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