

# Which side are you on?

**Randi Weingarten**, President  
American Federation of Teachers

Our country's history abounds with moments when Americans had to choose which side they were on: Independence or loyalty to the Crown. Jim Crow or civil rights. Marriage equality or discrimination. War or peace. We are in such a moment now.

Americans pride ourselves on our foundational ideals of liberty, equality and justice, and our constitutional rights and freedoms. Many of us take democratic rule in the United States for granted. But, by any objective, historical measure, President Donald Trump exhibits classic authoritarian behavior: Demagoguery. A war on the truth. Branding journalists and the media as “enemies of the people.” Stoking resentment and division. Animating nostalgia for a mythical, idyllic past—supposedly eroded by minorities, immigrants and political correctness. Threatening to jail his adversaries (“lock her up”) and fire investigators who provide some of the checks and balances in our democratic system.

And while many of these checks and balances are built into our Constitution and government structures, they do not work when the party in power ignores them, as Republicans mostly have. Just this week, Trump refused to condemn the kingdom of Saudi Arabia for the apparent torture and murder of one journalist, and he cheered the assault of another, signs that he not only accepts but applauds violence against the free press. The GOP's response to Trump? Silence.

No doubt their acquiescence results from the fact that Trump has been giving his backers what they want—huge tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations, undoing generations of environmental and financial regulation, and rushing through the appointments of a slew of conservative judges to federal courts, including to the U.S. Supreme Court. Perhaps Republicans fear the diatribes that Trump metes out when he feels aggrieved. Whatever the reason, Trump's allies have signaled that it's ok by them to side with foreign strongmen, to lie outrageously, to tear the safety net, and to divide the country the president is sworn to lead.

The midterm elections provide voters an opportunity to declare which side they are on. Take the Republicans' tax overhaul and its consequences. There could be no starker difference as to where the parties stand: The GOP said their tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy would “pay for themselves.” They don't, as many of us

said they wouldn't; last week, we learned that the federal deficit shot up 17 percent to \$779 billion in the just-ended fiscal year.

Trump's budget director blamed the soaring deficit not on the tax cuts but on “irresponsible spending,” citing Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, which together kept 44 million people out of poverty last year. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell promptly

## Trump's allies signal that it's ok for him to lie, tear the safety net and divide the country.

sharpened his knives to go after those very safety net programs. And while some Republicans have undergone pre-election conversions to the importance of protecting people with pre-existing conditions, McConnell vowed once again to gut those protections if Republicans prevail in the midterm elections.

And if Democrats gain majorities? Their priorities are safeguarding Social Security and Medicare; putting fairness and decency over cruelty; providing checks and balances; jump-starting stagnant wages; rebuilding our crumbling roads and electric and water systems; increasing access to healthcare; strengthening public education; addressing the student debt crisis; upholding civil and human rights; and reclaiming America's role as a practicing democracy, including protecting every citizen's right to vote.

Some say that comparing the rise in nationalism and white supremacy in our country to the period leading up to the Nazi regime in Germany is hyperbolic. But such trans-Atlantic borrowing and mirroring of fascist policies

is not new. Yale professor Jason Stanley notes that Adolf Hitler was darkly inspired by instruments of racial supremacy in the United States, including the Confederacy, Jim Crow laws and the Immigration Act of 1924, which gave preference to immigrants from Northern Europe and placed restrictions on or excluded everyone else. Don't forget that, before he became a dictator, Hitler and the

Nazi Party took power in a democratic system.

Stanley's own family history bears witness to how people underestimate malign forces. Some left Nazi Germany as anti-Semitism and Hitler's demagoguery intensified. Others stayed; like so many, they were unable to imagine the evil their neighbors and countrymen were capable of. Many perished.

I'm reminded of a passage in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, in which a character, asked how he went bankrupt, responds, “Gradually, then suddenly.” The same can be said of the descent into authoritarianism. It happens cut by cut until it is absolute.

As a nation, we have stumbled, but we remain rooted in our fidelity to our founding principles. This descent, while perilous, is not yet inevitable or irreversible. We must choose which side we are on: Cruelty or decency. Fairness or bias. Democracy or autocracy. This Election Day, Nov. 6, will foretell which path our country will take. Your vote will be decisive.



Weingarten addresses a rally for public education at Northwest Classen High School in Oklahoma City.

Michael Campbell

**FOLLOW RANDI WEINGARTEN:** [twitter.com/rweingarten](https://twitter.com/rweingarten)