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How Tyrants Fall—and the Need for Civil Resistance¹

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Tyrants “are fundamentally broken people. Anyone who would seek to get themselves made a dictator, or who eliminates democratic constraints to become one, is, by definition, someone with extreme and destructive personality traits. And the act of being a dictator requires extreme cruelty that only abusive, power-hungry megalomaniacs are capable of carrying out.” Brian Klass, Associate Professor of Global Politics at University College, London

Donald Trump checks all the boxes. That’s why many of us thought it would never happen, that America would never knowingly elect a sociopathic wannabe dictator to be president a second time. After all, he clearly demonstrated his malignant narcissism during his first term and in the succeeding years. But the nightmare has come true.

This time, he’s carrying out his most dangerous threats, many extrajudicially, while he serves up Ukraine to Russia, setting the stage for another world war while mirroring Vladimir Putin’s absurd claim that President Zelinsky would be responsible.

We live in an age of global authoritarianism vs. democracy. As of 2024, there are 66 countries considered dictatorships, autocracies or some form of authoritarian [government](#). Out of 195 nations, that’s nearly 34%. And that’s not counting the United States (our membership is too new for the 2024 statistics). So, we’ve got a band of despots, many with nuclear bombs, controlling the lives of 5.4 billion people or 70% of the world population.

Hopefully, we’ve learned some tough lessons. More than half the country are low information voters. And a nation of laws remains so only when its leaders obey them. We don’t know if Trump’s fiats will stand. It feels like we’re living in a house of cards.

What to do? First, we need to understand who dictators are. And second, we need to learn what strategies have succeeded to bring them down.

How Tyrants Fall: And How Nations Survive by political scientist Marcel Dirsus is a new profile of history’s most notorious dictators and how they came to ruin. He reveals their common denominators. 1. They are rational, despite their monstrous acts. 2. They are addicted to power, and they succeed by keeping a small group of followers loyal through gifts of money and/or promotions to positions of power. 3. They all live in constant fear of being deposed.

“Dirsus rightly points out that there is a widespread myth that dictatorships are bastions of stability, that despots easily maintain an iron grip on power. The opposite is true,” says political scientist Brian Klass in his review of the book. “Dictators live precarious lives, constantly needing to look

¹ [The Delray Democrat](#), March 2025, page 9.

over their shoulders, relentlessly crushing their enemies and any would-be usurpers.”

But they have been vanquished. And a seminal study by Harvard researcher Dr. Erica Chenoweth and Tuft’s Dr. Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, illustrates why non-violent civil resistance is the best course of action. “They collected data about every violent and nonviolent mass action from 1900 to 2006—323 of them in all—and analyzed them in the context of 160 variables. Chenoweth expected that violent movements would be shown to be more successful in overthrowing the regimes they were opposing. The data proved her [wrong](#).”

The authors reveal specific strategies we can chunk down in planning to at least debilitate, if not destroy, the Trump dictatorship and prevent his acolytes from succeeding him.

The researchers found the essential elements of a successful nonviolent resistance movement include (1) Shifting the loyalty of the dictators’ supporters, such as political appointees, corporations, police and the military (in those cases where it has been usurped), (2) using resistance methods beyond mass demonstrations, (3) the discipline to stand up to direct repression without turning to violence, and (4) a large, diverse population that can be sustained over time.

But that diverse population must have collective goals. In the last election, Venezuelans in South Florida learned the hard way the result of prioritizing self-interest over the common good. Applauding Trump while he denigrated other South American migrants (*he’s not talking about us*) and believing his promise not to remove the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) of Venezuelan non-citizens, the highly concentrated Venezuelan population in South Florida came out in huge numbers for him. Now he’s ordered their TPS removed, effective in April, using the same accusations of criminality he threw at Mexicans.

A dictatorship can be extinguished by either internal or external opposition. Dirsus shows that some authoritarians were overthrown by their own people, like Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, who was [slaughtered](#) by rebels. Charles Taylor was given over to the International Court in the Hague by the Liberians he so brutally ruled. He’s now serving a 50-year sentence at a men’s prison in Great Britain.

On the other hand, although Iraq’s president, Saddam Hussein, was hanged by his own people for crimes against humanity, including the murder of 148 Shi’ites in Dujail in 1982, it was the invasion of the United [States](#), searching for non-existent weapons of mass destruction, that laid the groundwork for his execution in 2003.

Either way, the odds for dictators aren’t good. According to [The Guardian](#), “Since the second world war, 23% of the world’s rulers have ended up exiled, imprisoned or killed after leaving office. For dictators, though, the figure rises to 69%.”

But this is the United States and we’re not going to hang a president. Heck, we couldn’t even punish Trump for 34 felony convictions or try him for stealing and defiantly holding classified documents for over a year or unleashing a mob on the Capitol in an effort to steal an election. During the 2024 campaign, the wheels came off the systems we historically relied on. Much of the media chose profits over facts. Some federal judges demonstrated fealty to the man who appointed them instead of their oaths of office. And a majority of the voting public was more

interested in social media's easy lies than getting off their asses to learn about the Biden administration's superb stewardship and Kamala Harris' unparalleled qualifications.

But here are factors to consider starting now.

Sometimes dictators are toppled by those closest to them. Since 1950, about 65% of the world's dictators have been removed by regime [insiders](#). As Dirus says, "Due to the structure of the regimes they depend on, their biggest threat comes from the people around them – the palace elites, generals and advisors." OK, Melania is unlikely to come through, but just three weeks into Trump's term, some congressional Republicans were already grousing about his eating their lunch. Others who prostituted themselves for appointments in the Trump administration will feel his knife in their backs soon enough; that's his MO. It's important we keep reminding them how history will record their abject failures as stewards of the Constitution.

Our military has the option of disobeying illegal orders. Dictators commonly usurp the military, and that specter causes citizens to fear acts of civil disobedience. On July 1, 2024, the president was given unprecedented immunity by the United States Supreme Court in [Trump v. United States](#). Dissenting, Justice Sonia Sotomayor said the Court had made the president "a king above the law." That sparked concern that Trump might order the military to commit unlawful acts against the American people.

But the United States military retains the ability to disobey unlawful orders. "Service members have a legal, enforceable duty to obey only lawful orders from those authorized to give orders (violating them is prosecutable by court-martial under Articles 90 and 92 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice), and a legal excuse (*and* moral grounds) for disobedience under the limited circumstances of receiving an *unlawful* order. The issue of presidential immunity for the commander in chief—whether absolute or presumed—is absolutely irrelevant to the underlying lawfulness of the order [itself](#)."

It doesn't take a huge number of resisters. Chenoweth and Stephan reported that **only a "small critical mass" is needed to overthrow authoritarian governments: "Movements that were able to mobilize at least 3.5 percent of the population were uniformly successful."**

Of course, there is a huge difference between those dictators who came to power through coups d'état versus a democratic election like ours.

The 25th Amendment allows for the transfer of power from the president to the vice president if he or she is removed from office because of death, resignation or impeachment. But impeachment demands a two-thirds vote of both Houses, and the Republicans have made it clear they are too afraid of Trump's vindictiveness to honor the Constitution. There are no Watergate heroes in the wings.

Where to start? As consumers, we have tremendous influence. We can boycott, wherever feasible, the companies the Trump loyalists own or invest in. When boycotts aren't possible, we can bombard the companies with calls and letters to demand accountability.

It works. [The Ethical Consumer](#) reports: "Twitter/X has lost half its advertising revenue since Elon Musk bought the company in 2022. 500 advertisers stopping spending on the platform after the

coalition ‘Stop Toxic Twitter’, composed of around 60 organisations, wrote an open letter asking Twitter’s top 20 advertisers to ‘cease all advertising on Twitter globally,’” because the site failed to monitor the right-wing lies being posted.

Of course, the Right has used this tool successfully. In May 2023, US retailer [Target](#) removed the LGBTQ-themed items it had offered for Pride month after conservatives complained. In response to Trump’s war on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, [Target](#) announced in January 2025 it would no longer offer DEI programs. This, from a company that was a pioneer for inclusion.

We’ve got to be watchdogs because dictators also use social media for repression. In his review of Chenoweth’s work, [Ralph Renally](#) notes her study of authoritarians’ use of the internet. “In one case in Sudan during 2011’s Arab Spring, the regime of then-President Omar al-Bashir feared that it might face an uprising, so its security services created a fake event on Facebook designed to look like a protest organized by young activists. As many as 17,000 people responded, and the would-be protesters who showed up were rounded up by security forces. Interrogations and authorities’ subsequent access to the protesters’ Facebook contacts led to even more arrests.” Trump created Truth Social as a vehicle for his daily propaganda and has used X to lie about anyone he perceives as the opposition.

Despite a lawless president, we’re not powerless. The architecture of democracy is still in place. It’s time to employ every tool that history has shown can work.