

English 3281
Essay/Prose Study #4
We're Heading into Dark Times. This is how to be your own light in the Age of Trump
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Sarah Kendzior is a [St. Louis](#)-based journalist and author. She has written for [Al Jazeera](#), [The Guardian](#), [Foreign Policy](#) and other outlets, is the author of *The View From Flyover Country* – a collection of essays first published in *Al Jazeera* – and a co-host of the *Gaslit Nation* podcast. She grew up in Connecticut and went to [Sarah Lawrence College](#) in the late 1990s. After graduating from college, beginning in 2000, Kendzior worked for three years for the [New York Daily News](#). Kendzior later obtained a Master's degree in Eurasian Studies from Indiana University and a PhD in anthropology from Washington University in St. Louis. She speaks [Russian](#), and her focus of study was former Soviet Union authoritarian states. Kendzior's dissertation was on how the Uzbekistan dictatorship employed the Internet to undermine public trust in and manipulate the media.

In a well-developed, multi-paragraph essay, discuss the extent to which you think Sarah Kendzior has achieved her purpose. You may wish to discuss literary or rhetorical techniques such as point of view, parallelism, and diction.

(1) My fellow Americans, I have a favor to ask you.

(2) Today is November 18, 2016. I want you to write about who you are, what you have experienced, and what you have endured.

(3) Write down what you value; what standards you hold for yourself and for others. Write about your dreams for the future and your hopes for your children. Write about the struggle of your ancestors and how the hardship they overcame shaped the person you are today.

(4) Write your biography, write down your memories. Because if you do not do it now, you may forget.

(5) Write a list of things you would never do. Because it is possible that in the next year, you will do them.

(6) Write a list of things you would never believe. Because it is possible that in the next year, you will either believe them or be forced to say you believe them.

A president-elect who wants to strip our country down for parts

(7)It is increasingly clear, as Donald Trump appoints his cabinet of white supremacists and war-mongers, as hate crimes rise, as the institutions that are supposed to protect us cower, as international norms are shattered, that his ascendancy to power is not normal.

(8)This is an American authoritarian kleptocracy, backed by millionaire white nationalists both in the United States and abroad, meant to strip our country down for parts, often using ethnic violence to do so.

(9)This is not a win for anyone except them. This is a moral loss and a dangerous threat for everyone in the United States, and by extension, everyone abroad.

(10)I have been studying authoritarian states for over a decade, and I would never exaggerate the severity of this threat. Others who study or have lived in authoritarian states have come to the same conclusion as me.

(11)And the plight is beyond party politics: it is not a matter of having a president-elect whom many dislike, but having a president-elect whose explicit goal is to destroy the nation.

None of us deserves what's coming

(12)I am writing this not for those who oppose him, but for those who support him, because Trump and his backers are going to hurt you too.

(13)I live in Missouri, now a bright red state, alongside you. I have faced the same economic misery as you, struggling to stay afloat since the recession, which never ended though many falsely claimed it did. I have the same anxiety over crime and racial tension and corrupt leadership as you. I am an independent, not a Democrat or a Republican, because I am as disappointed in political parties as you.

(14)I am writing down my own good memories, and some of them are with you. I have walked beside you in our state parks, along our flowing rivers, and in our cities and small towns. I have talked and laughed with you in St. Louis, in Cape Girardeau, in Hannibal, in the Ozarks, and in the devastated rural areas in between, while surrounded by your signs and hats proclaiming support for Donald Trump. You do not deserve what is going to happen to you, and I do not deserve what is going to happen to me, because there is absolutely no one in the world who deserves what may be coming.

(15)He told us his plans all along, though most chose to downplay or deny them
You can look to the president-elect himself for a vision of what is to come. He has told you his plans all along, though most chose to downplay or deny them. You can even look back to before his candidacy, when in February 2014, he went on Fox News to defend Russia. Why a reality TV host was on Fox News defending Russia is its own story, but here is what he said about his desired outcome for the United States:

(16)*"You know what solves it? When the economy crashes, when the country goes to total hell and everything is a disaster. Then you'll have a [chuckles], you know, you'll have riots to go back to where we used to be when we were great."*

(17) This is what “Make America Great Again” means to Donald Trump. It is how he has operated his businesses, taking advantage of economic disasters like the housing market crash for personal gain. It is why, during a long and painful recession, he made “You’re fired” a national catchphrase, because he understands that sometimes it feels good to know that the person getting fired, for once, is not you. He said he could shoot someone on 5th Avenue and people would still vote for him, and he said he could grab women “by the pu**y” because “When you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything.”

The system is rigged in his favor

(18) He is right about that last part. No one holds Trump accountable, because he is exactly what he claimed to be railing against: an elite billionaire with no concern for the average person, a kleptocrat who enjoys taunting people less powerful than him with threats. When you have that kind of money, which Trump was given in birth and further gained through fraud, there are few limitations to the ways you can hurt people.

(19) He is right that the system is rigged: it is rigged in his favor. And now it is rigged against you, unless we find a way to stop it.

(20) I have been to the Trump rallies, not as a journalist, but as an observer in the crowd. I talked with you and you told me your hopes for the country under him, how you felt you were watching history being made, how you thought he was going to stick it to those who have been screwing us. I know the loyalty he inspires. I know it is unearned, because he lied.

(21) Trump’s vision for the United States is echoed in that of his chief strategist, Steve Bannon, a man who even the very right-wing Glenn Beck describes as a dangerous, sociopathic racist. In 2016, a reporter from the Daily Beast recalled this conversation with Bannon:

“I’m a Leninist,” Bannon proudly proclaimed.

Shocked, I asked him what he meant.

“Lenin,” he answered, “wanted to destroy the state, and that’s my goal too. I want to bring everything crashing down, and destroy all of today’s establishment.”

The days of free speech may soon end

(22) This mirrors Trump’s own goals of destroying the United States, and it mirrors the intentions of dictators everywhere, who see people as objects to be manipulated and discarded, and not as real human beings. I have seen dictatorships firsthand in the former Soviet Union. I have friends who were imprisoned for expressing even the slightest criticism of the state, friends who had their businesses shaken down by the government and were left bankrupt, and friends whose family members were murdered by state security services.

(23) I have worked, often unpaid, as an expert witness in political asylum cases for people from authoritarian states, because I will do anything to help people in this terrible position. The brutality they have endured, the fear of the state that prevents them from making independent choices, is something difficult for American minds to fathom.

The mainstream media has promoted him ceaselessly and are now rationalizing and normalizing Trump's most extreme policies

(24) We are a deeply flawed nation, and those who are minorities or poor have faced state-sanctioned cruelty as well as limited opportunities. But it is simply not the same as authoritarianism.

(25) Though our speech is often challenged, we can still speak. We can debate each other and come up with ways to improve our country. We can scream at each other and mock each other and tell each other our political choices are terrible. You will miss those days, they may end soon.

(26) You may be wondering why I am writing a letter to Americans in a Dutch news outlet. It is because I do not trust the US outlets to remain free, and believe that many are already compromised. The mainstream media who Trump proclaims to hate are actually his best friend. They have been all along, promoting him ceaselessly, and they are now rationalizing and normalizing his most extreme policies. Trump tells you to boycott CNN, but CNN's boss always had a framed Trump tweet on the wall.

(27) For what it's worth, Trump supporters, I have always supported your boycott of CNN. But this common ground is grim.

Preparing to live like a nation of dissidents

(28) It is possible that I will end up living like the dissidents who I defended from foreign dictatorships for so long. I will talk in coded terms, as I have started to do already. Did you think it was a coincidence that I published an article about Elijah Lovejoy, a journalist who sought freedom for all and was killed by St. Louis mobs, right before the election? I will try to continue to publish in foreign outlets. I will rearrange my life so I can fight this fight, because I am fighting for my country, and I never give up on my country or on my countrymen.

(29) But I need you to fight too, in the way that matters most, which is inside. Authoritarianism is not merely a matter of state control, it is something that eats away at who you are. It makes you afraid, and fear can make you cruel. It compels you to conform and to comply and accept things that you would never accept, to do things you never thought you would do.

(30) You do it because everyone else is doing it, because the institutions you trust are doing it and telling you to do it, because you are afraid of what will happen if you do not do it, and because the voice in your head crying out that something is wrong grows fainter and fainter until it dies.

We are heading into dark times, and you need to be your own light. Do not accept brutality and cruelty as normal even if it is sanctioned

(31) That voice is your conscience, your morals, your individuality. No one can take that from you unless you let them. They can take everything from you in material terms – your house, your job, your ability to speak and move freely. They cannot take away who you truly are. They can never truly know you, and that is your power.

(32)But to protect and wield this power, you need to know yourself – right now, before their methods permeate, before you accept the obscene and unthinkable as normal.

(33)My heart breaks for the United States of America. It breaks for those who think they are my enemies as much as it does for my friends. You still have your freedom, so use it. There are many groups organizing for both resistance and subsistence, but we are heading into dark times, and you need to be your own light. Do not accept brutality and cruelty as normal even if it is sanctioned. Protect the vulnerable and encourage the afraid. If you are brave, stand up for others. If you cannot be brave – and it is often hard to be brave – be kind.

(34)But most of all, never lose sight of who you are and what you value. If you find yourself doing something that feels questionable or wrong a few months or years from now, find that essay you wrote on who you are and read it. Ask if that version of yourself would have done the same thing.

(35)And if the answer is no? Don't do it.
