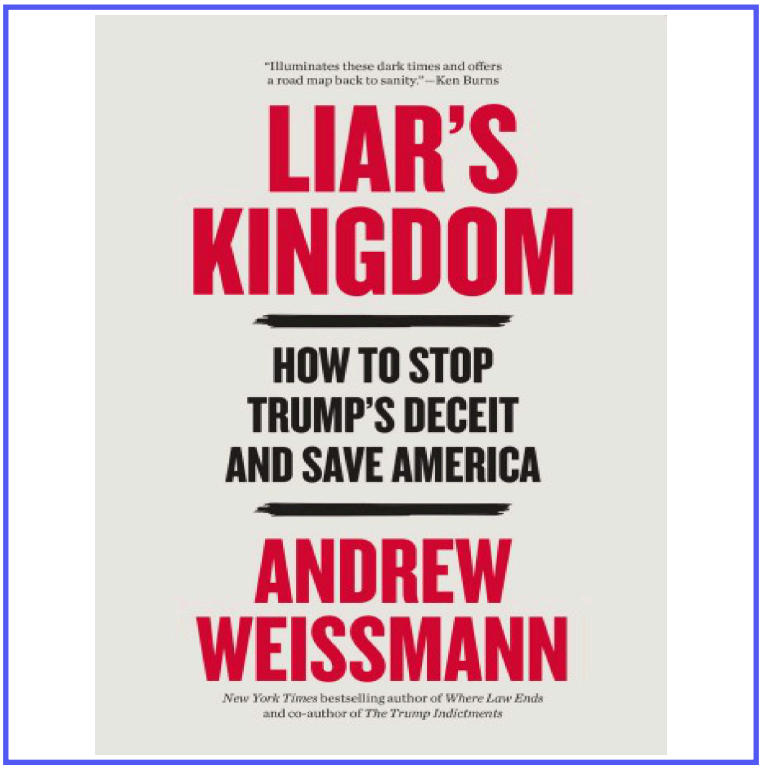



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# Contents

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*Dedication*

*Epigraph*

Introduction

CHAPTER 1
The Honesty Crisis

CHAPTER 2
Democracy at Stake

CHAPTER 3
The Marketplace of Ideas

CHAPTER 4
Stolen Valor

CHAPTER 5
Looking Overseas

CHAPTER 6
A Way Forward

CHAPTER 7
The Law in Action

Conclusion

*Acknowledgments*

*Discover More*

*Notes*

*About the Author*

*To Lisa*

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The result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world — and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end — is being destroyed.

— Hannah Arendt

# INTRODUCTION

It was spring of 2019, halfway through the first administration of Donald J. Trump, when I bounded breathlessly into my parents' favorite Manhattan restaurant. They had lunch here at the same table every Saturday afternoon, and today I was joining them — but as so often happened those days, I'd been running late. I had only recently returned to New York City from my latest stint in Washington, DC, where I'd just finished working as a senior prosecutor for Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller. I was still reorienting myself to both civilian life and the pace of the Big Apple.

My parents knew from my decades of work at the Department of Justice that, although we had a lot of catching up to do, it was going to be a pretty one-sided affair. As a government employee, I had learned to stay tight-lipped about my work. As they were both talkers, I knew this would not result in awkward silences. Sure enough, they delved headlong into what was happening to our country.

My father was a research scientist and my mother a Freudian psychologist. Between their two professions, they had a lot to say about our president and the current American political landscape. True to his training, Dad railed about the lack of data to support Trump's various pronouncements — a gap so pronounced that he concluded Trump was not just factually wrong, but intentionally so. Mom was focused more on the "why" question — why were so many people ready to accept such representations as true, when they were plainly false. "Cognitive dissonance" and "denial" were two concepts she expounded on.

I had given a lot of thought to these same questions. It was impossible not to, having just emerged from an investigation into Russia's incontrovertible interference in the 2016 election, which the president nonetheless frequently derided as "the Russia hoax." But on this day, I was less interested in sharing my own impressions with my parents than I was in

getting theirs.

My parents had both been fresh out of college during the 1950s Red Scare, in which Senator Joseph McCarthy engaged in a hunt for communists who, he claimed, were infiltrating the government, the media, and universities. How, I asked, did that period compare to the time we were living in now? We had survived McCarthyism, and I probably was hoping they would reassure me that we'd survive this, too — that what we were experiencing was just another pendulum swing, one that would correct itself with time.

My parents were of one mind on my inquiry: the McCarthy era was worse. No doubt, they observed, Trump and McCarthy both resorted to lies and fabricated boogeymen as a means to gain and cling to power. My parents acknowledged that Trump, unlike McCarthy, had far more actual power than the senator to carry out his threats. But what made the demagoguery of the 1950s so scary, they said, was how alone you felt; no one was speaking out. People were too afraid. You felt completely isolated and unsupported. By contrast, although half the country may have supported Trump at the time of our lunch, the other half did not and was unafraid to say so.

Not one to view the world through rose-colored glasses, my father said that I was ignoring a more apt historical analogue: Germany in the 1930s. The same resort to lies and boogeymen; the same appeals to nationalism, victimization, and class warfare; the same misguided belief by the elites that they would be able to control the candidate when he came to power. My father had a more intimate awareness of this history than books alone could afford: he was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1930 and was Jewish. He and his parents managed to get out after the *Anschluss* in 1938, when the Germans marched into Austria and its borders were closed.

Dad rarely made comparisons to those times. It was understood in our family that they simply were not analogous to anything before or since. As he spoke, I found myself wondering, *Is Dad overreacting?*

I never got to tell him that he was all too right. My father died just before the COVID-19 pandemic, and today my mother suffers from acute dementia. It is one of God's small blessings that they are unable to compare the current American upheaval with what my father lived through as a boy in Europe. If they could, I know in my heart that their answer to my

question would be quite different, given the brazenness of Trump and his enablers during his second presidency, and given the cowardly silence brought on by multiple acts of retribution. Neither do I have any doubt that Dad would continue to draw a historical parallel to prewar Germany. Although years have passed since our Saturday lunch conversation, it came flooding back when Senator JD Vance himself labeled Trump "America's Hitler" (which he later would retract). Now we are confronted daily with another analogy: Trump as a king, with unchecked power despite a system that is based on checks and balances to diffuse that power. This abuse of his position is noted by judges called on to adjudicate the excesses of his actions, as well as by millions of people across the globe in "No Kings" rallies protesting the exercise of power by this American president.

The questions that we discussed that afternoon at lunch remain particularly salient. How are we to deal with the core challenges to democracy we are confronting anew today — especially the fact that the truth no longer seems to matter and that our politicians lie with abandon, and without legal and political consequence? What does it mean for the longevity of a society when we no longer have a common ground?

I was still wrestling with these questions one day in the summer of 2025 as I walked from my digs on the Left Bank of Paris to my temporary NYU-France office, where I had begun drafting this book during time off from my "day job" teaching national security and criminal procedure courses at New York University School of Law. Each morning, I walked across the short bridge that connects two islands floating in the Seine — the tiny island of Île de la Cité and the even smaller Île Saint-Louis. From this vantage point I was confronted with two seemingly disparate monuments that, on this day, resonated with special force.

The first monument was the Mémorial des Martyrs de la Déportation, which commemorates those who died in the concentration camps established by the German Nazi Party. It comprises a series of subterranean concrete warrens, graphically recounting the horrors and cruelty of the deadliest of authoritarian regimes. The exhibit depicts a government with no functioning checks or balances — no independent news media or legal system to reveal and stop the crimes transpiring in the name of the German people. Walking through the memorial's windowless room after windowless room evokes by design that bygone system's oppression and persecution.

No wonder that, many years later, FBI Director Louis Freeh required all incoming FBI special agents to visit the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, to understand the great power they soon would be privileged to wield and to absorb what can happen when that power goes unchecked.

The second monument before me that day was one of the great cathedrals of the Western world, Notre-Dame de Paris. Building began in the twelfth century, an astounding thousand years ago, but in 2019 it was engulfed in a ravaging fire that ignited in the wooden "forest" supporting its metal roof. Images of its charred beams, collapsed roof and spire, and the exposed ribs of its famed flying buttresses rocketed across the Internet, to our collective disbelief. I had taken the cathedral's permanence for granted, only to watch the sight of it vanish in thick smoke.

The reaction to Notre-Dame's devastation was immediate and uplifting: an outpouring within France and across the globe to support rebuilding the edifice. Architects, craftspeople, environmentalists, safety specialists, and preservationists were assembled. This team of specialists made critical decisions about how to rebuild, tempering the goals of historical accuracy in design and materials with the imperative of adding modern fortifications that would thwart another conflagration. Sprinkler systems, fire-retardant wood, and modern alert systems were all added to the project, even as the cathedral's original types of oak and limestone were reused as the primary construction materials.

These two disparate monuments, I realized, exemplify the main theme of this book: First, not to look away from the authoritarianism engulfing the United States. Second, to prepare for a time when we will be able to rebuild — but wisely. Like the choices made by the stalwart Notre-Dame team, we should not resort to a mere facsimile of what was there before the fire. We must incorporate new, sturdier elements in a design that respects the original but fortifies it for the future.

You may be wondering how on God's green earth I could have such dour thoughts instead of succumbing to the mesmerizing beauty of Paris, the most romantic of cities and a seemingly perfect antidote to the political turmoil back home. I was living, after all, that old joke: "What are the four best things about being an academic?" Answer: May, June, July, and August.

But my other "day job" keeps me tethered to the sobering daily churn of