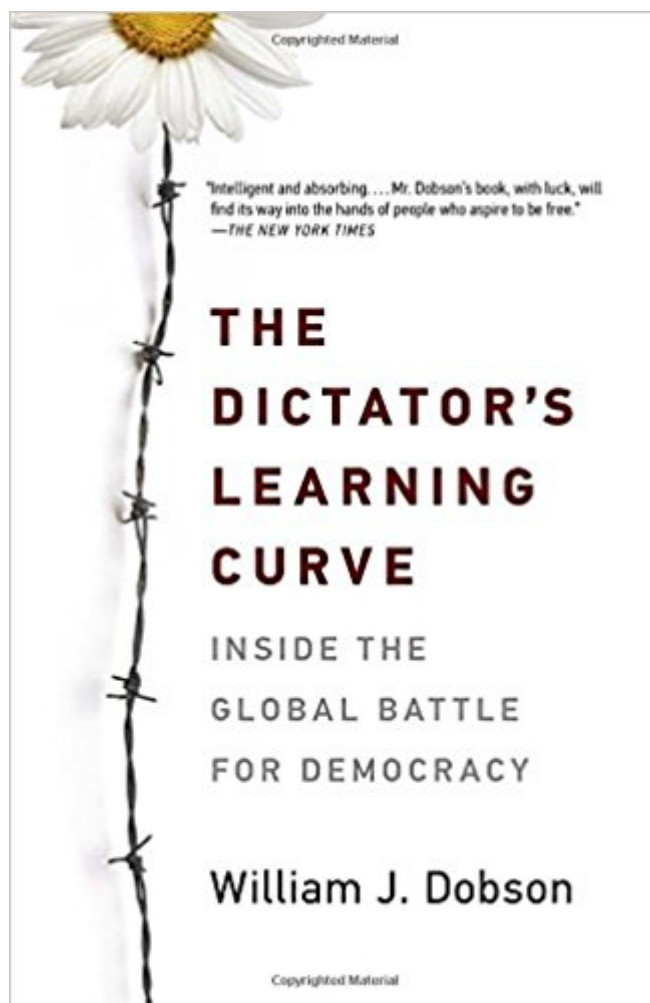


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# The Dictator's Learning Curve: Inside The Global Battle For Democracy



## Synopsis

In this riveting anatomy of authoritarianism, acclaimed journalist William Dobson takes us inside the battle between dictators and those who would challenge their rule. Recent history has seen an incredible moment in the war between dictators and democracy—•with waves of protests sweeping Syria and Yemen, and despots falling in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. But the Arab Spring is only the latest front in a global battle between freedom and repression, a battle that, until recently, dictators have been winning hands-down. The problem is that today—•s authoritarians are not like the frozen-in-time, ready-to-crack regimes of Burma and North Korea. They are ever-morphing, technologically savvy, and internationally connected, and have replaced more brutal forms of intimidation with subtle coercion. The Dictator—•s Learning Curve explains this historic moment and provides crucial insight into the fight for democracy.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Praise for William J. Dobson's *The Dictator's Learning Curve*:  
•“Intelligent and absorbing. . . . Mr. Dobson's book, with luck, will find its way into the hands of people who aspire to be free.”  
•The New York Times  
•“An essential perspective on a crucial struggle. . . . Dobson is that rare thinker who combines a gift for storytelling with an understanding of how the world works.”  
•Fareed Zakaria  
•“[Dobson] writes with exemplary clarity and a sharp eye for color. . . . Timely, authoritative, and as readable as a novel, this is one of the season's most resonant books—not least because it ends on a note of guarded

hope for the future. Prospect "A brilliant and original analysis of the nature of modern authoritarianism. Anne Applebaum, author of Iron Curtain, winner of the Pulitzer Prize "[A] deft, incisive book. . . . The mix of perspectives results in an impressive overview of the global struggle between authoritarian power and determined advocates of political freedom. Publishers Weekly, starred review "Dobson has invested time and insight, from China to Venezuela, and Egypt to Russia, trying to capture the shape-changing nature of modern authoritarianism, and the resourcefulness and wit of its opponents. . . . [He] captures empathetically the skill and insight of modern neo-despots in much the way their more successful opponents do. . . . Rare is the book on dictatorship that can end on an uplifting note that its narrative carefully substantiates. Financial Times "William J. Dobson's exploration of the contest between contemporary dictatorships and those who rebel against them is valuable because it offers a sober analysis of both sides. Dobson traveled nearly 100,000 miles researching this book, which takes a close look at the face of modern authoritarianism. . . . His book may be about the struggle for freedom of other countries, but there are lessons in it for the preservation of our own. The Washington Post "[A] thoughtful journey through formidable dictatorships of our time. . . . Instead of offering caricatures of vintage dictators, Dobson observes the more dangerous trend of dictators adopting the form of democratic governance, while draining it of any substance. The Independent "Dobson's is a terrific book to argue with. And it's hard to think of a higher compliment for a book about Big Ideas. Christian Science Monitor "Says something really fresh about the world we live in. Michael Burleigh, The Telegraph's Best Books of 2012 "After a remarkable year in which citizens of a dozen countries have challenged their authoritarian governments, readers will welcome veteran journalist Dobson's overview of the complicated dance of adaptation by the world's dictators and those who resist their oppressive power. . . . A timely, valuable contribution to readers' understanding of global unrest. Booklist "Colorful and sharply reported. Bloomberg BusinessWeek "Fascinating . . . some of Dobson's most astute observations come from his reporting about China. The Chinese communists, he concludes, are the least complacent of today's modern authoritarians. Foreign Policy "A vivid real-time portrait of the movement for democracy. Among its virtues, Dobson's book clarifies the ways in which the recent challenge to dictatorship represents a coordinated worldwide effort, and the ways in which each country's struggle is unique. James

Fallows, national correspondent for The Atlantic and author of China Airborne – “It is hard to imagine a timelier book than this one. William Dobson provides a new framework and a new vocabulary for understanding modern authoritarianism, backed up by detailed and gripping stories of dictators and their citizen opponents in Russia, China, Venezuela, Egypt, and Malaysia. Anyone seeking to make sense of the extraordinary tide of revolutions and protests sweeping around the world will find The Dictator’s Learning Curve an indispensable read.”

• Anne-Marie Slaughter, Bert G. Kerstetter – “University Professor of Politics and International Affairs, Princeton University, and former Director of Policy Planning, U.S. State Department” – “William J. Dobson vividly portrays [the] struggle against authoritarian rule | Dobson’s coverage of Venezuela’s internal political struggles is particularly fascinating. He had spectacular access to well-placed sources in this oil-rich country, including political prisoners.”

• Wilson Quarterly – “Dobson’s book ends up not only a sophisticated but also a wonderfully readable account of the latest installments in an age-old type of struggle.”

• Pacific Standard – “Dobson has interviewed scores of protesters, security experts, opposition political candidates, elite power brokers, and a former Egyptian police officer who, from his computer in the United States, guided protesters occupying Tahrir Square | As a result, the reader gets a wide-ranging overview of political strife as we live it now.”

• The Weekly Standard – “Timely”

| Dobson chronicles in detail the ingenious but sinister ways in which modern authoritarian regimes are suppressing dissent.

• The Journal of Democracy – “A fluid study of how heavy-handed repression by authoritarian regimes has given way to more subtle forms of control. . . . A pertinent work of journalistic research that will gain fresh meaning as authoritarian regimes both evolve and fall.”

• Kirkus Reviews

William J. Dobson is politics and foreign affairs editor for Slate. He has been an editor at Foreign Affairs, Newsweek International, and Foreign Policy. During his tenure at Foreign Policy, the magazine was nominated for the coveted National Magazine Award for General Excellence each year and won top honors in 2007 and 2009. His articles and essays have appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal, and he has provided analysis for ABC, CNN, CBS, MSNBC, and NPR. He lives in Washington, DC.

Great book, must read to people who think that because there are still elections in some countries, they are Democratic. Wrong!

Required reading for a class I'm taking and very enjoyable. Based on interviews with many of the movers and shakers who actually were involved. Very timely.

Some interesting examples of how modern dictators are changing their methods to more sophisticated ones. By using the principle of a "wolf in sheep's clothing" they can "blind" the public to their true character. The foolish and the immature will follow a leader "over the cliff" if they promise a lot! The poor including the "poor in spirit" are particularly susceptible. The greedy are also easy to "buy off". I am intrigued, however, by the creative non-violent approach espoused in the book. I think it has real possibilities but I wonder how effectively it could be applied in China against the CCP.

I have mixed feelings regarding this book. The negatives: This book is all over the place, jumping from descriptions of struggling freedom activists in Venezuela to Egypt to China in a single chapter. This disjointedness somewhat harms the flow of the book. It is not a critical issue, but more a question of style. The other negative is that the writing style is a bit casual. The author is after all a journalist not an academic, but I am used to reading historical analyses done by academics and their style is more formal yet authoritative. Again, this is not a critical flaw. The positives: This book is definitely a worthwhile read. It lets us know about the courage and fortitude of people fighting for democracy in brutal and vicious regimes. I take my hat off to these people. They are heroes in every sense of the word, and I want to express my appreciation to the author for bringing their existence to my attention. In that sense, I recommend this book wholeheartedly!

It is a true picture of democracy being perverted to produce constitutional dictators. I would recommend reading it together with Sharps "From dictatorship to democracy". It is a true picture of Chinese, Russian, Myanmar, Singapore, Venezuelan and other autocracies where the constitution is mocked by the subversion of balance of powers.

The Dictator's Learning Curve: Inside the Global Battle for Democracy is not what I expected, and yet I love it. I heard NPR interviewing the author, and the subject fascinated me. As dictatorships are being challenged and overthrown throughout the Middle East and the world, the natural flip side would be that some regimes are learning from the challenges, and growing stronger. Although I thought this would be the focus of the book, it isn't. The focus really is a blend of successful rebel

movements, rebel strategies, and general authoritarian practices that have succeeded or failed. It isn't a study of dictatorships and their structures and evolution as much as a study of how each side defines itself and its boundaries. The duality of this approach is gripping and educational, and clearly biased in support of the resistance movements. As I, too, think the behavior of these dictators is disgusting, I'm glad to hear the skepticism of the author as he lists the meager defenses regimes offer for subjecting their citizens to human rights abuses. I watch the news daily. I even pay attention. Having read this book, I understand the news much more, and feel better connected to the global political climate. Read it!

I would have given this book five stars if it had more historical context. Even if readers prefer its 20th century discussions, the concept of tyrant and dictator have Greek (as in Xenophon's "Tyrannicus") and Roman historical connections that could have been placed in an appendix section. I also would like to read the author's explicit definitions of "totalitarianism" and "authority." Rather than expand this review with quotations from Arendt's "Origins of Totalitarianism," Max Weber's "Theory of Social and Economic Organization" and Georg Simmel's "Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies," I suggest that these readings enrich understanding of the last three centuries of regimes considered free, dictatorial or authoritarian. Readers could work out for themselves whether or not Dobson's assertion that totalitarian regimes are a 20th century phenomenon. Arendt points out a specific structural relation among totalitarian regimes that she ties to failures of democratic institutions. Weber understands the role of charisma in emotional attachment to a Leader (Lenin, Evita, Hitler and more) that becomes routinized by subsequent generations. Simmel understands the nature of cloaking actual relations in a regime that underlie its public facade. What I like about this book is that it helps refresh memories of 20th century events and stands ready to assist 21st century readers with a review of political economies of "authoritarian" regimes. Learning curves of control-driven personalities with a shaky grasp on ethics are important to document. And extant "democracies" still have the flaws described by Machiavelli in his three good forms of government that produce three bad forms of government. Broadly, it is the same flaw: failure to govern. Princes become tyrants in very few generations, aristocrats forget obligation (Weber again) to become oligarchs and democracies descend into licentiousness by voting themselves "bread and circuses." There is another technical issue I will raise related to non linear developmental tracks in a history of governance: the hope that a group of leaders will be "safer" in terms of political voice than a single person. Plato's "Republic" raises but does not solve "the problem of the guardians." Rather, it suggests that guardians of a state are like "noble dogs" who are given training to know friend or

enemy. By the time of the American revolution, a unique design for guardians was developed in the US Constitution's separation of powers. This was and is, an "unstable hierarchy" with specific rules of interaction, similar to that of "scissors-paper-rock." Compromise in this circular set of relations allows each participant some things desired, but requires skill at negotiating peacefully. Or it might result in the American habit of "disjointed incrementalism" or muddling through (William Ophuls "The Politics of Scarcity"). A five part unstable hierarchy can be found in the rules for "scissors-paper-rock-lizard-Spock" (for example, Spock refutes paper, lizard poisons Spock). Unstable hierarchies are tricky, because they demand constant attention to detail (small picture) related to the actual effort of governing (intermediate to large picture). In this century, there are a number of states that have triple authority entities. Number of actors is not salvation, but adherence to clearly balanced rules is a road to survival with reasonable freedoms. I will leave it to readers to figure out which multiple entities are in the Middle and the Far East. Are the guardians of the state armed? What about President Eisenhower's warning concerning military-industrial complexes? And how many Americans have read all of the Federalist Papers? Does the current mode of war fighting a diffuse enemy rather than conventional war for territory (see Admiral McRaven's book "Spec Ops") pose problems connected with secret "black operations" for democracies that could be exploited by dictators? What is jointly learned about "crowd control technologies" (see Dobson's Chapter 8) by interacting authorities and demonstrators? If this "Dictator's Learning Curve" is to find its place in a history of dangerous trends of controlling populations under the rubric of a "state," then it needs some more explicit connections to human efforts to safely provide food and shelter with political voice for their populations. The potential is there in its eight case studies. Maintaining democratic rule is always labile and demands diligence from its deme. Finally, Chuang Tzu (Zuangzi) of more than two millennia ago points out in his tale of "Binding Trunks" how Robber Wu can steal a trunk (analog of a state) if its bindings are sufficiently strong.

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