

# The Strongman Fantasy (updated)

Timothy Snyder

(Note to readers: this is a text I wrote in March, looking ahead. Given where we are now in the US, I thought it deserved an update. Please share it.)

Quite a few Americans like the idea of strongman rule. And now we have an president-elect who vows to persecute the enemy within, and who has proposed a cabinet that seems designed to overturn a republic.

What's wrong with that, ask many? Why not a dictator who will get things done?

I lived in eastern Europe when memories of communism were fresh. I have visited regions in Ukraine where Russia imposed its occupation regime. I have spent decades reading testimonies of people who lived under [Nazi](#) or [Stalinist](#) rule. I have seen death pits, some old, some freshly dug. And I have friends who have lived under authoritarian regimes, including political prisoners and survivors of torture. Some of the people I trusted most have been assassinated.

So I think that there is an answer to this question.

Strongman rule is a fantasy. Essential to it is the idea that a strongman will be *your* strongman. He won't. In a democracy, elected representatives listen to constituents. We take this for granted, and imagine that a dictator would owe us something. But the vote you cast for him affirms your irrelevance. The whole point is that the strongman owes us nothing. We get abused and we get used to it.

Another pleasant illusion is that the [strongman will unite](#) the nation. But an aspiring dictator will always claim that some belong and others don't. He will define one group after another as the enemy. This might feel good, so long as you feel that you are on the right side of the line. But now fear is the essence of life. The politics of us-and-them, once begun, never ends.

We dream that a strongman will let us focus on America. But dictatorship opens our country to the worst the world has to offer. It will always turn out that the people who talk about "America First" are actually copying dictatorships abroad.

An American strongman will measure himself by the wealth and power of other dictators. He will befriend them and compete with them. From them he will learn new ways to oppress and to exploit his own people.

At least, the fantasy goes, the strongman will get things done. But dictatorial power today is not about achieving anything positive. It is about preventing anyone else from achieving anything. The strongman is really the weak man: his secret is that he makes everyone else weaker.

Unaccountable to the law and to voters, the dictator has no reason to consider anything beyond his own personal interests. In the twenty-first century, those are simple: dying in bed as a billionaire. To enrich himself and to stay out of prison, the strongman dismantles the justice system and replaces civil servants with loyalists.

The new bureaucrats will have no sense of accountability. Basic government functions will break down. Citizens who want access will learn to pay bribes. Bureaucrats in office thanks to patronage will be corrupt, and citizens will be desperate. Quickly the corruption becomes normal, even unquestioned.

As the fantasy of strongman rule fades into everyday dictatorship, people realize that they need things like water or schools or Social Security checks. Insofar as such goods are available under a dictatorship, they

come with a moral as well as a financial price. When you go to a government office, you will be expected to declare your personal loyalty to the strongman.

If you have a complaint about these practices, too bad. Americans are litigious people, and many of us assume that we can go to the police or sue. But when you vote a strong man in, you vote out the rule of law. In court, only loyalty and wealth will matter. Americans who do not fear the police will learn to do so. Those who wear the uniform must either resign or become the enforcers of the whims of one man.



Everybody (except the dictator and his family and friends) gets poorer. The market system depends upon competition. Under a strongman, there will be no such thing. The strongman's clan will be favored by government. Our wealth inequality, bad enough already, will get worse. Anyone hoping for prosperity will have to seek the patronage of the official oligarchs. Running a small business will become impossible. As soon as you achieve any sort of success, someone who wants your business denounces you.

In the fantasy of the strongman, politics vanishes and all is clear and bright. In fact, a dreary politics penetrates everything. You can't run a business without the threat of denunciation. You can't get basic services without humiliation. You feel bad about yourself. You think about what you say, since it can be used against you later. What you do on the internet is recorded forever, and can land you in prison.

Public space closes down around you. You cannot escape to the bar or the bowling alley, since everything you say is monitored. The person on the next stool or in the next lane might not turn you in, but you have to assume they will. If you have a t-shirt or a bumper sticker with a message, someone will report you. Even if you just repeat the dictator's words, someone can lie about you and denounce you. And then, if you voted for the strongman, you will be confused. But you should not be. This is what you voted for.

Denunciation becomes normal behavior. Without law and voting, denouncing others helps people to feel safe. Under strongman rule, you cannot trust your colleagues or your friends or even your family. Political fear not only takes away all public space; it also corrupts all private relationships. And soon it consumes your thoughts. If you cannot say what you think, you lose track of what you believe. You cease to be yourself.

If you have a heart attack and go to the hospital, you have to worry that your name is on a list. Care of elderly parents is suddenly in jeopardy. That hospital bed or place in a retirement home is no longer assured. If you draw attention to yourself, aged relatives will be dumped in the street. This is not how

America works now, but it is how authoritarian regimes *always* work.

In the strongman fantasy, no one thinks about children. But fear around children is the essence of dictatorial power. Even courageous people restrain themselves to protect their children. Parents know that children can be singled out and beaten up. If parents step out of line, children lose any chance of going to university, or lose their jobs.

Schools collapse anyway, since a dictator only wants myths that justify his power. Children learn in school to denounce one another. Each coming generation must be more tame and ignorant than the prior one. Time with young children stresses parents. Either your children repeat propaganda and tell you things you know are wrong, or you worry that they will find out what is right and get in trouble.

In a dictatorship, parents no longer say what they think to their children, because they fear that their children will repeat it in public. And once parents no longer speak their minds at home, they can no longer create a trusting family. Even parents who give up on honesty have to fear that their children will one day learn the truth, take action, and get imprisoned.

Most likely you won't be killed or be required to kill. But amid the dreariness of life under dictatorship is dark responsibility for others' death. By the time the killing starts, you will know that it is not about unity, or the nation, or getting things done. The best Americans, betrayed by you when you cast your vote, will be murdered at the whim and for the wealth of a dictator. Your tragedy will be living long enough to understand this.

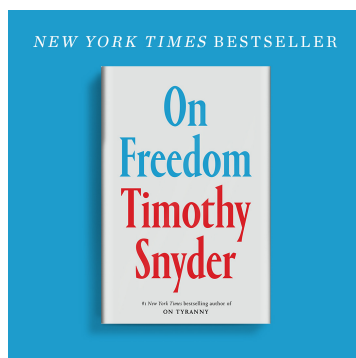
Once this process begins, it is hard to stop. At the present stage of the strongman fantasy, people imagine an exciting experiment. If they don't like strongman rule, they think, they can just elect someone else the next time. This misses the point. If you help a strongman come to power, you are taking part in the elimination of democracy.

Hard to stop: but not impossible. There are lessons to be learned from the past, as I have shared in other [posts](#), and in a little book. We will also have to speak to one another. People voted as they did for various reasons. The outcome of the vote makes strongman rule possible. We will have to get past arguing about the vote, and have conversations about what authoritarianism is really like. This post was meant to help those conversations.

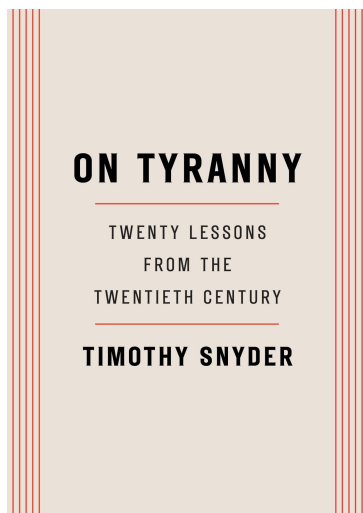
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TS 16 March 2024, updated 23 November 2024. For specific historical examples of strongman rule, make sure to read Ruth Ben-Ghiat. For the phenomenon of contemporary fascism, see Jason Stanley. On electoral authoritarianism, see Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way.