

Tyranny and Democracy: Past and Present

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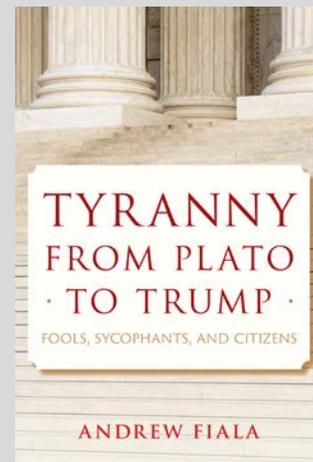
Apr. 20, 27, May 4

NOTE: May 11 will be postponed to May 25

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Course Plan

- April 20: Tyranny as a Perennial Spiritual Problem
 - Tragedy, History, Humanism
 - The tragic trio
 - The Trump era
- April 27: Theological and spiritual problems
 - Tyranny as a philosophical problem: Plato
 - Tyranny in theology
 - Secular and humanistic challenges
- May 4: Political and structural problems
 - Ancient tyrannies
 - Modern problems
 - American Challenges
- May 25: Solutions and opportunities
 - Moral citizenship
 - Enlightened constitutions
 - The Value of history, philosophy, and the humanities



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Tyranny as perennial spiritual problem



Camuccini
1793

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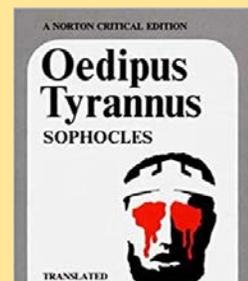
Setting the stage...

A plague descended on the nation as the tyrant ranted and raved, refusing to admit that he was the cause of the nation's ills.

The tyrant lived in a fantasy world of his own creation. He refused to accept what was said by those who spoke truth to power. Instead, he listened only to those who flattered his ego and encouraged him in his delusion.

The nation suffered profoundly under the tyrant and his plague. He tried to blame the plague on some other scapegoat.

Members of the public were seduced by the tyrant and his sycophants to sacrifice everything on behalf of a lie. Violence erupted.



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Setting the stage...

When the awful truth was finally revealed,
the chorus reached a tragic conclusion.

*Our lives are mere shadows.
Happiness fades away to nothing.
The tyrant's fall reminds us that
No human creation lasts forever.
Plague and trouble make victims of us all.*

- (*Oedipus The Tyrant*, lines 1190ff)



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Preface

The disease is genetic. Every generation or so, the conditions conspire to bring together an ugly cast of characters that includes a tyrant, his sycophants, and the moronic fools who cheer him on. Every so often a new plague breaks out. Albert Camus wrote, during the plague of Nazism, that the plague is never exterminated: it merely lies dormant, waiting for a lapse in attention.

That is why we must remain eternally vigilant in identifying and preventing the disease. Safeguards can be hard-wired into the system. But the tendency remains. Tyrannical people seek power. Sycophants suck up to them. The foolish masses cheer it on.

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Guiding Questions

- What can the Trump Era teach us about perennial problems in ethics, political philosophy, and religion?
- What can history, philosophy, and the humanities teach us about the present era?
- What does the study of tyranny teach us about the human spirit?

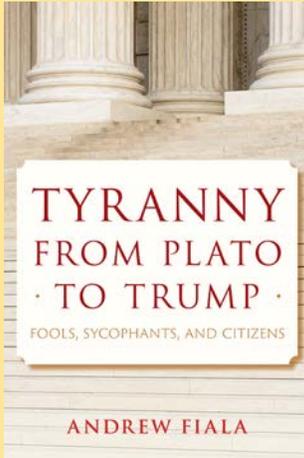
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Contexts, Questions, and Cures

- **Political:** How do we construct political power to prevent tyranny?
 - Constitutional limits
 - Enlightened citizens
- **Theological:** Is God a tyrant?
 - Theological critique
 - Modest “humanism”
- **Social:** How does tyranny show up businesses, families, and elsewhere?
 - Freedom
 - Education
 - Enlightenment

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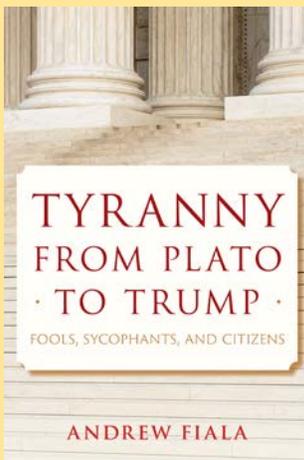
Perennial Problem and Trump Era



Constitutional limitations and moral education can prevent the plague of tyranny from taking root. The case of Donald Trump teaches us this lesson. We also learn this from Plato and the Greeks. The Trump era sheds light on perennial issues. And ancient philosophy can help us make sense of current events.

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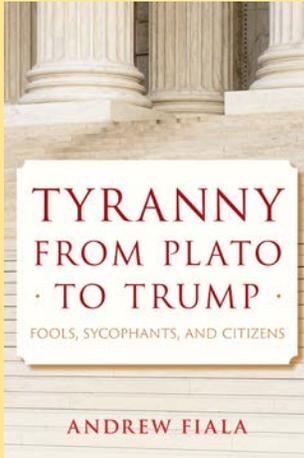
What can the Trump Era teach us about ethics, politics, philosophy, and religion?



- Tyranny is political and spiritual problem
- *The problem of tyranny is not merely caused by moral failure in the heart of the tyrant or something unique about political power. Rather, tyranny is a social problem, facilitated by morons and sycophants. Without fools and suck-ups to support him, the tyrant cannot obtain power. Tyrannical power is not only the result of pride; it is also the result of complicity, compliance, idiocy, and incompetence.*

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Solutions?



- Moral education
 - Engaged and educated democratic citizens
 - *Autonomy requires cultivation. It results from moral education. If we lack moral autonomy in this sense, we remain broken. Liberty without limit produces political discord. It gives rise to tyranny or mob rule.*
- Structural Safeguards: Enlightened Constitution
 - Separation of powers, rule of law, human rights, etc.
 - James Madison: *The truth is that all men having power ought to be mistrusted.*

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Why this matters...

Marjorie Taylor Greene on January 6 Insurrection

<https://sports.yahoo.com/marjorie-taylor-greene-claims-declaration-003749315.html>

- If you think about what our Declaration of Independence says, it says to overthrow tyrants...
- There is a clear difference between Jan. 6 and the Marxist, Communist revolution, the Antifa, BLM, Democrat ground troops waged on the American people in 2020.



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A Bi-Partisan and Perennial Problem

- **King George III**

- **Declaration of Independence:** “The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States.”

- **Abraham Lincoln**

- **John Wilkes Booth:** *“sic semper tyrannis”*

- **Barack Obama**

- **Senator Ted Cruz:** “What the Obama administration is doing to harm the American economy is the sort of power grab that our founders would have recognized as tyranny.”

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A Bi-Partisan and Perennial Problem

- **Donald Trump**

- **Representative Ilhan Omar:** “For years we have been asked to turn a blind eye to the criminality, corruption and blatant disregard for the rule of law from this tyrant in the White House.”
- **Representative Rashida Tlaib:** “Donald Trump is a tyrant that has continued to endanger and bring harm upon the people in the United States.”

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A Bi-Partisan and Perennial Problem

- **Joe Biden**

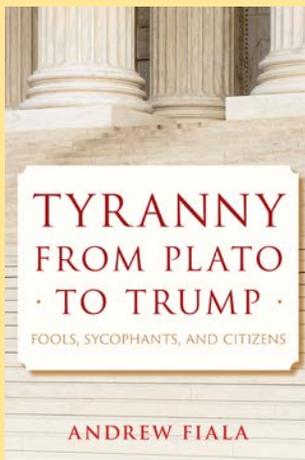
- **Representative Lauren Boebert to Joe Biden:** “being reasonable” is following the Constitution, tyrant” (i.e., against Biden calling for gun control)

- **Vladimir Putin**

- **Nancy Pelosi:** It is – it’s stunning to see, in this day and age, a tyrant roll into a country. This is the same tyrant who attacked our democracy in 2016. This is the same tyrant who is opposed to democracy and wants to minimize – trivialize it, to downgrade it in the eyes of the Russian people.
- **Joe Biden:** Liberty, democracy, human dignity — these are the forces far more powerful than fear and oppression. They cannot be extinguished by tyrants like Putin and his armies.

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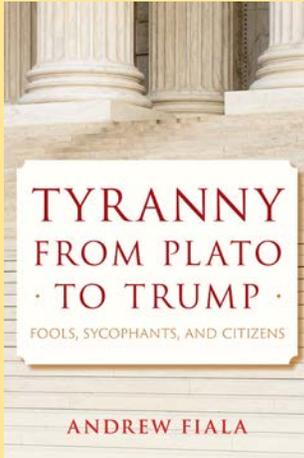
Tragedy



- *Human beings have a tendency to view themselves as special and unique. The tyrant does this more than anyone else. But history and philosophy show us that no one is special and unique. There are no saviors, messiahs, or God-anointed leaders. We are each merely human beings playing a part in a much larger story.*

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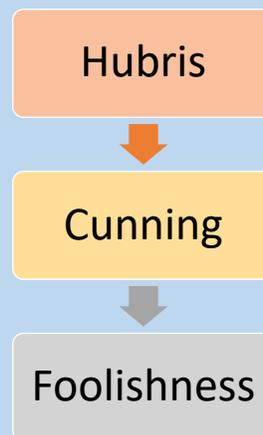
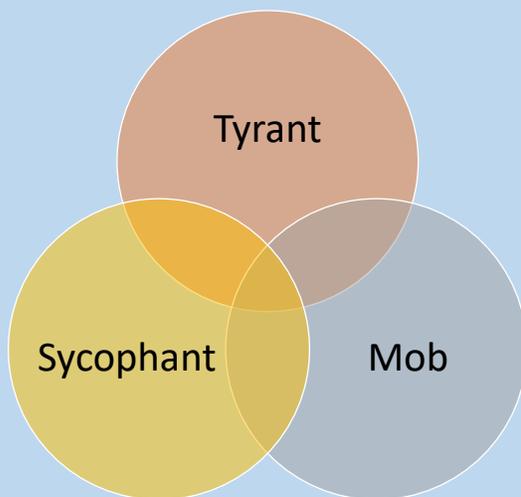
Tragedy



The deeper plague is lack of wisdom grounded in objective truth. Polarization is a significant part of the problem. The tyrant and his cronies are convinced (or convince themselves) that they are the good guys. The masses get pulled along and end up dying. Some of these characters may be downright cruel and evil. But tragedy is not melodrama. Tragic characters are more subtle than that—and therefore more insidious. The problem is that we are sick and believe ourselves to be well. We seek out an authority to save us. But he only makes things worse. The plot thickens, however, as truth is rejected as fake news and truth tellers are transformed into enemies of the people. This is not so much a problem of malice, cruelty, and deliberate evil as a problem of pride and ambition as well as ignorance and stupidity.

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The Tragic Trio



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Complexity of tyranny

The problem of tyranny is not merely caused by moral failure in the heart of the tyrant or something unique about political power. Rather, tyranny is a social problem, facilitated by morons and sycophants. Without fools and suck-ups to support him, the tyrant cannot obtain power. Tyrannical power is not only the result of pride; it is also the result of complicity, compliance, idiocy, and incompetence.

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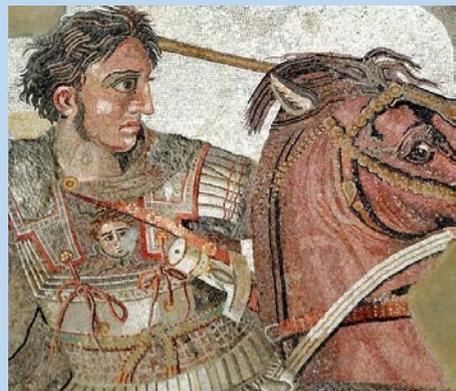
The Tyrant

- Truth... whatever the tyrant says it is
- Goodness... whatever the tyrant loves/desires
- Beauty... the image of the tyrant

- Sophocles: *Hubris gives birth to tyranny.*

Three conditions for tyranny

1. Desires absolute power
2. Actually possesses absolute power.
3. Tyrant's desire is based on hubris (pride, ambition, selfishness).



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The Sycophants

- Cunning Kiss Ups
- Contortionism and Opportunism
- Flattery and Obsequiousness
- Aristotle: *Everyone hates thieves and sycophants.*

Three Conditions for Sycophants

1. Uses words in devious ways
2. Aims to gain advantage and access to power
3. Understands the difference between truth and falsehood.



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The Moronic Mob

- Willful blindness
- Enjoying violence, cruelty, and amusement
- Tarantino: "violence is fun, man."
- MLK: *Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.*

Three condition for foolishness

1. Able to think and reason
2. But not reasoning objectively
3. Lacks desire to reason properly



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The Trump Era



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Trump: According to Former Attorney General William Barr

- Barr Statement on January 7, 2021: “Orchestrating a mob to pressure Congress is inexcusable.... The President’s conduct yesterday was a betrayal of his office and supporters”
 - <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/01/07/barr-trump-committed-betrayal-of-his-office-455812>
- Barr on NPR: “After the election, he didn't seem to listen to anybody except a group of sycophants who were telling him what he wanted to hear.”
 - <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/07/1084510375/ag-bill-barr-book-trump-2024>



Barr resigned (or was he fired?) December 2020

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Former Attorney General William Barr *Washington Post, Feb. 2022*

- Trump's "constant bellicosity diminishes him and the office."
- In his final days in office Barr came to realize that "Trump cared only about one thing: himself. Country and principle took second place."
- "Donald Trump has shown he has neither the temperament nor persuasive powers to provide the kind of positive leadership that is needed."
- Trump, was an "incorrigible narcissist" who, "through his self-indulgence and lack of self-control," blew the 2020 election and then did "a disservice to the nation" in falsely claiming his defeat was due to fraud.
- "The election was not 'stolen,'" Barr writes. "Trump lost it."
 - <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/02/27/barr-trump-2024/>



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The Mob

- One rioter who was interviewed in the immediate aftermath of January 6 said, "It was really fun."
- Another rioter who was later arrested and charged with assaulting a federal officer as well as obstruction of Congress explained his participation in the events of January 6 to an undercover FBI official as follows: "It was fucking fun."
- Quentin Tarantino: "violence is fun, man."



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Trump Fans

- “I like Trump because he’s hardcore. . . . He talks like I’m talking to you now. He’s rough around the edges and that’s what I am. I’m rough around the edges, and whatever comes to my mind, I just say whatever comes to my mind.”
- “I’ve always liked him. He just seemed like such a powerful person, all the way back to ‘The Apprentice.’ I think that’s what we need.”
- *When the world was talking about a video of Trump bragging about grabbing pussies, the actor Scott Baio went on Fox News to defend him, saying, “I like Trump because Trump is not a politician, he talks like a guy. And ladies out there, this is what guys talk about when you’re not around.”*



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Former Anti-Trump Folks

- Ted Cruz (Texas)
 - Trump insulted him on the campaign trail, giving him the name “Lyn’ Ted,” accusing Cruz’s father of being involved in the Kennedy assassination, and insulting Cruz’s wife.
 - Cruz called Trump a narcissist and a pathological liar.
 - But Cruz endorsed Trump and asked for Trump’s support in Cruz’s 2018 reelection bid. And when Trump contested the election of 2020, Cruz was an ardent proponent of that cause—one of the few senators to register a formal objection to the election on the fateful day of January 6, 2021.
- Lindsey Graham (South Carolina)
 - Senator Lindsey Graham once called Trump a “jackass” and voted for a third-party candidate rather than vote for Trump.
 - Senator Graham said, during the 2016 election, “I have doubts about Mr. Trump. I don’t think he’s a Republican, I don’t think he’s a conservative, I think his campaign’s built on xenophobia, race-baiting and religious bigotry. I think he’d be a disaster for our party.”
 - But Senator Graham went on to become one of Trump’s greatest champions.



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Michael Cohen

- Cohen was interviewed on CNN on September 15, 2020. The host reminded Cohen that he was once an “ardent” Trump supporter who was “seduced” by him.
- **Cohen said, “Let’s call me what I was. I was a sycophant.”**



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Rudy Giuliani

- His own daughter, Caroline Rose Giuliani, warned about this in October of 2020. She wrote:
- *If being the daughter of a polarizing mayor who became the president’s personal bulldog has taught me anything, it is that corruption starts with “yes-men” and women, the cronies who create an echo chamber of lies and subservience to maintain their proximity to power. **We’ve seen this ad nauseam with Trump and his cadre of high-level sycophants (the ones who weren’t convicted, anyway).***



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Beyond Trump... The Human Problem

- The party in power succumbs to the charismatic power of the tyrant—even those who once vowed “never Trump.” Sycophants swarm to the powerful ruler, allowing corruption to grow and fester. The sycophant cleverly manipulates opinion, spreads rumors, creates alliances, and plays a game with the appearances of things. All of this is good fun for the moronic masses. Power and popularity titillate the mob, which sticks by a tyrant despite the lies, intrigue, and corruption.
- Of course, this is a bipartisan and common human problem. The opposition party hatches its own plans to take power, the mob swings to and fro, manipulated and deceived by propaganda, “fake news,” and a system of justice that has devolved into a Machiavellian game. Each side accuses the other of hubris, depravity, and stupidity.

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Questions?

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