

On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century
By Timothy Snyder
Tim Duggan Books, 128 pp. \$7.99

Timothy Snyder begins his book with the following observation about the founders of our democratic republic, “History does not repeat, but it does instruct. As the Founding Fathers debated our Constitution, they took instruction from the history they knew. Concerned that the democratic republic they envisioned would collapse, they contemplated the descent of ancient democracies and republics into oligarchy and empire. As they knew, Aristotle warned that inequality brought instability, while Plato believed that demagogues exploited free speech to install themselves as tyrants.”

Snyder later writes that “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.” The U.S. political system, he notes, was designed “to mitigate the consequences of our real imperfections, not to celebrate our imaginary perfection.”

As Carlos Lozada says in his excellent review in the Washington Post, “...this slim book fits alongside your pocket Constitution and feels only slightly less vital.” Each of the 20 lessons is a chapter title. The lessons were widely circulated soon after the 2016 election. Later in December, in three days of concentrated writing, Snyder expanded on those themes for the book. It quickly became a best seller. Here are the chapter titles:

1. **Don't 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**

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~~ Bart Arenson