

The second of Timothy Snyder's lessons from the twentieth century in his book *On Tyranny* is to DEFEND INSTITUTIONS. The author warns the reader: "Do not speak of 'our institutions' unless you make them yours by acting on their behalf." Giving lip service to the entities that protect our democracy is not enough. Snyder advises the reader to select even one institution—a court, a newspaper, a law, a labor union—and take its side.

The author writes that demagogues and dictators do not always take power in "coups." They often come to their positions of authority through legitimate means and then solidify and extend their power through changing or eliminating those institutions that would protect the system from their abuse—the same system that allowed them to attain a high office.

The independence of our justice system, for example, has been compromised and its effectiveness weakened by the actions of the President of the United States and his Attorney General. They have succeeded in interfering with the sentencing of people who have been convicted of crimes by juries of their peers. One could very well regard the independence of our courts of law to be the prime institution that we should speak out to protect.

Going one step further, though, brings us to our free press. If we cannot get accurate information about the activities of people in our government, we have no basis for making decisions that may have far reaching and long lasting repercussions. So, it seems to me that standing up for freedom of the press is of great importance.

We cannot let our "leaders" denigrate and dismiss the mainstream press—print, TV, radio, internet—as "fake news." This is an unconscionable activity that has become prevalent in this present administration. And, the fact that ordinary citizens promote this fiction through social media does harm to all of us.

We all need to learn the difference between "political commentary" and "news." There are many different opinions on any given subject, but truth is still truth. There is no alternative. There may be differing interpretations of what someone says or does, but facts do not change. The President of the United States may say, as he did month after month, that the coronavirus would soon go away "like magic," but over 163,000 Americans are dead of this disease—about three times as many as U.S. losses in the Vietnam War.