

Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

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'How Democracies Die' & 'On Tyranny'

Almost immediately after the 2016 presidential election, there was a “boomlet” in books about how democracy dies, the rise of fascism (an ill-defined and poorly understood term), and the new administration abandoning mainstream conservatism by flirting with authoritarianism and rule by executive action. As one might expect, the boomlet contained a mixture of the old and the new, the banal and the profound, and any number of tomes muddling along in the middle of both quality and insight.

In this **Book Notes** we'll take a quick look at several and then focus in on two – Levitsky and Ziblatt's ***How Democracies Die*** and Snyder's ***On Tyranny***.



Among older works that saw a revival was Sinclair Lewis' ***It Can't Happen Here***, a novelistic treatment of the rise of a Hitler-esque figure in 1930s America. Once the darling of the American literati, Lewis languished in increasing obscurity until his brief star-turn in 2017. A hastily written, mediocre novel replete with cardboard cut-out characters and a mechanical plot, ***It Can't Happen Here*** still offers a glimpse into how an American demagogue might rise to power by practicing a politics of divide and conquer. Buzz Windrip rises to the presidency by fueling fear of the “other,” promoting drastic economic and social reforms, and promising a return to traditional values.

George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984: A Novel* both reappeared on paperback best-seller lists. *Animal Farm* is Orwell's dystopian vision of an authoritarian future in which "all pigs are equal, but some pigs are more equal than others." Published in 1945, Orwell's novel was an allegory about how the ideals of the Russian Revolution devolved into a Stalinist dictatorship and a cult of personality. Published in 1949, *1984* amplified issues first raised in *Animal Farm*. It takes place in an imagined future world of perpetual war, all-pervading governmental surveillance of citizens, propaganda, and the nullification of history. Many of its characters, ministries and themes have become tropes of the post-modern world – Big Brother, the Ministry of Truth, and doublethink.

The Ministry of Truth is the office of propaganda; it invented the concept of "fake news," for if one denies the possibility of truth, then one denies the possibility of refutation. And, if a statement cannot be refuted because there is no longer an agreed upon set of "facts," then there can be no common ground upon which to base compromise. If there is no common ground upon which to base compromise, then politics becomes simply a contest of power. Or, as Nietzsche warned, a contest of wills.

From my perspective, *1984*'s most powerful insight is the importance of history. Although in the novel it is an axiom of the ruling party, the party dictate that "he who controls history controls the present and he who controls the present controls the future" is Orwell's most profound warning. For if one does not know how one got to here and now, then one cannot understand here and now; if one cannot understand here and now, then one cannot understand where one is going. Thus, one is at the mercy of those who do. So, if those who control the present rewrite history to justify their control, then they can use that rewritten history to invent the future.

Which automatically raises the question – what is history? That is too large a topic for a paragraph or two in a brief *Book Notes*, but it is not only the major chord of Orwell's *1984*, it is the major chord of current American politics, cancel culture, and the question "What is America?" In a future *Book Notes*, we will delve into that topic, the question of Confederate monuments and which Founders deserve to be honored and which do not as we explore Heather Cox Richardson's *How the South Won the Civil War* and *West From Appomattox*.

Before leaving that topic, let me ask, "What was *The Lost Cause* and why is *Gone With the Wind* a historical obscenity?" Well, regarding the latter, if history, to paraphrase Jill Lepore "is the art of making an argument about the past by telling a story accountable to evidence," [1] then *Gone With the Wind* exemplifies what Lepore meant when she said, "the far right's American history – it's anti-history – exist(s) outside of argument and has no interest in evidence." [2]

In ***Fascism: A Warning***, Madeleine Albright gives a succinct definition of that often-misused word. She says, “a fascist is someone who identifies strongly with and claims to speak for a whole nation or group, is unconcerned with the rights of others, and is willing to use whatever means are necessary – including – violence – to achieve his or her goals.” [3] The phrase “to speak for a whole nation or group” is arguable, under our present circumstances, when it is clear the current administration dismisses vast swaths of the populace as not being legitimate members of the nation or group.

Michael Tomasky’s ***If We Can Keep It: How the Republic Collapsed and How It Might Be Saved*** brilliantly tours the history and roots of our current culture wars, the rise of Movement Conservatism and its ultimate aberration in the Trump administration, and the fraying of the Democratic Party into competing interest groups. Tomasky takes his title from an alleged quip that Benjamin Franklin made as he left the Constitutional Convention when a woman asked him, “what have you created?” Franklin replied, “a republic, if you can keep it.”

An interesting aside – the woman who asked Franklin that question has largely been written out of history. In most accounts of Franklin’s riposte, she is nameless, only identified by her gender. It is an example of women being written out of history, as if they were not there. And if they were not there, why should they be here?

But they were there. The woman who asked Franklin that question was Elizabeth Willing Powel, arguably the most influential woman of the early republic. [4] In doing research on George Washington, I first came across Powel. She was one of his closest confidants. She was a powerbroker before that phrase was coined. In that era, there were no formal roles for politically interested women. Like Madame de Stael during the French Revolution, Elizabeth Willing Powel created her own role by hosting gatherings of the powerful and influential during the Constitutional Convention and later during Philadelphia’s tenure as the national capitol. The gatherings were called *salons*. We would call them cocktail parties, but they were far more than that. They were “smoke-filled rooms” without the smoke; they were the private conversations “where deals got done” and policy was created. Sometimes they were dinners, sometimes not, but over food, drink, and conversation, a nation was crafted.

In my ***The American Tapestry Project*** on WQLN radio beginning Sunday, Aug. 9, and later this fall at the Jefferson Educational Society, we’ll meet Powel in the *Freedom’s Faultlines: Tales of Race and Gender* episode.

In the *Age of Franklin*, republics were rare creatures. Some Italian city-states tried it, but before that you have to go back to ancient Rome and Greece. John Adams supposedly gave the infant republic two hundred years. Then society would inevitably slide back to “the one, the few and the many.” We are at 246 and counting. Adams is looking increasingly prescient.

That Adams might have been wrong will require, as Thomas Jefferson may or may not have said, “The price of liberty is eternal vigilance.” [5] But if he had, he would have been correct. Paraphrasing that, the price of democracy is eternal vigilance. It requires that citizens be keenly attuned to threats against their democratic rights. Of the books under review, the two best at advancing that vigilance are Levitsky and Ziblatt’s *How Democracies Die* and Timothy Snyder’s *On Tyranny*.

In *How Democracies Die*, the authors begin by pointing out the obvious. Well, maybe it is not that obvious. In every democracy that slides into tyranny, the voters first elected the authoritarian figure – from Mussolini to Hitler, from Peron to Fujimori, from Chavez to _____ the authoritarian was democratically elected. Once elected, he or she immediately moved to consolidate power and abolish democratic processes.

How? Levitsky and Ziblatt crystallize their analysis into four principles with attendant questions. In order to seize power, democratically, elected leaders morphing into authoritarians:

1. **Reject** (or weaken their commitment to) democratic rules of the game.
2. **Deny** the legitimacy of political opponents.
3. **Tolerate** or encourage violence.
4. **Curtail** the civil liberties of opponents and the news media.

For each principle or authoritarian tactic, the authors pose questions to those who support and defend democracy. For example:

Reject (or weaken their commitment to) democratic rules of the game.

- Do they reject the Constitution or express a willingness to violate it?
- Do they suggest a need for antidemocratic measures, such as canceling elections, violating or suspending the Constitution, banning certain organizations, or restricting basic civil or political rights?
- Do they seek to use (or endorse the use of) extraconstitutional means to change the government, such as military coups, violent insurrections, or mass protests aimed at forcing a change in the government?
- Do they attempt to undermine the legitimacy of elections, for example, by refusing to accept credible electoral results?

Deny the legitimacy of political opponents.

- Do they describe their rivals as subversive, or opposed to the existing constitutional order?
- Do they claim that their rivals constitute an existential threat, either to national security or to the prevailing way of life?
- Do they baselessly describe their partisan rivals as criminals, whose supposed violation of the law (or potential to do so) disqualifies them from full participation in the political arena?
- Do they baselessly suggest that their rivals are foreign agents, in that they are secretly working in alliance with (or the employ of) a foreign government – usually an enemy one?

Tolerate or encourage violence.

- Do they have any ties to armed gangs, paramilitary forces, militias, guerillas, or other organizations that engage in illicit violence?
- Have they or their partisan allies sponsored or encouraged mob attacks on opponents?
- Have they tacitly endorsed violence by their supporters by refusing to unambiguously condemn it and punish it?
- Have they praised (or refused to condemn) other significant acts of political violence, either in the past or elsewhere in the world?

Curtail the civil liberties of opponents and the news media.

- Have they supported laws or policies that restrict civil liberties, such as expanded libel or defamation laws or laws restricting protest, criticism of the government, or certain civic or political organizations?
- Have they threatened to take legal or other punitive action against critics in rival parties, civil society, or the media?
- Have they praised repressive measures taken by other governments, either in the past or elsewhere in the world?

Does any of this sound familiar? While not exhaustive, the following sample is chilling. To date, the Trump administration has proposed canceling the 2020 elections, suggested it might not accept the results of that election and used, granted technically within the law, the Border Patrol and the Department of Homeland Security as a federal paramilitary force against protesters in Lafayette Square and Portland, Oregon. At different times, it has chanted that political opponents should be “locked up,” that members of the Democratic Party are anti-American anarchists whose members are criminal conspirators. President Trump has encouraged violence at his rallies, egging on supporters to attack protesters and tacitly endorsed extremist violence by refusing to condemn violent acts (Charlottesville and armed militia in the Michigan state

house). Evidence suggests Trump has attempted to politicize the Postal Service to thwart mail-in voting (which actually might hurt Republicans more than Democrats), threatened civil action against political parties, punished whistle-blowers within the government, and been lavish in his praise for authoritarian leaders elsewhere, most notably Vladimir Putin.

What to do about all of this? I have a friend, an esteemed retired local attorney, whose sanguinity is reassuring. He thinks Americans need to chill. The system will hold; while the election can't get here soon enough, it will be held. The results will be favorable for democracy and the American experiment in self-government of the people, by the people, for the people.

Hmmm, perhaps, but I am not as sanguine. So, for the less sanguine, what should we do?

Well, first vote and trust that your vote is counted! But also pay close attention to Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny*. In a brief 128 pages, Snyder provides 20 actions citizens can do to protect their democratic heritage. He also places that heritage in a historical context, reminding us of the need for eternal vigilance and the need to take action. As Snyder notes, "history does not repeat, but it does instruct." What does it teach? It teaches that, as Aristotle knew, inequality brings instability; that as Plato knew, demagogues exploit free speech to install themselves as tyrants. [6] They do that by lying, or more artfully, as in **1984**, by a combination of blatant and repetitive lies obfuscating the truth, or rendering the truth dubious, as in shouts of "fake news" or in Kelly Anne Conway's example, citing "alternative facts." [7] Or, as Jonathan Swift wrote, "Falsehood flies, and the truth comes limping after." [8]

And it also teaches that democracies are fragile things – they are easily broken. Snyder places his analysis cleanly in the second half of the 20th century, the era of democracies flourishing. But that modern history of democracy is one of decline. From the ashes of World War II briefly rose a flurry of democratic regimes; again after the fall of colonialism in the 1960s, and then again after the fall of communism in the 1980s and early 1990s when Francis Fukuyama declared the end of history and the triumph of liberal democracy. He was wrong, as we see in Putin's Russia, Orbán's Hungary, Erdoğan's Turkey, and elsewhere.

What to do? How to be "eternally vigilant?"

Snyder offers 20 suggestions beginning with "Do Not Obey in Advance – most of the power of authoritarianism is freely given." He offers examples from Austrian complicity in Hitler's Anschluss to Stanley Milgram's famous experiments in obedience. [9] Other suggestions include "Defend Institutions ... because institutions do not defend

themselves ... so choose an institution you care about – a court, a newspaper, a law, a labor union – and take its side.” [10] He counsels to beware of the one-party state and to take responsibility for the face of the world. Regarding the latter, he points out, as did Orwell, that symbols are important – “notice the swatiskas and other symbols of hate” for today’s symbols enable tomorrow’s reality. [11] He reminds us to remember professional ethics, thereby validating Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman’s integrity and rebuking many of Attorney General William Barr’s arguments.

“Be wary of paramilitaries,” [12] Snyder writes, bringing to mind Portland and other militia groups on state house steps protesting mask wearing in a time of pandemic, and do not be afraid to stand out – remember Rosa Parks. [13] Be kind to our language, respect the truth, and investigate, which is to say use your intelligence actively. Do not be a passive recipient of whatever balderdash Twitter serves up. Learn from peers, listen for dangerous words, and contribute to good causes; be calm when the unthinkable arrives, be a patriot and be as courageous as you can. [14]

In short, if freedom isn’t free, Snyder offers a primer on how to stay vigilant, on how to protect democracy, and on how to be that person Lincoln meant when he said “government of the people, by the people, for the people.”

You can begin that vigilance by reading *How Democracies Die* and *On Tyranny*, then by paying close attention to the world around you, defending evidence-based truth, and reporting back to those who need to know and then, most importantly, voting and helping others to vote.

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End Notes

1. Lepore, Jill. **The Story of America: Essays on Origins**. (Princeton and Oxford: The Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 15.
2. Lepore, Jill. **The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party’s Revolution and the Battle over American History**. (Princeton and Oxford: The Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 96.
3. Albright, Madeleine. **Fascism: A Warning**. (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), p.11.
4. Anishanslin, Zara. “*What we get wrong about Ben Franklin’s ‘a republic, if you can keep it’*”, **The Washington Post** (October 29, 2019) available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/10/29/what-we-get-wrong-about-ben-franklins-republic-if-you-can-keep-it/> accessed August 4, 2020.
5. “*Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty (Spurious Quotation)*”. **The Jefferson Monticello** available at <https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/eternal-vigilance-price-liberty-spurious-quotations> accessed August 4, 2020.
6. Snyder, Timothy. **On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons From the Twentieth Century**. (New York: Tim Duggan Books, A Penguin Random House Book, 2017), p. 9.

7. Blake, Aaron. “*Kellyanne Conway says Donald Trump’s team has ‘alternative facts’*”, **The Washington Post** (January 22, 2017) available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/01/22/kellyanne-conway-says-donald-trumps-team-has-alternate-facts-which-pretty-much-says-it-all/> accessed August 4, 2020.
8. Swift, Jonathan. “Falsehood flies...”, **The Examiner** No. XIV (Thursday November 9, 1710) in Jonathan Swift at **Wikiquote.org** available at https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Jonathan_Swift accessed August 4, 2020.
9. Snyder, pp. 17-21.
10. Ibid., p. 22.
11. Ibid., p. 32
12. Ibid., p. 42
13. Ibid., p.51
14. Ibid., various pages.

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