyder is a prominent American historian of 20th-century Europe, whose work focuses on the Holocaust and Eastern European communism. Since 2010, he has written a series of books about this history’s relevance to the 21st century, especially as nationalist authoritarian-style leaders like Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump increasingly take and consolidate power.

**Adolf Hitler** – Adolf Hitler was the infamous leader of Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1945, whose imperialist expansion into Europe caused World War II (which killed about 80 million people), and who planned and implemented the Holocaust (which led to the murder of 11 million people). Snyder emphasizes that, although he is known as an authoritarian dictator, Hitler was democratically elected and widely popular—not only in Germany, but also throughout Europe and the United States. In fact, Snyder analyzes Hitler’s election and early efforts to win loyalty from the German public and business world, amass power, and destroy institutions in order to illustrate how dictators dismantle democracy and replace it

with tyranny. Throughout this process, Snyder notes, Germans naively believed that their democracy would never fall and therefore chose not to resist the Nazis—just like Americans today think that American democracy will survive the presidency of Donald Trump, who embraces many of the same rhetorical and political tactics that Hitler used to secure absolute power over the German government and population.

**Donald Trump** – Donald Trump is the 45th president of the United States, whose authoritarian style Snyder considers an unprecedented threat to American democracy and whose election motivated Snyder to write *On Tyranny*. With the United States already on the point of collapse, Snyder argues, Trump threatens to turn the nation into a “fascist oligarchy” by using many of the same strategies that dictators throughout history have used to accumulate power, eliminate opposition, repress citizens, and kill through war and genocide. For instance, Snyder suggests that Trump presents lies as facts and journalists as liars, advocates contradictory policies in a “blatant abandonment of reasoning,” and demands loyalty from everybody who works for him. He also encourages his supporters to use violence, uses the originally pro-Nazi slogan “**America First**,” and appeals to a “great” past that cannot be identified with any particular moment in history. Snyder highlights how, like Trump, many dictators—like Putin and Hitler—were initially elected but then dismantled the institutions that limited their power and established tyranny, often capitalizing on some sort of crisis or emergency to give themselves greater power that they then never give up. Using these examples, Snyder stresses that liberal democracy is not inevitable and that Americans must act now in order to prevent Donald Trump from establishing tyranny in the United States.

**Vladimir Putin** – At the time of *On Tyranny*’s publication, Vladimir Putin has been Russia’s authoritarian leader since 1999. He came to power by leading the Russian secret police in coordinating a series of bombings that he then used to justify starting a war in the predominantly Muslim region of Chechnya. He has continued to use terrorism crises of his government’s own invention to seize more and more power, and since the mid-2010s he has started using similar tactics to try and destabilize democratic governments in Europe and the United States (for instance, Snyder says, by interfering in the 2016 election on behalf of Donald Trump). Snyder argues that Putin has used the tactics of tyranny to convert Russia from a democracy back into an authoritarian dictatorship, and that Donald Trump’s enthusiastic support for Putin shows his affinity for tyranny over democracy.

**Victor Klemperer** – Victor Klemperer was a German intellectual who, after narrowly surviving the Holocaust, used his training as a literary scholar to analyze the rhetorical strategies of Hitler’s Nazi Germany. In his ninth and tenth chapters, Snyder repeatedly cites Klemperer’s 1947 book *The Language of the Third Reich* to show how Donald Trump uses



these same strategies (like “endless repetition” and “the open embrace of contradiction”) to win support and how the “post-truth” era of American media and political discourse creates space for fascism to emerge.

**Hannah Arendt** – Hannah Arendt was a prominent German-American Jewish political theorist who, after escaping Nazi Germany, became a renowned expert on tyranny, totalitarianism, and the history of the Holocaust. She is best remembered for the books *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition*, and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Snyder notes that, in the internet age, Arendt’s belief that “facts [always] overcome falsehoods in a free society” may no longer hold, and what Arendt defined as totalitarianism—“the erasure of the difference between private and public life”—may become the norm.

**Stanley Milgram** – Stanley Milgram was a psychologist famous for conducting the 1961 electroshock experiment that Timothy Snyder cites in Chapter One. In this experiment, Milgram asked subjects to deliver progressively greater electroshocks to a stranger behind a pane of glass (who was actually an actor pretending to be shocked). Milgram found that people obeyed the researcher’s orders even when their electroshocks appeared to kill the actor, which shows how normal people blindly obey authority rather than standing up to it, even when this authority is immoral and corrupt. For Snyder, this shows how tyrants can easily convince their nations’ citizens to give them greater power and condone horrific crimes.

**Winston Churchill** – Winston Churchill was the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom during World War II. Snyder cites Churchill’s insistence on fighting rather than surrendering to Hitler’s Germany as a crucial turning point that “forced Hitler to change his plans” and ultimately allowed the Allies to win World War II. Snyder uses this as an example of how resisting tyranny requires standing out against the status quo.

**Teresa Prekerowa** – Teresa Prekerowa was a Polish historian who was a high schooler in Warsaw during the Holocaust. When the Nazis started forcing Warsaw’s Jewish population into a designated neighborhood (or *ghetto*), most non-Jewish residents simply cut ties with their Jewish friends and allowed the Nazis to move forward with their plans. However, Prekerowa started visiting the ghetto, “bringing food and medicine,” and helping people escape. Snyder uses this as a shining example of how citizens must “stand out” against the status quo in times of tyranny.

**Eugène Ionesco** – Eugène Ionesco was a renowned Romanian-French playwright who watched many friends and acquaintances gradually “slip away into the language of fascism” during World War II. He wrote the play *Rhinoceros*, in which such sympathizers turn into rhinoceroses, to point out how bizarre it is for people to start rejecting evidence and believing the lies that tyrants like Trump and Hitler tell them.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Leszek Kołakowski** – Leszek Kołakowski was a Polish philosopher and historian, who is best known for his complex critique of communism in the lengthy book *Currents of Marxism*. Snyder takes his epigraph from Kołakowski: “In politics, being deceived is no excuse.”

**Václav Havel** – Václav Havel was a prominent Czech anti-communist dissident writer and, later, the first president of democratic Czechoslovakia. Snyder cites Havel’s analysis of communist symbolism in his famous essay “The Power of the Powerless” and includes anecdotes from his experience throughout the book.

## TERMS

**Authoritarianism** – Authoritarianism is a form of government in which power is heavily concentrated, political dissent and opposition parties are banned or actively repressed, and citizens have limited civil rights. An authoritarian state may be ruled by a single leader (dictator), a party, the military, or small networks of corrupt officials (in an oligarchy). Because authoritarian governments are not accountable to institutions or citizens, they often (but not always) rule through tyranny, putting the self-interest of leaders above the interests of the nation. In some cases, they give way to totalitarianism, an extreme and often violent kind of absolute control by the state. In this book, many of Snyder’s examples of tyranny are authoritarian regimes, like communist Czechoslovakia and present-day Russia. While authoritarianism and democracy are generally opposed, they are not mutually exclusive, and Snyder points out that democracies frequently turn into authoritarian governments—which, he argues, the United States risks doing by electing **Donald Trump**.

**Communism** – Communism is a philosophical and political ideology, largely grounded in the work of economist Karl Marx, that is broadly opposed to the private ownership of resources and property under capitalism and specifically aims to establish a classless, equal society. Communism has taken many forms in different political contexts, and in this book Snyder specifically focuses on officially communist states, like the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, that established tyrannical authoritarian governments in order to fulfill their goals.

**Democracy** – Democracy is a form of government in which the people have ultimate power to govern, either by voting directly or by electing representatives to make laws on their behalf. When Snyder talks about democracy in this book, he generally means contemporary Western liberal democracy, or a system of government composed of an assembly of representatives who belong to different political parties and are elected by the people. Snyder contrasts democracy, which he argues protects human rights and can put the interests of citizens first, with

tyranny, which he defines as private government for private interests. However, he also notes that democracies often turn into tyrannical authoritarian or even totalitarian states, especially through the direct election of antidemocratic leaders, like **Adolf Hitler** in Germany.

**Fascism** – Fascism is a term traditionally associated with Mussolini's Italy and **Hitler's** Germany, as well as other similar far-right movements and regimes. Broadly speaking, fascism advocates the complete control of society by a totalitarian centralized government, which pursues national "greatness" by projecting strength and defeating so-called enemies who are generally racial, cultural, or religious minorities. Opposed to democracy, modernity, and social equality, fascists often win and maintain popular support through pseudo-religious narratives, symbolism, and political rallies. In general, fascists defines nationality in terms of race or ethnicity and praise traditional religious values and gender hierarchies, military strength and imperial expansion, and private control of the economy. **Snyder** warns that **Donald Trump's** style, political ideology, and (especially) loyal following are similar to those of fascist parties and governments, and he warns that Trump's presidency threatens to turn the United States into a "fascist oligarchy."

**Oligarchy** – Oligarchy is a government ruled by a small group of elites, as opposed to autocracy (rule by a single dictator) and democracy (rule by the people). Oligarchies are often, but not always, authoritarian and oppressive. **Snyder** argues that the United States is quickly becoming an oligarchy because of the extent to which private business interests dominate politics and the specific threat **Donald Trump** poses to the basic principle of political and social equality. (Other political scientists have taken this further and argued that the United States already is a corporate-run oligarchy.)

**Totalitarianism** – Totalitarianism is an extreme form of authoritarianism, in which the state has unlimited power and its control extends beyond political issues. For instance, it might regulate people's beliefs and religious practices, totally control the media and the economy, create a cult of personality around a leader, and arbitrarily punish or murder anyone it takes to be an opponent. As **Hannah Arendt** put it, totalitarianism is "the erasure of the difference between private and public life," in which everything becomes fair game for the government to control and citizens essentially stop having any protected rights at all. Many of the governments **Snyder** cites (like Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union) were totalitarian, but others (like present-day Russia) are better described as merely authoritarian.

**Tyranny** – Tyranny is a word with a broad range of meanings throughout history that today usually refers to the rule of oppressive, unfair, and highly centralized government. Under tyranny, people generally live in a state of fear and danger, lacking rights and freedoms, without trust in their government,

neighbors, and media. Following the American Founding Fathers, **Snyder** specifically defines tyranny as an individual, group, or institution turning the government into a tool to promote their own self-interest, rather than prioritizing the interests and the needs of the public. In most cases, Snyder uses the word tyranny to describe the condition of unchecked and arbitrary government power that often (but not always) comes about in totalitarian dictatorships and authoritarian governments, whether fascist like Nazi Germany, communist like the Soviet Union, or neither, like **Vladimir Putin's** 21st-century Russia. However, "tyranny" describes a power structure, not a specific form of government. Non-authoritarian governments can also create tyranny. For instance, political theorists for centuries have worried about a "tyranny of the majority" oppressing the rights of minorities in a democracy—and non-government institutions and private individuals can also establish tyranny (like through slavery).



## THEMES

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### THE COLLAPSE OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

In *On Tyranny*, Timothy Snyder presents various strategies that authoritarian governments use to gain power and ways that citizens can resist them. Donald Trump's election to the American presidency in 2016 is what motivated Snyder, a renowned historian of authoritarianism in 20th-century Europe, to pen the book. According to Snyder, Donald Trump poses a unique and unprecedented threat to American democracy: because of his political style and ideology, indifference to facts and the rule of law, and ties to Russia's dictatorial regime, Trump risks destroying the institutions that have sustained American democracy for centuries and establishing tyranny in their place.

Snyder argues that the American system of government is already remarkably fragile before Trump—in many ways, it is closer to an oligarchy than a democracy, and it has numerous characteristics that make it ripe for takeover by an authoritarian government. The most dangerous structural flaw in American government, Snyder argues, is that it is almost entirely controlled by the rich, who sway elections and determine policy with massive, unrestricted donations. Like many corrupt governments of the 20th century, Snyder notes, the ruling Republican Party only has minority support and represents the interests of a tiny economic elite. While

Americans might consider their country a democracy ruled by the people, in reality it has many characteristics of a Russian-style oligarchy, ruled by and for a wealthy few. Donald Trump, whose campaign was overwhelmingly funded by the rich, risks pushing the nation even further in this direction and concentrating even more power in private hands. A second reason that Snyder sees the American political system as fragile is that the American media, especially on the internet, has already lost its foundation in facts and commitment to revealing the truth—instead, it largely treats politics like a spectacle or television show, a source of entertainment rather than a series of consequential decisions with implications for people's lives. This “post-truth” environment is very advantageous for tyrants, who win when they convince people to make political decisions based on feelings rather than reality. The same is true for the privatization of violence: Snyder emphasizes that authoritarians generally use private paramilitaries and secret death squads to terrorize their populations and circumvent the rule of law. The United States already relies heavily on private paramilitaries and security forces to conduct its wars and run its prisons, Snyder notes, and Trump has explicitly advocated ordering such groups to use violence against declared “enemies,” like immigrants and his political opponents. From Snyder's perspective as a historian, this shows that the United States is just a few small steps from falling into tyranny.

Snyder believes that Donald Trump uses classic antidemocratic and fascist techniques to take advantage of the existing fragility in American government and civic life. Through these techniques, he specifically seeks to undermine the tolerance, sense of shared factual reality, and institutional checks and balances that are cornerstones of American government and civil society. First, Trump attacks the basic democratic concept of tolerance: the idea of a multiparty system in which opposing groups share power and consider one another fellow citizens (rather than enemies to be annihilated). Rather, he openly attacks and advocates violence against political opponents, creating a culture of dehumanization and fear that threatens democracy by suggesting to people that their government is not legitimate if it is run by their opponents. Trump also attacks the basic facts that people must agree to in order to meaningfully govern themselves. Snyder notes that 78% of Trump's statements during his campaign were false, that he advocates clearly contradictory policies (like cutting taxes, increasing spending, and reducing debt all at the same time), and that he repeatedly focuses his followers' attention on identity and loyalty instead of policy and logic. In short, Snyder argues, Trump tells his followers that they can believe anything that makes them feel good, and then he uses this as the basis for a “post-truth” campaign that makes no substantive promises and advances no clear principles. Finally, Trump openly plots to undermine governmental institutions and traditions. Even before Trump's inauguration, Snyder notes, he defended

Putin-style “terror management” methods as a way of seizing and accumulating power. This makes it even more clear to Snyder that, even if Trump is not a dictator yet, he wants to become one.

Snyder structures his arguments around historical examples rather than Donald Trump's specific actions and proposals so that his readers can see the clear parallels between the contemporary United States and past democracies that have collapsed into oligarchy, authoritarianism, and/or tyranny, like Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler and 21st-century Russia under Vladimir Putin. Nevertheless, this book never would have existed had Donald Trump not come to power: Snyder's general outline of tyranny and strategies to combat it are specifically directed at Americans living under Trump's historical presidency, which Snyder believes could quite literally spell a permanent end to the democratic ideals enshrined in the United States Constitution and the beginning of an era of lawless dictatorship. Many Americans may find Snyder's argument shocking and outlandish, and Snyder explains this tendency by noting that most Americans are taught to think that democracy is inevitable and American institutions are strong enough to withstand any attack. But Snyder emphasizes that this is not true: just as democracies have collapsed over and over throughout history, the American system is already on the brink of collapse, and Donald Trump has clearly declared his intention to push it over the edge and turn the nation into a “fascist oligarchy.”



## TYRANNY AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF POWER

Whether communist, fascist, or neither, the authoritarian regimes that Snyder describes in *On Tyranny*

all use similar tactics to amass, preserve, and exercise power—which they seek for themselves, not for the citizenry. In fact, according to Snyder, this is precisely what defines tyranny: the use of government power for the private ends of the people running government rather than the public good of society as a whole. Tyrants use political tactics to eliminate the institutional checks and balances on their power, psychological tactics to win loyalty and submission from citizens, and both kinds of strategies to identify and eliminate the people they label as “enemies.” Snyder highlights how leaders seeking to establish tyranny use these tactics to gradually increase their power, relative to civil society and other governmental institutions, until they reach a tipping point at which they can completely grab all power and begin using it however they wish.

When wannabe authoritarians take control of a democratic government, the most straightforward and ruthless way for them to proceed is by destroying the political structures and institutions that limit their power. This is why dictators' first targets tend to be institutions. Authoritarians might seek to discredit other branches of government or threaten them into

agreeing with their policies. For instance, after his election, Hitler used a fire at the Reichstag (the German parliament) to convince that same parliament to let him rule by decree. With one piece of legislation, all checks and balances were eliminated, and Hitler won absolute power for as long as he lived. Other tyrants do less extreme versions of the same thing, for instance by filling parliaments and courts with diehard loyalists or simply centralizing rather than delegating executive powers. By targeting nonpolitical institutions like professional associations and even private charities, authoritarians send the message that nobody may resist their policies. Gradually, by either silencing such organizations or turning them into mouthpieces for the government, authoritarians eliminate dissent and amass power. For instance, Hitler convinced the German legal and medical establishments to help him build concentration camps, even though they should have opposed his policies, according to their declared ethical and professional principles. Similarly, Snyder explains that authoritarians often set up private paramilitary organizations to do their bidding, circumventing the official state military. Through all these tactics, rulers completely destroy the rule of law—or the principle that justice is blind and everyone is equal before the law.

However, in addition to waging political campaigns to amass power, tyrannical governments almost always wage parallel psychological campaigns designed to control their citizens' thinking and prevent them from rebelling. Snyder emphasizes that authoritarians carefully manipulate language and symbolism in order to delegitimize opposing groups and ways of thought. For instance, in authoritarian states, rulers speak as though "the people" always conveniently want whatever the government does, and they call any ideology that disagrees with the government "extremism." Snyder argues that Trump makes both of these moves (and several others) on the campaign trail in order to portray his personal political successes as "winning" for the whole nation and help people lose the ability to discern the difference between the public interest of the nation and the private interests of its president. In order to disincentivize citizens from thinking independently and encourage them to obey rather than dissent, Snyder explains, authoritarians use such tactics to starve citizens of *concepts*, literally forcing them to think about things like "the people" and "extremism" in the terms that the leader wants rather than analyzing the world for themselves. When they can get away with it, authoritarians go so far as to throw away truth altogether and simply replace it with convenient, self-serving falsehoods that appeal to people's feelings. Once people cannot tell the difference between the truth and the government's lies, Snyder explains, they lose their freedom and independence as individuals. When they make politics about shared feelings and loyalty rather than facts and principles, authoritarians no longer have to show that their policies benefit anyone, so they can rule for their own private benefit.

Ultimately, this emphasis on loyalty has dangerous consequences. Authoritarians nearly always mobilize both the government and their loyal supporters against other groups—usually racial, ethnic, or religious—that they declare to be enemies. This conflict becomes the tyrant's justification for staying in power and gives the tyrant's supporters a source of meaning and purpose in politics. It also leads to catastrophic events like the Holocaust, when governments provide citizens with a mission to give meaning to their loyalty. People feel that they are special or chosen for following their leader, and in turn that those who do not are "enemies of the state." To prove their faith and trust in the government, citizens actively help persecute scapegoated "enemies," whom they often place at the center of elaborate conspiracy theories. This is why everyday Germans gave the Nazis lists of Jewish citizens to deport, and doctors, lawyers, and policemen enthusiastically agreed to participate in mass murder ordered by the government. This makes authoritarians uniquely dangerous: they invent enemies and then persecute them using all the tools of the state and the citizenry. In short, this explains why tyranny frequently leads to genocide and war—and why it must be stopped.

Snyder explains that authoritarians generally seize power slowly at first, even imperceptibly so, by "slicing off layers of opposition" and gradually introducing their exclusionary ideas into the mainstream. Once they see an opportunity to win enough power that they can never be ousted or outvoted, however, they tend to grab it quickly, all at once. In particular, many take advantage of national **emergencies** to seize powers that they simply never give up. With this power, tyrants go about fulfilling their personal whims while distracting the public, whether by hypnotizing them with slogans or by giving them an enemy to fight on the nation's behalf.



## POLITICAL ACTION AND CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

Often, governments are not as resilient as people hope, and citizens themselves are all that holds democracy back from the forces of tyranny. In order to save democracy, citizens must know when and how tyrants are trying to overthrow it, and then act to stop this process. In other words, citizens have a responsibility to understand and critically analyze their governments' actions, work actively to strengthen democracy when it is threatened, and never give in to authoritarians' attempts to usurp power. While Snyder admits that these forms of civic action are harder than they sound, they are also far more important and impactful than people—especially Americans—might expect.

First, citizens must understand how authoritarianism works in order to effectively resist it. Snyder emphasizes that responsible citizens must think independently. This requires looking beyond the news media, which examines a limited time period with a meager set of concepts, and instead reading



books in order to develop a “mental armory” of concepts that can be used to analyze the world. Of course, *On Tyranny* is designed precisely to give people such concepts and help them determine when their nations are headed toward authoritarianism. Snyder also asks citizens to build solidarity internationally by forming friendships and learning about political struggles in other countries. Because different countries often face similar challenges at different times, citizens—particularly those who live in inward-looking countries like the United States—can learn about both authoritarian governments’ actions and citizens’ strategies for resistance from international contexts. Snyder argues that citizens must specifically understand and recognize certain stages in a nation’s progression toward tyranny. Namely, citizens must be vigilant when they see **symbols of loyalty** and hate going up around them, exceptions and **emergencies** cited as justifications for giving the government new powers, and the classic rhetorical techniques of fascism identified by Victor Klemperer (like blatant lying and “magical thinking,” or contradictory logic). If they identify these warning signs early on, Snyder argues, citizens can resist the spell of authoritarianism and preemptively plan resistance and protest movements.

Once they have the basic understanding of tyranny and democracy that is necessary for them to effectively and strategically resist an oppressive government, Snyder argues that citizens must next dedicate themselves to strengthening the precise institutions and principles that authoritarians seek to demolish. Snyder repeatedly emphasizes that people must actively defend institutions, whether governmental bodies, professional organizations, or simply casual clubs and associations. All of these institutions allow people to work together to resist the encroachment of tyranny, but “institutions do not protect themselves”—they are made of people, and if nobody actively defends them and their principles, governments that promise to destroy them will do precisely that. In addition to supporting formal organizations, citizens should embrace inclusion and solidarity with others in their daily lives. Concretely, this means reaching out to others, especially since tyranny often subdues the citizenry by making neighbors suspicious and afraid of one another. It can also mean consciously displaying symbols of inclusion, which reject the binaries between insider and outsider, or loyal citizen and “enemy of the state,” that authoritarian governments use to divide and conquer the population. By sustaining the principle of inclusion, citizens make organizations and protests possible, and they remind one another that there are alternative ways to live and structure society besides the authoritarian government’s. Finally, citizens must understand and protect their rights, including the right to protest and the right to privacy. This applies even if those rights are not immediately being violated, Snyder insists, because otherwise tyrants could take them away before they become truly necessary.

Ultimately, citizens will have to directly resist oppressive policies. When active resistance is not possible, Snyder insists that people must hold out for as long as possible and never give in to the demands of tyranny. Snyder’s first rule, “Do not obey in advance,” neatly encapsulates this principle: even if tyranny seems to have won, the people can still limit its evil effects. If nothing else, they can prevent it from getting worse by simply doing nothing and refusing to comply—for instance, many Europeans helped the Nazis search for Jews because they felt they had no option and their compliance was meaningless, but many others simply refused to participate whatsoever, indirectly saving lives in the process. This shows that there is always something that citizens can do to at least minimize the damage caused by tyranny. Similarly, Snyder calls for people to “be reflective if [they] must be armed” because even members of the authoritarian regime have moral choices to make. Numerous German police officers executed people during the Holocaust simply because they were ordered to do so and too afraid to refuse—even though they could have done so without any repercussions. However, Snyder’s strongest call for dissent and refusal comes in his eighth chapter, in which he implores citizens to “stand out” and break the status quo in order to set an example that others can follow. Therefore, even a seemingly small gesture can have ripple effects. For instance, Teresa Prekerowa saved an entire Jewish family just because she visited them periodically and encouraged them to escape, whereas virtually all other non-Jewish residents of Warsaw idly watched their Jewish friends and acquaintances disappear. While these others let the circumstances alter their moral compass, Prekerowa insisted on maintaining a kind of basic decency and morality that ultimately saved lives.

Snyder concludes by declaring that people must be “prepared to die for freedom.” This represents both the promise of democracy and the obligation it confers on citizens: everybody is responsible for the collective, and nothing will save democracy but the people themselves. Anyone can and should act to protect their nation from tyranny, even if this requires self-sacrifice, and this very sacrifice is a way of reaffirming and spreading the fundamental values of inclusion, equality, and solidarity that must form the foundation of any truly democratic society.



## HISTORY AND MEMORY

Timothy Snyder did not write *On Tyranny* as a history book simply because he is a historian by trade. After all, he is also widely respected as a scholar of present-day democracy and authoritarianism, and he could have shown Americans how to resist Donald Trump’s worst tendencies without getting into detail about the Warsaw ghetto or the Soviet secret police. Rather, Snyder used 20th-century authoritarianism as the basis for *On Tyranny* because he sees Americans’ unhealthy relationship to history as the

source of their inability to make sense of the present or take organized political action against the Trump regime. Not only does history provide meaningful lessons about the way tyrannies function, but it also reminds everyday people that they, too, are agents of history. While many 21st-century Americans assume that their country will naturally improve a little bit with every generation and there is nothing they can do to change this tendency in either direction, in reality the future is not defined: it is the product of people's choices, *not* some national destiny. By understanding history, Snyder argues, people will learn to fight tyranny, strengthen democracy, and take responsibility for their nation's future.

Snyder uses history as a guide simply because "history does not repeat, but it does instruct." Essentially, stopping authoritarianism now requires studying authoritarianism in the past. In his Prologue, Snyder notes that the American Founding Fathers structured the government of the United States around the need to avoid tyranny, which ancient Greek philosophers like Aristotle described as the domination of public life by private interests. This shows that tyranny—and especially the prospect of democracy falling into a tyrant's hands—has been a political danger for millennia. In other words, the challenges that Snyder addresses are not new: the conflict between democracy and authoritarianism is as old as recorded history. So while Snyder uses examples from the 20th century because it is "more recent and relevant" to the present day, it is clear that the general principles of authoritarian government and citizens' capacity to respond to it are more or less consistent throughout history, and he reminds the reader of this broad consistency throughout the book, even while insisting that no two situations are ever exactly alike. Of course, the fact that the American Founding Fathers addressed the problem of tyranny in establishing the government of the United States also shows that a certain concern for history is already baked into the founding principles and documents of American democracy.

Nevertheless, Snyder argues that Americans have conveniently forgotten the Founding Fathers' wisdom by giving up on history. This ignorance about history, Snyder concludes, actually explains *why* Americans are unable to conceptualize or adequately address the threat of tyranny in the 21st-century United States. Specifically, Snyder argues that, since the fall of the communist Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc, Americans have wrongly believed that capitalism and liberal democracy are inevitable—in other words, they have assumed that all governments will end up as democracies, and international politics is just a waiting game. Snyder calls this the "politics of inevitability," but he argues that the global shift away from democracy and toward authoritarianism in the first two decades of the 21st century is proof that this politics of inevitability is simply false. In fact, Americans are only able to keep believing in the politics of inevitability because they have

never truly studied history—namely, they do not know that even strong democracies have often crumbled and fallen. So when they realize that democracy is declining in the present, they fall into an opposite kind of politics, a despair that Snyder calls the "politics of eternity": they decide to try and return to some kind of idealized past, assuming that things are only getting worse and will continue to do so. But this past is memorialized based on feeling, not historical fact: in most cases, it never existed in the first place. Snyder thinks that "Make America Great Again" is a typical example of this strategy. By studying history, people can understand what a specific time period they consider "great" was actually like. They might see the limits of this "greatness," along with the result of specific conditions and policies that enabled it. For instance, Trump supporters who think of the 1940s and 1950s as "great" might remember that this time period was marked by widespread discrimination and the tragedy of World War II, and that it was only economically prosperous because of huge government investment and social welfare support—which Trump does not support. But in such instances of the "politics of eternity," people explain "greatness" through the "inherent virtue" of some people, place, or historical moment, rather than actual historical factors. In short, they trade history for a fantasy version of the past. But learning about history demystifies the past by accurately describing what it was actually like, illustrating how others dealt with it, and helping citizens realize that they face comparable dilemmas in the present—and have a comparable kind of power and agency to respond to them.

If both the politics of inevitability and the politics of eternity lead people to get stuck in the present and give up all control over the future—whether because they believe things will inevitably get better or because they decide that human ingenuity cannot construct a future any better than a past that has already come and gone—then people must study the past in order to reclaim the future. In short, history shows that human decisions, both individual and collective, fundamentally shape the world. This understanding forces people to recognize that their political activity is consequential and has the potential to make a meaningful difference, and so by ensuring that his readers understand tyranny through the lens of history, Snyder ensures that they will grasp the importance of their own actions. Just like people could have acted differently in the past and changed the course of history forever, all people can change the future by acting differently now.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## SIGNS OF HATE AND LOYALTY

Authoritarians frequently ask citizens to display symbols of identity and loyalty, which represent not only citizens' submission to these powerful, tyrannical regimes, but also the process by which tyranny gradually gains power by taking over the spheres of civil society and private life in order to turn normal people into unwitting accomplices to its violence. Authoritarians gradually change the symbolic landscape of a society, Snyder explains, to control citizens psychologically. When their exclusionary and antidemocratic ideas are still not widely accepted, authoritarians introduce them through innocent-seeming symbols that, over time, transform into mandatory signs of loyalty and group membership. For instance, the Nazis initially marked Jewish and "Aryan" (non-Jewish) businesses just to make citizens notice and begin identifying on the basis of this "us versus them" division. Eventually, however, this division—and the symbols like the swastika and gold star that represented it—became the criterion on the basis of which people were allowed to live or sent to die in concentration camps. Initially, displaying a symbol is voicing support for the government, but eventually, to *not* display the symbol is to signal *dissent* from the government, which can prove deadly. Snyder implores his readers to notice and refuse to condone these symbols, especially in the early days, by pointing out that they are not as innocuous as they seem and replacing them with symbols of openness and inclusion. By displaying official symbols of hate, even normal people become unwittingly complicit in violence. However, normal people also have significant power to fight the injustices that surround them and help preserve democracy just by putting up inclusionary symbols (or taking down exclusionary ones) all around them.



## EMERGENCIES

Emergencies represent an opportunity for tyrants, allowing them to turn a democracy into an authoritarian state by seizing power and then never letting go. Whether real or manufactured, emergencies provide "one moment of shock [that] enables an eternity of submission" to the government, and citizens must anticipate these tactics in order to resist them as soon as they come to the fore. The most notorious example of such an emergency was the Reichstag fire in 1933: when the Reichstag (German Parliament) burned down, Hitler used the emergency to suspend civil rights and secure absolute dictatorial power, which he never gave up. If he had not capitalized on this emergency, it is doubtful that Hitler would have ever been able to orchestrate World War II and the Holocaust. Similarly, Russian dictator Vladimir Putin has repeatedly used manufactured terrorist attacks as a justification for stripping power from democratic institutions like regional governors and privately owned television stations.

Accordingly, the emergency marks the regime's shift from pretending to follow the playbook of democracy (by letting political opponents continue to have their rightful voice in government, weakening but not completely destroying institutions, and at least pretending to respect citizens' human rights) to openly governing for its own sake and throwing all democratic principles out the window. In addition to representing the need for citizens to constantly remain vigilant and hold their governments accountable, then, the emergency also demonstrates how authoritarians invert the ordinary tools and obligations of government. As they claim to be serving the national welfare, they are really seizing power and pursuing personal gain at the expense of the citizenry.





## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Tim Duggan Books edition of *On Tyranny* published in 2017.

### Prologue Quotes

●● In politics, being deceived is no excuse.

**Related Characters:** Leszek Kołakowski (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 5



### Explanation and Analysis

As an epigraph, Snyder takes this quote from Leszek Kołakowski, an influential Polish philosopher who was also one of his teachers at Oxford. This quote illustrates how Snyder conceptualizes civic responsibility in a declining democracy: citizens must understand tyranny in order to resist it. This is because tyranny functions by deception. Authoritarians want to rule for their own benefit, while remaining popular among the people so that they do not get kicked out of office. In order to do this, they lie profusely to blur the line between fact and fiction, invent crises to get people to look the other way while they pursue their real agendas, and reduce politics to a question of loyalty and feeling, when politics in a democracy should really consist of rationally identifying and fulfilling the best interests of the citizenry as a whole. Collectively, these strategies allow citizens to live in blissful ignorance about the government's true motives and actions. This may be innocuous in some cases, but it becomes incredibly dangerous when governments start persecuting people they identify as enemies and, in some extreme cases, committing atrocities like the Holocaust. Snyder's primary goal in this book is to

help citizens understand tyranny in order to resist it, but the first thing readers must learn is that they must expect to be deceived by the government. Merely pointing out this fact will do nothing to save them; rather, people must first see through the deception in order to then act to stop it, and neither of these steps is possible without the other.

☛ The European history of the twentieth century shows us that societies can break, democracies can fall, ethics can collapse, and ordinary men can find themselves standing over death pits with guns in their hands. It would serve us well today to understand why.

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 11-12

### Explanation and Analysis

At the end of his Prologue, Snyder explains why he structured *On Tyranny* as a history book rather than a guide to present-day American politics or a work of pure theory. As a democracy, Snyder says, one of the United States' greatest weaknesses is its citizens' belief that it is special. Americans often think that the United States has particularly strong democratic institutions and traditions, which will inevitably protect it from antidemocratic forces and prevent it from collapsing. Some people take this a step further by arguing that all modern countries will inevitably become democracies, and these democracies will never become anything else.

However, Snyder emphasizes that these views are simply wrong. Several thousand years of recorded human history consistently shows that democracies collapse, often into tyranny and often when their citizens least expect it. In reality, because democracies give all citizens some access to power, they are not especially stable but rather extraordinarily *unstable*: they allow individuals to lie and cheat their way to power by deceiving others.

Unfortunately, psychologists know that it is remarkably easy to manipulate people, especially through political power: this is how "ordinary men can find themselves standing over death pits with guns in their hands." To keep democracy alive, Snyder argues, citizens must preempt this kind of deception by actively participating in politics and sustaining democratic institutions. If they become passive, tyranny can easily gain a foothold.


Snyder warns that American democracy is dealing with

these dangers right now. In part because of their mistaken belief that democracy is inevitable, Americans passively watch as inequality deepens and power becomes increasingly concentrated in the United States. Snyder worries that Donald Trump, whose political ideology and governing style are dangerously close to those of dictators throughout history, threatens to push American democracy over the cliff once and for all.

## Chapter 1 Quotes

☛ Most of the power of authoritarianism is freely given. In times like these, individuals think ahead about what a more repressive government will want, and then offer themselves without being asked. A citizen who adapts in this way is teaching power what it can do.

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 17

### Explanation and Analysis

This paragraph is Snyder's short introduction to the first of his 20 lessons, which is "Do not obey in advance." Giving up is the biggest mistake that citizens can take when an authoritarian government takes power. While it makes sense to feel defeated, this is not the same as admitting defeat: pro-democracy forces might not be able to completely win power back from tyrants, but they can still take meaningful action. Specifically, they can stop the worst excesses of tyranny, and they can build a resistance movement that make it possible to reclaim the nation from tyranny in the long run.

Even simple noncompliance can make a difference: Snyder uses the example of how European governments and citizens gave up when Hitler's forces invaded and, in many cases, offered the Nazis detailed lists of where Jews lived and work. Simply withholding this information would have saved numerous lives. Analogously, in the 21st century, refusing to cooperate with oppressive policies can still make a difference, even if everyone else seems to have given up any sense of moral responsibility. In fact, these others obey because they confuse leaders' political power with moral authority—in short, they assume that leaders must be right because they are leaders, and this leads them to carry out the government's will without reflecting on the true moral consequences of doing what they are asked. Instead, democracy requires citizens to always put morality first and



hold power to the standards of morality, not vice versa.

☛ People whom they did not know, and against whom they had no grievance, seemed to be suffering greatly—pounding the glass and complaining of heart pain. Even so, most subjects followed Milgram's instructions and continued to apply (what they thought were) ever greater shocks until the victims appeared to die. Even those who did not proceed all the way to the (apparent) killing of their fellow human beings left without inquiring about the health of the other participants. Milgram grasped that people are remarkably receptive to new rules in a new setting. They are surprisingly willing to harm and kill others in the service of some new purpose if they are so instructed by a new authority.

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker), Stanley Milgram

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 21

### Explanation and Analysis

At the end of his first chapter, Snyder explains the famous electroshock experiment conducted by psychologist Stanley Milgram, who wanted to understand how so many ordinary people could have set aside morality and participated in the horrific crimes of the Holocaust. In this experiment, Milgram had ordinary people ask questions to an actor (who they thought was another test subject) behind a pane of glass. When the actor gave a wrong answer, Milgram (or whomever he had assigned to lead the experiment) ordered his subjects to administer increasingly stronger electroshocks. In reality, there were no shocks, and the actor was only pretending to suffer them. Eventually, the actor pretended to be in severe pain or even die—and while many subjects protested, most of them continued to deliver the shocks when the experimenter ordered them to. Although Milgram and his colleagues initially hypothesized that only a small number of their test subjects would be willing to deal out the strongest shock, in reality the vast majority of them did.


Milgram's experiment shows that people generally set morality aside when they are dealing with authority figures. This demonstrates that the sense of social connection and obligation that people feel throughout their normal lives in a democratic society will not necessarily prevent their society from falling into authoritarianism. Namely, authoritarian governments exploit people's tendency to obey the dictates

of power by making obedience and loyalty their supreme civic values, then coercing obedient citizens into implementing the will of the state, even if it means injuring other citizens who are just like them. Ultimately, this shows why even people who expect themselves to be courageous in the face of tyranny might ultimately end up fulfilling the government's will, and this explains why Snyder makes "Do not obey in advance" the first and arguably most important of his 20 rules for resisting tyranny.

## Chapter 2 Quotes

☛ Do not speak of "our institutions" unless you make them yours by acting on their behalf. Institutions do not protect themselves.

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 22

### Explanation and Analysis

Throughout *On Tyranny*, Snyder repeatedly notes that Americans tend to assume that their country's democracy is stronger than it really is. At the end of the book, he names this attitude—specifically, the assumption that progress and democracy are inevitable—"the politics of inevitability." Although this belief is comforting and convenient, it does not hold up to further scrutiny. When asked why American democracy is so strong and stable, one of the first explanations that many Americans choose is that American *institutions* are strong and stable. But this is just another version of the "politics of inevitability": there is no inherent reason that American institutions will survive any more than there is an inherent reason for American democracy as a whole to continue functioning. In fact, maintaining blind faith in democracy and institutions is tantamount to refusing to acknowledge the profound rot that threatens them both. In turn, the myth of inevitable, strong institutions serves the very people who are dismantling these institutions because it convinces citizens not to protect them. Institutions are only as strong as the people who staff them.


In reality, Snyder emphasizes, democracy and institutions only survive because people actively sustain them. After all, democracy is really just a way that the people of a nation decide to organize themselves, and institutions are the structures and traditions that they create. But if people stop collectively governing themselves, democracy ceases to exist, and if they stop sustaining these structures and

traditions, institutions collapse. Accordingly, the idea that institutions will automatically protect the people is backwards: instead, people must protect institutions in order to preserve democracy.

### Chapter 3 Quotes

☛ Does the history of tyranny apply to the United States? Certainly the early Americans who spoke of “eternal vigilance” would have thought so. The logic of the system they devised was to mitigate the consequences of our real imperfections, not to celebrate our imaginary perfection. We certainly face, as did the ancient Greeks, the problem of oligarchy—ever more threatening as globalization increases differences in wealth. The odd American idea that giving money to political campaigns is free speech means that the very rich have far more speech, and so in effect far more voting power, than other citizens. We believe that we have checks and balances, but have rarely faced a situation like the present, when the less popular of the two parties controls every lever of power at the federal level, as well as the majority of state houses. The party that exercises such control proposes few policies that are popular with the society at large, and several that are generally unpopular—and thus must either fear democracy or weaken it.

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker), Vladimir Putin, Adolf Hitler, Donald Trump

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 29-30

#### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Snyder explains the dangers of a one-party state, or a government in which one political party manages to completely destroy or disempower its opposition, to the point that it has complete control over the state and can pursue its own ends without fearing a loss of power. Snyder notes that the United States is actually remarkably close to one-party rule in the present. While the United States is famous for its bitterly polarized two-party system, the early abolitionist Wendell Phillips’s famous call for “eternal vigilance” in the nation’s electoral system points to the way that a single party can easily rig the system once it wins power.


Snyder argues that the Republican Party is doing this in the present, and that as of the late 2010s, it appears to be openly seeking single-party rule in the United States. Even though the Republican Party consistently sees the support of a minority of voters and only represents the interests of a small, wealthy elite, Snyder suggests, these voters and this


elite have a power vastly disproportionate to their numbers. Accordingly, while by no means inevitable or even very likely, it is completely possible that the Republican Party manages to further corrupt electoral processes to the extent that it can remain in power perpetually, with no checks and balances from the majority of the country, and impose an oligarchical tyranny that systematically redistributes resources to the wealthy and powerful. Such a system already exists in Putin’s Russia, Snyder notes, which should serve as a cautionary tale.

### Chapter 4 Quotes

☛ You might one day be offered the opportunity to display symbols of loyalty. Make sure that such symbols include your fellow citizens rather than exclude them.

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 



**Page Number:** 35


#### Explanation and Analysis

Snyder argues that, while they might initially seem to be unimportant or merely metaphorical, the political signs and symbols that citizens display in public have an important effect on their ability to remain free from tyranny. At first, authoritarian governments use subtle signs to make their policies palatable to the public—but later, they start demanding that citizens openly promise their loyalty and support by displaying other, more brazen kinds of signs. These signs primarily serve to help leaders and citizens distinguish the “us” who support the government from the “them” who are considered its enemies. Snyder emphasizes that, if this happens “one day” in the United States, citizens must strive to display *inclusive* symbols to fight against the logic of us-versus-them. By emphasizing that anyone can be an American and there is no distinguishing trait—whether racial, religious, political, sexual, or personal—that can reliably divide “us” from “them,” citizens can help prevent this exclusionary logic from translating into exclusionary policies and, at worst, open persecution.

●● We have seen that the real meaning of the greengrocer's slogan has nothing to do with what the text of the slogan actually says. Even so, the real meaning is quite clear and generally comprehensible because the code is so familiar: the greengrocer declares his loyalty in the only way the regime is capable of bearing; that is, by accepting the prescribed ritual, by accepting appearances as reality, by accepting the given rules of the game, thus making it possible for the game to go on, for it to exist in the first place.

**Related Characters:** Václav Havel (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 37

### Explanation and Analysis

In his fourth chapter, Snyder encourages readers to “Take responsibility for the face of the world,” specifically by paying attention to the symbols of loyalty and identity that their fellow citizens display and trying whenever possible to use inclusive rather than exclusionary imagery in their own. He includes a famous example from Czech dissident writer and pro-democracy politician Václav Havel’s essay “The Power of the Powerless.” Havel tells a parable about a grocery store owner who puts a communist poster in his window, even though he is not a communist at all. Rather, the grocery store owner just wants to stay in the government’s good graces and avoid suspicion. Havel points out that this still ends up supporting the government because it sends the message that either the grocer is a true supporter or he is not willing to openly resist.

Even ironically mocking the government’s tyrannical control of everyday life, in other words, means allowing the government to keep exercising that control. If citizens have gotten to the point of recognizing that others are only jokingly paying lip service to the government but do not actually believe in its policies, then they have also gotten to the point where they can organize and resist these policies. This allows them to provide a counternarrative to the government, a different set of “rules of the game” that do not require submitting to authority or accepting that repression is inevitable.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

●● Most governments, most of the time, seek to monopolize violence. If only the government can legitimately use force, and this use is constrained by law, then the forms of politics that we take for granted become possible. It is impossible to carry out democratic elections, try cases at court, design and enforce laws, or indeed manage any of the other quiet business of government when agencies beyond the state also have access to violence. For just this reason, people and parties who wish to undermine democracy and the rule of law create and fund violent organizations that involve themselves in politics. Such groups can take the form of a paramilitary wing of a political party, the personal bodyguard of a particular politician—or apparently spontaneous citizens’ initiatives, which usually turn out to have been organized by a party or its leader.

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 



**Page Number:** 43

### Explanation and Analysis

Snyder explains the danger with paramilitaries by starting from one of the most basic principles that defines a legitimate government: “only the government can legitimately use force,” and it uses this force impartially and fairly—or, in other words, according to *laws* that apply equally to all members of a society, rather than just according to the whims of leaders or ruling parties. This principle—that everybody is subject to laws, including rulers themselves—is also known as the “rule of law,” and it is what allows “democratic elections” and all the “business of government” to function normally, because it means that violence is never used to destabilize laws, only to enforce them. In a democracy, this means that the agents of violence—the police and military—should only ever use their powers in order to preserve democracy itself. (Of course, this often does not happen in practice, as these organizations frequently violate the rule of law—for instance, to protect themselves—and therefore undermine their own legitimacy.) The issue with paramilitary groups, then, is that they use force for the promotion of individual *private* interests, not the collective *public* interest that is expressed by the laws and fulfilled through the rule of law. In essence, this is the same issue that makes tyranny undemocratic: it puts government to work for private, not public, interests.

●● Because the American federal government uses mercenaries in warfare and American state governments pay corporations to run prisons, the use of violence in the United States is already highly privatized. What is novel is a president who wishes to maintain, while in office, a personal security force which during his campaign used force against dissenters.

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker), Donald Trump

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 44-45

### Explanation and Analysis



In his sixth chapter, Snyder explains why the privatization of military and security forces is one of the most important indicators that a state is approaching tyranny, because it shows that the state is permitting the use of violence in the service of private ends, when a legitimate government only ever uses violence in order to preserve the public interest of society as a whole. In plainer terms, when private individuals' living depends on being paid to use violence, it becomes likely that unnecessary violence will proliferate. Snyder says that this is already the case in the United States, which pays private companies to fight wars on its behalf overseas and run prisons within its borders. These companies profit from violence and benefit from having an enemy to use it against. This is why such companies so often work hand in hand with tyrants, who fight off imagined enemies in order to win support from the population, which then looks the other way while the government ignores the interests of the majority.

According to Snyder, the "highly privatized" nature of violence in the United States is evidence that American democracy is already quite weak, if it can be said to still exist at all. Donald Trump's explicit promises to use violence against people who disagree with and politically oppose him takes this to the next level, however, because while previous administrations have hired private corporations to enact violence on the government's behalf, Trump is asking private individuals to act violently on his behalf—in other words, on behalf of the private interests of part of the government, not the public interests of the nation.

## Chapter 8 Quotes

●● After the Second World War, Europeans, Americans, and others created myths of righteous resistance to Hitler. In the 1930s, however, the dominant attitudes had been accommodation and admiration. By 1940 most Europeans had made their peace with the seemingly irresistible power of Nazi Germany. Influential Americans such as Charles Lindbergh opposed war with the Nazis under the slogan "America First." It is those who were considered exceptional, eccentric, or even insane in their own time—those who did not change when the world around them did—whom we remember and admire today.

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker), Adolf Hitler

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 51-52

### Explanation and Analysis

In his eighth chapter, Snyder implores citizens to "stand out" in order to break "the spell of the status quo" and help build momentum for a broader resistance movement. He begins this chapter by reminding his readers of a historical trend that most would prefer to forget: much of the world, including many Americans, felt "admiration" for Hitler and the Nazis before, during, and in some cases even after the Holocaust. What was normal then seems insane today—to the point that Americans have "created myths of righteous resistance" to try and forget their indirect complicity in Hitler's project (by actively supporting him, for instance, but also by refusing to accept Jewish refugees and waffling about entering the war).

Snyder specifically mentions the slogan "America First," which Donald Trump made into a centerpiece of his own campaign, in order to show the dangers of this selective amnesia: Trump and his supporters do not even realize that the precise idea they are advocating would have been catastrophic in the past and could have similar effects in the present and future. Accordingly, in this passage Snyder offers two different but equally reasons to pay much greater attention to history in American politics: first, because Americans have forgotten much of what actually happened, and secondly, because the hindsight they can have today will show them the longer-term dangers of political ideas like "America First."



## Chapter 9 Quotes

☞ Staring at screens is perhaps unavoidable, but the two-dimensional world makes little sense unless we can draw upon a mental armory that we have developed somewhere else. When we repeat the same words and phrases that appear in the daily media, we accept the absence of a larger framework. To have such a framework requires more concepts, and having more concepts requires reading. So get the screens out of your room and surround yourself with books.

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 62

**Explanation and Analysis**

Snyder explains that authoritarians use a kind of psychological warfare to restrict citizens' freedom of thought. By muddling the distinction between truth and lies, twisting the meaning of words to the point that citizens can no longer use them while remaining neutral, and restricting people's access to dissenting ideas and perspectives, the government can stop resistance movements in their tracks and make it very difficult for citizens to clearly understand what policies are actually doing. To resist this tendency, which the news media only intensifies, citizens must take up analytical tools and perspectives that are independent from the government's, most of all by finding "words and phrases" whose meaning the government has not already changed. The best way to do this, Snyder concludes, is for people to unplug and read books. Books put people in touch with the collected wisdom of thousands of years of human history and expose them to perspectives that are far removed from the present-day United States in terms of both time and place. This "larger framework" for thought—which means being able to see the present as just one moment among many moments throughout history—allows people to see more clearly and make sense of the world for themselves rather than just accepting one of the prescribed opinions offered to them on the nightly news. Of course, Snyder's book is precisely an attempt to provide people with a succinct version of this "larger framework" by introducing them to many of the basic concepts they need to resist authoritarianism.

## Chapter 10 Quotes

☞ Fascists despised the small truths of daily existence, loved slogans that resonated like a new religion, and preferred creative myths to history or journalism. They used new media, which at the time was radio, to create a drumbeat of propaganda that aroused feelings before people had time to ascertain facts. And now, as then, many people confused faith in a hugely flawed leader with the truth about the world we all share. Post-truth is pre-fascism.

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker), Donald Trump

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 71

**Explanation and Analysis**

In his 10th chapter, Snyder warns that the late-2010s trend toward "post-truth" politics and media profoundly threatens the sense of verifiable reality that is necessary for democracy to function. Democracy needs truth because people need to agree on facts before they can agree on what to do about them. But fascist politicians, who try to win the people's support without having to actually implement policies that benefit them, thrive when truth is thrown out of the window. By getting people to believe in what Snyder calls "a fictional counterworld," fascists turn politics into a game of emotions and loyalty rather than facts and collective interests. Their main mode of communication is "propaganda that arouse[s] feelings before people ha[ve] time to ascertain facts." Of course, Donald Trump does the exact same thing, and he uses television to serve his purposes just like previous leaders used radio. By turning politics into a game of drama and distraction, authoritarians like Trump get the news media to stupefy the public. Those who disagree with the government become too paralyzed by outrage and intrigue to meaningfully resist, and those who support the government buy into lies and completely miss the decisions that really matter and have an impact on their lives.

## Chapter 11 Quotes

☞ “What is truth?” Sometimes people ask this question because they wish to do nothing. Generic cynicism makes us feel hip and alternative even as we slip along with our fellow citizens into a morass of indifference. It is your ability to discern facts that makes you an individual, and our collective trust in common knowledge that makes us a society. The individual who investigates is also the citizen who builds. The leader who dislikes the investigators is a potential tyrant.

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   



**Page Number:** 73

### Explanation and Analysis

Snyder has already noted that authoritarianism thrives when the public does not care about truth, and he concluded that “post-truth is pre-fascism.” Here, he now asks why so many people still fall into the trap of “post-truth” thinking, in which people choose to believe what is convenient over what is verifiably true. He argues that “post-truth” is a lazy and irresponsible perspective often chosen by people who care about “feel[ing] hip and alternative” but do not seem to recognize that their actions have repercussions. In fact, ironically enough, rejecting truth is initially seen as a way to rebel against the mainstream—until, that is, it *becomes* the mainstream. Of course, this likely reflects citizens’ broader sense of civic disengagement and dissatisfaction with the state of the nation. But the solution is not to say that nothing matters: it is to get politically engaged. As Snyder noted at the end of the last chapter, there is nothing “new or postmodern” about being “post-truth.” Commentators who associate “post-truth” with postmodernism and identity politics are actually willfully misinterpreting those movements, which are about achieving social equality by introducing more perspectives into collective political conversations, *not* suggesting that the existence of multiple perspectives means that anything goes.

☞ The better print journalists allow us to consider the meaning, for ourselves and our country, of what might otherwise seem to be isolated bits of information. But while anyone can repost an article, researching and writing is hard work that requires time and money. Before you deride the “mainstream media,” note that it is no longer the mainstream. It is derision that is mainstream and easy, and actual journalism that is edgy and difficult.

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 76

### Explanation and Analysis

While Snyder is deeply critical of contemporary American televised news media, he emphasizes that this is not the same as deriding the “mainstream media,” like citizens of all political persuasions are fond of doing in the 21st-century United States. In fact, when people rally against the “mainstream media”—by which they mean print journalism—they are really complaining about the fact that good journalists cannot say whatever they want but rather are limited to saying what they can prove to be true. Of course, all journalism is written from a perspective and all perspectives have some bias, but this does not mean that all perspectives are equally *true* or *valid*. A perspective is only valid if it is based on *facts*, and good print journalism is essential because it brings out facts for citizens who might not otherwise know about them.

Whereas a media populated by dedicated print journalists is an essential institution in a democratic society, according to Snyder, televised news is largely a distraction. Not only does it elevate the opinions of pundits and largely serve the interests of corporate stakeholders, but it also saturates political conversations with information about the immediate present. True political trends become clear over time, Snyder emphasizes, and accurately analyzing politics requires referring to the past and addressing the long-term implications of policies, rather than just covering the day’s breaking news. By failing to provide the historical context, in-depth investigative reporting, and meaningful expert analysis, the televised news media prevents people from forming truly independent and informed opinions about the world. In contrast, investigative journalists often follow a story for weeks to years in order to uncover and better convey the broader significance of what they are reporting. Accordingly, Snyder concludes that Americans must pay far more attention to such print journalism and far less to the talking heads on cable news.

## Chapter 12 Quotes

☞ A smile, a handshake, or a word of greeting—banal gestures in a normal situation—took on great significance. When friends, colleagues, and acquaintances looked away or crossed the street to avoid contact, fear grew. You might not be sure, today or tomorrow, who feels threatened in the United States. But if you affirm everyone, you can be sure that certain people will feel better.

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 82


### Explanation and Analysis

In his short twelfth chapter, citing examples from 20th-century eastern Europe, Snyder points out that tyrants' campaigns of psychological warfare against the people they rule often lead to a complete breakdown in normal manners. While this might seem mundane, it is actually incredibly important: if government repression makes extending "a smile, a handshake, or a word of greeting" to the wrong person a risk, it is all the more important to offer these gestures to others. First, these gestures allow people to signal their solidarity to one another and maintain the social bonds that they might eventually need to resist the government in an organized way, and secondly, they allow people to show each other that, even if the government *wants* to take complete control over everyone's lives, it will never truly be able to. In other words, everyday manners help sustain the private sphere, preserving a kind of intimate personal space that the government will never be able to take away.

## Chapter 14 Quotes

☞ What the great political thinker Hannah Arendt meant by *totalitarianism* was not an all-powerful state, but the erasure of the difference between private and public life.

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker), Hannah Arendt

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 88

### Explanation and Analysis



Hannah Arendt, the German-American philosopher who became a world-renowned commentator on the Holocaust and its aftermath after escaping Nazi Germany, is perhaps best remembered for her analysis of totalitarianism—the extreme form of authoritarianism in which the government tries to control absolutely every aspect of citizens' lives and destroy the private sphere. In a totalitarian state, citizens never know if their private actions could come back to haunt them or have them labeled an "enemy of the state." This is why Snyder encourages his readers to "Establish a private life" in his fourteenth chapter: even if a totalitarian

government does not become "all-powerful," it does erase all the rights and freedoms that citizens could formerly count on by treating absolutely everything as fair game for government control. So while an authoritarian government might centralize power and rig elections, it probably would not care to arrest absolutely anyone who says something negative about the government. In contrast, a totalitarian government tries to regulate even these most intimate parts of life, turning the private sphere into just another dimension of public life.

## Chapter 16 Quotes

☞ History, which for a time seemed to be running from west to east, now seems to be moving from east to west.

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker), Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 97

### Explanation and Analysis

In his sixteenth chapter, Snyder encourages Americans to look outward to other parts of the world by travelling, developing personal relationships, and reading and consuming media from and about places besides the United States. Because Russia and Ukraine had already seen their elections destabilized by propaganda and disinformation, Snyder notes, Russian and Ukrainian journalists were better poised to understand 2016 United States presidential election than American journalists. However, their warnings were generally ignored, and this shows the profound danger in Americans' reluctance to admit that any other country could have lessons to teach the United States.



In fact, this attitude of American exceptionalism is also one of the primary errors that leads Americans to assume that democracy will never collapse in the United States. Americans often assume that history involves a specific kind of progress toward capitalist economic development and liberal democracy. Accordingly, they think that rich industrialized countries like the United States are further along this path of development, while poorer countries in places like the global South and eastern Europe are a few steps behind. In a few decades, they assume, the rest of the world will somehow catch up, and every country will look like the United States, with a large economy, high levels of resource consumption, and, most of all, the rights and freedoms associated with liberal democracy.


Unfortunately, this incredibly common view of world history has no foundation in reality: democracies fall all the time, countries often become poorer rather than richer over time, and American-style capitalism is dominant because the United States won the Cold War, not because it is inherently superior or more just. By assuming that history always moves “from west to east”—or that progress extends outward from Western Europe and the United States to the rest of the world—Americans blind themselves to the weaknesses in their nation’s system of government and make it all the more likely that this government will collapse. Now, on the contrary, things “seem[] to be moving from east to west”—Russian and Chinese-style authoritarianism, in other words, is increasingly becoming the norm in the liberal democratic countries of Europe and the Americas.

## Chapter 17 Quotes

☛ People who assure you that you can *only* gain security at the price of liberty usually want to deny you both.

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 100

### Explanation and Analysis



In his final few chapters, Snyder looks at the crucial moments when a government takes the leap from slowly dismantling democracy to suddenly establishing tyranny in its place. It may take several years for a wannabe authoritarian administration to hollow out institutions, chip away at the opposition, and lull the population into ignorance to the point that it can overthrow democracy. But when it sees an opportunity, such a government will look for any excuse it can find to decisively take all power away from the people and start ruling through intimidation and terror. Most of all, Snyder notes in this chapter, tyrannical governments manipulate crises—whether real or manufactured—in order to argue that they need absolute power in order to protect the population. In other words, they argue that citizens must trade their liberty for their security, and many citizens happily agree because they instinctively feel that the government will protect them. But this is a dangerous trap, and citizens must remember that it is usually not necessary to give up their liberty in order to ensure their security. When the government takes this crucial leap toward tyranny, as with all the smaller steps that


preceded it, citizens must see through the government’s lies and actively and forcefully resist in order to save democracy.

## Chapter 18 Quotes

☛ Modern tyranny is terror management. When the terrorist attack comes, remember that authoritarians exploit such events in order to consolidate power. The sudden disaster that requires the end of checks and balances, the dissolution of opposition parties, the suspension of freedom of expression, the right to a fair trial, and so on, is the oldest trick in the Hitlerian book. *Do not fall for it.*

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker), Adolf Hitler

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 103

### Explanation and Analysis

Snyder emphasizes that emergencies—such as wars, pandemics, and most of all terrorist attacks—offer wannabe dictators an unparalleled opportunity to consolidate their power and establish tyranny in the place of democracy. They exploit the logic of the national emergency, or the assumption that the government needs to take abnormal actions in unusual times, in order to expand their power over things that, more often than not, have nothing to do with the crisis. In other words, they declare an emergency to both distract people and give themselves cover for taking a number of antidemocratic steps that they were hoping to take anyway. These emergencies often never end—not because the immediate threat does not go away, but rather because the government does not want to give up the powers it has gained.

Of course, crises generally *do* require somewhat expanding government powers, but they almost *never* require dissolving democratic institutions, checks and balances, and civil rights. Although thinking rationally and being vigilant in such circumstances is often much harder than usual, citizens must clearly recognize when emergencies are only pretenses for overreach and resist in any way they can. After all, the inherent danger in all states is that a government can always give itself greater powers, and the only thing that can stop it is the citizenry itself.



## Chapter 20 Quotes

☞ If none of us is prepared to die for freedom, then all of us will die under tyranny.

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  Idea

**Page Number:** 115

### Explanation and Analysis

Snyder's short twentieth chapter, "Be as courageous as you can," consists entirely of this short call for citizens to put themselves on the line for the sake of their democracy. Snyder's point about the fundamental nature of democracy is straightforward: by definition, all citizens are just as responsible for their democracy as every other, and nobody can reasonably refuse to sacrifice themselves for the sake of democracy while expecting others to do so. Accordingly, if the great benefit of democracy is that it gives everybody collective control over how they will organize their society and treats all citizens as equals, this also entails that everybody must personally take responsibility for the health of the whole and be willing to sacrifice themselves for fellow citizens, including people they don't know. This principle is the heart of democracy, and ultimately it is the only thing that can reliably prevent authoritarians from consolidating power and turning the government against the people.

According to Snyder, one of the primary reasons that Americans fail to see the critical weaknesses in their democracy is that they simply believe that democracy is inherently a stable system that naturally protects itself. Some believe that American democracy is uniquely special, defined by freedoms that are greater than those found anywhere else in the world. Unfortunately, both of these ideas are false. In particular, the idea that democracy is stable is completely inconsistent with all historical evidence: as Snyder has emphasized throughout *On Tyranny*, democracies have frequently collapsed since the beginning of recorded human history, and there is no reason to think that the United States is special. Rather, the *idea* of American exceptionalism is simply a product of the fact that, after winning the Cold War, Americans decided to start believing that this victory somehow reflected *destiny*, and that all nations would ultimately become capitalist liberal democracies like the United States. Unfortunately, Snyder argues, this is a lie, and it is a convenient one for authoritarians who hope to distract Americans from efforts to destabilize democracy that are taking place under their very noses. In order to fight this "politics of inevitability," Snyder concludes, Americans need to take a serious look at both the history of democracy and the present state of different democracies around the world.

☞ Both of these positions, inevitability and eternity, are antihistorical. The only thing that stands between them is history itself.

## Epilogue Quotes

☞ Until recently, we Americans had convinced ourselves that there was nothing in the future but more of the same. The seemingly distant traumas of fascism, Nazism, and communism seemed to be receding into irrelevance. We allowed ourselves to accept the politics of inevitability, the sense that history could move in only one direction: toward liberal democracy. After communism in eastern Europe came to an end in 1989-91, we imbibed the myth of an "end of history." In doing so, we lowered our defenses, constrained our imagination, and opened the way for precisely the kinds of regimes we told ourselves could never return.

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  Idea  History  Idea  History

**Page Number:** 117-118

### Explanation and Analysis

**Related Characters:** Timothy Snyder (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  Idea  Idea  History

**Page Number:** 124-125

### Explanation and Analysis

When he wrote this book in late 2016 and early 2017, Snyder argued that the United States was principally stuck in the "politics of inevitability" but increasingly falling into the "politics of eternity." In plainer language, most Americans assumed that all countries will inevitably become capitalist liberal democracies, and those which already are—like the United States—will never become everything else. Meanwhile, a growing segment of the population, which has found its living conditions worsening and given up on the idea of progress, has turned to Donald Trump in an effort to "Make America Great Again," even though they have not clearly defined what kind of "great" society they want to create.

While these two positions seem to be opposites, Snyder emphasizes in his book's closing pages, they are really two sides of the same coin. This is because they rely on the same fundamental, underlying principles: they say that the future has already been determined and there is nothing that people can do, as individuals or a collective, to make the world any better. They believe, in other words, that history is a force independent of human beings. But studying history reveals that people make history through their

actions and decisions, which collectively determine how societies develop. Ultimately, Snyder hopes highlights that some societies have become more democratic and equal throughout history only because their citizens have dedicated their lives to fighting for their political visions. With this, he encourages contemporary Americans to break out of their funk and recognize that they are collectively responsible for shaping the future of their democracy—but that they will lose this democracy if they fail to act.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PROLOGUE: HISTORY AND TYRANNY

Snyder's epigraph comes from the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski: "In politics, being deceived is no excuse." History can instruct people, Snyder begins, even if it does not necessarily repeat itself. Informed by ancient philosophy, the American Founding Fathers feared the rise of tyranny—powerful people using their power to benefit themselves rather than the collective. Snyder examines history in 2017, because he, too, believes that the United States risks falling into tyranny.

*Snyder uses this epigraph from Kołakowski because his book's purpose is precisely to give readers the understanding they need to fight tyranny. Deception and diversion are tyranny's principal strategies, so effectively resisting it—and being a responsible citizen in its face—requires learning to see through it. Developing this understanding requires paying attention to history, both because of the lessons it provides about what tyrants do and also because it acts as a reality check, which people desperately need because contemporary American politics relies on deceiving them about the history of the United States.*



While the Founding Fathers looked at classical antiquity in Greece and Rome, Snyder will look at European democracies founded at three critical periods in the 20th century: 1918, 1945, and 1989. Many of these democracies collapsed, giving way to authoritarian fascist and communist governments that tried and failed to stop globalization. In the 21st century, the United States faces the threat of a similar collapse, and Americans must learn from the past.

*While Americans often assume that American democracy will survive any pressures placed on it, the Founders' dedication to protecting the state from tyranny and the history of 20th-century Europe demonstrate that democracy is actually remarkably unstable, and citizens must take steps to protect it.*



## CHAPTER 1: DO NOT OBEY IN ADVANCE.

Throughout history, people have obeyed authoritarians automatically, like when German citizens eagerly supported Adolf Hitler's newly elected government. Similarly, when Hitler started planning to invade Austria, the Austrian government simply agreed. Austrians started persecuting Jews before the Nazis even took over, and the Nazis modeled their later genocidal policies on these Austrians' riots. In his famous electroshock experiments, psychologist Stanley Milgram convinced everyday people to electroshock a stranger behind a pane of glass until the stranger apparently died of a heart attack. While the strangers were actors and not actually getting shocked, this experiment shows how people are more willing than they think to commit violence when authority figures order them to.

*While people prefer to think of Hitler as a rogue who commandeered the German state over its citizens' protests, this is a willful misrepresentation of history. It is a particularly dangerous and self-serving one because it leads people to think that something similar couldn't possibly happen where they live. In reality, Hitler was elected, and he was extremely popular (even outside Germany). Those who did not actively support him passively obeyed. In other words, the people of Germany and the territories it occupied are also responsible for the horrors of the Holocaust, even though they were normal people with normal moral compasses. Milgram's experiment shows that people have trouble maintaining their morality—specifically, their ability to empathize with others and demand fair treatment for everyone—when they are pressed by authorities, and especially under conditions of crisis. Snyder's message is clear: citizens must never get used to repression and violence, and they cannot trust the government to protect them.*



## CHAPTER 2: DEFEND INSTITUTIONS.

“Institutions do not protect themselves,” Snyder remarks, and everyone should choose one to actively defend. After Hitler’s election, the German public wrongly assumed that institutional checks and balances would prevent the Nazis from implementing the anti-Jewish policies they planned. In fact, when authoritarian rulers openly declare that they want to undermine a nation’s political institutions, it should be no surprise that they do so. Less than a year after their election, the Nazis had already destroyed German democracy by banning all other parties and weakening all existing institutions.

*The institutions of government and civil society, including the tradition of democracy itself, “do not protect themselves” because they are made of people. As with citizens’ tendency to “obey in advance” rather than resist the overwhelming power of the state, their tendency to trust institutions is based on an overly optimistic misunderstanding of the way power and democracy work: societies have to be carefully shaped over centuries in order to be and remain democratic, because democracy requires spreading power around rather than concentrating it. Therefore, democracy is not inevitable: it can always be undone, especially by those in power, and therefore citizens must do whatever is necessary to defend it.*



## CHAPTER 3: BEWARE THE ONE-PARTY STATE.

People should fight parties that try to consolidate power. The famous saying “eternal vigilance is the price of liberty” is often misattributed to Thomas Jefferson and understood as meaning that Americans must protect their democracy from foreigners, but actually its author was the abolitionist activist Wendell Phillips, who wanted to point out how power-hungry Americans pose the greatest threat to their own democracy.

*“Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty” is simply an eloquent way of saying that citizens must constantly protect their democratic institutions in order to maintain the freedom that it gives them. Democracy is always under attack because there are always people who would rather use the powers of the government for their own private interests rather for the greater good. That this quote is frequently misunderstood and misattributed demonstrates the importance of accurately understanding and remembering history. The fact that people attribute it to a slaveholding politician, not an antislavery activist, shows how people tend to wrongly assume that the people at the top defend democracy and equality rather than everyday people who are willing to put themselves on the line for their fellow citizens.*



This is how 20th-century European democracies fell into single-party rule: elected parties started slowly eliminating opposition. Nobody knows when they are voting in their last free election—as in Germany in 1932 (until 1945), Czechoslovakia in 1946 (until 1989), or Russia in 1990 (until the present). As the United States is already becoming an oligarchy, ruled by the wealthy and a party with minority support, the 2016 election could be its last truly free one. The nation desperately needs to reform its electoral system.

*Although a one-party state seems like an extreme version of a state in which institutions have collapsed, leading to the collapse of democracy, Snyder emphasizes that the United States is practically already there: even though there are still two parties in American politics, it is still completely possible for the Republican Party to implement procedures that determine that they will never give up power, even if they lose elections by a significant majority.*





## CHAPTER 4: TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE FACE OF THE WORLD.

People must confront and remove “**signs of hate**” like swastikas, which have real political effects. For instance, in the 1930s, the Soviet government caricatured wealthy farmers as pigs in order to justify expropriating and collectivizing all land, then killing millions of people. Similarly, by marking shops with symbols that meant their owners were Jewish, the Nazis taught Germans to see Jews as economic and political enemies to be eliminated.

If the government demands people display their loyalty, they should do so through *inclusive* symbols. Even small symbols like lapel pins and seemingly innocent expressions of national pride can create exclusion. For instance, the Czech writer Václav Havel remembered seeing a grocery store owner put up a pro-communist sign in his window just to please the government, but this made it impossible for him to resist that government.

*Although they might seem innocent because they are mere symbols, signs of hate, loyalty, and inclusion are actually an important way for different ideas to gain access to people’s psychology. Authoritarians use such symbols to gradually make dangerous ideas acceptable to the population and push their agenda into the public’s picture of what is politically possible and acceptable.*



*When displaying symbols of loyalty to the government becomes normal—as in Havel’s example—these symbols demonstrate the government’s power over every aspect of life and people’s utter loss of privacy and personal freedom of expression, which they should be guaranteed in a just society.*



## CHAPTER 5: REMEMBER PROFESSIONAL ETHICS.

When politicians demand obedience, professionals must insist on acting ethically. Hitler convinced German lawyers that the law was a political tool that he could use however he wanted, including in the service of war and genocide. He had lawyers running concentration camps where physicians experimented on prisoners and businessmen profited from forced labor. All these people abandoned the normal ethical rules underpinning their professions, which must be enforced and strengthened in precisely the circumstances when governments say they should be abandoned. Otherwise, by “just following orders,” professionals end up committing and participating in horrific acts of violence.

*Hitler’s ability to manipulate ordinary, successful, and educated professionals is just as disturbing as these professionals’ willingness to dismiss the moral consequences of their behavior by claiming to be “just following orders.” Like Milgram’s electroshock experiment, this shows how people easily adapt to new situations and power structures. Authoritarians know this, and they exploit it in order to use the power of organized groups (like professional associations) for their own self-interest. Again, although citizens’ widespread support for the Holocaust has largely been erased from contemporary narratives about its horrors, it is essential for people to confront the true evil that normal people committed—none of this seemed out of the ordinary at the time, and there is no reason to think that contemporary people would realize if they end up participating in equally horrific and historic acts of hate and violence.*



## CHAPTER 6: BE WARY OF PARAMILITARIES.

Armed anti-establishment groups are incredibly dangerous when they *become* the establishment. In a functioning society, the government is the only agent that can use violence, and it must follow its laws. But when armed paramilitary groups gain power, they threaten to help anti-democratic parties establish tyranny. In fact, the Nazis used a paramilitary force called the SS to terrify the populace, rig elections, and the concentration camps. According to Snyder, the United States is already far down this track: it has privatized its wars and prisons, and Donald Trump encourages his private security team and his supporters to use violence at his rallies. He wants to ensure that American military and police forces believe in and support his exclusionary political goals.

*In a functioning society, paramilitaries should be subject to the law—the government should be able to take legal action against them when they use force illegitimately. But in the United States, where private corporations already carry out government functions, such armed groups are outside the law—they are neither subject to it, like citizens, nor following and applying it, like a police force. This shows that the United States already has the infrastructure necessary to carry out authoritarian atrocities, and Snyder thinks that Donald Trump’s plans should cause Americans to sincerely fear that such atrocities will actually happen.*



## CHAPTER 7: BE REFLECTIVE IF YOU MUST BE ARMED.

Tyrants almost always force armed public servants, like police officers, to support the criminal actions of their secret police forces. For instance, the Soviet secret police executed 682,691 so-called “enemies of the state” with the help of numerous lawyers, police, and bureaucrats. Similarly, while contemporary Germans like think of the Holocaust as an anonymous and murder machine, in reality thousands of police officers also executed Jews. More regular officers participated in these executions than members of the specialized Einsatzgruppen death squads. Although it was not their job, these everyday policemen *chose* to conform, even though those who refused faced no punishment.

*For Snyder, joining the armed forces means making a commitment to serve the nation rather than to merely serve one’s superiors. Accordingly, soldiers and police officers have a moral obligation to refuse orders to commit atrocities. When authoritarian governments exploit people’s obedience and use concepts like “enemies of the state” to dehumanize the people they want killed, their goal is to make the people carrying out atrocities give up their sense of individual moral responsibility, either by putting a sense of duty to the government first, or by teaching people that their individual choices are morally irrelevant (because they are just following orders). But in reality, soldiers’ true duty is the same as their moral responsibility: to protect society as a whole, including from the state itself. They must not let the state deceive them into putting morality aside. Indeed, this recalls the book’s epigraph, from Leszek Kołakowski: “In politics, being deceived is no excuse.”*



## CHAPTER 8: STAND OUT.

People must stand out and reject the status quo in order to encourage others to follow. In the 1930s and 1940s, European and American governments and popular culture *supported* the Nazis. Nobody resisted Germany’s earliest invasions, and the war only started when Poland insisted on fighting back. Germany started winning, but under Winston Churchill’s leadership, Britain successfully defended itself and made Hitler change course and attack the Soviet Union, its ally at the time, which then switched sides and joined Great Britain. This was a crucial turning point in the war, but Churchill’s resistance was unpopular and unusual at the time, as was Poland’s insistence on fighting back.

*Poland and Great Britain’s insistence on fighting back is significant because at first, the odds were overwhelmingly against them. But they chose to “stand out” to build momentum, not necessarily because they expected to win. This shows how resistance is never futile, because even when it fails in the short term, it can set a precedent in the long term. This applies to individuals as much as nations.*



During Germany's occupation of Poland, Teresa Prekerowa was a high schooler in the capital city of Warsaw, and she watched the Nazis force the city's Jewish residents to move into a ghetto, or designated neighborhood. While most people simply stopped associating with Jewish people, Prekerowa instead took medicine and food to the ghetto, and she even convinced a friend's family to escape the ghetto only months before the Nazis started exterminating its residents. In adulthood, Prekerowa became a historian and studied the Holocaust. She always insisted that she acted rationally and normally, even though contemporary people would see her behavior as "exceptional."

*The human tendency to conformity multiplies the already dangerous human tendency to obey authority (which Snyder described in his first chapter). Through Prekerowa's case, Snyder suggests that individual acts of resistance are important not only because of the direct impact they make but also because of the example they set for others: they show people that conformity is not the only option, and that not everyone accepts all of the government's orders as legitimate. Of course, history can set the same kind of moral example for present-day people. Indeed, Prekerowa's insistence on calling her actions normal rather than "exceptional" shows that she simply refused to buy into the new morality that the Nazis wanted to push on her and her society—rather, she acted on the ordinary, normal moral principle of helping one's neighbor.*



## CHAPTER 9: BE KIND TO OUR LANGUAGE.

People must find their own voices, separate from the majority's, especially through books. Scholar Victor Klemperer noted that Hitler dismissed his opposition by carefully using words like "the people," "struggles," and "defamation" to present his policies as the only legitimate ones. Today, television does the same thing: it repeats political clichés, distracts people by moving fast, and uses image to lull audiences into a "collective trance."

*By distorting the meanings of words, authoritarians deprive people of the ability to think clearly. For instance, imagine that someone is used to thinking about "the people" of their nation as a complex group that disagrees on major issues and negotiates solutions to those issues through politics. But then imagine that this person starts hearing a populist candidate proclaim that "the people" really want one thing, and everyone who disagrees is an enemy of "the people." Even if they do not agree with this candidate, this citizen might become confused about which "people" really count in politics, and they might have trouble talking clearly about "the people" of the country when they discuss politics with others, because it becomes unclear whose version of "the people" is being discussed. The concept of "the people" becomes muddled. Similarly, even when the media disagrees with such a candidate, by discussing politics in terms of the candidate's own distorted concepts, they contribute to the sense of "collective trance," in which people cannot distinguish fact from fiction.*



In fact, famous novels about totalitarianism, like *Fahrenheit 451* and *1984*, predicted this strategy: tyrants and their media prevent people from understanding the present and conceptualizing its relationship to history. To analyze politics, people need to develop “a mental armory” of concepts. To build these concepts, Snyder recommends several novels, scholarly works of political theory and history, and even the Bible.

*Even if candidates do not brainwash people, they do confuse them and muddle their concepts in a way that makes it difficult to discuss and reconcile political differences. This helps them advance their picture of politics as a “struggle” for victory over one’s enemies—rather than a conflict among the differing worldviews of equal citizens. This idea allows authoritarians to portray those who oppose them not as fellow citizens who also deserve rights and protections but as hostile foes who must be defeated at any cost. The purpose of developing a “mental armory” of clear concepts by reading and studying history is to have ways of understanding and discussing politics that do not fall into this trap. By using these independent concepts, people can help others start thinking for themselves.*



## CHAPTER 10: BELIEVE IN TRUTH.

When truth is thrown out the window, the powerful can freely reject criticism and turn politics into showmanship. While people might enjoy believing everything the government says, this destroys democracy. According to Klemperer, there are four ways that “truth dies.” First, tyrants ignore the truth and lie profusely—Snyder suggests that Donald Trump is a good example, as 78% of his statements during his presidential campaign were false. Secondly, they endlessly repeat phrases and ideas—for instance, Trump invents nicknames for his political opponents and leads chants (like “Build that wall” and “Lock her up”) at his rallies in order to build emotional connections with his followers. Thirdly, tyrants use contradictory logic. For instance, Trump promised to simultaneously lower taxes and increase spending while reducing debt, but believing this requires “a blatant abandonment of reasoning.”

*Rhetorical strategies like Trump’s build a closed loop between a candidate and their supporters: the candidate invents a claim, the supporters believe it and repeat it back, and then the candidate uses this support as evidence that the claim is really true. As a result, supporters are only able to think in terms of the candidate’s limited set of false concepts, and “truth dies” because, having decided to put loyalty and emotion before policy reason, people lose the ability to distinguish fact from fiction. This “blatant abandonment of reasoning” is dangerous because it is not possible to persuade someone who does not believe in truth or who cares more about what feels true to them than what can be proven with evidence.*



The fourth and final strategy that tyrants use to destroy truth is demanding faith and loyalty. For example, Donald Trump insists that he is the only person capable of solving various problems, so people simply have to believe in him. Klemperer wrote that Nazis felt the same way about Hitler: they supported him because of faith, not reason. The playwright Eugène Ionesco even wrote a play called *Rhinoceros* about this problem: he pointed out how strange it was to watch people gradually “slip away into” fascism by depicting those who did as transforming into rhinoceroses. The current political trend toward “post-truth,” Snyder concludes, is not the result of postmodern philosophy—rather, it is the oldest rule in the fascist playbook, and today “post-truth is pre-fascism.”

*Snyder’s analysis of authoritarians’ demand for loyalty reveals an important fact about the way their strategies work over time. At first, they have to gradually build power and introduce their radical ideas into the mainstream, for instance by using symbols and paramilitaries, gradually changing language, and weakening institutions bit by bit. Then, after their power and ideas grow to a certain critical mass, authoritarians can begin defending their positions openly and getting people to “slip away into” their way of thinking. This “post-truth” phase is “pre-fascism” because, once they are dominant, authoritarians can start demanding conformity and loyalty, turning against anyone who refuses to offer it. Snyder’s different strategies for resistance are best used in various moments during this progression, but he emphasizes that the earlier people act, the more they can do to slow the progression of tyranny.*



## CHAPTER 11: INVESTIGATE.

People should support, read, and share high-quality investigative print journalism. People are only free and independent because they can tell the truth from falsehoods. Accordingly, authoritarians like Trump try to limit this ability by promoting propaganda, suppressing honest journalists, and accusing critics of lying. In 1971, philosopher Hannah Arendt argued that truth will always defeat lies, but today, the internet dominates politics and promotes misinformation. In contrast, longform print journalism can help people think through and analyze stories on their own terms—like Trump’s offensive behavior toward women and business failures.

Screens reduce politics to spectacles, turning reality into “a reality show” in which people thrive off of drama without actually putting the information they receive together into a coherent whole or recognizing that the events they see impact real people’s lives.

No journalism is perfect, but good journalism is governed by ethical standards that ensure its accuracy, unlike much of what now passes for journalism on the internet. Of course, journalists need to make a living, so people should financially support journalism if they can. The people Snyder cites throughout his book—like Kołakowski, Arendt, Klemperer, and Havel—all had it much harder than writers today: they struggled to publish their writings, which they often ended up disseminating in secret. Now that everyone can publish their thoughts the internet, everybody must take “some private responsibility for the public’s sense of truth,” so everybody should verify what they read and support trustworthy reporters. While the internet makes it harder for people to see how their words affect others, people are still responsible for these words.

## CHAPTER 12: MAKE EYE CONTACT AND SMALL TALK.

Responsible citizenship requires treating people respectfully. People living under the tyrannical governments of 20th-century Europe quickly learned to gauge whether they were safe or under threat based on their interactions with their neighbors. Plus, escaping persecution requires having friends to fall back on.

*In addition to refining their own capacities for objective political analysis, Snyder explains, citizens should also try to help ensure that such analysis is available to their fellow citizens. The only thing better than supporting reporters is becoming one. Print journalism’s advantage over television is that reporters actually have to put significant time and effort into verifying facts and assembling a comprehensive narrative over multiple drafts. These narratives can therefore connect events over a longer period of time: the weeks to years that it takes to accurately measure the effects of policies and discern lasting political trends.*



*Television news generally focuses on immediate events, limited to a period of days to weeks, and selects what is newsworthy based on what is likely to get audience attention rather than what actually impacts people. This is why it turns politics into a “reality show”: like Trump’s rhetoric, it elevates emotion at the expense of reason.*



*Again, Snyder emphasizes that democracy does not function unless people actively participate in it. His argument that people should take “some private responsibility for the public’s sense of truth” is really an alternative way of framing citizens’ civic responsibility as members of a democracy: just as they are all collectively responsible for the health and stability of society, they are all collectively responsible for the nation’s relationship to truth. The internet transforms this relationship by making information far easier to disseminate but much more difficult to verify.*



*This may seem like a minor point, but maintaining normal styles of social interaction is actually crucial because it allows people to maintain power over their own lives and protect the private sphere. By refusing to let the government affect their private interactions, people can remind each other that not everybody supports the totalitarian government, which does not have all power over everything.*





## CHAPTER 13: PRACTICE CORPOREAL POLITICS.

Successful political resistance requires diverse groups assembling publicly to demand change. Snyder uses an antigovernment strike in Poland in 1980 as an example of how a broad coalition can demand change. Each section of this coalition previously lost its own individual fight, but by working together, these groups created a labor union and put pressure on the government. The communist government then outlawed the coalition, but when the government grew weak in 1989, the coalition gained power and helped establish democracy. This shows how people must “draw the line” separating the private and public spheres for themselves.

*Although Snyder’s example of Polish labor organizing might seem oddly specific and irrelevant to the contemporary United States, his point is that people cannot just disagree with the government: they must actively organize themselves and demand change. This is “corporeal politics” because it requires people to take their bodies outside—and, possibly, put those bodies on the line. When he argues that people must “draw the line” between public and private, Snyder means that people must actively engage in politics—the public sphere—so that the government cannot increasingly take control over the private sphere. If citizens instead passively wait for the government to act, the government will be able to continue gaining power, taking away their rights, and shrinking the sphere of what they can keep private.*



## CHAPTER 14: ESTABLISH A PRIVATE LIFE.

Snyder suggests that people should be careful about what they put on the internet. Hannah Arendt defined “totalitarianism” as “[the erasure of the difference between private and public life](#),” meaning that citizens cannot control what others know about them. But now, electronic privacy violations are normal, which gives governments and corporations immense power over people. In the 2016 presidential campaign, the media dishonestly manipulated politics and erased digital privacy by taking emails out of context and turning them into political news.

*It is important to differentiate between totalitarianism and mere authoritarianism—in which a government is highly centralized and powerful, but does not try to control every aspect of citizens’ lives and the workings of society. Arendt’s definition of totalitarianism emphasizes the fact that totalitarian governments gradually increase their power by limiting citizens’ ability to do anything—including thinking and speaking—without somehow involving the government. This includes psychological tactics, like persuading people to be suspicious of one another, building reverence for a leader, and misusing words until their meaning is forever distorted.*



Totalitarians manipulate people’s love for secrets in order to push conspiracy theories, but when people accept these theories, they help destroy democracy. People should not only protect their own privacy but also fight for collective privacy protections and laws.

*Snyder shows that citizens participate in this process of expanding psychological control when they look for secret conspiracies, because they are helping the government justify its desire to make private lives public, even though their conspiracy theories are not backed by any solid evidence. While accessing people’s personal data may be necessary in select cases—like corruption inquiries or criminal investigations—this does not mean that corporations or the government should gain an absolute right to do so, whenever they want. Even though the violation of citizens’ electronic privacy has not led to restrictions on most people’s freedoms yet in the United States, Snyder worries that it sets a dangerous precedent, which would allow a repressive government to easily enact such restrictions.*



## CHAPTER 15: CONTRIBUTE TO GOOD CAUSES.

People should fund charities and participate in organizations that matter to them. Freedom is not only about individuals defending their rights from the government but also about people choosing whom to associate with, whether for political reasons or not. Citizen associations are the foundation of “civil society,” and they help people trust and learn from others. Like 20th-century communists and fascists, contemporary authoritarian governments oppose such organizations because they are a way for people to preserve their freedom.

*Supporting groups that form part of “civil society,” or the non-governmental portions of a society’s collective political life, is analogous to Snyder’s second rule (“Defend institutions”). In addition to helping specific groups survive and pursue their goals, by participating in civic organizations people help preserve the institution of civil society itself—of public life not controlled by the government.*



## CHAPTER 16: LEARN FROM PEERS IN OTHER COUNTRIES.

People should take an international perspective in their thinking, personal relationships, and travel. Snyder notes that, for instance, journalists from Ukraine and Russia who were covering the 2016 American election saw the dangers of the Trump campaign’s fake news and propaganda before American journalists did. In fact, the Russian government tested out the internet disinformation techniques it used in the 2016 election on Ukraine in 2014, but Ukraine was prepared and beat them. Meanwhile, very few Americans even have a passport, which is necessary not only in case they need to flee state violence, but also in order to travel and see how other people in other places address similar political problems.

*While most of American public life is currently inward-looking, in part due to the size and global dominance of the United States, Snyder offers the unique perspective of an American who has spent his life studying other places. Looking to the world for guidance is akin to looking at history for a sense of perspective and agency. As an added bonus, it can also help people understand how changes in the contemporary world—like the growing threat of digital misinformation—are playing out in different kinds of nations and contexts.*



## CHAPTER 17: LISTEN FOR DANGEROUS WORDS.

Some words—particularly “extremism,” “terrorism,” “emergency,” and “exception”—are dangerous propaganda tools. The Nazis undid democracy by declaring “a permanent **emergency**” that required citizens to give absolute trust and power to the government. Terrorism is a real threat, but politicians exploit the idea of it in order to make people give up freedom in order to stay safe, even though freedom and safety are not in conflict. People might *feel* safer when they submit to the government, but in reality they are becoming less safe. The word “extremism” is meaningless—tyrants have always used it to describe their enemies, no matter their beliefs.

*These emotionally charged words are the most extreme examples of how authoritarian governments’ propaganda denies citizens access to the truth by distorting the concepts that they use to analyze the world. Although these four words all do ordinarily refer to real things in the real world, authoritarians distort them so much that they can no longer be used in accordance with their original meanings. In other words, authoritarians destroy these concepts and force citizens to search for other concepts to think with. The inherently contradictory idea of a “permanent emergency” is a case in point: by definition, an emergency is temporary, but by extending declarations of emergency to justify extending their expanded powers, governments twist the concept of “emergency” beyond recognition in order to justify their tyranny.*



## CHAPTER 18: BE CALM WHEN THE UNTHINKABLE ARRIVES.

Authoritarians love **emergencies** that provide them with an opportunity to seize power and destroy democratic institutions. Famously, after the Reichstag (Germany's parliament building) mysteriously caught on fire in 1933, Hitler declared an emergency in order to grab power. He suspended people's rights and started detaining opponents by blaming them for the fire, and then the parliament gave him absolute, unlimited power to do whatever he wanted. Germany spent more than a decade in this "state of emergency," slaughtering millions in the process.

Russian dictator Vladimir Putin came to power in similar circumstances: Russia's own secret police set off bombs around the country, and then Putin started a civil war against the Chechen Muslims he blamed for the attacks. Then, Putin used further terrorist attacks as excuses to destroy checks and balances like privately owned television stations and the powers of regional governors. Russia has used this narrative of terrorism to try and destabilize the rest of the world: it used it to justify invading Ukraine in 2014, created fake cyberthreats against France and Germany to make Europeans afraid of Muslim refugees, and then bombed Syrian civilians to ensure that refugees would seek asylum in Europe.

Donald Trump openly supports Vladimir Putin's government and antidemocratic "terror management" tactics. Like tyrants throughout history, Trump and Putin sees that "one moment of shock enables an eternity of submission." Citizens must identify and fight this tendency.

*So far, Snyder has repeatedly emphasized how authoritarian governments secure power bit by bit, gradually eroding their opposition, civic institutions, and citizens' sense of truth and reality. However, at a certain point, these gradual efforts are successful enough to permit an authoritarian government to suddenly and irreversibly grab power. By making the "state of emergency" permanent, Hitler destroyed all semblance of democracy in Germany, until his regime fell. In short, tyranny takes control of a society just like Ernest Hemingway famously said that people go bankrupt: "gradually and then suddenly." Stopping tyranny is far easier in the first, gradual stage—but citizens must have some idea of "the unthinkable" that is to come.*



*Putin's use of "terror management" shows how authoritarians can also combine the tactic of manufactured emergencies (or the principle that "one moment of shock enables an eternity of submission") with the strategy of gradually eroding checks and balances. Like the Reichstag fire in Germany, the conveniently timed, manufactured terrorist attacks were cynically designed to convince the public that there was an enemy that needed to be defeated and they needed to place faith in the government in order to do so. In other words, it created a sense of a warlike national mission for Russian citizens, when its real motive was to help Putin secure greater and greater power. As Putin's government continues using these same disinformation and false terrorism tactics to gain empire-like influence throughout the world, it spreads the same violence against minorities and antidemocratic disorder that it has sown inside its borders.*



*The Russian government launched a similar disinformation campaign in the United States to help Donald Trump win the 2016 election, and Snyder has been a constant, vocal critic of this violation of sovereignty, as well as Trump's deep ties to Russia. In fact, he devoted his next book to the subject (The Road to Unfreedom, 2018).*



## CHAPTER 19: BE A PATRIOT.

Future generations need role models of American patriotism, and Snyder stresses that Donald Trump is *not* a good example. From draft-dodging and ridiculing the military to funneling public funds to his private companies and befriending dictators like Putin around the globe, Trump is no patriot in Snyder's eyes. Trump does *nationalistically* proclaim that the United States is "the best," Snyder says, but he is not a *patriot* because he does not care about Americans' actual lives or have any principles. Democracy is on the brink of collapse in the United States, and while nationalists like Trump deny this, patriots are busy trying to prevent it from happening.

Snyder writes about patriotism here because he believes that Trump often twists this concept to justify his policy proposals, which actually stand to benefit Trump and his rich friends at the expense of the majority of Americans. Therefore, Trump's insistence on patriotism is a classic example of authoritarian disinformation: he calls people patriots if they do what he wants, not if they love and pursue the best interests of their nation (which would be the actual definition of patriotism). By rhetorically replacing the public interest with his own private interests, Trump makes his true motives clear. Snyder's response to this tactic is to simply remind his readers what words (like "patriotism") actually mean.



## CHAPTER 20: BE AS COURAGEOUS AS YOU CAN.

"If none of us is prepared to die for freedom," Snyder says simply, "then all of us will die under tyranny."

Democracy is worth defending because it gives the people who comprise it the power to shape society. But the reverse is also true: the people in a democratic society also have the ultimate responsibility to protect their democracy. Powerful people and institutions usually benefit from tyrants' concentration of power in fewer and fewer hands, so they cannot be trusted to defend the interests of the majority against the minority. Citizens stand to lose from this concentration of power, and only this collective truly has an incentive to defend democracy. This means that each citizen is as responsible as every other, and all must be willing to put themselves on the line in order to protect the collective.



## EPILOGUE: HISTORY AND LIBERTY

Faced with tyranny, Hamlet famously declared that "time is out of joint." Contemporary Americans should feel the same way: they are ignoring and risk repeating history. Their first error is the "*politics of inevitability*": they believe that democracy is the logical endpoint of all history. After the fall of the Soviet Union, when it became obvious that communism would not create a utopia, Americans happily decided that capitalist liberal democracy was inevitable. But this idea means that Americans have lost the ability to imagine political change.

The "*politics of inevitability*" results from a failure to adequately understand the collapse of democracies throughout history, but it is also a product of history itself: namely, the United States' global dominance since the Cold War has led many Americans to assume that the rest of the world will eventually turn into the United States. Specifically, they assume that this dominance means there is something exceptional or superior about the American system of government. In addition to being empirically false—Snyder emphasizes that the United States is now one of the most fragile democracies in the industrialized world—this idea is also profoundly dangerous because it leads Americans to assume that their political system will save itself. This idea serves the interests of tyrants, who benefit from an idle population that simply has faith in the inherent goodness of their country. Snyder's central message is that democracy will not save Americans: rather, Americans need to save their democracy.



Along with the “politics of inevitability,” Americans are also guilty of the “politics of eternity,” or trying to recreate an idealized past that never existed. The Nazis, Soviets, and politicians who led Brexit all reasoned this way. So does Donald Trump, who took the slogan “America First” from a 1930s pro-Nazi committee, and whose plan to “Make America great again” does not refer to any actual historical moment. His kind of mythologized politics becomes about celebrating the nation’s “inherent virtue” instead of actually solving political problems.

*Just as the “politics of inevitability” places absolute faith in the idea of American progress and democracy, the “politics of eternity” thinks the same thing about an even hazier idea of American “inherent virtue.” While the “politics of inevitability” says that the United States will always be the greatest democracy on Earth (even though, Snyder suggests, it isn’t), the “politics of eternity” says that the United States will always be great, no matter what it does—and anyone who disagrees is not truly American. Trump’s adoption of a pro-Nazi slogan makes it clear that his “politics of eternity” is based on a profound misunderstanding of history.*



As an alternative to the politics of inevitability, the politics of eternity entrances people and threatens to establish “fascist oligarchy” in the United States. When people can no longer believe in the politics of inevitability, it is easy for them to turn to the politics of eternity.

*When Snyder argues that Trump’s politics threaten “fascist oligarchy,” he is not just being pejorative—rather, he has chosen those two words carefully. Trump’s government would be an oligarchy because his policies and political style threaten to concentrate all wealth and political power in the hands of a small business elite that would never have to give up that power, and it would be fascist because it would use the assertion of American “greatness” to rally supporters around a sense of pride and loyalty, so that they do not examine the actual effects of Trump’s policies.*



Both the politics of inevitability and the politics of eternity encourage people not to act. They do so by claiming that the future is already determined and failing to see the relevance of history. If people are to take meaningful political action, Snyder says, they should first consult history in order to uncover patterns in the past, learn to analyze the present, and build a sense of individual responsibility for the future. But contemporary Americans have grown up with the politics of inevitability, so they have never learned from history. They can choose eternity, or they can choose to learn about history in order to change it.

*Snyder ends by reaffirming two of his book’s central messages for the American public: the importance of history and the reality of political agency. The politics of inevitability and eternity are counterproductive for citizens (but useful for tyrants) because they teach people a false history that prevents them from seeing their own political agency. Snyder’s goal has been to show his readers concrete examples of when democracies have failed and how citizens can protect them, so that Americans can start taking the concrete actions that are necessary to save American democracy in the present.*







## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Jennings, Rohan. "On Tyranny." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 28 Apr 2020. Web. 29 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Jennings, Rohan. "On Tyranny." LitCharts LLC, April 28, 2020. Retrieved April 29, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/on-tyranny>.

To cite any of the quotes from *On Tyranny* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

### MLA

Snyder, Timothy. *On Tyranny*. Tim Duggan Books. 2017.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Snyder, Timothy. *On Tyranny*. New York: Tim Duggan Books. 2017.