



## Understanding History to Fight Tyranny

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IN THIS ERA of political tumult, many of us are asking several important questions: Are our democracy and our system of checks and balances endangered? If so, what can we do about it, individually and collectively? What can history, both national and global, tell us? Two pieces in this issue provide answers we hope readers will find illuminating. “Hope in Dark Times,” by Richard D. Kahlenberg, examines the crisis at hand and the role of trade unions and public education in strengthening democratic values and countering authoritarianism. And an excerpt from *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, by Yale University history professor Timothy Snyder, describes times in the last century when fascism reared its ugly head and offers lessons to counter its return.

Kahlenberg details the ways President Donald Trump seeks to undermine various pillars of democracy—through assaults on the independence of the judiciary, the free press, religious freedom, public education, and trade unions.

“Historically, teachers unions have played a special role in strengthening democratic cultures,” Kahlenberg writes, “and they are urgently called on to do so again.”

Indeed, the AFT actively engages in what Kahlenberg calls “social justice unionism,” pressing for a strong and vibrant democracy that stands up to bigotry and discrimination and protects the civil rights of all. This is unionism that fights for great neighborhood public schools; accessible, affordable higher education that prepares students for productive lives and citizenship; good jobs that can support a middle-class life; the right to voice and agency through participation in a union; and affordable health-care as an ethical and economic imperative.

In *On Tyranny*, Snyder establishes himself as a cogent voice in the emerging literature of the resistance. He takes

readers through three distinct times when Europeans confronted authoritarian regimes: at the end of the First World War in 1918, the end of the Second World War in 1945, and the fall of communism in 1989. Such pivotal points in history marked a victory of pluralism and democracy over authoritarianism—but not forever.

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“We might be tempted to think that our democratic heritage automatically protects us from such threats,” Snyder writes. “This is a misguided reflex.”

We need look no further than Trump’s firing of James Comey, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. While a president is entitled to fire an FBI director, it raises questions now because Comey was leading an inquiry into possible ties between the Russian government and Trump and his associates.

Snyder offers 20 lessons from the 20th century that relate to today’s political climate. The first one, “Do not obey in advance,” urges citizens not to engage in “anticipatory obedience” or adapt to authoritarian regimes, for such behavior only emboldens such regimes. Snyder explains how acts of conformity on the part of Austrians ultimately showed Nazi officials what was possible: systematic murder on a massive scale.

Lesson 2, “Defend institutions,” reminds us that institutions cannot protect themselves. Rather, it is up to us, as individuals, to ensure their survival. “So choose an institution you care about,” Snyder writes—“a court, a newspaper, a law, a labor union—and take its side.”

All 20 lessons are easier said than done, especially number 8: “Stand out.” While it’s safer to go along with the crowd, Snyder reminds us of the benefit of not doing so. “Remember Rosa Parks,” he writes. By invoking the woman who refused to give up her seat on the bus, Snyder draws on the proud history of the civil rights movement and highlights the difference

one person can make. As he writes in lesson 20, “Be as courageous as you can.”

These lessons seem especially important for educators to absorb and impart because, as Kahlenberg writes, they are on the frontline. Public education is society’s primary means to foster equity, opportunity, and pluralism. And, since most students in American schools and colleges today were born after the elimination of apartheid in South Africa, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the end of de jure segregation in the United States, they might have the “sense that history could move in only one direction: toward liberal democracy,” Snyder writes. He warns that when Americans have engaged in such thinking, “we lowered our defenses, constrained our imagination, and opened the way for precisely the kinds of regimes we told ourselves could never return.”

If the next generation is to defend democratic institutions, our students must learn from the past. Who better to teach them than America’s educators? To avoid the mistakes of previous generations “and to make history, young Americans will have to know some,” Snyder writes. “This is not the end, but a beginning.”

Let’s hope he’s right.