

Book review

ON TYRANNY

Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century

Timothy Snyder

For those wondering what can be done about the turmoil we face in our current political environment, this fascinating little book (126 pages) by Timothy Snyder, a Yale history professor, gives us his historian's answer, with "twenty lessons from the twentieth century, adapted to the circumstances of today."

In the Prologue, Snyder begins by noting the examples of Greece and Rome, the great democracy and republic in the ancient world that the Founding Fathers looked to when establishing our Constitution; both of these ultimately failing as their rulers circumvented the law for their own benefit or as power was usurped by single individuals or groups, an evil that the ancient philosophers called "tyranny". From Aristotle, the Founding Fathers understood that inequality brings instability and from Plato that demagogues can exploit free speech "to install themselves as tyrants." To safeguard against such outcomes, the Founding Fathers in their new constitution established a democratic republic founded upon the rule of law that included a system of checks and balances as a mechanism to make the consolidation of power more difficult. The political system they devised has served us well over the last two hundred years, perhaps encouraging a belief that it automatically protects us from tyranny. Snyder calls this a "misguided reflex." Instead, he says, we must see as the Founding Fathers did, what history tells us about the root causes of tyranny and to consider how to respond effectively.

We don't have to look to the Greeks and Romans; more recent, relevant examples can be found in Europe in the twentieth century in three periods where democracy arose—after the First World War in 1918; after the Second World War in 1945, and after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989. Many of these democracies failed during periods resembling our own in many important respects (e.g. the perceived inequalities created by expansion of global trade and the rise of right-wing political movements in response). In Snyder's twenty lessons, listed below, he describes how small, gradual, or seemingly inconsequential action or inaction on the part of their citizenry led these new European democracies to be overtaken by fascists, Nazis or communists.

As Snyder notes, "Americans today are no wiser than the Europeans who saw democracy yield to fascism, Nazism or communism in the twentieth century. Our one advantage is that we might learn from their experience."

Snyder's twenty lessons:

1. Do not obey in advance.
2. Defend institutions.
3. Beware the one-party state.

4. Take responsibility for the face of the world.
5. Remember professional ethics.
6. Be wary of paramilitaries.
7. Be reflective if you must be armed.
8. Stand out.
9. Be kind to our language.
10. Believe in truth.
11. Investigate.
12. Make eye contact and small talk.
13. Practice corporeal politics.
14. Establish a private life.
15. Contribute to good causes.
16. Learn from peers in other countries.
17. Listen for dangerous words.
18. Be calm when the unthinkable arrives.
19. Be a patriot.
20. Be as courageous as you can.

The Epilogue offers Snyder's take on how we got where we are today: two alternate anti-historical positions, the politics of inevitability vs. the politics of eternity. The politics of inevitability, the belief in "the end of history" which arose after the fall of the Soviet Union, posits that henceforth societies can move in only one direction—toward liberal democracy. That assumption that the status quo cannot change has stifled policy debate in the twenty-first century.

In the politics of eternity, described by Snyder as a "longing for past moments that never really happened during epochs that were, in fact, disastrous," as we cling to a mythological past we are prevented from considering future possibilities. In the politics of eternity, the nation is defined by its inherent virtue, not its future potential; politics is all about good vs. evil rather than exploring possible solutions to real-world problems.

At the end of the Epilogue, Snyder offers a glimmer of hope—that young Americans could "become a historical generation, rejecting the traps of inevitability and eternity that older generations have laid before them." Perhaps his students have encouraged such optimism. Let's hope he's right.

