

A Veteran Teacher's Lessons: Teachers on the Front Lines

As students return to the classroom this fall, social studies teachers face unique challenges to teaching about our American democracy unprecedented in our history. We have a former President who refuses to accept the results of the 2020 election. In January, our students watched news footage of a mob attacking the US Capitol to stop the peaceful transfer of power. Dozens of statewide bills have been introduced to suppress voter turnout, with some becoming law. In addition, various media and social media outlets propagate misinformation and conspiracy theories, undermining citizen's ability to sort out fact from fiction. It is a daunting terrain for any social studies teacher to explain.

Critical Reading and Detecting Media Bias

To become informed citizens, students must become critical readers of information provided from a variety of sources including newspapers and magazines. ([The Common Core Reading Standards for grades 11 and 12](#)) The [Newsela](#) website provides students with daily news articles from diverse, but reputable sources. Newsela allows teachers to choose the reading level for each article, so it can be adapted each student's skill level. In addition, Newsela editors have created text sets, combining articles on common [social studies themes](#). The featured articles have on-line reading quizzes, as well. Whether you use the free Newsela resources or have your school purchase more features with the subscription service, Newsela is an excellent way to get your students reading topical non-fiction articles.

Now more than ever, civics and government instructors should help students become aware of the political slant of various outlets, giving them practice in detecting bias in the media. One good resource for the classroom is the [AllSides](#) website designed to "prepare students for participation in democracy with a focus on news literacy, respectful dialogue, and critical thinking." It includes [lessons plans specifically on media bias](#).

The Big Lie, Brown Shirts and a Reichstag Moment

World history teachers have long taught about the rise of fascism in Germany, the archetype of 20th century tyranny. In today's classroom, teaching about the tactics used by Hitler to gain and consolidate Nazi power seems particularly relevant. Their units should reveal the specific ways that tyrants and dictators attack democratic institutions in their efforts to install authoritarian regimes.

Recently, documents released by the House Oversight and Reform Committee show, [Trump asked his Justice Department to say the election was corrupt](#) as a way of overturning its results. In addition, General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, feared that Trump might try to stage a coup after his defeat in the November election, writes Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker in their book, *I Alone Can Fix It*. According to the *Washington Post* article the, ["Joint Chiefs chairman feared a 'Reichstag moment' aimed at keeping Trump in power"](#). Milley compared Trump's MAGA marchers to the Brown Shirts, the violent Nazi paramilitary forces who helped Hitler capture power. Democrats and several prominent Republicans, including Liz Cheney, have accused Trump of propagating "the big lie" that Democrats stole the election. They point out that across the country Secretaries of State certified their vote counts as accurate, while state and federal courts universally struck down Republican legal challenges of voter fraud.

History teachers need to be sure teenagers understand the historical reference to "the big lie", Nazi propaganda falsely claiming that Germany's loss in WW 1 was due to the Jews, who they scapegoated for having "stabbed Germany in the back"? It is imperative to teach about Goebbels,

Hitler's chief propagandist, and his belief that if you tell a big lie repeatedly you can convince people it's true? Students need to grapple with its relevance today especially in the age of social media.

When I taught, the very best curriculum on the Nazi experience was designed by [Facing History and Ourselves](#). Their deep dive unit, [Holocaust and Human Behavior](#), begins with a focus on the fragility of German democracy in the 20's and 30's. These lessons help students understand "how the Nazis destroyed democracy, targeted minorities and political enemies, and encouraged conformity and consent within German society in order to build the Third Reich." There is no better historical foundation for our students.

In addition, teachers may want to supplement these materials with a new video series from Netflix, [How to Become a Tyrant](#). The first episode focuses on Hitler, showing how he seized the reigns of the German government. It is narrated by Peter Dinklage, of *Game of Thrones* fame, with a somewhat sarcastic tone. That said, it has good historical footage, excellent animation and experts outlining the steps in Hitler's totalitarian takeover of Germany. The remainder of the six-part series focuses on other 20th century dictators. Each case study highlights a different aspect of the tyrant's playbook: "Crush your Rivals", "Reign Through Terror", "Control the Truth", "Create a New Society", and "Rule Forever".

We always need to be careful in making historical parallels between Hitler and other anti-democratic rulers and movements because of the sheer scale and horror of Nazi atrocities. Nevertheless, the Nazi Party was once a nascent movement in a democratic Germany long before Hitler took absolute power, plunging the world into war and carrying out genocide against Europe's Jews. It is helpful for our students to understand that authoritarian leaders often use similar techniques to consolidate their deadly regimes.

The last year and a half our heroes have been nurses and doctors fighting the good fight against COVID. This year social studies teachers are on the front lines in the current struggle for democracy in the US.