

They Thought They Were Free

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by [Joshua Styles](#), [Brownstone Institute](#)

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“I came back home a little afraid for my country, afraid of what it might want, and get, and like, under pressure of combined reality and illusion. I felt—and feel—that it was not German man that I had met, but Man. He happened to be in Germany under certain conditions. He might, under certain conditions, be I.” —Milton Mayer, [They Thought They Were Free](#), ix.

It's been more than seventy-five years since the Nazis were defeated and Auschwitz was liberated. Seventy-five years is a *long* time—so long, in fact, that while many still learn of the horrors of the Holocaust, far fewer understand how the murder of the Jews happened. How were millions of people systematically exterminated in an advanced Western nation—a constitutional republic? How did such respectable and intelligent citizens become complicit in the murder of their countrymen? These are the questions Milton Mayer sought to answer in his book [They Thought They Were Free](#).

In 1952, Mayer moved his family to a small German town to live among ten ordinary men, hoping to understand not only how the Nazis came to power but how ordinary Germans—ordinary people—became unwitting participants in one of history's greatest genocides. The men Mayer lived among came from all walks of life: a tailor, a cabinetmaker, a bill-collector, a salesman, a student, a teacher, a bank clerk, a baker, a soldier, and a police officer.

Significantly, Mayer did not simply conduct formal interviews in order to “study” these men; rather, Mayer had dinner in these men’s homes, befriended their families, and lived as one of them for nearly a year. His own children went to the same school as their children. And by the end of his time in Germany, Mayer could genuinely call them friends. *They Thought They Were Free* is Mayer’s account of their stories, and the title of the book is his thesis. Mayer explains:

“Only one of my ten Nazi friends saw Nazism as we—you and I—saw it in any respect. This was Hildebrandt, the teacher. And even he then believed, and still believes, in part of its program and practice, ‘the democratic part.’ The other nine, decent, hard-working, ordinarily intelligent and honest men, did not know before 1933 that Nazism was evil. They did not know between 1933 and 1945 that it was evil. And they do not know it now. None of them ever knew, or now knows, Nazism as we knew and know it; and they lived under it, served it, and, indeed, made it” (47).

Until reading this book, I thought of what happened in Germany with a bit of arrogance. How could they not know Nazism was evil? And how could they see what was happening and not speak out? Cowards. All of them. But as I read Mayer’s book, I felt a knot in my stomach, a growing fear that what happened in Germany was not a result of some defect in the German people of this era.

The men and women of Germany in the 1930s and 40s were not unlike Americans in the 2010s and 20s—or the people of any nation at any time throughout history. They are human, just as we are human. And as humans, we have a great tendency to harshly judge the evils of other societies but fail to recognize our own moral failures—failures that have been on full display the past two years during the covid panic.

Mayer’s book is frighteningly prescient; reading his words is

like staring into our own souls. The following paragraphs will show just how similar the world's response to covid has been to the German response to the "threat" of the Jews. If we can truly understand the parallels between our response to covid and the situation in Hitler's Germany, if we can see what lies at the end of "two weeks to flatten the curve," perhaps we can prevent the greatest atrocities from being fully realized in our own day. But to stop our bent toward tyranny, we must first be willing to grapple with the darkest parts of our nature, including our tendency to [dehumanize others](#) and to [treat our neighbors as enemies](#).

Overcoming Decency

"Ordinary people—and ordinary Germans—cannot be expected to tolerate activities which outrage the ordinary sense of ordinary decency unless the victims are, in advance, successfully stigmatized as enemies of the people, of the nation, the race, the religion. Or, if they are not enemies (that comes later), they must be an element within the community somehow extrinsic to the common bond, a decompositive ferment (be it only by the way they part their hair or tie their necktie) in the uniformity which is everywhere the condition of common quiet. The Germans' innocuous acceptance and practice of social anti-Semitism before Hitlerism had undermined the resistance of their ordinary decency to the stigmatization and persecution to come" (55).

[Others have explained](#) the link between totalitarian impulses and "institutionalized dehumanization" and have discussed the ["othering" of unvaccinated persons](#) in nations across the world. Mayer shows that such dehumanization does not necessarily begin with prejudice:

"National Socialism was anti-Semitism. Apart from anti-Semitism, its character was that of a thousand tyrannies before it, with modern conveniences. Traditional anti-

Semitism . . . played an important role in softening the Germans as a whole to Nazi doctrine, but it was separation, not prejudice as such, that made Nazism possible, the mere separation of Jews and non-Jews” (116-117).

Even if many Germans did not harbor anti-Semitic prejudices (at least not initially), the forced separation of Jews and non-Jews created a devastating rift in German society, tearing the social fabric and paving the way for tyranny. In our day, the separation of the masked and unmasked, the vaccinated and the unvaccinated, has divided populations around the world like nothing we’ve experienced in our lifetimes. And the global scale of this separation has perhaps not happened in recorded history.

How has this separation been made possible? The immense power of propaganda, and particularly propaganda in the digital age. We think we understand how propaganda affects us, but we often don’t realize the truly insidious effects on how we view others until it is too late. Mayer’s friends explained this in great depth. On one occasion, Mayer asked the former bank clerk about one of his Jewish friends. “Did your memory of the peddler make you anti-Semitic?” “No—not until I heard anti-Semitic propaganda. Jews were supposed to do terrible things that the peddler had never done. . . . *The propaganda didn’t make me think of him as I knew him but of him as a Jew” (124; emphasis added).*

Is there anything we can do to mitigate the dehumanizing effects of propaganda? Mayer describes the power of Nazi propaganda as so intense that all of his friends were affected by it—*changed* by it—including the teacher who was more aware of such tactics. Nearly seven years after the war, his friends still could not be persuaded that they had been deceived:

“Nobody has proved to my friends that the Nazis were wrong about the Jews. Nobody can. The truth or falsity of what the

Nazis said, and of what my extremist friends believed, was immaterial, marvelously so. There simply was no way to reach it, no way, at least, that employed the procedures of logic and evidence” (142).

Mayer’s conclusion is depressing. If we cannot persuade others with logic and evidence, how can we persuade them? How many of us have shared indisputable data that the vaccines carry risks? How many of us have shown videos where public health officials openly admit that the vaccines [do not stop transmission](#) and that cloth masks don’t work (and are in fact [little more than “facial decorations”](#))? Yet the evidence does not persuade those who have been captured by propaganda; indeed, it *cannot* persuade them. This is because the very nature of propaganda does not appeal to logic or reason; it does not appeal to evidence. Propaganda appeals to our emotions, and in a world where many people are led by emotions, propaganda becomes deeply rooted in the hearts of those who consume it.

So what are we to do? Mayer relays a frustrating reality. But understanding how propaganda worked in Nazi Germany and how it works today is essential if we are to have any chance of persuading those who have been shaped by it. Moreover, understanding *why* many people tend to be led by emotions and to outsource or suspend their critical thinking is perhaps even more essential to forestalling greater tragedies. We cannot expect others to escape the tyranny of propaganda if they do not have time to think or are motivated *not* to think.

Our Own Lives

Even without the dehumanization of those who were a “threat” to the community, most Germans were too focused on their own lives to consider the plight of their neighbors:

“Men think first of the lives they lead and the things they see; and not, among the things they see, of the extraordinary

sights, but of the sights which meet them in their daily rounds. The lives of my nine friends—and even of the tenth, the teacher—were lightened and brightened by National Socialism as they knew it. And they look back at it now—nine of them, certainly—as the best time of their lives; for what are men’s lives? There were jobs and job security, summer camps for the children and the Hitler Jugend to keep them off the streets. What does a mother want to know? She wants to know where her children are, and with whom, and what they are doing. In those days she knew or thought she did; what difference does it make? So things went better at home, and when things go better at home, and on the job, what more does a husband and father want to know?” (48)

The best time of their lives. From where we stand in 2022, this seems like an unbelievable statement. How could they view a society that ostracized and eventually murdered millions of their fellow citizens as a good society? How could they look the other way when the Jews and others were suffering? It’s easy to ask these questions, but in our modern world, are we not also narrowly concerned with the comforts of our own lives and those of our loved ones? If the lives of others are put at risk so that our families can continue to “stay home and save lives”—so that we can feel safe from a deadly virus and “righteous” because of our decisions—would we not choose to do it? Many of us did. But did we even consider that our staying home meant others could not?

The lockdowns destroyed the lives of millions of poor children, both at home and abroad. But the laptop class remained insulated from this suffering, content with delivered groceries, zoom calls, and new episodes of Tiger King. And while many around the world starved or fought over limited supplies of food and water, we battled over the newest iPhones, believing that these devices were necessary to “ride out the pandemic” from our high-rise castles and suburban fortresses. Indeed, for many of us, our biggest concern was

whether or not we could quickly have a new 42" TV delivered if ours stopped working. We knew nothing of the suffering of others, and we barely considered that their realities could be different. So also in Germany:

"There were wonderful ten-dollar holiday trips for the family in the 'Strength through Joy' program, to Norway in the summer and Spain in the winter, for people who had never dreamed of a real holiday trip at home or abroad. And in Kronenberg 'nobody' (nobody my friends knew) went cold, nobody went hungry, nobody went ill and uncared for. For whom do men know? They know people of their own neighborhood, of their own station and occupation, of their own political (or nonpolitical) views, of their own religion and race. All the blessings of the New Order, advertised everywhere, reached 'everybody'" (48-49).

We quickly forget those who are distanced from us. And in a faceless world of "social distancing," it's that much easier to forget the myriad human beings who are suffering beyond what we could bear. The children who have never known their teachers' faces? Not our concern. The elderly and infirm who've been cut off from the rest of the world, deprived of social interaction and human touch? It's for their health and safety. Both children and adults with disabilities and special needs, those who cannot speak and cannot hear? We must all make sacrifices to slow the spread.

Our Own Fears

Add to our own lives our own fears (real or imagined), and we become even less motivated to consider the hardships of others:

"Their world was the world of National Socialism; inside it, inside the Nazi community, they knew only good-fellowship and the ordinary concerns of ordinary life. They feared the 'Bolsheviks' but not one another, and their fear was the

accepted fear of the whole otherwise happy Nazi community that was Germany” (52).

The “accepted fear” of the community. The ten men Mayer lived among described the socially acceptable fears they were allowed to express—and the fears by which they must order their lives. But to express fear or even uneasiness about the growing totalitarianism of the Nazi regime? Such concerns were *verboten*. And so it is today. We are permitted (indeed, encouraged!) to fear the virus. We can fear the collapse of the healthcare system. We can fear “the unvaccinated” and even “anti-maskers.” But dare we express fear of the growing totalitarianism among us? Dare we challenge the “scientific consensus” or question the edicts of public health officials? We dare not, lest we be lumped together with the science-denying anti-vaxxers. We dare not, lest our posts be labeled misinformation or our accounts be permanently suspended.

Our Own Troubles

“It was this, I think—they had their own troubles—that in the end explained my friends’ failure to ‘do something’ or even to know something. A man can carry only so much responsibility. If he tries to carry more, he collapses; so, to save himself from collapse, he rejects the responsibility that exceeds his capacity. . . . Responsible men never shirk responsibility, and so, when they must reject it, they deny it. They draw the curtain. They detach themselves altogether from the consideration of the evil they ought to, but cannot, contend with.” (75-76).

We all have our own lives—the everyday concerns of our families and friends. We also have our own fears—fears of imaginary threats or actual risks. Add to our lives and fears the weight of our own responsibilities, and we can be rendered powerless to consider the troubles of those around us. This was true not only of the Germans of this era but of Americans

as well. Mayer describes an interaction with his friend Simon, the bill collector, over the American internment of the Japanese. Simon recounted the forced relocation of more than 100,000 Americans—including children—because of their Japanese ancestry (and supposedly due to the threat they posed to the security of the nation).

Simon asked what Mayer had done to stand up for his fellow citizens who were removed from their homes without any form of due process. “Nothing,” Mayer replied. Simon’s response is sobering:

“‘There. You learned about all these things openly, through your government and your press. We did not learn through ours. As in your case, nothing was required of us—in our case, not even knowledge. You knew about things you thought were wrong—you did think it was wrong, didn’t you, Herr Professor?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘So. You did nothing. We heard, or guessed, and we did nothing. So it is everywhere.’ When I protested that the Japanese-descended Americans had not been treated like the Jews, he said, ‘And if they had been—what then? Do you not see that the idea of doing something or doing nothing is in either case the same?’” (81).

We all want to think we would react differently. We all have the best of intentions and believe we would have the courage to stand up for others. We will be the heroes when everyone else is too afraid to act. But when the time comes, what will we *actually* do? Mayer’s interaction with his friend the teacher is worth quoting at length:

“‘I never got over marveling that I survived,’ said Herr Hildebrandt. ‘I couldn’t help being glad, when something happened to somebody else, that it hadn’t happened to me. It was like later on, when a bomb hit another city, or another house than your own; you were thankful.’ ‘More thankful for yourself than you were sorry for others?’ ‘Yes. The truth is,

Yes. It may be different in your case, Herr Professor, but I'm not sure that you will know until you have faced it. . .

You were sorry for the Jews, who had to identify themselves, every male with "Israel" inserted into his name, every female with "Sarah," on every official occasion; sorrier, later on, that they lost their jobs and their homes and had to report themselves to the police; sorrier still that they had to leave their homeland, that they had to be taken to concentration camps and enslaved and killed. But—weren't you glad you weren't a Jew? You were sorry, and more terrified, when it happened, as it did, to thousands, to hundreds of thousands, of non-Jews. But—weren't you glad that it hadn't happened to you, a non-Jew? It might not have been the loftiest type of gladness, but you hugged it to yourself and watched your step, more cautiously than ever" (58-59).

I feel bad for them, but I am unwilling to speak up. I hate that children are denied access to speech therapy, in-person school, or social interaction with their friends. But if I speak up, I may lose my status and influence. I hate that the unvaccinated are losing their jobs and being confined to their homes. But if I speak up, I could lose my job as well. I hate that my fellow citizens are being taken to "quarantine centers" against their will. But if I speak up, I could face criminal penalties. And I hate that the unvaccinated are being excluded from society and treated with contempt by national leaders. But if I speak up, I could be excluded as well. The risk is too great.

The Tactics of Tyrants

"[M]odern tyrants all stand above politics and, in doing so, demonstrate that they are all master politicians" (55).

How often have public officials denounced those who question

the narrative as “politicizing covid”? “Stop politicizing masks!” “Stop politicizing vaccines!” And those who dissent are demeaned as “science-denying Trump supporters” or “anti-vax conspiracy theorists.” It’s no wonder so few have questioned the official narratives on masks, lockdowns, and vaccines—to do so is to put oneself in the crosshairs, to draw accusations of caring more about politics and the economy than people’s lives and health. This gaslighting is by no means the only tactic of those who seek greater authoritarian control. In addition to helping us understand what makes us susceptible to totalitarianism—why so many of us will “draw the curtain” in the face of evil—Mayer’s work also exposes the tactics of tyrants, enabling his readers to see and resist.

“This separation of government from people, this widening of the gap, took place so gradually and so insensibly, each step disguised (perhaps not even intentionally) as a temporary emergency measure or associated with true patriotic allegiance or with real social purposes. And all the crises and reforms (real reforms, too) so occupied the people that they did not see the slow motion underneath, of the whole process of government growing remoter and remoter” (166-167).

Many have sounded the alarm over the past two years about the threat of endless emergencies, and we have all seen the goalposts be moved time and again. “It’s just two weeks.” “It’s just a mask.” “It’s just a vaccine.” And on and on it goes. But while most everyone recognizes that “two weeks to flatten the curve” was not just two weeks, too few understand the insidious threat of ongoing “rule by emergency.” But Mayer’s friends understood, and they experienced the catastrophic results.

Before Hitler became chancellor, Germany was still a republic governed by the Weimar Constitution. But [Article 48](#) of this constitution permitted the suspension of civil liberties “[i]f public security and order are seriously disturbed or

endangered.” These emergency powers were continually abused, and following the Reichstag Fire in 1933, the Enabling Act transferred all law-making power from the German parliament to the executive branch, allowing Hitler to “rule by decree” until the end of the War in 1945.

While the legislative branches of the States and the federal government in the United States (and other nations around the world) have been in session the past two years, the reality is that legislatures rarely sought to limit the powers of the executive. Under the auspices of the CDC, the WHO, and other health agencies, executives have effectively ruled by fiat. Closing businesses, mandating masks and vaccines, forcing people to stay home—most of these measures were implemented by executives without even consulting legislatures. And what was the justification? The “emergency” of covid. If we could go back in time to 2019 and ask whether executives should be permitted to unilaterally impose such life-altering policies on their people even *with* legislative consent, the vast majority of people would likely say “No!” So how did we get here in 2022? Mayer’s friends offer valuable insight.

The Common Good

“The community is suddenly an organism, a single body and a single soul, consuming its members for its own purposes. For the duration of the emergency the city does not exist for the citizen but the citizen for the city. The harder the city is pressed, the harder its citizens work for it and the more productive and efficient they become in its interest. Civic pride becomes the highest pride, for the end purpose of all one’s enormous efforts is the preservation of the city. Conscientiousness is the highest virtue now, the common good the highest good” (255).

What has been the reason given for many of the measures implemented over the past two years? The common good. We must wear our masks to protect others. Get vaccinated to love our

neighbors. Stay home to save lives. And it's not just for our neighbors as individuals but for the community as a whole. We must close schools to preserve hospital resources. In the U.K., efforts were being made to "Protect the NHS." And countless other slogans signaled our common virtue.

To be clear, I'm not opposed to working together for the common good; I do not value my liberties more than the lives of others (this was a common gaslighting tactic employed against those who opposed government overreach). Rather, I simply understand how governments across time have used the "common good" as an excuse to consolidate power and implement authoritarian measures that under normal circumstances would be rejected. This is exactly what happened to Mayer's friends:

"Take Germany as a city cut off from the outside world by flood or fire advancing from every direction. The mayor proclaims martial law, suspending council debate. He mobilizes the populace, assigning each section its tasks. Half the citizens are at once engaged directly in the public business. Every private act—a telephone call, the use of an electric light, the service of a physician—becomes a public act. Every private right—to take a walk, to attend a meeting, to operate a printing press—becomes a public right. Every private institution—the hospital, the church, the club—becomes a public institution. Here, although we never think to call it by any name but pressure of necessity, we have the whole formula of totalitarianism.

The individual surrenders his individuality without a murmur, without, indeed, a second thought—and not just his individual hobbies and tastes, but his individual occupation, his individual family concerns, his individual needs" (254; emphasis added).

Tyrants understand how to exploit our desire to care for others. We must understand their tendency to exploit our good

will. Indeed, to understand this tactic and to resist encroachments on liberty is the way to preserve the *actual* common good. Tragically, many people do not realize that they have been exploited—that their desire to work for the common good has become obedience without question. Mayer's description is stunning:

"For the rest of the citizens—95 percent or so of the population—duty is now the central fact of life. They obey, at first awkwardly but, surprisingly soon, spontaneously."
(255)

This type of compliance seems to have happened most clearly with the use of masks. We obey spontaneously, not at the point of a gun. And we obey without thinking about the rationality of what is required. We will wear a mask to walk to a table in a packed restaurant, and we will dine for two hours before donning it again to walk out. We must wear masks on a plane to "stop the spread," but we can take them off as long as we are eating or drinking. Some even wear masks while driving alone in their cars. To be clear, I am not criticizing those who wear masks in these situations; I am lamenting how propaganda has so affected us that we comply without considering our actions. Or, perhaps worse, we *have* considered them, but we comply anyway because that's what others are doing and that's what we're expected to do.

Do you see the dangerous parallels between what's happening today and what happened in Germany? This is not simply about masks (and it never has been). This is about a willingness to comply with government demands, no matter how illogical or insidious. Can you see how these tendencies contribute to the demonization of certain persons, particularly the unvaccinated? Those who do not act to "protect their neighbors" by wearing a mask, or who choose not to get vaccinated "for the sake of the vulnerable," are a danger to society and a threat to us all. Can you see where this

demonization can lead? We know where it led in Germany.

Endless Distractions

“[S]uddenly, I was plunged into all the new activity, as the university was drawn into the new situation; meetings, conferences, interviews, ceremonies, and, above all, papers to be filled out, reports, bibliographies, lists, questionnaires. And on top of that were the demands in the community, the things in which one had to, was ‘expected to’ participate that had not been there or had not been important before. It was all rigmarole, of course, but it consumed all one’s energies, coming on top of the work one really wanted to do. You can see how easy it was, then, not to think about fundamental things. One had no time” (167).

Combine the tyrannical use of the common good with a perpetual state of emergency, and you have a totalitarian regime that cannot be questioned: “[T]his, of all times, is no time for divisiveness” (256). Add to these tactics endless distractions to occupy the citizenry, and no one even has *time* to question. Listen to one of Mayer’s colleagues:

“The dictatorship, and the whole process of its coming into being, was above all diverting. It provided an excuse not to think for people who did not want to think anyway. I do not speak of your ‘little men,’ your baker and so on; I speak of my colleagues and myself, learned men, mind you. Most of us did not want to think about fundamental things and never had. There was no need to. Nazism gave us some dreadful, fundamental things to think about—we were decent people—and kept us so busy with continuous changes and ‘crises’ and so fascinated, yes, fascinated, by the machinations of the ‘national enemies,’ without and within, that we had no time to think about these dreadful things that were growing, little by little, all around us. Unconsciously, I suppose, we were grateful. Who wants to think?” (167-168).

Is this not what is happening, even as I write this, in the world around us? Over the past two years we have experienced a continual upending of our lives with lockdowns, zooming, online “learning,” mask mandates, “social” distancing, and more. And then we are told we must comply with vaccine mandates or lose our jobs, leaving some of us too weary to resist and others more weary for trying. And for those of us who have chosen to forgo the available vaccines, we must spend time—lots and lots of time—composing exemption requests for the various mandates, [explaining in depth our reasons](#) for objecting to the jabs.

And then, when it seems the covid madness is coming to an end (at least for the time being), an “emergency” is declared in Canada that [tramples the rights of Canadian citizens](#), and even now the world has been plunged into crisis because of the [conflict in Ukraine](#). There is so much going on, so many legitimate concerns that demand our attention, that many are unaware of the totalitarian noose that is tightening around us. More than that, we are too exhausted to examine what is happening, too tired to even care. But care we must! Or it will be too late, and there will be [no turning back](#).

Science and Education

“[T]he university students would believe anything complicated. The professors, too. Have you seen the ‘race purity’ chart?” “Yes,” I said. “Well, then, you know. A whole system. We Germans like systems, you know. It all fitted together, so it was science, system and science, if only you looked at the circles, black, white, and shaded, and not at real people. Such Dummheit they couldn’t teach to us little men. They didn’t even try” (142).

“Trust the science.” Or so we have been told the past two years. Yet another tactic used by authoritarians across time is the appeal to science and expertise. Mayer’s friends described how the Nazis used “science” to convince students

and others that the Jews were inferior, [even diseased](#). But this was not science; it was scientism. And so it is today.

Science is not dogma; it is not a set of beliefs. Real science is the process by which we discover the truth about the physical world. We begin with a hypothesis that must be rigorously tested through observation and experimentation. But over the past two years, “science” has meant whatever the public health authorities claim to be true, regardless whether the claims are supported by evidence. In fact, much of this so-called science has proved to be demonstrably false.

In addition to using “science” to support its goals, the Reich government also sought to control education. “National Socialism required the destruction of academic independence” (112), replacing truth and the search for truth with allegiance to Nazi doctrine. Notably, the Nazis captured not only the secondary schools but the primary schools as well, even rewriting certain subjects to comport with Nazi propaganda: “In history, in biology, and in economics the teaching program was much more elaborate than it was in literature, and much stricter. These subjects were really rewritten” (198). Mayer’s friend the teacher explained how the Reich would also place “ignorant ‘reliables,’ from politics or business, over the educators”; this was “part of the Nazi way of humiliating education and bringing it into popular contempt” (197). In today’s world, this would likely involve bringing in bureaucrats to control what is taught in the classroom or to control whether there even *is* a classroom, as so many schools have been perpetually closed “to slow the spread.”

Suppressing Speech and Encouraging Self-Censorship

“Everything was not regulated specifically, ever. It was not like that at all. Choices were left to the teacher’s discretion, within the ‘German spirit.’ That was all that was necessary; the teacher had only to be discreet. If he himself

wondered at all whether anyone would object to a given book, he would be wise not to use it. This was a much more powerful form of intimidation, you see, than any fixed list of acceptable or unacceptable writings. The way it was done was, from the point of view of the regime, remarkably clever and effective. The teacher had to make the choices and risk the consequences; this made him all the more cautious” (194).

The Reich's method of controlling education (and speech more broadly) did not rely on overly specific regulations. In our modern world, this tactic goes well beyond the enforcement of covid protocols, but it certainly includes them. Rare were the institutions that permitted a choice concerning masks; most schools required their students to wear them regardless of personal convictions. The result? Students who quickly learned that they must cover their faces to participate in society, and some who came to believe that they would seriously harm themselves or their classmates if they took them off. And even with most U.S. jurisdictions removing mask requirements in most schools, many students have become so self-conscious of showing their faces that they will voluntarily continue wearing them. What is the cost not only to the mental health of these students but to freedom of speech and expression? We may never fully know.

And it was not only schools. Covid protocols and covid narratives were enforced outside of schools as well. In early 2021, only a small minority of businesses permitted their customers to enter unmasked; still fewer allowed their employees this option. Though rarely acknowledged by most public health officials, masks *do* interfere with human communication (if they did not, world leaders would not take them off to speak). And if the ability to communicate is hindered, the free exchange of ideas also suffers.

As to speech more broadly, the tactic described by Mayer encourages self-censorship, which any fair-minded person

admits is also happening today. Going back decades to speech that was considered “politically incorrect,” we all understand that there are certain accepted positions on a variety of topics, ranging from race and gender to vaccines and covid treatments.

Don't dare share anything that counters the narrative, on covid or anything else. To share something that comes close to questioning the narrative could have myriad consequences, both personal and professional. You do not want to be accused of spreading misinformation, do you? Or maligned as a conspiracy theorist? So we refrain from sharing counterpoints and evidence, even if that evidence is absolutely legitimate and completely sound.

Uncertainty

“You see,” my colleague went on, “one doesn't see exactly where or how to move. Believe me, this is true. Each act, each occasion, is worse than the last, but only a little worse. You wait for the next and the next. You wait for one great shocking occasion, thinking that others, when such a shock comes, will join with you in resisting somehow. You don't want to act, or even talk, alone; you don't want to ‘go out of your way to make trouble.’ Why not?—Well, you are not in the habit of doing it. And it is not just fear, fear of standing alone, that restrains you; it is also genuine uncertainty.

“Uncertainty is a very important factor, and, instead of decreasing as time goes on, it grows. Outside, in the streets, in the general community, ‘everyone’ is happy. One hears no protest, and certainly sees none. . . . you speak privately to your colleagues, some of whom certainly feel as you do; but what do they say? They say, ‘It's not so bad’ or ‘You're seeing things’ or ‘You're an alarmist.’”

“And you are an alarmist. You are saying that this must lead to this, and you can't prove it. These are the beginnings,

yes; but how do you know for sure when you don't know the end, and how do you know, or even surmise, the end? On the one hand, your enemies, the law, the regime, the Party, intimidate you. On the other, your colleagues pooh-pooh you as pessimistic or even neurotic. You are left with your close friends, who are, naturally, people who have always thought as you have" (169-170).

And so we do nothing. Mayer is right. His colleague was right. What can we say?

One thing we can say is that those who have required masks, whether by accident or design, have made the feeling of uncertainty even greater. We struggle to know what others are thinking, or feeling, because our faces are hidden. In addition to the low-level anxiety and fear that masks induce in everyone (at the very least causing us to view others as threats to our safety and not as persons), we are uncertain *why* those around us are wearing masks. Is it simply because they are told to do so? Is it out of deference to others? Or because they genuinely desire to wear them?

Let's say it's true that the strong majority of workers would choose not to wear masks if their employers did not require them. How are we to know for sure what they prefer if the choice is taken from them? Similarly, if one was required to do various things to show allegiance to the Party, how was one to know whether others were genuinely loyal to the Party or simply going along in order to blend in (and not be taken to the camps)?

Gradually, Then Suddenly

"To live in this process is absolutely not to be able to notice it—please try to believe me—unless one has a much greater degree of political awareness, acuity, than most of us had ever had occasion to develop. Each step was so small, so inconsequential, so well explained or, on occasion,

'regretted,' that, unless one were detached from the whole process from the beginning, unless one understood what the whole thing was in principle, what all these 'little measures' that no 'patriotic German' could resent must some day lead to, one no more saw it developing from day to than a farmer in his field sees the corn growing. One day it is over his head" (168).

Of all the tactics employed by tyrants to achieve their goals, the illusion that we have plenty of time to escape is arguably the most important. If we could all go back to February 2020, how many of us would have predicted we would be *here*? How did it all happen? Gradually, then all at once. Mayer senses our dilemma:

"How is this to be avoided, among ordinary men, even highly educated ordinary men? Frankly, I do not know. I do not see, even now. Many, many times since it all happened I have pondered that pair of great maxims, Principiis obsta and Finem respice—'Resist the beginnings' and 'Consider the end.' But one must foresee the end in order to resist, or even see, the beginnings. One must foresee the end clearly and certainly and how is this to be done, by ordinary men or even by extraordinary men? Things might have changed here before they went as far as they did; they didn't, but they might have. And everyone counts on that might" (168).

Think back to March 2020. We should have resisted then. We should not have tolerated stay-at-home orders or various (and even non-sensical) restrictions on local businesses and private life. Governments had already gone too far. And then came the masks, and some said that masks were the hill. Individuals who shared these concerns were derided as fanatics and conspiracy theorists, but they were *right*.

Many did not see it, and even fewer resisted. I saw it relatively early, but I did not resist as fiercely as I

should, and my failure haunts me to this day. Had we more seriously resisted masks, the prospect of vaccine mandates would have largely collapsed. Indeed, there would be no political, moral, or practical support for vaccine mandates and the more insidious vaccine passports had mask mandates been successfully resisted. But we—but I—did not resist as fiercely as I should have.

Why not? I told myself that it was worth keeping my position of influence at my job. It was a “calculated decision” to continue to help those around me. And I also needed to provide food and shelter for my daughters, to enable them to have a “normal” childhood.

But in my good and noble compromises—they are, in fact, compromises—have I laid the groundwork for further infringements on my family’s lives and liberties? Have I sowed the seeds of an eternal dystopia that will forever terrorize my daughters and their children? Have I made a deal with the devil? More importantly, if I have, is there any way out of this contract?

The Power of Non-Violent Resistance

“It is actual resistance which worries tyrants, not lack of the few hands required to do the dark work of tyranny. What the Nazis had to gauge was the point at which atrocity would awaken the community to the consciousness of its moral habits. This point may be moved forward as the national emergency, or cold war, is moved forward, and still further forward in hot war. But it remains the point which the tyrant must always approach and never pass. If his calculation is too far behind the people’s temper, he faces a palace Putsch; if it is too far ahead, a popular revolution” (56).

We underestimate how much power people have when they choose to resist. Parents across the nation pushed back against mask mandates, and many school boards relented and made masks

optional. Many employees refused to comply with vaccine mandates, and many employers relented (or at least granted broad exemptions). Parents and employees did not win in all cases, but they've won more battles than many realize, and the war is far from over. Strong and united opposition has also resulted in reversals of government covid policies, and more mandates are being lifted as more pressure is applied. We must continue to resist and help others do the same, recognizing that the costs we bear will be worth it in the end.

The Cost of Dissent

"You are respected in the community. Why? Because your attitudes are the same as the community's. But are the community's attitudes respectable? We—you and I—want the community's approval on the community's basis. We don't want the approval of criminals, but the community decides what is criminal and what isn't. This is the trap. You and I—and my ten Nazi friends—are in the trap. It has nothing to do directly with fear for one's own or his family's safety, or his job, or his property. I may have all these, never lose them, and still be in exile. . . . My safety, unless I am accustomed to being a dissenter, or a recluse, or a snob, is in numbers; this man, who will pass me tomorrow and who, though he always said 'Hello' to me, would never have lifted a finger for me, will tomorrow reduce my safety by the number of one" (60).

In Hitler's Germany, to stray from the acceptable concerns, to deviate from the accepted narrative, was to put oneself at risk. And so it is today. Dissenters are looked on as the ones who cause problems. Challenging the accepted narratives or questioning the "consensus" draws the ire of both everyday citizens and cultural elites. Dissent is dangerous, not because one is factually incorrect in his assessments, but because his assessments challenge accepted dogmas.

The Cost of Compliance

There is a cost to being a dissenter. Mayer's friends were in constant danger of losing their jobs and their freedoms—and possibly their lives. But there is also a cost to compliance, and that cost is far greater than anything we can currently imagine. Listen carefully to Mayer:

“It is clearer all the time that, if you are going to do anything, you must make an occasion to do it, and then you are obviously a troublemaker. So you wait, and you wait. But the one great shocking occasion, when tens or hundreds or thousands will join with you, never comes. That's the difficulty. If the last and worst act of the whole regime had come immediately after the first and smallest, thousands, yes, millions would have been sufficiently shocked—if, let us say, the gassing of the Jews in '43 had come immediately after the 'German Firm' stickers on the windows of non-Jewish shops in '33. But of course this isn't the way it happens. In between come all the hundreds of little steps, some of them imperceptible, each of them preparing you not to be shocked by the next.

“And one day, too late, your principles, if you were ever sensible of them, all rush in upon you. The burden of self-deception has grown too heavy, and some minor incident, in my case my little boy, hardly more than a baby, saying 'Jew swine,' collapses it all at once, and you see that everything, everything, has changed and changed completely under your nose. The world you live in—your nation, your people—is not the world you were born in at all. The forms are all there, all untouched, all reassuring, the houses, the shops, the jobs, the mealtimes, the visits, the concerts, the cinema, the holidays. But the spirit, which you never noticed because you made the lifelong mistake of identifying it with the forms, is changed. Now you live in a world of hate and fear, and the people who hate and fear do not even know it themselves; when everyone is transformed, no one is

transformed. Now you live in a system which rules without responsibility even to God."

"You have gone almost all the way yourself. Life is a continuing process, a flow, not a succession of acts and events at all. It has flowed to a new level, carrying you with it, without any effort on your part. On this new level you live, you have been living more comfortably every day, with new morals, new principles. You have accepted things you would not have accepted five years ago, a year ago, things that your father, even in Germany, could not have imagined. Suddenly it all comes down, all at once. You see what you are, what you have done, or, more accurately, what you haven't done (for that was all that was required of most of us: that we do nothing). You remember those early meetings of your department in the university when, if one had stood, others would have stood, perhaps, but no one stood. A small matter, a matter of hiring this man or that, and you hired this one rather than that. You remember everything now, and your heart breaks. Too late. You are compromised beyond repair."

"What then? You must then shoot yourself. A few did. Or 'adjust' your principles. Many tried, and some, I suppose, succeeded; not I, however. Or learn to live the rest of your life with your shame. This last is the nearest there is, under the circumstances, to heroism: shame. Many Germans became this poor kind of hero, many more, I think, than the world knows or cares to know" (171-172).

I've read this section more times than I can count, and as I read it now, I weep for my own failures. My own fears. My own complicity in the slow growth of covid totalitarianism. Of allowing governments and media to set narratives. Of failing to take a stand. But it is not too late! What is coming with digital IDs and digital passports is more insidious, and more ingenious, but there is still time to resist. But we must

resolve to stand now. We must resolve to stand together. And we must stand no matter the cost.

“You know,” he went on, “when men who understand what is happening—the motion, that is, of history, not the reports of single events or developments—when such men do not object or protest, men who do not understand cannot be expected to. How many men would you say understand—in this sense—in America? And when, as the motion of history accelerates and those who don’t understand are crazed by fear, as our people were, and made into a great ‘patriotic’ mob, will they understand then, when they did not before?” (175).

The duty is upon us who see what is happening to stand up and resist. We will all bear some cost, either now or in the future. Some of us have experienced the cost of standing up: we have lost jobs, lost friends, even lost freedoms. But *all* of us have borne the cost of tyrannical overreach in the name of public health. I’ve lost count of the number of people I know who were not permitted to say goodbye to their loved ones. Who were denied access to potentially life-saving treatments. Who were refused medical care in the name of the common good. There is no doubt we’ve all suffered during the past two years, but failing to resist this ever-encroaching tyranny will cost more than we can comprehend. I don’t know exactly what it will cost us to stand for truth and liberty in the coming months and years. But what I can say with near certainty is that the cost of present resistance will be far more tolerable to our consciences and perhaps our lives than failure to resist. More importantly, resisting now will certainly be more tolerable for the lives of our children.

The Choice Before Us

Because of the risks to their lives and their families, many Germans refused to speak openly about what was happening, even when they knew. And their fears were completely justified:

“Those who came back from Buchenwald in the early years had promised—as every inmate of every German prison had always had to promise upon his release—not to discuss his prison experience. You should have broken your promise. You should have told your countrymen about it; you might, though the chances were all against you, have saved your country had you done so. But you didn’t. You told your wife, or your father, and swore them to secrecy. And so, although millions guessed, only thousands knew. Did you want to go back to Buchenwald, and to worse treatment this time? Weren’t you sorry for those who were left there? And weren’t you glad you were out?” (59).

Is this not the case with the many who have escaped the camps in North Korea? Or the Uyghurs who have been released from “re-education facilities” in Xinjiang, China? I dare not judge harshly those who have not spoken up, as I have no way of understanding what they have experienced. But I want to think that I—and that everyone reading this piece—will have the resolve to speak up in these dark hours. To stand shoulder to shoulder, to not shirk from our responsibility to our children, to our neighbors, and to the generations who will come after us. But then I think of my children—my three precious daughters—and I think of the present cost of standing up.

If I speak up, I might be arrested, my bank accounts might be frozen, my professional license suspended or revoked. My ability to provide for my family could be greatly diminished, and my girls might lose their family home. Even more, if I am one day arrested and taken to prison or to a camp (or whatever the facilities are called where people are being held against their will), I will not be present to play catch with my youngest, to watch my second ride her hoverboard, or hear my oldest read to me. I might not be able to tuck them in bed, to sing to them, to pray with them—and not only for a night but for weeks or months (if not years). So I am torn.

Do I speak up, knowing that voicing dissent could upend my daughters' lives and render them virtually fatherless? Or do I choose to remain silent, with the protests of my heart suppressed until they shrivel to nothing? Do I accept a new normal of dystopian tyranny in order to be physically present with my children, knowing that this choice will consign my daughters (and their families and descendants) to a totalitarianism that may *never* be overthrown? What would love compel me to do? What is the *right* thing to do? What will I choose to do? I know what I hope I will choose, but do you see the difficulty?

What Will We Choose?

"Here in Kronenberg? Well, we had twenty thousand people. Of these twenty thousand people, how many opposed? How would you know? How would I know? If you ask me how many did something in secret opposition, something that meant great danger to them, I would say, well, twenty. And how many did something like that openly, and from good motives alone? Maybe five, maybe two. That's the way men are." "You always say, That's the way men are," Herr Klingelhöfer," I said. "Are you sure that that's the way men are?" "That's the way men are here," he said. "Are they different in America?" Alibis, alibis, alibis; alibis for the Germans; alibis, too, for man, who, when he was once asked, in olden time, whether he would prefer to do or to suffer injustice, replied, "I would rather neither." The mortal choice which every German had to make—whether or not he knew he was making it—is a choice which we Americans have never had to confront" (93-94).

When Mayer wrote his book, Americans had not yet confronted the choices his friends had to make. But for the past two years, we have been staring these choices in the face. Certainly Australians are confronting them, as are the citizens of New Zealand. Austria, Spain, Italy, and Canada—to say nothing of many Eastern nations—are most definitely

confronting them. And in many blue cities and states across the nation, our fellow Americans have faced these choices and felt the weight of separation and discrimination.

I often ask my students the following question when we discuss this book each spring: what happens if the United States and other free nations fall into tyranny? In Germany before World War II, it was at least possible to immigrate elsewhere. One could get out if he had means and if he saw it coming in time. But what happens if we give up the fight? Where else can we go? Where can our children flee? If the whole world becomes like China, there is nowhere else to escape the approaching storm.

So what must we do? We must decide today to draw a line that must not be crossed. As others have written, we should have drawn the line at masks. Governments the world over have rendered entire societies more compliant by hiding our faces. In so many cases, we no longer see others as human. We instead view them as threats, as anonymous vectors of disease. But since we didn't draw the line at masks in 2020, we must regain that ground that was lost. We must fight to end not only the current mask and vaccine mandates (and other remaining covid restrictions), but we must not relent until the *possibility* of such mandates is viewed not only as politically untenable but morally and ethically indefensible. And no matter the cost, we cannot under any circumstance accept the use of digital passports (this [short video](#) shows why). And finally, we must not only be in the business of changing policies; we must strive to change hearts and minds, to wake others to the reality of what is taking place.

Friends, we must act—I must act. There is no more time to wait.

Joshua Styles is an Associate Professor of Criminal Justice &

Legal Studies / Christian Studies at North Greenville University. He is committed to finding and reporting the truth.

cover image "Hitler greets the Protestant Archbishop of Nuremberg, Ludwig Müller, and Benedictine Abbott Albanus Schachleitner at the Reich Party Rally of 1934." is in [the public domain](#)