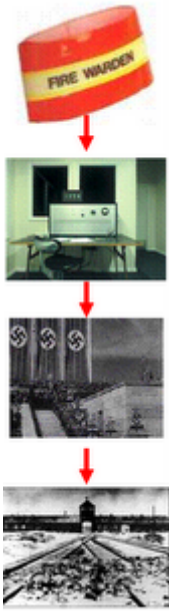


# From fire alarm to fascism



A fire alarm and office evacuation at work on Friday reminded of the capacity for profound evil that lurks just below the surface in humankind. Once granted the authority bestowed by a fire warden's jacket, normally mild-mannered and obsequious people can become frightening tyrants, barking orders and becoming blind to reason or sense.

It reminded me of [the Stanley Milgram experiments](#) conducted in the early 60s. The subjects were told they were part of an experiment in learning - they were made 'teachers' and required to administer ever increasing electric shocks to 'learners', as they answered questions incorrectly. In fact, the shocks were fake, the learners were actors and the subject of the experiment was the obedience of the teachers to authority demanding that they inflict pain and potential death on others. In the variations and repetitions of the experiments, some 60-70% of subjects were prepared to administer fatal shocks to the learners - a most frightening result, and one of the most persuasive explanations for the evil-doing capacity of totalitarian regimes.

Milgram's experiments were done to test the war crimes defence "I was only obeying orders". The ['superior orders' defence](#) remains problematic, but I think the fire-warden effect may go beyond this - in that the role seems to select those for whom authority and its potential for abuse is a thrilling, though mercifully rare, experience. These are the people to watch out for...