

02/19/25 Il Governor JB Pritzker Sounds the alarm

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JB Pritzker
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If you think this is remotely overstated
YOU ARE NOT PAYING ATTENTION

"As some of you know, Skokie, Illinois once had one of the largest populations of Holocaust survivors anywhere in the world. In 1978, Nazis decided they wanted to march there.

The leaders of that march knew that the images of Swastika clad young men goose stepping down a peaceful suburban street would terrorize the local Jewish population – so many of whom had never recovered from their time in German concentration camps.

The prospect of that march sparked a legal fight that went all the way to the Supreme Court. It was a Jewish lawyer from the ACLU who argued the case for the Nazis – contending that even the most hateful of speech was protected under the first amendment.

As an American and a Jew, I find it difficult to resolve my feelings around that Supreme Court case – but I am grateful that the prospect of Nazis marching in their streets spurred the survivors and other Skokie residents to act. They joined together to form the Holocaust Memorial Foundation and built the first Illinois Holocaust Museum in a storefront in 1981 – a small but important forerunner to the one I helped build thirty years later.

I do not invoke the specter of Nazis lightly. But I know the history intimately – and have spent more time than probably anyone in this room with people who survived the Holocaust. Here's what I've learned – the root that tears apart your house's foundation begins as a seed – a seed of distrust and hate and blame.

The seed that grew into a dictatorship in Europe a lifetime ago didn't arrive overnight. It started with everyday Germans mad about inflation and looking for someone to blame.

I'm watching with a foreboding dread what is happening in our country right now. A president who watches a plane go down in the Potomac – and suggests – without facts or findings – that a diversity hire is responsible for the crash. Or the Missouri Attorney General who just sued Starbucks – arguing that consumers pay higher prices for their coffee because the baristas are too “female” and “nonwhite.” The authoritarian playbook is laid bare here: They point to a group of people who don't look like you and tell you to blame them for your problems.

I just have one question: What comes next? After we've discriminated against, deported or disparaged all the immigrants and the gay and lesbian and transgender people, the developmentally disabled, the women and the minorities – once we've

ostracized our neighbors and betrayed our friends – After that, when the problems we started with are still there staring us in the face – what comes next?

All the atrocities of human history lurk in the answer to that question. And if we don't want to repeat history – then for God's sake in this moment we better be strong enough to learn from it.

I swore the following oath on Abraham Lincoln's bible: "I do solemnly swear that I will support the constitution of the United States, and the constitution of the state of Illinois, and that I will faithfully discharge the duties of the office of Governor according to the best of my ability."

My oath is to the Constitution of our state and of our country. We don't have kings in America – and I don't intend to bend the knee to one. I am not speaking up in service to my ambitions – but in deference to my obligations.

If you think I'm overreacting and sounding the alarm too soon, consider this:

It took the Nazis one month, three weeks, two days, eight hours and 40 minutes to dismantle a constitutional republic. All I'm saying is when the five-alarm fire starts to burn, every good person better be ready to man a post with a bucket of water if you want to stop it from raging out of control.

Those Illinois Nazis did end up holding their march in 1978 – just not in Skokie. After all the blowback from the case, they decided to march in Chicago instead. Only twenty of them showed up. But 2000 people came to counter protest. The Chicago Tribune reported that day that the "rally sputtered to an unspectacular end after ten minutes." It was Illinoisans who smothered those embers before they could burn into a flame.

Tyranny requires your fear and your silence and your compliance. Democracy requires your courage. So gather your justice and humanity, Illinois, and do not let the "tragic spirit of despair" overcome us when our country needs us the most."