



Tips for Grassroots Advocates on Defending Democracy

Excerpts from legal scholar and author Joyce Vance in her book, *Giving Up Is Unforgivable: A Manual for Keeping a Democracy*

Democracy is not a spectator sport. [It] is an ongoing experiment, which means you have to prepare for it like a marathon.

Be Smart. Understand the forces that don't have your best interests at heart will try to manipulate you. They will do it with misinformation. Our job is to resist being manipulated. We can and should develop our own information literacy programs.

Be in Community. Being in a community is part of how we survive the damage that is being done in our country. Especially if you're frequently among people who don't share your concerns, surround yourself with people who take what we're facing seriously, and who can buoy your spirits.

Never Bet Against America. Refuse to believe that government doesn't work. We elect representatives to do a job. It's time to make demands on the people who are supposed to be representing us. Be heard.

Understand that Defending Democracy Comes in a Lot of Colors. Democracy is about the ability of individuals to act on their own views and beliefs. Different issues matter to different people. If everyone devotes their time to the issue that matters most to them, then all the work gets done.

Decide Who You Are and Stick to It. Know your personal red lines. Be prepared to make a stand for them. Once you cave in, like some law firms and universities did when Trump came to them with demands, that's who you are.

Be the Hope. Help others get over the rough patches. We all have them. If you give up hope, there is no chance of succeeding at the end.

Take Baby Steps. It might not seem like enough, but it can be the slow, individual, person-to-person conversations that matter most. Plant seeds that might grow down the road. Believe that the work you do is important, because it is.

Exercise Your Rights. Protest works. It is quintessentially American. We have a First Amendment right to peacefully assemble and petition the government, to speak freely, to associate with whom we choose. Exercise [your rights] early and often. And take your friends along with you.



A front-and-back handout from the Values to Votes Initiative of the Grassroots Iowa Network. For more information:
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Presidential Statements on the Rule of Law and The Independence of the Justice Department

Dwight D. Eisenhower. Speech to the American Bar Association, 1958

“The clearest way to show what the rule of law means to us is to demonstrate that we ourselves respect it.”

Context: Eisenhower frequently emphasized that constitutional government requires public officials—including presidents—to be constrained by law and by respect for legal institutions.

Jimmy Carter. Remarks at the Department of Justice, 1978

“We must restore complete confidence in the integrity of our system of justice and in the independence of those who administer it.”

Context: Speaking in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal, Carter stressed rebuilding public trust in the impartial administration of justice and reaffirming the independence of federal law enforcement.

Ronald Reagan. Remarks to U.S. Attorneys, 1985

“The independence of the courts from improper political influence is a sacred principle of our system of justice.”

Context: Reagan emphasized that prosecutors and courts must uphold the law free from political interference, reinforcing the traditional norm of institutional independence.

Barack Obama. Remarks to Department of Justice employees, 2015

“I appointed you, but you don’t serve me. You serve the American people. I expect you to act with independence and integrity.”

Context: Obama used this line to underscore that Justice Department officials represent the Constitution and the public interest rather than the political priorities of the president.

Donald Trump. Interview with *The New York Times*, 2017 and Speech at the Department of Justice, 2025

“I have absolute right to do what I want to do with the Justice Department.”

“Our predecessors turned this Department of Justice into the Department of Injustice. ... As the chief law enforcement officer in our country, I demand full accountability.”

Context: Trump has turned the Department of Justice into a tool for imposing his will, including investigations or prosecutions of political opponents. He has set aside a broad and bipartisan consensus on the importance of an independent Department of Justice and Judiciary and threatened a Constitutional safeguard regarding the separation of powers.



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