



# Reading and Discussion Guide

By Dave Forrest

September 2021

Dear Teachers,

*On Tyranny* is a must read for our students during these turbulent times.

Yale Historian Timothy Snyder has written a powerful and timely book. His slim volume's subtitle is *Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth-Century*. Snyder's website aptly describes his effort as "a guide for surviving and resisting America's turn towards authoritarianism."

Snyder's message is one we often tell our students: each generation must defend democracy, extend its freedoms, and make improvements in our institutions. In the present moment, he argues, "American democracy must be defended from Americans who would exploit freedoms to bring about its end."

*On Tyranny* is a non-fiction cautionary tale. The author reminds us that the forward march of our democracy is not inevitable. Recent events have reawakened us to this truth, as well.

This small book is full of big ideas. Snyder has given teachers an invaluable resource for teaching 21<sup>st</sup> century citizenship.

A Social Studies department could make *On Tyranny* a supplementary text in an American government or civics class for seniors or a companion non-fiction reading to a World Studies class covering the 20<sup>th</sup> century history. An English Department might pair *On Tyranny* with fictional works about totalitarianism such as Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* or Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984*.

There are lots of ways for social studies teachers to use *On Tyranny*. It could be read a chapter a week for a semester or completed in its entirety in a week or two. The book lends itself to academic conversations, whether in pairs, groups or whole class. And creative teachers may use a chapter as a springboard for various authentic projects such as student art, poetry or video.

What follows is a reading and discussion guide I've designed to get you started. I've highlighted key vocabulary in each chapter. In addition, I've suggested questions that might guide your students' reading and discussion. And at the end of the guide, I've shared a list of extension activities to help students delve more deeply into themes found in this book.

I hope you find the *On Tyranny* Reading and Discussion Guide useful with your students!

Dave Forrest

## **Prologue – History and Tyranny**

### **Vocabulary –**

prologue

oligarchy

empires

democratic republic

demagogues

tyrants

tyranny

imperiled

fascism

communism

### **Reading and Discussion Questions**

1. Timothy Snyder begins his book with the words, “History does not repeat, but it does instruct.” (page 9) What do you think he means?
2. How does the author define tyranny?
3. Snyder thinks US democracy is currently imperiled. Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. Which historical period does Snyder think provides lessons to Americans seeking to improve our democracy?
5. Respond to Snyder’s statement that, “Americans are no wiser than Europeans who saw democracy yield to fascism, Nazism, or communism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.” (page 13) Do you agree or do you think our democratic institutions are strong enough to protect us from tyranny?

## **Chapter 1 – Do Not Obey in Advance.**

### **Vocabulary**

anticipatory

obedience

voluntarily

conformity

pogrom

### **Reading and Discussion Questions**

1. Look at the meanings of anticipatory and obedience. What do you think anticipatory obedience means?
2. What examples of anticipatory obedience does Snyder cite from Germany and Austria in the 1930's?
3. The Nazis persecuted Jews in the 1930's and 40's, unfairly blaming them for Germany's defeat in WW 1. Do you think that there are groups within the US that are being unfairly blamed for our nation's problems today?
4. What did Milgram hope to prove before he designed his experiment?
5. What conclusions did Milgram reach after conducting his experiment in the United States?

## Chapter 2 – Defend Institutions

### Vocabulary

Institutions

### Reading and Discussion Questions

1. What are examples of institutions Snyder highlights in this chapter?
2. Snyder writes, “We tend to assume that institutions will automatically maintain themselves against even direct attacks.” (page 23) Do you think of any of our democratic institutions are currently under attack? Give examples and explain.
3. What mistake did some Jews in Germany make about Hitler’s rise to power in Germany early in 1933?
4. Snyder argues, “The mistake is to assume that rulers who came to power through institutions cannot change or destroy those very institutions – even when that is exactly what they have announced they will do.” (page24) Brainstorm a list of what citizens can do to defend democratic institutions from attack.

## Chapter 3 – Beware of one-party rule.

### Vocabulary

omnipotent

multi-party system

vigilance

coup d'état

oligarchy

globalization

gerrymandered

### Reading and Discussion Questions

1. Snyder points out that we often view defending our democratic institutions from foreign countries and threats. However, he writes, "... human nature is such that American democracy must be defended from Americans who would exploit its freedoms to bring about its end." (page 27) Do you agree or disagree with Snyder? Are there currently internal threats to American democracy?
2. List three historical examples of democracies that collapsed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
3. Find three examples the author gives in this chapter to support his belief that our democracy is currently under attack by fellow Americans.
4. Do you agree or disagree with Snyder's argument that we need paper ballots for our elections? Explain.
5. Respond to the famous saying, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

## Chapter 4 – Take responsibility or the face of the world.

### Vocabulary

swastikas

propaganda

dehumanization

collectivization

### Reading and Discussion Questions

1. Do you see any signs of hate in your community? Have you seen any inappropriate symbols or words on social media or at your school?
2. How did Stalin and the communists portray wealthy farmers in the Soviet Union? What was the grim result for people in the Soviet countryside?
3. How did the Nazis mark Jewish stores? What was the symbol of allegiance to the Nazi regime? What symbol were Jews forced to wear?
4. Czech dissident Vaclav Havel wrote, “... By accepting the prescribed ritual, by accepting appearances as reality, by accepting the given rules of the game, thus making it possible for the game to go on, for it to exist in the first place.” (page 37) What do you think he meant?
5. Snyder writes, “In the politics of the everyday, our words and gestures, or their absence, count very much.” (page 33) Do you agree or disagree with Snyder? What things can we do when we see hateful symbols or words?

## Chapter 5 – Remember professional ethics.

### Vocabulary

subvert

authoritarians

civil servants

Ensatzgruppen

ethics

ethical

### Reading and Discussion Questions

1. What did the Nazi lawyer Hans Frank claim was the purpose of law?
2. What role did some doctors play in the Nazi regime?
3. How did some German businessmen benefit from the Nazi regime?
4. Snyder argues, "If lawyers had followed the norm of no execution without trial, if doctors accepted the rule of no surgery without consent, if businessmen had endorsed the prohibition of slavery, if bureaucrats had refused to handle paperwork involving murder, then the Nazi regime would have been much harder pressed to carry out the atrocities by which we remember it." (page 41) Why do you think some people did not adhere to professional ethics in Nazi Germany? What were the qualities of those German professionals who resisted Nazi requests? What were the consequences to both groups?
5. What do you feel are the ethical obligations of teachers and adults in your school? How about students, do you have ethical obligations, too? What are they?



## **Chapter 6 – Be wary of paramilitaries.**

### **Vocabulary**

paramilitary

intermingle

monopolize

rule of law

privatized

mob violence

ideology

exclusion

penetrate

transform

### **Reading and Discussion Questions**

1. According to Snyder, “...people and parties who wish to undermine democracy and the rule of law create and fund violent organizations that involve themselves in politics.” (page 43) What is the difference between a paramilitary organization and a police force?
2. Can you think of any paramilitary organizations in the United States? Have there been recent examples of paramilitaries operating in the US?
3. What role did the paramilitary organizations play in the rise of fascism in Germany, Romania, Hungary, and Austria in the 20<sup>th</sup> century?
4. What evidence does Snyder give that candidate Trump encouraged a mob mentality at his rallies?
5. According to the author, as tyrannical rulers consolidate power what happens to paramilitaries?

## **Chapter 7 – Be reflective if you must be armed.**

### **Vocabulary**

reflective

authoritarian

regular police

secret police

The Great Terror

The Holocaust

conformists

### **Reading and Discussion Questions**

1. What were the names of the secret police forces in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union?
2. What role did the regular police forces play in the Great Terror and the Holocaust?
3. Why do you think many German and Soviet policemen followed orders? Why do you think some police refused?
4. The title of this chapter is, “Be reflective if you must be armed?” What do you think the author is advocating?
5. There has been a lot of focus on the police and police brutality in the last several years in the US. What might be the lessons from history for police forces?

## **Chapter 8 – Stand out.**

### **Vocabulary**

status quo

righteous resistance

accommodation

animus

### **Reading and Discussion Questions**

1. What does the author mean, “The moment you set an example, the spell of the status quo is broken, and others will follow?” (page 51)
2. Which American opposed war with Germany during WWII under the banner of “America First”?
3. Which European nations initially did not resist Hitler when he began taking over countries?
4. How was Winston Churchill different? How did he stand out?
5. What did Teresa Prekerowa do to stand out during the Holocaust?
6. Can you think of Americans, past or present, who have helped break the spell of the status quo? How can each of us follow their examples?

## Chapter 9 – Be kind to our language.

### Vocabulary

defamation

libel

cliché

elude

entranced

trance

### Reading and Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the author in this chapter suggests that you, “Make an effort to separate yourself from the internet.”? Read books.” (page 59) Do you think this is a good suggestion, why or why not?
2. How did Hitler use the term – *the people*? Can you think of other examples of how politicians use language to create political division and control?
3. What problems does the author see with television? Do you agree or disagree with his arguments?
4. Have you read fiction like *Animal Farm*, *1984* or *Fahrenheit 451* that warn of the ways the citizens are controlled by their government? Discuss the most memorable books you have read.
5. Do you agree or disagree with the author that it is important for each of us to “Avoid pronouncing the phrases everyone else does. Think up your own way of speaking ...” (page 59) How important is individual expression?

## **Chapter 10 – Believe in truth.**

### **Vocabulary**

spectacle

renunciation

totalitarianism

verifiable

incantation

repetition

deify

propaganda

### **Reading and Discussion Questions**

1. Write a short response, a think-write, about one of the sentences from page 65. What do you think is the author's meaning? Can you give examples? Do you agree or disagree?
2. What are the four ways that Victor Klemperer explained that truth dies?
3. How did Trump diminish his opponents through repetition?
4. Give an example of magical thinking.
5. Explain how the Nazis used propaganda to persuade Germans to follow Hitler.
6. What do you think Snyder means when he writes, "Post-truth is pre-fascism."?(page 71)

## Chapter 11 – Investigate.

### Vocabulary

subsidize

print media

cynicism

hip

morass

indifference

grandiosity

fake news

manipulation

erroneous

subliminally

verifying

bots

trolls

### Reading and Discussion Questions

1. According to the author, how did Trump use the word *lies*?
2. Discuss the meaning of Snyder's observation that, "Within the two-dimensional internet world, new collectivities have arisen, invisible by the light of day – tribes with distinct world views beholden to manipulation." (page 75)
3. Why does Snyder believe that print media is better for learning the truth than things found on the internet or television? Do you agree or disagree?

4. Why does Snyder support journalism and journalists? Why does he feel that their work should be respected and is important?
5. How is verifying facts different than retweeting something? Which does the author support and why?
6. Snyder suggests that each of us try writing an investigative article on a topic of interest. Why do you think he makes this suggestion?
7. Snyder asks us not to publish falsehoods. What damage does he feel that passing along falsehoods, unverified facts, has on others? What is the overall impact on the internet?
8. Reflect on your own use of the internet. Are you a good citizen when you are online or have you participated in some of the negative practices the author describes? How could you improve your own online presence?

## **Chapter 12 – Make eye contact and small talk.**

### **Vocabulary**

denunciation

psychological

affirm

memoir

### **Reading and Discussion Questions**

1. Why does the author argue that making eye contact and small talk is more than being polite?
2. What is a common memory that people who survived the Nazi regime, the Great Terror, or the purges in eastern Europe wrote about in their memoirs?
3. The author writes, “Having old friends in politics is a last resort. And making new ones is the first step towards change.” (page 82) What are small ways that each of us can reach out to others, especially to those we don’t know or may have previously feared?



## **Chapter 13 – Practice corporeal politics.**

### **Vocabulary**

corporeal

dissipating

resistance

Solidarity labor movement

### **Reading and Discussion Questions**

1. The author argues that “Power wants your body softening in a chair and your emotions dissipating on the screen.” (page 83) Do you think that spending time online dissipates your emotions? Do you think it helps people in power? Why or why not?
2. Snyder suggests that you “Make new friends and march with them.” (page 83) He is calling for political activism in the streets – rather than just expressing opinions online. What do you think? Is demonstrating sometimes necessary to prevent authoritarianism?
3. What were the lessons that the author drew from the Solidarity labor movement in Poland?
4. Have you ever participated in a peaceful protest? Are there issues you feel strongly about that might lead you publically demonstrate? Why or why not?

## **Chapter 14 – Establish a private life.**

### **Vocabulary**

malware

disinformation

salacious

conspiracy theories

demolition

devolution

### **Reading and Discussion Questions**

1. What does the author mean when he writes, “email is skywriting?” (page 87) Do you agree or disagree?
2. What steps does Snyder recommend to citizens who do not want their electronic privacy violated?
3. Why does Snyder believe that, “During the campaign of 2016, Americans took a step toward totalitarianism ...”? (page 88)
4. According to the author, what mistakes did the media make regarding the publication of emails?
5. Have Americans been drawn into conspiracy theories or become a mob? What evidence would you give to support or oppose these arguments?

## **Chapter 15 – Contribute to good causes.**

### **Vocabulary**

civil society

gratifying

association

### **Reading and Discussion Questions**

1. “But one element of freedom is the choice of associates, and one defense of freedom is the activity of groups to sustain their members.” (page 93) Are there groups you associate with? As Snyder argues, they don’t have to be political groups.
2. In what ways have authoritarian leaders opposed the free association of individuals? Give an example.
3. Have you given to or worked for charities? Have you or your family supported good causes?
4. What different ways can students contribute to good causes?

## **Chapter 16 – Learn from peers in other countries.**

### **Vocabulary**

peers

commentariat

cyber war

### **Reading and Discussion Questions**

1. Snyder writes that many observers of the 2016 election from eastern Europe were not surprised by its outcome? Why does he argue they could predict the outcome?
2. What tactics did the Russians use against the Ukrainians that they also employed against the US in the 2016 election?
3. What reasons does the author give for Americans getting a passport?
4. Do you agree or disagree with the author's notion that Americans have lots to learn from people in other countries, especially those who have had experiences with authoritarian governments?
5. How about you, have you come from or traveled to different countries? If so, what did you learn from these experiences?

## Chapter 17 – Listen for dangerous words.

### Vocabulary

extremism

terrorism

exception

treacherous

permanent emergency

dissidents

### Reading and Discussion Questions

1. What does the author mean when he writes, “Be angry about the treacherous use of patriotic vocabulary?” (page 99) How can patriotic words be used for treacherous purposes?
2. How did the Nazis use national emergencies to control the German people?
3. Why doesn't Snyder believe that Americans must give up their freedoms in the name of safety? What do you think?
4. How do tyrants use the word *extremism*?
5. Can you think of examples of US politicians who use patriotic words for treacherous purposes?

## Chapter 18 – Be calm when the unthinkable arrives.

### Vocabulary

dissolution

exploit

Reichstag

nugatory

### Reading and Discussion Questions

1. Snyder argues that tyrannical leaders use crisis and terror attacks to destroy democratic institutions and take away citizens' liberties. Explain how Hitler used the Reichstag fire to consolidate his power.
2. Which events did Putin exploit to raise his approval ratings?
3. Which two institutions did Putin change to consolidate his power over Russia?
4. Give examples of methods Putin used in Ukraine, France, Germany and the US in his efforts to undermine these governments?
5. Snyder writes, "For us, the lesson is that our natural fear and grief must not enable the destruction of our institutions." (page 110) What does the author mean? Can you think of examples of how current politicians exploit our fears in ways which could potentially lead to the destruction of our democratic institutions?

## **Chapter 19 – Be a patriot.**

### **Vocabulary**

patriot

nationalism

### **Reading and Discussion Questions**

1. Snyder cites several examples of Trump's unpatriotic behavior. Do you agree or disagree with these criticisms of the former president? Explain.
2. According to the author, what are the main differences between patriotism and nationalism?
3. Give several examples of American patriotism that you have observed or read about.
4. What are patriotic actions you can take as a young person? Explain.

## Chapter 20 – Be as courageous as you can.

### Reading and Discussion Questions

1. “If none of us is prepared to die for freedom, then all of us will die under tyranny.” (page 115) Discuss the meaning of this sentence.
2. Why do you think the author wrote the chapter title as, “Be as courageous **as you can**” and not simply “Be courageous”? Is there a difference? What are the different ways people can show courage?
3. Who in history or today do you view as courageous? Explain.
4. Tell classmates about everyday heroes in your family, neighborhood or school.
5. What are the different ways that you and your fellow students can show courage?



## **Epilogue – History and Liberty**

### **Vocabulary**

epilogue

receding

irrelevance

inevitability

teleology

coma

relevant

status quo

neoliberalism

hegemony

eternity

ahistorical

victimhood

national populists

Brexit

mythicized

hypnosis

vortex

trance

## Reading and Discussion Questions

1. In the epilogue Snyder writes, “We allowed ourselves to accept the *politics of inevitability*, the sense that history could only move in one direction: toward liberal democracy.” (page 118) Explain the author’s concept of the *politics of inevitability* and why he thinks it is dangerous?
2. What do you think? Are our democratic institutions so strong that our democracy is safe or should we fear that our democracy can be destroyed?
3. In describing the *politics of eternity*, Snyder writes, “Its longing is for past moments that never really happened, during epochs that were, in fact disastrous.” (page 121) Explain the author’s concept of the *politics of eternity*?
4. Why does the author believe that slogans like “Make America Great Again” reflect the dangerous *politics of eternity*?
5. The author’s first sentence of prologue is, “History does not repeat, but it does instruct.” (page 9) In one of Snyder’s closing paragraphs of the epilogue he writes, “How will young people react now that the promise of inevitability has been so obviously broken? Perhaps they will slide from inevitability toward eternity. It must be hoped that they could, instead become a historical generation, rejecting the traps of inevitability and eternity that older generations have laid before them. If young people do not begin to make history, politicians of eternity and inevitability will destroy it. And to make history, young Americans will have to know some. This is not the end, but a beginning.” (page 126)

Discuss these passages. Why does Snyder hope that your generation will become a historical generation? What does being a historical generation mean? What does he hope young people will do?

6. What do you think about your generation, will you learn from the past and make history yourselves? Are you hopeful or discouraged about your generation’s possibilities?
7. What issues do you feel are most important for your generation to tackle? What methods do you feel will be most effective in making change? Are you ready for the challenge?

## After You Read

1. Write a short book review of *On Tyranny*. In the review, let us know if you recommend this book to a classmate, family member or friend?
2. Tell us about the best chapter in the book from your point of view. What made it powerful or important?
3. Pick three of your favorite sentences from the book. Respond to these golden lines with your own thinking.
4. Were there any recommendations from the author that inspired you? For example, will you change your online habits, read more long articles and books, give to a favorite charity, participate in a protest or visit a foreign country? Tell us your plans.
5. Take Snyder's challenge and write an investigative article on a topic of interest. Be sure to include evidence taken from reputable sources.
6. Snyder hopes that your generation will be instructed by history. Take one historical period the author wrote about in the book and read and write more deeply about this historical experience. What are the lessons from your study?
7. Read one of the pieces of literature mentioned in Chapter 9. Write a literary analysis of the novel, connecting the book with the themes found in *On Tyranny*.
8. Get creative! Choose one of the chapters from the book and create a piece of art symbolizing the concepts in the chapter. Or create an original song, poem, or rap expressing a key idea from *On Tyranny*.