

The Democracy Advocate

A Guide to Strengthening Our Democratic Institutions



2025, Issue 1

Contact us at: DDNRVst100@gmail.com

Published by: Defending Democracy

The Defending Democracy (DD) initiative began in the spring of 2024 to address authoritarian challenges that emerged in the 2024 election. The mission of Defending Democracy is to advocate for actions and policies that strengthen democracy and its institutions within this country through: education, mobilization, and outreach. We currently have a mailing list of over 400 people who have expressed interest in our work and wish to be involved. Currently, we are establishing our action agenda and welcome folks who are concerned about the current state of our democracy.

Origins of Defending Democracy

Defending Democracy began as an information network of concerned citizens at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the New River Valley in the spring of 2024. The increase in authoritarian political rhetoric for the 2024 election was a source of grave uneasiness to members of the congregation. The congregation voted to adopt a resolution in support of democracy and a steering committee was formed to explore strategies for taking our concerns about

authoritarianism to the public. Prior to the election, six events were organized and implemented by the group. In the post-election era, Defending Democracy has expanded to include citizens from all faiths and organizations and shifted its focus from concern about the election to focusing on how to forestall and reverse the autocratic actions of the Federal Government.

Join Us

Don't sit home and fret; there are many organizations engaged in community assistance and in supporting the institutions that make democracy resilient, including:

Blacksburg Refugee Partnership
Citizens for Arsenal Accountability
Community Works NRV
Democratic Socialists of America
The Future Economy Collective
Justice Advocates

League of Women Voters
Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America
NAACP, Montgomery Co, Radford City, Floyd
New River Abortion Access Fund.
New River Environmental Coalition
New River Valley Citizen Activist Network
NRV Indivisible
Our Bodies Our Choice
POWHR (Protect our Water Heritage Rights)
Pulaski Free Store
Red, Wine and Blue Virginia
The Community Group of Montgomery County
The Democracy Action Hub
Virginia Organizing: New River Valley
Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy

Get Involved: For Events of Note, Go to one of the following sites

Local Sources for Current Events for Defending Democracy
Use QR codes or the Website urls

The Democracy Action Hub
<https://democracyactionhub.org/>



NRV Citizen Activist Network



Website and Podcasts of Importance:

<https://therighting.com/> - Alerting Public to Headlines from the Right

<https://www.fairobserver.com/> - Online newspaper with an international perspective on democracy, governance, and the economy

Reading For Resistance and Resilience:

Here are some books worth spending some time reading over the summer. Included are those which help us understand authoritarianism and how to resist, and equally important, those that will help us be more resilient personally in times of high anxiety.

Resisting Authoritarianism

How Fascism Works. The Politics of US and Them. Jason Stanley, Random House, 2018. A primer for understanding how democracies transform to fascism

Democracy in Chains. The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America. Mancy MacLean, Penguin Books, 2023. The title tells it all.

Defending Democracy from its Christian Enemies. David Gushee, William Eerdmans Publishing, 2023. The role of the Christian right in supporting authoritarianism.

Demagoguery and Democracy. Patricia Roberts-Miller. The Experiment Publishing. 2020. A brief and clear-eyed depiction of the dangers of demagogues – how to spot them and how to resist their predictable powers.

You're More Powerful Than you Think. A Citizen's Guide to Making Change Happen. Eric Liu. Public Affairs. 2018. How to engage to make changes and make a difference.

Personal Resilience – Coping with Anxiety

We Solve Murders. Richard Osman. Penguin Books, 2024. Pure Joy. The humor will keep you sane over the summer

A Gentleman in Moscow. Amor Towles. Penguin Books, 2019. Moving account of one who is forced to live his life in solitude under an authoritarian regime. Persistence and ingenuity triumph over coercion.

Meeting Mozart: A Novel Drawn from the Secret Diaries of Lorenzo DaPonte. Howard Jay Smith. Sager Group LLC, 2020. How a Jewish intellectual survives in a world of anti-Semitism.



Corruption and Fraud Alert

A universal feature of all authoritarian regimes is the prevalence of corruption and fraud. When the reins of power are in the hands of a small cadre of government officials, checks on corruption and fraud are absent. One need only look at Russia, Venezuela, and other contemporary authoritarian countries to witness a common occurrence – government decisions that enrich those in government and their friends. For your consideration:

- Qatar gift of a \$400 million plane to the Trump administration. Remember Qatar has long been a financial supporter of Hamas. So, we deport or jail folks for protesting the war in Gaza, but allow a mega-gift from a Hamas friendly regime.
- Cryptocurrencies. Does anyone really understand bitcoins, block-chain, meme coins, etc.? What we do know is that in the past five years scams, fraud, and illegal activities have been associated with such schemes. So, the Trump family is now engaged in a \$20 billion cryptocurrency enterprise (\$Trump). Any chance that investment will influence enforcement of crypto-scams or crypto-policy? Oh – SES drops lawsuit against Binance! Stop Chinese graduate students from coming to U.S. university, but allow Chinese crypto-bros to attend the White House crypto-dinner if they purchased Trump coins!!
- Check our next issue for the latest in fraud, corruption and other nonsense.

Activist Interviews

Why I Engage: A Conversation with Bob Stimson:

Bob Stimson is one of Defending Democracy's first members. I sat down with him to learn more about his motivations for doing the hard work for democracy. – Katherine Allen

1. Why “defending democracy,” and why now?
What got me going was during the first Trump regime, when he came out of the White House toward the church where all the presidents except him have attended a service, held the Bible upside down, and stood there as the Secret Service pushed people around. I drove to D.C., where I joined in with a large gathering, protesting against George Floyd's death and against Donald Trump. It was enlightening—the people who spoke were powerful people. They shared their insight which helped the crowd meld together. I felt like it was a worthwhile and educational event. But it didn't dissipate my anger toward the president at that time.

2. What motivated you to attend your first protest?
That trip to DC was my first foray into protesting. Since that time, I've also protested against the Mountain Valley Pipeline locally and in DC. My motivation for all the protests I've attended is my view that people and our earth are not being treated with respect. I, also, felt that being in my seventies it was about time to do something to help our country.

3. How did you get involved with the Defending Democracy group?
Jim Bohland's three classes on authoritarianism at the UUC (Unitarian Universalist Congregation) got me interested. The tipping point for me was a news

report in which a politician said, “Immigrants are poisoning the blood of America, destroying the fabric of our society.” And then he described the large encampment he would have constructed to hold all of these bad people. This scared me. I felt it was time to do something. In a month or so, with many more people on board, a steering committee for Defending Democracy was assembled.

4. In what ways do you build community through social action and protest?
Community is built when a group gets together to do a social action. We have a mutual focus and share a similar desire. I first noticed this with the Mountain Valley Pipeline protests I attended, where younger people were organizing, distributing responsibilities, and making sure that everyone knew what they should and shouldn't do—this is how trust, respect, and community are quickly built.

5. What is most surprising about the social justice activism you are doing now?
I'm waiting for enough people to feel the pain from the recent decisions of the federal government. When that happens, I believe social activism will increase dramatically and there will be a much wider spectrum of people involved. This growth in numbers will/should cause change in Washington and voting.

The bottom line is that I do not want our country and world to be ruined by the time my four-year-old grandson turns 78, in the year 2099. This is my motivation

Opinion – Making Sense of Nonsense by T. Pain

Don't Normalize Authoritarianism

Sipping a cup of tea and listening to NPR news has been one of those cherished morning moments in my life for many years. These fulfilling movements were shattered in January after the inauguration of the current regime. I still sip my tea and listen to the news, but any sense of serenity is lost as day after day the announcement of another “presidential executive order” or a Stephen Miller interview, stirs me to anger, remorse and a sense of futility. Confronted with this new reality, I wrestle with a dilemma – forgo the news and refocus on my daily tasks of dog pampering, reading, and writing, OR I let the anger rise to an ulcer producing level, yell at the radio, and then resign myself to “well there’s nothing I can do” sense of helplessness.

A recent article in the Guardian helped me understand my sense of despondency to our government’s actions, which I find unwarranted at best, abominable at worst. Adrienne Matei introduced me to the concept of “hyper-normalization” as it pertains to my present angst. It has the ring of jargon, but it aptly characterizes what I have been experiencing, and I believe, what has become a prevailing feeling among many Americans. Hyper-normalization occurs when people believe governing systems and institutions are broken or are being destroyed. At the same time, because of a perceived inability to alter the current situation, we carry on our lives as normal even while carrying a load of fear, dread, and denial.

Alexei Yurchak argues this is precisely the life experiences of the average citizen in Russia under Putin. I believe we are seeing a similar sense of hopelessness and resignation emerging in the United States as the Trump administration breaks legal, formal and informal norms and institutional safeguards in our society. The chaos and the harm inflicted on so many normal law-abiding citizens numbs our sensibilities, but we go back to sipping our tea, listening to the news and aside from a few

expletives, carry on as usual. However, hyper-normalization is what enables autocrats to persist and thrive. It breeds inaction, lack of involvement, and a fake normalcy that eats at our ethical and moral soul. It fosters an environment where Elon Musk can muse that “The fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy,” and we shrug shoulders and move on.

So, how do we avoid the normalization trap? How we resist and maintain our resilience in times of governance chaos requires difficult but critical actions. First, one must engage in resistance and avoid the alluring trap of acceptance and compliance to actions that violate our fundamental values. To do the latter, will eventually lead to rejection of our core beliefs and bends them to accepting those of a regime that lacks a moral compass. Rather than accept normalization, take time to assess your talents and how you can make them applicable to resisting the current regime in Washington. In 2014 Ursula Le Guin stated that “any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.” Use your individual talents, be it writing, marching, organizing, speaking, or whatever special aptitude you possess. When we remain silent, we allow those supporting illiberal values to appropriate our language and redefine our basic rights and freedoms – speech, economic security, control of our health and bodies, religion, rule of law, what we can read, or who we can love and marry. *Become part of the solution.*

Second, engage your talents through collective action. There is power in numbers. Solidarity in resistance demonstrates to authoritarian leaders that their actions will have consequences. Erica Chenoweth argues that if 3.5% of the population of a nation engage in peaceful protests, authoritarian efforts can be minimized. Focused, continuous peaceful protests have proven to be effective historically. Solidarity in purpose also has a cathartic effect on one’s well-being. Being part of a group dedicated to promoting your values can soften despondency associated with hyper-normalization. So, ENGAGE

Readers Forum

We welcome your feedback on the newsletter. In particular we would like suggestions for feature stories, books, websites, opinions, etc. Also, if you wish to write something for us, send it along for review.

Send all correspondence to our email address: DDNRVst100@gmail.com .

If this Democracy Advocate was forwarded from a friend and you would like to be on the Defending Democracy activist list, click the Subscribe button at the bottom of this email, or drop a line to our email address with your name and email address.