

Tyranny and Democracy: Past and Present

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Apr. 20, 27, May 4

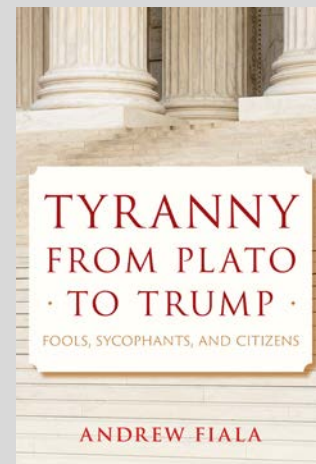
NOTE: May 11 will be postponed to May 25

<https://andrewfiala.com/lecture-powerpoints/>

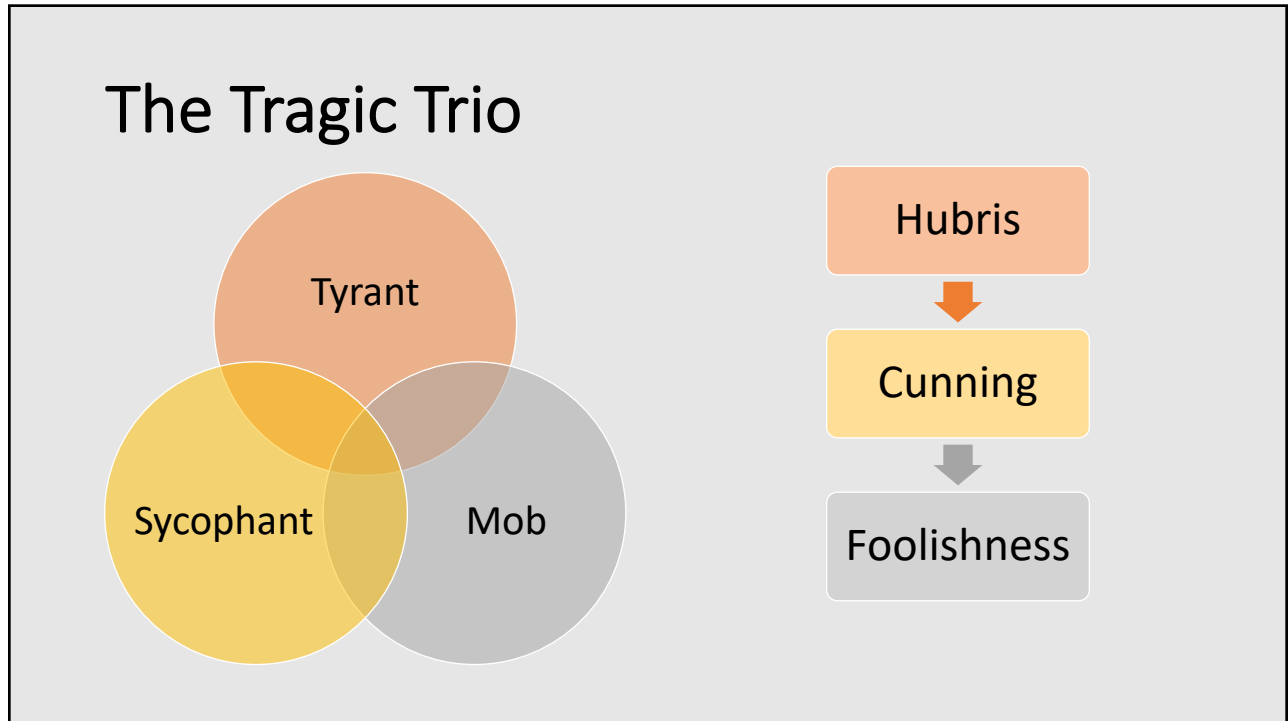
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Course Plan

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



2



3



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The Problem of “Tyrant-talk”

- Polarization
- Violence
- Tyrannicide
- Lack of critical thinking
- Aristophanes (Wasps): accusations of tyranny are as “common as sardines”



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Michelle Bachmann: Obamacare tyranny Washington Times, March 27, 2012

- Obamacare isn't about a right to health care. It is about the government telling you what you have to do or, more precisely, what you must purchase. **Government should never infringe on personal liberty like this, as it opens a gateway to more egregious government abuses of power that border on tyranny.**
- That is why the court must kill Obamacare by cutting out its heart and killing its roots.
- <https://m.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/mar/27/ripping-out-obamacare-by-the-roots/>



6

Mike Huckabee: Fight gay marriage judicial tyranny
USA Today, June 25, 2015

- The Court created a national right to same-sex marriage that doesn't exist in our Constitution, it hijacked the democratic process, subverting the will of Americans in more than 30 states who voted to protect traditional marriage, and trampling on America's most fundamental right — religious liberty.



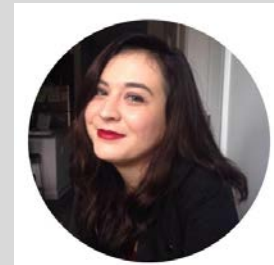
• <https://christianheritagefellowship.com/judicial-tyranny-the-return-of-king-georges-judges/>

7

The Supreme Court Is a Tool of Tyrants

Sarah Jones at New York Magazine, May 4, 2022

- Anti-abortion activists have discovered that with enough elite power at their disposal, they can comfortably ignore the wishes of the people. Their stance on abortion predisposes them to a tyrannical form of politics.
- To break conservative tyranny, break its tools. Start with the Supreme Court.



• <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/05/the-supreme-court-is-a-tool-of-tyrants.html>

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Objective definition of tyrant?

“Tyranny is the conjunction of pride and power.”

- A tyrant is a person:
 - Who wants absolute power
 - Based on hubris
 - And who actually has absolute power

- A tyrant is irrational and immoral
 - Morality and Law is about power
 - Truth/objectivity is a matter of self-interest

- Therefore:
 - No respect for the rule of law
 - No respect for moral limits or truth-telling

Hubris breeds tyranny

Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 873

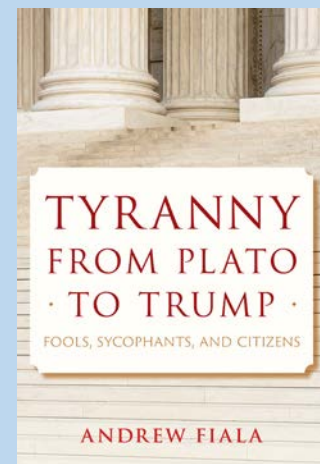


*The tyrant is a child of pride
Who drinks from his sickening cup
Reckless and vain*

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The Would-Be Tyrant

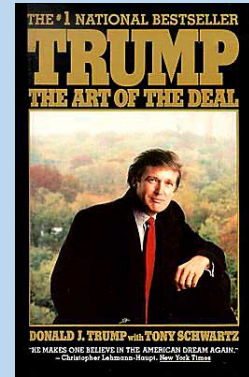
- Trump is only a symptom and an exemplar. **Trump remained only a would-be tyrant.**
- The constitutional system provided a brake on tyranny. Some suspect that Trump has a tyrannical personality. But personality alone is insufficient to produce full-blown tyranny.



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“Truthful Hyperbole”

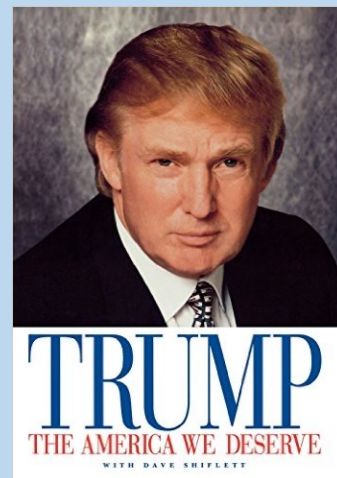
- The final key to the way I promote is bravado. I play to people’s fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That’s why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it **truthful hyperbole**. It’s an innocent form of exaggeration — and a very effective form of promotion (p. 58).



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Unrestrained speech

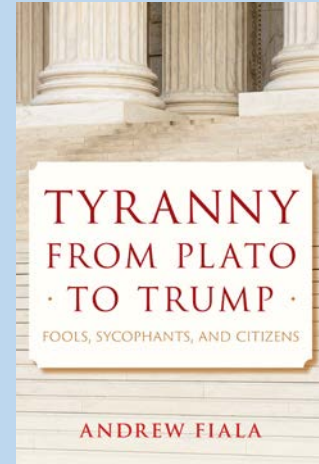
- Most politicians use language to conceal what they think. Or to conceal the fact that they don’t think. Many are trained as lawyers and speak to win support rather than to define the truth. I use language to speak my mind. Being blunt hasn’t hurt me so far. I’ve lived my life as I choose and said what I wanted to say.
 - Donald Trump, *The American We Deserve* (2000)



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Trump's Lack of a Moral Vocabulary

- My analysis discloses an important feature of the tendency toward tyranny—which is the lack of a moral vocabulary. Trump's limited moral language is focused primarily on his own self-interest and self-aggrandizement and on comparative measures of value.
- President Trump rarely used the words *moral*, *morality*, *ethics*, or *ethical*. *Value* shows up more frequently in Trump's words. But it is usually used to refer to the value of real estate.
- This is a remarkable fact, given that the rhetoric of most American presidents is infused with this kind of language. Trump's lack of moral vocabulary is anomalous in the American tradition and helps to explain how his presidency devolved.



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The problem of violence

- Former Defense Secretary Mark Esper charges in a memoir out May 10 that former President Trump said when demonstrators were filling the streets around the White House following the death of George Floyd: **"Can't you just shoot them? Just shoot them in the legs or something?"**
- That moment in the first week of June, 2020, "was surreal, sitting in front of the Resolute desk, inside the Oval Office, with this idea weighing heavily in the air, and the president red faced and complaining loudly about the protests under way in Washington, D.C.," Esper writes.

- <https://www.axios.com/mark-esper-book-trump-protesters-24e93272-2af5-423d-be3b-164daab7b43d.html>



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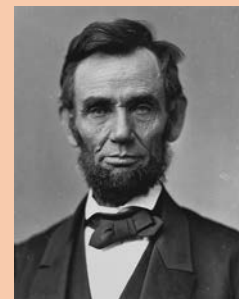
Problem of Violence

- The Greek word *tyrannos* began its history as a name for any ruler. Eventually it came to mean an evil, despotic ruler who seizes and maintains power by violence. In some cases, a tyrant simply slaughters his way into power. But outright violence and brutality are not effective without a more subtle form of political power. The masses need to be convinced that violence and brutality are somehow justified. And more importantly, the masses must be persuaded to put their own bodies on the line—to fight and die on behalf of the tyrant. It is the sycophants who help to accomplish this, as the go-between who translates the will of the tyrant into the movement of the crowd.

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Lincoln and the Problem of Violence

- *Abraham Lincoln was also accused of tyranny. Lincoln spoke of a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. He actualized that ideal by eliminating the tyranny of slavery.*
- *In 1858 in a debate with Stephen Douglas, Lincoln suggested that slavery was a form of tyranny. There is a “tyrannical principle,” he said, that underlies slavery. “No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle.”*

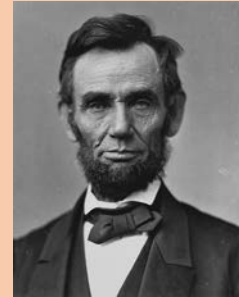


Lincoln
1809-1865

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Lincoln and the Problem of Violence

- *But Lincoln himself was accused of being a tyrant by the Southern states that felt they had a right to tyrannical rule over their slaves and thus seceded from the Union. John Wilkes Booth reportedly yelled “sic semper tyrannis” (thus always to tyrants) before shooting Lincoln.*
- *While most Americans view Booth as a sinister murderer, he was viewed as a hero across the American South. An editorial in the Texas Republican praised Booth, saying, “There is no reason to believe that Booth, in killing Lincoln, was actuated by malice or vulgar ambition. He slew him as a tyrant, and the enemy of his country. Therefore, we honor the deed.”*



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Aristotle on Tyranny: war and tyrannicide

- “The tyrant is a stirrer-up of war, with the deliberate purpose of keeping the people busy and also of making them constantly in need of a leader.”
- “High honors are awarded to one who kills a tyrant, but not to one who kills a thief.”



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Ancient Sycophants and Tyrants

- Greek: *sykophantes*: to “expose/show a fig”
 - “testifying”... and obscenity
- Flatterers: make themselves “flat”
- Aristotle: flatterers are servile and lowly people
- Plato: tyrants like to associate with flatterers



Waterhouse, *Favorites of Honorius* (1883)

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Ancient Sycophants and Tyrants

- *Republic*: “whatever some people may think, a real tyrant is really a slave, compelled to engage in the worst kind of fawning, slavery, and pandering to the worst kind of people”
- *Republic*: Thrasymachus accuses Socrates of being a *sykophantes*, implying that Socrates makes bad arguments in order to ingratiate himself.



Waterhouse, *Favorites of Honorius* (1883)

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Ancient Sycophants and Tyrants

- Aristotle: “For tyrants enjoy being flattered, but nobody would ever flatter them if he possessed a free spirit.”
- Aristotle: demagogue is what we call a tyrant in a democracy.
- The demagogue must suck up to the people. He is a “flatterer of the people” or “a sycophant of the commons.”



Waterhouse, *Favorites of Honorius* (1883)

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Ancient Sycophants

- Latin: *adulatio*, *obsequium*, *servus*
- Tacitus on Roman tyrants and sycophants
- Senators and others abased themselves before Caesar with servile flattery, slavish adulation, and fawning obsequiousness. Tacitus begins his *Annals* by casting blame upon the sycophants for making it difficult to discover the truth.
- There were attempts at writing the history of Rome, Tacitus said. But the sycophants scared away the truth. As Tacitus put it, “The histories of Tiberius, Caius, Claudius, and Nero, while they were in power, were falsified through terror.”



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Ancient Tyrant: Nero (ruled 54-68 CE)

- Kills his mother, Agrippina
- Kills his wife, Octavia
- Plays music and acts on the stage
- “Fiddles while Rome burns”
- Persecuted Christians
- Orders Seneca to commit suicide
- Sentenced to death by the Senate



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Nero's Sycophants

- *The Senate conspired to help Nero win a music and theatrical competition. According to Tacitus, Nero disgraced himself on the stage. But the crowd was forced to applaud the tyrant by soldiers who insisted they continue applauding even when their hands were aching.*



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Nero's Sycophants

- *The sycophants were also watching each other, waiting for a chance to pounce and take advantage. The story goes that when one of the sycophants of the Roman establishment, Vespasian, dozed off during Nero's performance, he was called out for this by Phoebus, another sycophant and was saved from being destroyed only by stroke of good fortune.*



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Nero's Death

- Declared "enemy of the people"
- Sentenced to be flogged to death... But suicide—with help...
- Famous Last Words: *"What an artist dies with me."*



26

Seneca to Nero, "On Clemency"

- What is the difference between the tyrant and the king—for their outward symbols of authority and their powers are the same — except it be that tyrants take delight in cruelty, whereas kings are only cruel for good reasons and because they cannot help it...
- Tyrants enjoy cruelty...
- Clemency is what makes the great distinction between kings and tyrants.



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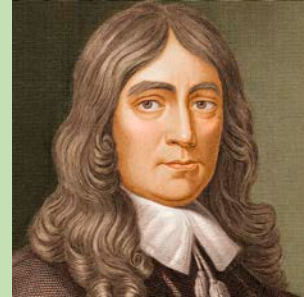
Seneca to Nero, "On Clemency"

- The fury of tyrants does not even stop short at their own relations, and they treat friends and strangers alike, only becoming more violent the more they indulge their passions.
- By insensible degrees he proceeds from the slaughter of individuals to the ruin of nations, and thinks it a sign of power to set roofs on fire and to plough up the sites of ancient cities: he considers it unworthy of an emperor to order only one or two people to be put to death, and thinks that his cruelty is unduly restrained if whole troops of wretches are not sent to execution together.

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An ancient remedy: violence?

- Milton (1649): “A Tyrant . . . is he who regarding neither Law nor the common good, reigns only for himself and his faction.”
- Milton: the people may “lawfully” do whatever they may do “against a common pest, and destroyer of mankind.”
 - Milton, *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*
- Lord Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*:
“Can tyrants but by tyrants conquered be”?



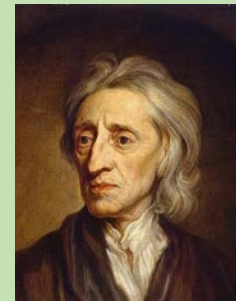
John Milton
1608-1674

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A modern remedy: revolution

John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (1689)

- If he have a purpose and design to ruin the kingdom and commonwealth, as it is recorded of Nero... And of Caligula.
- Such designs as these, when any king harbors in his thoughts, and seriously promotes, he immediately gives up all care and thought of the commonwealth; and consequently forfeits the power of governing his subjects, as a master does the dominion over his slaves whom he hath abandoned.
- The body of the people may with respect resist intolerable tyranny (quoting Barclay)



John Locke
1632-1704

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A modern remedy: revolution? *The Declaration of Independence*

- Whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government...
- When a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government...
- 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.

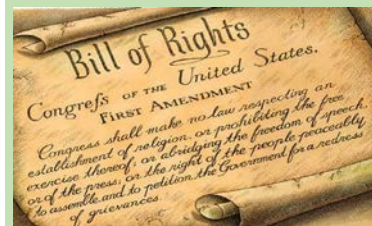
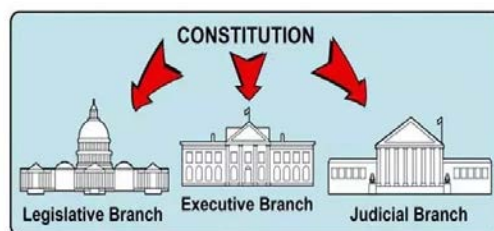
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A Modern Solution: Republic with Constitutional Safeguards



A nation of philosophers is as little to be expected as the philosophical race of kings wished for by Plato.

—James Madison, *Federalist 49*



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An Modern Solution James Madison, Federalist 51

- Ambition should be made to counteract ambition.
- If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.
- In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.

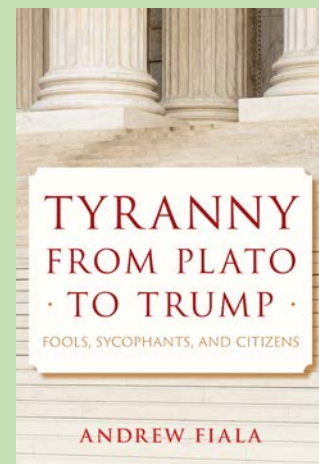


James Madison
1751-1836

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The Founder's Profound Blind Spot

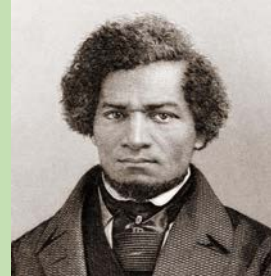
- While the founders argued against the tyranny of England, they continued to tyrannize their own slaves. George Washington owned more than 300 slaves. Thomas Jefferson owned more than 600 human beings during the course of his life. And James Madison owned 100 slaves.
- Despite the profound blind spot of race and slavery, they seemed to understand that political power ought to be restrained by morality and by wisdom.



34

Tyranny in American context: Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” (1852)

- What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.
- You hurl your anathemas at the crowned headed tyrants of Russia and Austria, and pride yourselves on your Democratic institutions, while you yourselves consent to be the mere *tools* and *body-guards* of the tyrants of Virginia and Carolina.



Frederick Douglass
1818-1895

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Questions?

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