

# Strongman: The Rise of Dictators and the Fall of Democracy

Kenneth C. Davis

## Who Are They?

One was a boy who loved to read fanciful tales of America's Old West and play at being a cowboy. With dreams of being a great artist, he only wanted to draw and paint.

Another dropped out of the seminary where he was training to be a priest and later worked briefly as a meteorologist making weather charts.

And still a third was a bullied schoolboy who balked at an arranged marriage at the age of 14, then registered to join a police academy and a soap-making school before working as a librarian's assistant.

Little in their early years hints that these men—Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Zedong—would become three of the most murderous dictators in history. They chafed at the plans

their fathers made for them. As young men beginning to find their way in the world, they were certainly rebellious, as many teenagers and students are. Yet all became capable of ordering the deaths of tens of millions of people through war, starvation, forced labor, and mass extermination. They achieved their genocidal legacies with the consent and complicity of many loyal disciples, obedient generals, secret police forces, willing politicians, and vast numbers of the people they ruled.

How could they do it? How *did* they do it?

In my latest book, *Strongman*, I show how a Strongman—a dictator or autocrat with unlimited control—gains that power. Such a leader ruthlessly suppresses dissent and eliminates enemies, real or imagined. A Strongman can wipe out any semblance of the freedoms that many Americans and people

This article is excerpted from the new book, *Strongman: The Rise of Five Dictators and the Fall of Democracy*, by bestselling historian Kenneth C. Davis. The article and the book are both  
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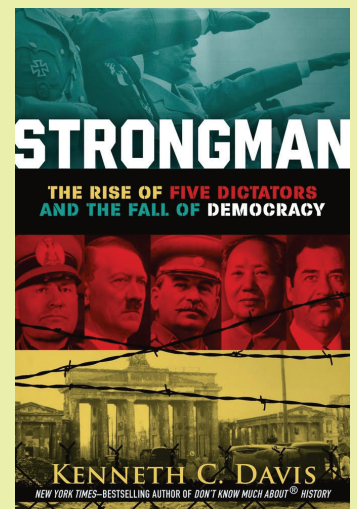
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Published on October 6, 2020, *Strongman* is a work of narrative history for both young adult and adult readers.

A few words in this excerpt have been modified by the author to make the reading experience cohesive.

*Strongman* tells the story of the rise of five of the most ruthless dictators of the twentieth century—Benito Mussolini of Italy, Germany's Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin of the USSR, China's Mao Zedong, and Saddam Hussein of Iraq. How did they amass such power? How did they create their murderous regimes? And how do we protect democracy against the threat of such a Strongman? The book also describes the history of democracy from its beginnings in ancient Greece and the Roman Republic to the foundation of an American democratic republic. But the risks to that democracy are great if we don't understand how quickly democratic institutions can vanish.

Readers can learn more about Kenneth C. Davis and his work at his website: [dontknowmuch.com](http://dontknowmuch.com). The author welcomes questions and comments, and is willing to make virtual visits to schools and participate in remote learning sessions. Details are available on his website. Kenneth C. Davis will present on *Strongman* at the NCSS Virtual Conference in December. Please check the conference schedule for specifics.



in other democracies may take for granted today, including free speech, the freedom to worship—or not—and the freedom of the press.

Each of the five men I studied—Benito Mussolini of Italy, Germany’s Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union, China’s Mao Zedong, and Saddam Hussein of Iraq—was responsible for genocidal crimes against humanity with unthinkable numbers of victims. Stalin killed millions of people well before World War II began, in 1939. The grim death toll mounted as Hitler’s Germany and the Soviet Union fought each other in that war, and then, with Mussolini’s assistance, the Nazis began the “Final Solution,” mass executions, starvation, and other war crimes. Mao Zedong, who secured Communist control over China in 1949, was responsible, historians now contend, for the deaths of at least 45 million people. The leader of a tyrannical regime in Iraq for decades before he was overthrown by the United States in 2003, Saddam Hussein employed torture, chemical weapons, mass executions, and wars against neighboring countries to secure his place in the list of infamous killers.

“One death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.” This quote, attributed to Stalin, reminds us that reading such astonishing numbers can be mind-numbing. But we must never become unfeeling. This history is not a list of faceless statistics. Neither is it an encyclopedia of the worst atrocities of fascism, Nazism, Communism, and other -isms. It is a collection of portraits of men who caused unthinkable death and destruction. My exploration of the lives of some of the twentieth century’s most deadly dictators puts a human face on inhumanity by looking at who these men were; how they were able to gain such unlimited power; what they shared in common; and how the people they ruled—either willingly or under a reign of terror—followed their murderous paths.

History is often a matter of emphasis. It can be presented as an eye-glazing list of dates and numbers. Or it can be told as heroic, rousing tales of “great men” to stir pride and patriotism. But sometimes history is something else. Often, it is simply horrible. This history contains an ugly catalog of crimes and injustice. It is about executions, unspeakable torture, and secret police forces coming in the night to spread terror among common citizens. It is about genocide.

Many visitors to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., are brought to tears by a display of shoes. Each victim of this mass murder was a person, and these shoes belonged to some of the millions of people who were consigned to death in the Nazi gas chambers and labor camps. These shoes remind us that history is about people—real, ordinary people.

The story of these five dictators is a human story—the story of real people doing terrible things to other people. Telling this story is difficult because it is so dreadful and yet cannot be sugar coated. There is no way to adequately discuss the countless deaths and horrific misery these leaders left in

their wake without laying bare the specific horror of their crimes against humanity. These crimes include beatings, rapes, individual acts of murder, deliberate starvation, and mass exterminations—all grim, but unfortunately too real to explain away and too dangerous to ignore.

Telling these stories has been made even more difficult because the lives of these men have been cloaked in misconceptions and continuing propaganda. Today, pilgrims visit the burial sites of Mussolini, Stalin, and Mao Zedong, drawn by nostalgic recollections of men celebrated as great national leaders, not murderous dictators. Propaganda upends, twists, and denies fact. But facts are stubborn things. If history is really supposed to help us learn from the past, we must relentlessly look for truth to answer some important questions:

What turns a seemingly ordinary man into a monstrous killer?

What makes a country fall prey to a dictator at the cost of millions of lives?

Is democracy the most desirable government?

If democracy is desirable, how do we safeguard it?

These are crucial issues. Around the globe today, political leaders—some elected legitimately—have begun whittling away at civil liberties, human rights, religious freedom, and the established rule of law. They use suppression of the media, mass arrests, and assassinations of people considered political threats or “enemies of the people”—journalists among them. Authoritarian rulers make widespread use of propaganda, or “fake news,” to manipulate public opinion. And very often, they target some group—immigrants, one particular race, or religious minorities—as scapegoats for a country’s ills.

In March 2020, Freedom House, an international organization that monitors democracy around the world, issued a report that said that global freedom had declined for the fourteenth consecutive year.

Democracy and pluralism are under assault. Dictators are toiling to stamp out the last vestiges of domestic dissent and spread their harmful influence to new corners of the world. At the same time, many freely elected leaders are dramatically narrowing their concerns to a blinkered interpretation of the national interest. In fact, such leaders—including the chief executives of the United States and India, the world’s two largest democracies—are increasingly willing to break down institutional safeguards and disregard the rights of critics and minorities as they pursue their populist agendas.... The protests of 2019 have so far failed to halt the overall slide in global freedom, and

**Orwell's book envisioned a world divided among three superpowers constantly at war, a bleak world in which personal freedom and individuality have vanished**

without greater support and solidarity from established democracies, they are more likely to succumb to authoritarian reprisals.

For that reason, *Strongman* is also about democracy. It opens with a case study of how quickly a democracy can die. It then offers a short biography of democracy as an idea.

Democracy is a fragile flower. When the U.S. Constitution was being written in 1787, Founding Father Benjamin Franklin worried that the United States might end up with an elected monarch. Some 2,000 years earlier, the Greek philosopher Plato predicted that democracy—an idea born in ancient Greece—would end in tyranny.

Were they right?

The stories of the five dictators pose even more difficult questions. Examining their repressive systems forces us to ask whether the bleak picture predicted in *1984*, George Orwell's nightmarish dystopian novel, is the way the world will go. Written in the aftermath of World War II as the Soviet Union extended its totalitarian hold over Eastern Europe, Orwell's book envisioned a world divided among three superpowers constantly at war, a bleak world in which personal freedom and individuality have vanished and many Party members wear the same blue overalls. Will Orwell's Big Brother displace Lady Liberty? Will his frightening Newspeak—a language controlled by the government—crush objective facts? Will history go down the “memory hole” in ashes, as it does in Orwell's Ministry of Truth, where records are destroyed and constantly rewritten to serve the state?

And finally, we are left with the hardest question of all. It is a personal one. “If faced with a Strongman, what would I do?” You've probably heard the popular expression “to die for.” That figure of speech raises the ultimate question: What, if anything, would you be willing to die for?

Family? Friends? Faith?

In 1776, the men who signed the Declaration of Independence pledged “our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor” to the cause of freedom. Those words were more than flowery sentiments. They reflected the enormous risk taken by those 56 men in the cause of some timeless ideas: that “all men are created equal,” that we are entitled to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” and that governments can only obtain “their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

The idea that we consent in the decisions that affect our lives was solidified in the first three words of the Constitution: “We, the People.”

For two centuries, those words have inspired people around the world, even though the history of the United States is admittedly filled with many deep injustices, starting with the treatment of the land's original inhabitants. In addition, many of those Founding Fathers enslaved people even as they fought for their own liberty. The nation they helped create has weathered many difficulties and crises, including a civil war, a great depression, and two world wars, without surrendering democracy to a Strongman.

So for many of us today, democracy is a matter of fact. A great number of people take those democratic ideals for granted. That may be one reason so many Americans fail to vote or make their voices heard. They prefer to sit on the sidelines instead of actively participating. But democracy is not a spectator sport. It requires work, participation, and sometimes sacrifice. And it can be very fragile. Democracy can die quickly.

And that is where we begin.



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*The first dictator profiled in **Strongman** is Benito Mussolini who seized power in Italy, which was a constitutional monarchy at the time, with a legislature and prime minister. His story is an example of how quickly a democracy can fall to a Strongman.*

Julius Caesar entered Rome in a blaze of glory, in a chariot, leading his loyal Roman legion. Benito Mussolini arrived in a sleeper compartment on an overnight train.

It was October 1922 and Mussolini's Blackshirts were converging on Rome from many points around Italy. Not to be confused with the battle-tested Thirteenth Legion that gave Caesar his victory, this ragtag collection included army veterans of the recent war. Some of them brandished pilfered weapons, handed over by sympathetic soldiers and police officers. Even so, the sight was not very intimidating.

"The overall array of weaponry included shotguns, muskets, powder-loaded pistols, golf clubs, scythes, garden hoes, tree roots, table legs, dynamite sticks, dried salt codfish, and an ox's jawbone!" writes historian Blaine Taylor. "Horses, carts, trucks, wagons, bicycles, and even a race car with a machine gun mounted on it were employed for transport ... while many more moved toward the capital on foot."

This was the March on Rome—a threat to overthrow the Italian government by Mussolini's Fascist Party. The danger to Italy's government seemed real enough that Prime Minister Luigi Facta proclaimed martial law—the control of a country by the military, usually in response to a temporary emergency, such as a natural disaster or a specific enemy threat.

These Blackshirts were the foot soldiers in Mussolini's Fascist Party, their uniforms modeled on those of the Arditi, an elite army corps that fought in World War I. Some of the men were former members of the Arditi, tough fighters known for their daggers and one-armed salute—a gesture carried over from Rome's storied legions. Many of them had joined Mussolini's party and were fanatically committed to the Fascist creed: "Believe, obey, and fight."

Wounded in a training exercise during the Great War, Benito Mussolini had still gained national fame as a persuasive orator and newspaper editor. He understood the power of words and images to shape public opinion. Elected to the Italian parliament's Chamber of Deputies in 1921, Mussolini possessed large political ambitions and a grandiose sense of history and himself. He wanted to control Italy and understood the value of recalling Rome's glorious past.

He knew that the sight of his Blackshirts moving on Rome to seize power and bring order to an Italy racked by political chaos would send a clear message—his army was also "crossing the Rubicon," as Julius Caesar had done. The Blackshirts converging on Rome evoked a past glory that would be welcomed by many unemployed, downtrodden,

Mussolini and Hitler in 1936 after the declaration of the Rome-Berlin Axis.



and disillusioned Italians. The very name Fascist was adopted from a symbol of ancient Rome. The fasces, an emblem of a magistrate's power, was typically shown as an

ax bound in a bundle of rods. The original Latin word *fascis* meant “bundle.”

In the election of May 1921, the Fascists had won 35 seats in the legislature, far from enough to lead the nation. Mussolini would have to join other parties in a coalition government, which meant sharing power.

Young Italian boys in the fascist youth organization called “Balilla.” The “M” on the uniform is for Mussolini.



Mussolini clearly had no interest in such a deal, and he declared in September 1922, “Our program is simple. We want to govern Italy.”

At dawn on October 28, 1922, the Fascist march was launched in a heavy downpour. As the main force of Blackshirts approached Rome, other Fascists seized telephone switchboards, telegraph offices, post offices, and government buildings across Italy. The rebellion that the prime minister feared was underway.

What the marchers did not know was that Mussolini, unlike Caesar, was taking no chances as he tossed the dice. Hours away from Rome in Milan, Mussolini waited, barricaded safely inside his newspaper offices to see whether luck was with him.

It was. That same morning Italy’s king, Victor Emmanuel III, refused to sign Prime Minister Facta’s proclamation of martial law. Mussolini knew he had won the game. While Italian troops were in place to turn back Mussolini’s poorly armed marchers, the timid king had his secretary call Mussolini at his Milan newspaper office the next day. Grandson and namesake of the Italian monarch who helped unite Italy, Victor Emmanuel III invited Mussolini to become prime minister and form a working government.

Benito Mussolini arrived in Rome in the relative comfort of a sleeper car. He had considered getting off the overnight train early to symbolically complete the trip into Rome on horseback, but he decided against that strategy. Even for Mussolini, it was too over-the-top. Accompanied by bodyguards, he first stopped at a hotel and changed his clothes. Then Mussolini walked into the royal palace.

The king declared Mussolini “a man of purpose,” and he became Italy’s prime minister.

Crowds lined the streets as the Fascists marched out of Rome in a five-hour parade. The story of the March on Rome quickly acquired the weight of legend. The number of Blackshirt marchers has long been disputed but was probably no more than 30,000. In time, the Fascists claimed much larger numbers. Every country has its history and its legends. Often the legends are created to form a proud, patriotic narrative of national identity and create a foundation story that unites the people. Sometimes, it is as simple as the story of George Washington chopping down the cherry tree, a story that has no basis in fact. Such legends can be powerful, but they are not the same as history.

In the case of Italy and Mussolini’s march, the truth was quite different from the legend. Far from being a power-seizing coup, the march had been a calculated piece of political theater. In all, about a dozen people died around the country in this aborted and contrived armed rebellion. Fascist propaganda later exaggerated that death toll to the thousands to make the march seem more heroic.

Mussolini had used an entirely staged moment and an extravagant threat of rebellion to gain the reins of power. Eventually, a generation of Italian schoolchildren would be taught his “official” heroic version of valiant Fascist marchers rescuing Italy.

## How Do We Recognize the Rise of An Authoritarian Leader?

It might be useful to think about authoritarianism, totalitarianism, or any kind of dictatorship in the same way we think about dangerous, life-threatening, infectious diseases. The best prevention against such a disease is to build immunity. Education is like a vaccination. Understanding history is part of the process of making ourselves more immune to the dangers of dictatorship.

Learning from the experience of history requires recognizing the patterns of dictatorships—the Strongman’s Playbook. Each of these profiles has laid out a set of steps that go into the making of a dictatorship. This blueprint typically includes the following:

- \* Extreme nationalism that calls for restoring a country’s past glory or greatness.
- \* Placing blame on a single group—usually an ethnic or religious minority, or foreign threat.
- \* Warning of an emergency, often nonexistent, or responding to severe economic distress that threatens the nation.
- \* Calls for “law and order” and eliminating corruption.

Once in a position of power, the Strongman does some or all of the following:

- Moves to control the courts, legislature, and elections.
- Heightens an emergency that may not exist.
- Creates a crisis that may demand military intervention.

- Takes control of the media.
- Increases the use of propaganda.
- Jails or threatens opponents, including journalists.
- Attacks artists, intellectuals, and other freethinkers.
- Sets out to control the education system.
- Attempts to create a young generation of devoted followers.
- Doles out economic favors to supporters and allies.
- Creates a larger-than-life cult of personality.
- Either threatens or restricts religious freedom, or bends religion to the regime’s agenda.

Most of the leaders discussed in this history practiced and perfected all of these techniques, taking them to inhumane depths. But the Strongman does not have to kill millions to accomplish his goals. Authoritarian governments do not always need concentration camps, mass starvation, or genocidal wars to maintain their power. In an age in which information has become the prevailing weapon of choice, the person who controls the flow of opinions, news, and facts may hold the greatest power. 🌐

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**KENNETH C. DAVIS** is the author of *Don’t Know Much About® History*; *In the Shadow of Liberty: The Hidden History of Slavery, Four Presidents, and Five Black Lives*; and *More Deadly Than War: The Hidden History of the Spanish Flu and the First World War*, among other books. This article is excerpted from his latest book, *Strongman: The Rise of Five Dictators and the Fall of Democracy*, published this month by Holt Books. His website is [dontknowmuch.com](http://dontknowmuch.com). Follow him on Twitter @kennethcdavis.

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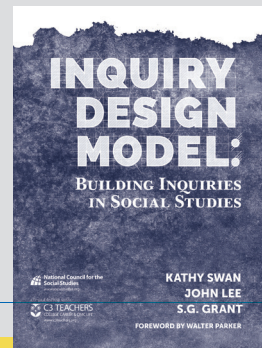
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