

Democracy Matters 1

Lesson One: Do not obey in advance.

When power structures shift (as they invariably do with an election), it's often tempting to adapt our behavior in ways that will enable us to benefit from the resulting changes. One important way in which people frequently look to take advantage of shifting power structures is by anticipating what their leaders will want and then offering themselves and their services before those in power have even begun to imagine what their authority will enable them to do.

This pattern can be seen in the events of 1941, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. At the time, SS soldiers, looking to ingratiate themselves with their commanding officers, took it upon themselves to invent methods of mass killing, *despite never having been given any orders to do so*.

The example of these soldiers is instructive. By behaving as they did, they effectively taught their leaders how far their power would let them go and, in the process, they went further than even Hitler had imagined. Do not do this. Rather, always make those in power prove the worthiness of their goals before you agree to obey.

Lesson Two: Defend institutions.

Institutions are what help us to preserve order and decency. Though many of our institutions are certainly imperfect, it's unlikely that we would want to live in a world entirely devoid of them. Would we want a world without access to reliable information? Clean drinking water? Access to education? Fair and equal treatment under the law? In a country as complex as ours, these and other goods vital to our basic functioning can only be secured through the collaborative efforts of multiple government and civil service organizations.

Precisely because they are integral to our social fabric and to our shared quality of life, we should not take our institutions for granted. Without

maintenance, institutions are vulnerable to decay, and without vigilance on the part of the public, they are susceptible to abuse by those in power. So do your bit to preserve the common order. Choose an institution you care about – a newspaper, a cultural/educational/social organization, a government body – and visibly take its side.

(Adapted from Snyder, Timothy. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. Vintage Digital, 2017.)