

Democracy Is Not a Spectator Sport: The Role of Social Studies in Safeguarding the Republic

Kenneth C. Davis

“Democracy dies in darkness.”

In early 2017, that phrase made its dramatic debut as the slogan of the *Washington Post*, prominently displayed on the newspaper’s front page, and now, on t-shirts and “onesies” available for purchase.¹

(Scherl/Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo / Alamy Stock Photo)



On the occasion of Italy’s annual ceasefire celebration Benito Mussolini welcomed King Victor Emmanuel (left), in 1928.

While admittedly catchy—yet appropriately alarming—the *Post*’s warning is also inaccurate, at least from the perspective of history.

Sometimes democracy dies quickly. Sometimes it dies the death of a thousand small cuts, lingering before taking a last breath. But rarely does it meet its demise in darkness. Very often, democracy dies in broad daylight.

That was certainly true of two of the most devastating deaths of democracy in modern times. In October

1922, Italy’s King Victor Emmanuel III asked Benito Mussolini to become the nation’s prime minister. An elected member of Italy’s legislature and leader of the Fascist party, Mussolini quickly accepted. Having issued a boastful and largely theatrical threat to overthrow the government with a “March on Rome,” Mussolini was handed the reins of power without need of an army storming Italy’s capital. King Victor Emmanuel welcomed the man who would soon be known as *Il Duce*, as



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Hitler and Hindenburg, soon after the future Führer was named Chancellor of Germany in February 1934.

a national savior. The next day, Rome celebrated with a parade.

A little more than 10 years later, in January 1933, German president Paul Hindenburg extended a similar invitation to Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazi party. An elected member of Germany’s Reichstag, or parliament, Hitler accepted Hindenburg’s offer and became Germany’s chancellor. With the Nazi party’s power growing and his personal popularity soaring, Hitler was legally appointed to a position equivalent to prime minister under Germany’s democratic Weimar constitution.

Neither of these two men needed the cover of darkness. Neither rode to power at the head of an army—like Julius Caesar or Napoleon. And neither toppled a democratic republic with a bloody coup. Openly cheered by large,

adoring crowds, both men had the support of willing subordinates, ambitious generals, acquiescent religious leaders, and enthusiastic industrialists.

But Mussolini and Hitler audaciously manipulated the levers of legal authority they had been granted under constitutional rule, quickly creating totalitarian dictatorships with barely a peep of protest. Mussolini's Fascists murdered political opponents, took control of the media, and forged a one-party state. For more than two decades, Mussolini ruthlessly wielded unchecked power.

Under the pretext of a still-suspicious fire in Berlin's parliament building, Hitler was given largely legal means to undermine the Weimar Republic. Using emergency powers, Hitler erased many

smiling Italians and Germans raised stiff-armed salutes and ecstatically chanted "*Il Duce*" and "*Heil Hitler*." The ascendance of two of history's deadliest dictators seemed to confirm the grim prediction of the Greek philosopher Plato more than 2,000 years ago when he said that democracy—an idea born in ancient Greece—would end in despotism.

In the United States, the question of how democracies die has acquired greater urgency today than at any time since Abraham Lincoln's 1860 election led to secession and Civil War. Democracy is under assault and reeling.

"We are at an inflection point in which the foundational principles of our democracy and our national security interests are at stake," stated 44 for-

over patriotism and historic norms cast aside. In the past, these senators contended, "Whatever united or divided us, we did not veer from our unwavering and shared commitment to placing our country, democracy and national interest above all else."² Reaching back decades, the erosion of democracy is the result of a steady drip of problems. An antiquated election system has been worn down by voter suppression campaigns, widespread gerrymandering, the 2013 Supreme Court decision that gutted the Voting Rights Act of 1965³ and the flood of largely unregulated political spending in the wake of the Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* ruling. That decision, as *New York Times* columnist Thomas Edsall wrote, "unleashed a wave of campaign spending that by any reasonable standard is extraordinarily corrupt."⁴

Decades of single-minded party loyalty have also battered many of the nation's institutional safeguards. The near-elimination of bipartisanship has led to more frequent federal shutdowns, oversight committees that increasingly function as party cudgels, and a Senate refusal in 2016 to consider a legitimate presidential appointment to the Supreme Court in an election year—before a nominee was named.⁵

The consequence is an electorate frustrated and disgusted by congressional gridlock and power plays. At both state and national levels, politicians seemingly rewrite the rules as they go along, often in favor of the people who write campaign checks for them. The public—including many students—gets caught in a cycle of cynicism that saps the desire to participate in civic life. Sadly, it seems that "*E Pluribus Unum*" has fallen victim to "My vote doesn't count."

The dismal state of affairs in the United States must be viewed against the backdrop of a growing international trend toward less democracy and more authoritarianism in such countries as Russia, Turkey, and the Philippines. In February 2019, Freedom House, an organization that monitors democracy



Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini in Munich, Germany, ca. June 1940.

of the rights guaranteed by Germany's 1919 constitution. After President Hindenburg's death in 1934, Hitler wiped away any vestiges of democracy, eliminating the office of president, and having himself declared *fürher* ("leader"). Instituting the era of the Third Reich, Nazi Germany next enacted the brutal racial laws that led to the Holocaust.

Democracy did not die in darkness in Italy or Germany. It was decapitated as the world watched and millions of

mer senators from both major political parties in a December 2018 open letter. "The rule of law and the ability of our institutions to function freely and independently must be upheld."

These men and women were writing as special counsel Robert Mueller probed the role played by Russia in the 2016 presidential election. But the senators were equally alarmed by another threat—a national climate in which party politics have been elevated

around the world, underscored that concern. The watchdog group issued a report stating that freedom had declined globally for 13 consecutive years. In its bleak warning, the group stated, “Democracy is in retreat.... The truth is that democracy needs defending, and as traditional champions like the United States stumble, core democratic norms meant to ensure peace, prosperity, and freedom for all people are under serious threat around the world.”⁶

These are crucial issues for our time. Around the globe, political leaders—some elected legitimately—have been relentlessly whittling away at political liberties, human rights, and the rule of law. To harden their grip on power, they use media suppression, mass arrests, and assassinations of people considered threats or “enemies of the state”—journalists among them. Compliant legislatures rewrite laws regarding the powers of these leaders. The widespread use of propaganda to manipulate public opinion buttresses their power. And very often, some groups—immigrants, an ethnic group, or some religious minor-

ity—are targeted as scapegoats for their country’s problems.

This sharp shift toward authoritarian rule has been widely documented. After a surge of democratic growth that followed the demise of Soviet-dominated Communism in the 1990s, anti-democratic leaders have emerged in such countries as Poland, Venezuela, Myanmar, and Brazil. Budding democracies have been ground under the heel of rising despots who follow the autocrat’s playbook.

In its “Democracy in Retreat” report, Freedom House stated,

More authoritarian powers are now banning opposition groups or jailing their leaders, dispensing with term limits, and tightening the screws on any independent media that remain. Meanwhile, many countries that democratized after the end of the Cold War have regressed in the face of rampant corruption, anti-liberal populist movements, and breakdowns in the rule of law.⁷

These trends should be setting off alarm bells. And the bells should be ringing loudly in classrooms. Social studies teachers surely recognize that many of the dangerous forces that led to the twentieth-century’s destructive world wars—nationalism, militarism, competition for resources, and religious divisions—have been loosed again. The “Strongman” style of leadership has taken hold, with democracy among the first casualties.

In the United States, the expectation of a fundamentally sound, democratic republic has been battle-tested time and time again. The republic survived a Civil War, the Great Depression, world wars, religious and ethnic intolerance, and a deep-seeded past of slavery and racial discrimination. Through these crises, many Americans professed optimism that the nation’s cherished values and systems would best any challenge. The fact that the United States—to date—has not fallen prey to a Strongman may be at the core of what is called “American Exceptionalism.”

Free Virtual Classroom Visits



In September 2019, author Kenneth C. Davis will begin offering a limited round of **free virtual classroom visits** on the subject of democracy and dictatorships.

To have your class considered for a free virtual visit, fill out a Contact Form at <https://dontknowmuch.com/for-teachers/> specifying your school location, the grade level, and your class size. (Multiple classes are welcomed.) Davis will continue these visits throughout the school year, subject to his availability.

The intent of the virtual visits is to speak with middle school and high school students and their teachers about what democracy is, what threatens democracy today, and how to protect it. As the coming presidential election year draws closer, the issue of civic engagement is more important than ever.

The virtual visit will draw on the subject of Davis’s forthcoming book—*Strongman: The Rise of Five Dictators and the Fall of Democracy*. Scheduled for publication in October 2020, the book will provide accounts of five of the most murderous dictators in modern history and the death of democracy.

Kenneth C. Davis’s goal in working with teachers and NCSS members is to lead the way in starting vital conversations on this important issue.

America's track record of rejecting demagoguery is robust and some extraordinary leaders prove it. In its two darkest moments, the United States called forth Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt, respectively. As presidents, both men committed grievous errors and each had their share of vocal critics. But they largely strove to expand freedom rather than destroy it. Setting out to preserve the Union, Lincoln knew that the United States must ultimately honor its promise as a nation "conceived in liberty." And as Hitler and Mussolini murdered Jews and political opponents, Roosevelt spelled out a vision of "Four Freedoms" for people all over the world.

Today, however, Abraham Lincoln's "mystic chords of memory" seem distinctly out of tune. Political institutions and civic engagement have frayed and been seriously weakened in a new age of fracture. Compounding the stresses on democracy's foundations is a plague of widespread ignorance of American history. In February 2019, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation reported that Americans still "Don't Know Much About History." According to the Wilson Foundation, "[O]nly 27 percent of those under the age of 45 nationally were able to demonstrate a basic understanding of American history. Nationally, only four in 10 Americans passed the exam."⁸ That is not only sad, it is dangerous.

How did we get here? First, we should dismiss the notion that the problem is of recent vintage. "Civic apathy is nothing new but the reports are increasingly dire," said a *Washington Post* editorial.⁹ That was in June 2011, three years after retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor spearheaded the creation of iCivics, the educational nonprofit that provides online gamification and lesson plans to encourage civics education.

But the problem is much older. Americans have traditionally been poor history students and reluctant voters. "Unfortunately, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation has validated what studies have shown for a century," Foundation

President Arthur Levine recently stated. "Americans don't possess the history knowledge they need to be informed and engaged citizens." The Wilson Foundation's 2019 survey found that only 15 percent of American adults could correctly note the year the U.S. Constitution was written. More significantly, 25 percent did not know that freedom of speech was guaranteed under the First Amendment.¹⁰

But this goes beyond the ability to ace the American History category on *Jeopardy*. We can debate which dates, constitutional landmarks, and presidential accomplishments are vital facts and which are mere trivia. But we cannot dismiss a hard truth—the fundamental ignorance of the past as a serious impediment to valuing rights, won at hard cost, and the responsibilities that come with them. Ignorance is not bliss. Nor is it strength, as Orwell's *1984* put it.

Clearly a longstanding problem, the chronic dysfunction of civics knowledge has reached a new critical mass. Teachers of American history and social studies face what NCSS President Tina Heafner recently called our "Sputnik Moment."

In 1957, Americans were shocked and terrified when the Soviet Union launched the first artificial satellite, Sputnik. The fact that the Soviet Union, which possessed the atomic bomb, had successfully put a vehicle into orbit confounded "experts" who viewed Stalin's USSR as backwards and incapable of such a technological achievement. The launch led to a crisis call for massive investments in American math and science education under the National Defense Education Act of 1957.¹¹

Heafner's comment is echoed by Sam Wineburg, professor of education at Stanford University, who wrote, "The threat to democracy by a digitally credulous citizenry is nothing less than an issue of national defense. Treating

it as anything but guarantees a further erosion of democratic society."¹²

It is this simple. If we don't understand how democracy in America works, it may stop working.

This deficiency remains a problem deeply rooted in the way social studies has been taught—or mistaught, as the case may be—for decades. For years, schoolbooks reflected the sanitized "cherry tree" version of history written to instill pride and patriotism. That comfortable narrative left out the stories of women, African Americans, Native Americans, and a wide array of immigrant groups who helped build the country.

Including the stories of their roles is not politically correct "revisionism," but an honest rebalancing of the scales. Just as children's trade publishers have heard the cry of "more diverse books," today's American history lessons must look more like today's American history students. They must see how history fits their lives and experiences.

Intensifying the crisis in social studies education is a set of twenty-first century "advances." First is the glut of time-sucking standardized tests that have come to dominate classrooms. Every teacher knows the drill—state exam time means tossing out lesson plans for practice tests and strategy sessions. "Time spent teaching social studies has declined in the last two decades," Sarah Gonser wrote in *The Hechinger Report*, "particularly since the 2001 passage of 'No Child Left Behind,' which favored a focus on math, reading and accountability as a way of addressing the country's growing achievement gap between rich and poor children."¹³

Echoing that concern, Jessica Ellison, president of the Minnesota Council for the Social Studies, asked: "Are we too far behind? We spent the last twenty-five years focused on STEM and ELA (English Language Arts) and testing of those subjects. At what cost?" A teacher education specialist with the Minnesota Historical Society, Ellison was recently

shocked when she heard an educator openly profess that social studies is not a “core discipline.”

The single-minded quest to raise standardized scores as the Holy Grail of academic achievement has come at considerable cost. Students endlessly drilled to fill in the right bubbles miss the point of education: learning to think for themselves.

The blindered focus on standardized testing has been coupled with the double-edged sword of technology. Most teachers would agree that online resources have revolutionized their jobs, giving students access to primary source documents that were once reserved for academics combing library archives while wearing white gloves. It is a marvel of the Information Age that the passenger lists of Ellis Island or ship manifests from the Transatlantic slave trade are now only keystrokes away.

But the downside is that tech-addiction in our classrooms and daily lives has made teaching more difficult. The constant buzzing and vibrating of tablets and phones issues a siren-call that few can resist. Then there are the plethora of diversions and distractions of games and social media. How can the Founding Fathers compete with *Fortnite*?

Even more sinister is the wave of misinformation and propaganda flooding our screens. Where home was once the primary source of many students’ perspectives and perceptions, the “virtual family” is now the centerpiece.

“Many students have increasingly come to trust social media ‘influencers’ for information and opinions,” says Chris Hitchcock, a World History teacher at Indiana University High School and a leader in Twitter’s #sschat group for social studies instructors. Hitchcock is not alone when she contends that students are relying on their “tribes.” They look to other young people who have come to dominate YouTube and Snapchat, abetted by businesses that eagerly amplify their reach. A “bestie’s” latest Instagram post holds far more

appeal for many students than a windy debate on the merits of the Electoral College.

But here is the real rub. From dangerous fads and serious medical misinformation to sinister political and social ideologies, our electronic worldview is awash in extremist ideas and outright lies. The consequences for our health, emotional well-being, and political sanity have been disastrous. And it may be getting worse.

“More than two years after anonymous accounts polluted the discourse surrounding the last presidential election cycle, there is no cure in sight,” commented Jim Rutenberg in the *New York Times*. “When it comes to disinformation, all signs point to a 2020 campaign that will make 2016 look like a mere test run.”¹⁴

Stanford University’s Sam Wineburg is similarly alarmed. “Our most reported finding was that 82 percent of middle school students couldn’t tell the difference between an ad and a news story,” he wrote in *USA Today*. “But putting it that way isn’t really fair to kids: While dozens of outlets reported this nugget, none mentioned an industry study that showed 59 percent of adults couldn’t tell the difference, either. We are all in the same boat. That boat is taking on water.”¹⁵

The rising tide of media illiteracy that threatens to sink the boat is one problem. But so is the quality of what passes for political dialog in the United States. In the public square, we no longer listen to each other but shout past each other in an effort to drown out other opinions with a cascade of personal attacks. World History teacher Chris Hitchcock sees the result in a corrosive atmosphere in which differences are no longer polite. “Politics is like a sports event and if you don’t support your team, you’re a bad person.”

It would be naïve to suggest that these problems did not exist before the computer and web transformed modern life. The “good old days” were often terrible. Few presidential campaigns were more

ugly than 1828, when supporters of John Quincy Adams called Andrew Jackson a murderer and Adams was accused of procuring prostitutes as an ambassador. Abraham Lincoln and his wife endured withering personal attacks. So did Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose appearance was the butt of cruel jokes. The dirty tricks, campaign finance corruption, and outright breaking-and-entering of the Watergate era ramped up political warfare to a new level of illegality. But these abuses were countered by courts and a Congress that stood their ground.

Today, there is little doubt that the operating systems of democracy have reached a critical mass. And the stakes are very high.

So what do we do about it?

In today’s crisis, social studies educators have a unique role and responsibility. They must take the lead in protecting the fundamental ideals of democracy and preparing a new generation of student citizens for active civic engagement. It is a profoundly important job. In fact, it might be best to view it not as a job to be done but a war to be won. Social studies teachers stand at the front lines. They are the Minutemen, the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, the Harlem Hellfighters, and the troops storming Normandy. They are the foot soldiers who must now dig in and hold the line.

That is a daunting challenge and there are many obstacles. But first we must acknowledge the problem and recognize that education and information are the crucial weapons we hold to defend democracy. In his recent book, *If We Can Keep It*, Michael Tomasky lists a “Fourteen-Point Agenda to Reduce Polarization.” Point Twelve is simple: “Vastly Expand Civics Education.”¹⁶

“More education will help,” agrees Minnesota’s Jessica Ellison. “And not just in secondary school. This must be scaffolded from kindergarten up, because kindergartners understand rules and fairness. These are civics skills and just as important as literacy skills.”

The nation's largest school system recognized the need with an initiative called "Civics for All." According to the New York City Department of Education, "The goal is for all our students to become engaged citizens who can think critically and are empowered to chart the course that our city and country take."¹⁷ During "Civics Week 2019," New York City schools devoted a week in April to the connections between history, current events, and democratic structures.

But there's the problem in a nutshell. A week just won't cut it. The remedy requires more than a quick-fix or Band-Aid. And it means more than merely rehashing the archaic "How a Bill Becomes a Law" lesson plan that was drawn up long ago and faraway. The challenge to democracy demands new approaches and a focus on creating a generation of student-citizens. Sure, coding is important. But so is voting.

The nonprofit Civics Education Initiative has proposed a test of "100 Facts Every High School Student Should Know." Drawn from the United States Citizenship Civics Test—the exam required of all new U.S. citizens—it comes with a prerequisite that high school students must pass this history and civics test as a condition for graduation.¹⁸

But the crisis demands more than learning a set of facts. The idea of "community service" is a regular part of school life at many private schools that may be missing in the public sector. "Without civic engagement, civic knowledge only does so much good," says Dr. Brooke Blevins, co-director of Baylor's iEngage Summer Civics Institute, on the organization's website. Citing the fact that only Maryland and the District of Columbia require service learning, Baylor's online program supports an "action civics" approach aimed at K-12 students that addresses root causes of community issues. Says Blevins, "Our goal is to move students from just thinking about citizenship as being personally responsible to being something that's more robust."¹⁹

Another ambitious experiment was launched by Democracy Prep, a charter that began in Harlem and has since expanded to 20 other locations. As described by writer Kevin Mahnken, "Democracy Prep's institutional focus lies in preparing kids not just for the rigors of college, but also for the demands of citizenship. Through an emphasis on government and social change, as well as a heavy dose of extracurricular civic involvement, the schools seek to transform K-12 students into future voters, volunteers and activists."²⁰

The school's curriculum goes beyond standard civics lessons and classroom debates, according to Mahnken. Students spend fall afternoons helping to register new voters and participate in community service. At the high school level, every senior receives two year-long courses of civics content.²¹

Seeking out community allies in this cause should be another focal point. Are social studies teachers talking to librarians, nurses, local rights advocacy groups, local jurists, and yes, politicians and political organizations? And are those people talking to your classrooms? If they care about building a community of involved citizens, they will come.

Such an effort requires will and investment. In 1957, Sputnik prompted a national response in an act of Congress. Today, realistically, such federal leadership is "Missing in Action." But if we are serious, the effort also demands more focus on teacher education and preparation. Let us be clear. It's not just about the kids. Teachers who are not conversant in American history can't lead us out of the wilderness.

That requires a fix in teacher education. Paul Fitchett, associate professor and director of curriculum and instruction for the doctoral program in education at University of North Carolina at Charlotte, told *The Hechinger Report*, "Research shows that teachers coming from elementary ed programs feel the least competent in teaching social stud-

ies, compared to math, English language arts, and even the sciences."²²

Confident, competent professionals in the classroom can carry out the paramount job of the social studies teacher—making students understand why history matters to them. History is more than dates, battles, and speeches. It is the story of who we are and how we got here. Every day, the lesson of the connection of past and present must be the core of the lesson we teach.

One riveting example of that connection came in the June 2019 debate over reparations for the stain of American slavery.²³ Scheduled appropriately on "Juneteenth"—the celebration marking the end of slavery in Texas in 1865—this congressional hearing on a proposal to create a Reparations Commission took place as the nation began to mark the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first Africans sold into servitude at Jamestown.

The testimony offered a compelling lesson in the "hard history" of slavery in the United States, the destructive impact of which reverberates even now, a fact highlighted by a recent Pew Research Center survey. According to Pew, many Americans believe the legacy of slavery still resonates, with 63 percent believing it affects the position of black people in American society today either a great deal or a fair amount.²⁴

History teaches that change does not come from the top down but the bottom up. Every great social movement in America's past—whether independence, abolition, suffrage, organized labor, or civil rights—has come from the people, usually advanced only with reluctant politicians being dragged along, kicking and screaming. As 2020 also marks the centenary of the amendment giving women the vote, teaching the long struggle to winning the vote should emphasize how difficult that path was. Women like outspoken suffragist Alice Paul, leader of the "Silent Sentinels" who stood outside the White House during World War I, were beaten and imprisoned for this cause.



The "Silent Sentinels" picketing outside the White House during World War I.

History class must make these stories a compelling human drama that is a piece of our birthright. That those rights can vanish is also a fact.

And, as John Adams famously said, "Facts are stubborn things." Underlying the everyday connection of past to present is the essence of social studies as a discipline grounded in truth. Across all four core disciplines—History, Civics, Geography, and Economics—teachers must emphasize that documented, reliable facts are the most significant weapons against the assault on democracy. This is the only response to a world that traffics in propaganda, spin, and the relentless tide of caustic social media corroding objective reality and giving rise to a White House aide's notorious suggestion in 2017 that "alternative facts" exist.²⁵

"Preparing students to be citizens is an important part of that," says World History teacher Chris Hitchcock. "To learn how to find and evaluate different types of information. How do I separate the good information from less reliable sources? How do I recognize a source that fits my preconceived notions?" To counter this, continues Hitchcock, "I ask them, 'Where did

you hear that?' We have to model that questioning, encourage that questioning."

Authentic history told through real stories and cultivating media literacy will help cut through the fog of false narratives. But another crucial component in the all-out effort to fortify democracy must lie in a new degree of activism outside the classroom. It is one thing to discuss the right to "redress grievances" when teaching the Declaration, or the right to "peaceable assembly" when teaching the First Amendment. It is another thing to put those principles into practice.

Teachers can learn from history that it may be time for activism. Encouraging voter registration among students is a good start. But teachers must be aware that they have power and a voice in their communities. Teachers are public servants. But service does not mean acquiescence. In the past year, teachers across the country have forged a "taking it to the streets" approach that went beyond calling for raises. They were voicing a passionate cry to make their schools better. Their powerful message is being heard and echoed.

Jessica Ellison of the Minnesota Council for the Social Studies is direct



Alice Paul, toasting passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920 with grape juice—alcohol was prohibited.

in her call for civic engagement by teachers. "Nobody is going to advocate for us. We need to do it for ourselves."

That means exercising those rights that come with the Constitution. Organize, speak up, speak out. March. Write letters. Call your elected officials and let them know this issue matters. In Ellison's case, it meant running for office. As a historian, teacher educator, and as a parent, she ran for the school board in her hometown

and won. “I encourage people to run for office,” she says. “If not me, then who? As educational professionals, we have so much to give.”

One of history’s most important lessons teaches that progress and sacrifice go hand in hand. The activism that makes change demands commitment. These are lessons that every teacher who coaches a sports team has drummed into their student athletes. Democracy is not a spectator sport.

American complacency about political involvement might be chalked up to ignorance of the blood, sweat, and tears that have been shed to win every single right. It is largely on social studies teachers to make sure that story is told and understood. It is a story of passionate belief in an idea found in three powerful words that open the Constitution—“We the People.”

“These are the times that try men’s souls,” wrote Thomas Paine in 1776. “Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered.”

Indeed, it must feel that way as teachers struggle to keep students engaged. It is tempting to toss in the towel. But as the recent report of Freedom House put it, “The promise of democracy remains real and powerful. Not only defending it but broadening its reach is one of the great causes of our time.”

The stakes are real. Democracy is on the line. And as history shows, democracy can die. Quickly. Some 2,000 years ago, the Greek philosopher Plato was dismissive of the Greek invention—the power of the people. He predicted that democracy would end in despotism.

The essential task of the social studies teacher is to prove him wrong. 🌍

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