

Jill Lepore

### **THESE TRUTHS**

A history of the  
United States  
932pp. Norton. £30  
(US \$39.95).  
US: Liveright. \$16.95.  
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### **THIS AMERICA**

The case for the  
nation  
150pp. John Murray.  
£12.99.



Washington, DC, January 20, 2017: the inauguration of Donald Trump as President

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# **This is what America means**

**Jill Lepore and the prehistory of now**

STEPHANIE MCCURRY

Sitting in a pub in Philadelphia recently, talking to the man next to me at the bar, I mentioned that I was a historian of the United States. “You aren’t Jill

Lepore are you?”, he asked. Sadly no. Jill Lepore has emerged as arguably the most important historian of the United States writing today. She is one of the few who reaches a broad audience both scholarly and popular. She is also, not coincidentally, one of the most prolific. Over a span of twenty years Lepore has written eleven single-authored books on a range of topics spanning the seventeenth and the twenty-first centuries. She is currently a staff writer for the *New Yorker* where she turns out elegant essays on topics ranging from Barbie dolls to the Tea Party and AI, at a rate of about one every eight weeks. Much of that prior work flowed into her two recent most books, both published in the past year: the massive *These Truths: A history of the United States* and the very brief *This America: The case for the nation*.

The books, and their author, command a big stage. Lepore has a clear view of the role of the historian in public life and the obligation to speak to the present. At key moments of threat, Lepore insists, the nation needs a new history of itself. As was the

case with McCarthyism in the 1950s, what the current moment requires is “an expansive, liberal account of the history of the American nation and the American people”, that defends the nation state and democracy itself from critics on the right and the left. Scholarly historians, she insists, have abandoned this field. Those Americans who want to read a history of the nation and its people can turn to right-wing media stars like Bill O’Reilly and Glen Beck or centrist journalists like Jon Meehan and David McCullough who narrow the story of America to the Founders and the presidents. In times like these, Lepore insists, scholarly historians need to step up. If liberal democracy is to be defended, it is up to them to say “This is What America means”.

*These Truths: A history of the United States* is Lepore’s answer to this call. It is very self-consciously positioned in the tradition of the “big sweeping account of American history”: George Bancroft in the nineteenth century, Richard Hofstadter, and, especially, Carl Degler in the

twentieth. It is not lost on Lepore that this has been the exclusive preserve of the most prominent (white) male historians. She doesn't shy away from the challenge or the comparison. In recent months she has been quite outspoken about "how much more women have to do [than men] to earn intellectual authority". It is, she says, "stolen from them". In offering her own one-volume history of the United States, she sets out to revive the tradition and claim her rightful place in the pantheon. Conservatives rose to power in the United States by winning elections and winning history, she insists. In *These Truths* she writes the history; in *This America*, facing the next election, she sounds the alarm and rallies the troops.

*These Truths* is a history of the United States from soup (Columbus) to nuts (Donald Trump). It is clear in purpose and elegant in design, although at almost 800 pages it tests any reader's patience. "These truths" are, of course, the ones Americans "hold to be self-evident: that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with a right to life, liberty,

and the pursuit of happiness”. Lepore sums up the nation’s core beliefs as “political equality, natural rights, and the sovereignty of the people”. Across the span of American history, she plays out the agonistic struggle between these truths and the course of events, between the foundational ideals that define the American political experiment and give purpose to the nation and its people, and their betrayal in the pursuit of power and profit. As Lincoln asked in the 1850s, “were ‘these truths’ mere lies?”

The book proceeds in four parts, the Idea, the People, the State, the Machine, each with its own version of the play between light and dark. As much as anything in the book, that organization conveys Lepore’s signature strength as a writer, which is the capacity to distil complex arguments. Parts One and Two play out the struggle between liberty and slavery, first in the era of the revolution and the question of self-rule: “Under what conditions do some people have a right to rule, or to rebel, and others not?” In the first half of the

nineteenth century, the new nation simultaneously expanded its commitment to government by the people and to African slavery as a source of wealth and strength. That betrayal of the foundational right to liberty and human equality divided the first republic and culminated in civil war. This highly contingent set of developments is cast here as virtually inevitable. “The U.S.,” Lepore writes, “was born as a republic and became a democracy, and as it did, it split in two, unable to reconcile its system of government with the institution of slavery.” This was the first fruit of the rule of numbers, majority rule – a subject Lepore tracks throughout – and the first crisis of democracy the nation faced. Union victory in the Civil War closed the open wound of slavery and inaugurated a new birth of liberty that recommitted the nation to its ideals, while leaving a new set of questions in its wake. How much equality did liberty require? With the emergence of a powerful nation state and federal government by the end of the Civil War, the question of race and citizenship could no longer be avoided.

In Part Three Lepore tells the story of the struggle for equality, focusing on the murderous tension between democracy and white supremacy which defined the United States up to the high point of New Deal liberalism and the Second World War. As the NAACP publication *The Crisis* put it, “A Jim Crow army cannot fight for a free world”. In treating the early twentieth century she pointedly identifies the ties between the populist movement and the rise of religious fundamentalism as a force in American political life. By the time of John Scopes’s trial in 1925 (for teaching evolution in high school) New York journalists such as H. L. Mencken were already lampooning William Jennings Bryan and his anti-evolution rural followers as a bunch of “dumb hicks”. Fundamentalism, Lepore says, posed a dangerous challenge to the “nation’s founding principles and especially to the nature of truth [that] would be felt into the twenty-first century”. The final part of the book, “The Machine”, offers a quick slide down to now, and a breathless account of mass democracy in the age of technology when, as she puts it,

“technological knowledge outpaced the capacity for moral reckoning”. It covers the period from the 1960s to the present, when the “long arc of American liberalism reached its peak and began its decline”. She charts the rise of modern conservatism, beginning with the backlash to the New Deal, and dwelling particularly on the later takeover of the Republican Party by the new right in the battle over women’s rights in the 1970s. In Lepore’s version of the story, Phyllis Schlafly is just as important as Joe McCarthy – maybe more. Her main theme is the increasing partisanship of American political life – “a domestic cold war” – a process that was already so far advanced by Ronald Reagan’s presidency that she describes the left–right split in the country as a second “irrepressible conflict”. Things got much worse in the early twenty-first century with the gift of the internet, which in her opinion functions as “a polarization machine”.

*These Truths* doubles as “an old fashioned civics book”, as Lepore herself says. But a civics book is



not the most interesting model for history-writing, whatever its utility. The framework of ideals and their betrayal holds the pieces together, but in an increasingly predictable way. There are far more women in Lepore's history than most, some of them very consequential in the story she tells. There is surprisingly little Native American history from this Bancroft Prize-winning author of *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the origins of American identity*, about the enmity between Native peoples and colonists in seventeenth-century New England. Instead it is African American history that provides the scaffolding for *These Truths*. More often than not, it is to black leaders and prophets like Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois and Martin Luther King that Lepore turns to articulate the nation's highest ideals and abject failure to live up to them. But however much she owes to them, her history of the United States is strikingly devoid of a critique of the racial capitalism and liberalism their positions involved. One thinks immediately of DuBois's searing account of "black Reconstruction" and the failed American

experiment in racial and workers' democracy. For all the wide-ranging knowledge on display in *These Truths*, Lepore's consistent lack of interest in matters of political economy is telling. Slavery is a moral outrage but not a system of labour exploitation or capital accumulation. There is liberalism and democracy, illiberalism and white nationalism, but there is no capitalism in either equation. There are foundational American ideals and there is a history of lapses or failures or exclusions or omissions. But there is no structural relationship between the two.

Jill Lepore is a master of the essay form, 10,000-word forays, an argument by way of a story. Here, deep dives into various topics, first offered in essays for the *New Yorker*, stud the textbook march forward. The first half of the book has such a delightful richness of detail and cast of characters that the set pieces merge seamlessly with the rest. Rural housewives let down hems for growing children as the new nation's constitution appears in the morning newspaper; you get Jane Franklin and

not just Benjamin; a dinner party, a revised poem and a speech link the Radical Republican Charles Sumner, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Abraham Lincoln, and serve up a primer on the antislavery faith. But as she moves into the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries the rich contextual detail and cast of characters fade away, the narrative becomes a synopsis of campaigns, elections and presidents, and the result is a snipped sequence of headlines: Citizens United (on election spending), Black Lives Matter, Sandy Hook, Ferguson, the whole sorry recent history of the United States culminating in the Trumpian present. What analysis there is comes from *New Yorker* articles strung together on a line: “The Lie Factory: How politics became a business” (2012), “Bad News: The reputation of Roger Ailes” (2014), “Politics and the New Machine: What the turn from polls to data science means for democracy” (2015); “After the Fact: In the history of truth a new chapter begins” (2016). As these titles suggest, much of the last part of the book is about the business of professional political campaigns, polling, and data,

the rise of which, as she sees it, went along with the erosion of fact-based truth.

For all its length and detail what *These Truths* offers is quite transparently a history of the present, a prehistory of now. The obvious presentism of the argument is one of the advantages – but also perhaps dangers – of the speed with which Lepore writes. The book goes all the way up to Trump’s election, and the way she tells the story of America you can see that blimp floating into view from a long way back. Lepore attributes a lot of blame to the business of political consulting and public opinion polling, which first emerged in the 1930s. She calls it “the single most important force in American democracy since the rise of the party system” – and by important she doesn’t mean good. She focuses repeatedly on a pioneering firm called Campaigns, Inc, run by a husband-and-wife duo that critics called “the Lie factory”. Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter had a startlingly effective strategy for campaigns. Mr and Mrs Average American citizen don’t want to be made to think,

they allegedly insisted; there are only two ways to sell your candidate – “you can put on a fight ... or you can put on a show”. Trump still works from that playbook.

“Fake news” made its first appearance surprisingly early too, in the 1930s, Lepore tells us, when newspapers used the term to call out pro-fascist propaganda served up by public relations firms. The Gallop poll arrived with FDR and stayed, a “product” which claimed to measure public opinion but actually produced it. By the late 1960s and Nixon’s administration, liberalism began its long decline and conservatism its long ascent. By the 1990s, Lepore insists, “the nation started a long fall into an epistemological abyss”, courtesy of the right (right-wing media, Roger Ailes et al) and the left (academics’ embrace of poststructuralism and postmodernism). “In some corners of the left, the idea that everything was a lie became a fashionable truth. Poststructuralism and postmodernism suffused not only American intellectual life but American politics, too.” It hardly seems reasonable

to attribute the same power to shape American political culture to Fox News on the one hand and NYU professors on the other. But that's the argument, and she sticks with it in *This America* too.

And so we get to now. Lepore minces no words. With the election of Donald Trump in 2016, she writes, "American history became ... a wound that bled, and bled again". "Each of these truths on which the nation was founded and for which so many people had fought was questioned. The idea of truth itself was challenged." As Trump took office it seemed as if the "the nation might break out in a civil war, as if the American experiment had failed, as if democracy itself were in danger of dying". "The fight to make good on the promise of the nation's founding truths held the country together for a century, during the long struggle for civil rights." But with Trump and the end of truth, "the nation came apart all the same, all over again".

For Lepore, the abiding problem is what "these

truths” can mean – and how they can anchor a nation of people – when the idea of “truth” itself has gone. She knows that truth is a historic construct, a set of “moral-epistemic convictions” as another historian, Sophia Rosenfeld, has put it, and that modern democracy belongs to a particular regime of truth, knowledge and authority. The abandonment of truth on the right and the left is thus tantamount to the abandonment of liberal democracy and the nation state itself. Conservatives rose to power on the claim that liberalism had failed. They focused on “winning elections and winning history” but, as Lepore sees it, liberals didn’t even put up a fight. Like liberal historians who had already abandoned the study of the nation for the study of the oppressed and exploited, liberal politicians had already chosen the idea of identity over the oneness of the American people embedded in these truths.

But if that is one answer to the question of “How did we get here?”, there is another obvious one that Lepore sidesteps, about what is perhaps the greatest

of the truths that anchor the story of America: the idea that all men are created equal, and the possibility that what we have lost is any faith in the idea of equality itself.

*These Truths* and *This America* are of a piece.

Facing a nation divided – a new civil war – Lepore condensed her long-form defence of liberal democracy and the American nation state into a polemic on the same theme, timed for the build-up to the next election. She tried out the argument of *This America* in an essay for *Foreign Affairs* in February 2019, “A New Americanism: Why a nation needs a national story”. Of course she had already offered that national story. In *This America* she issues “a call for a new Americanism, as tough-minded and openhearted as the nation itself”.

Against the “conflation of race and nation”, the pull of racial hatred and “other forms of belonging” she rallies liberals, and especially “liberal historians”, to reclaim the US for its highest ideals and, as the subtitle puts it, to make “the case for the nation”.

The book opens with a quotation from W. E. B.



DuBois, but as in *These Truths*, it has little in common with his mode of historian's truth-telling about the United States and the limits of its liberal-capitalist faith.

Lepore's faith in American ideals, in liberal democracy, and in the role of historians in public political culture is undimmed and indefatigable. But here, in sharpened, shortened form it also seems inadequate. The United States, she writes, "is a nation founded on a revolutionary, generous, and deeply moral commitment to human equality and dignity". In all its struggles it held "to these truths: all of us are equal, we are equal as citizens, and we are equal under the law". Her love of country is admirable. But in this moment of political danger what use is a defence of the nation offered exclusively in reference to its ideals?

Lepore concedes that liberalism failed, that "it could not contain the critique of the nation that civil rights demanded". The question, of course, is why. That would seem to invite a more searching critique

of liberal democracy and the limits of the “universalist” ideals on which nations like the United States were founded than the one she offers; it could also have turned her attention more to matters of political economy in analysing the long-term causes of democratic decline. For that we can turn to the scores of progressive or left (not “liberal”) historians whom she accuses of indulging the “politics of grievance” and dereliction of professional duty. For while the rise of the right and illiberal nationalism have a great deal to do with race and white supremacy, as she recognizes, the current crisis of liberalism is hardly separable from the massive inequalities in income, wealth and power that have defined the postwar era. Equally important, as the political scientist Jason Frank has argued, are the shrinking role of government in social welfare and the marketization of public goods, the unfettered role of money in political life, and the corrosion of democratic forms that goes along with these developments in the United States and elsewhere.

Historians cannot “sit out the struggle”. Nor can they meet the threat with simple expressions of love of country. Given Lepore’s elevated place in the academy, her scolding of colleagues doesn’t go down well. But at a more serious level it just seems misplaced. Why can right-wing populists declare liberalism a failure? It isn’t just because historians have failed to rally to its defence or have told an insufficiently robust story of who Americans are. Jill Lepore can write American history and do battle with Bill O’Reilly, Glenn Beck, Dick Cheney and Dinesh D’Souza and all of the right-wing media. To win elections, liberals have to win history. Maybe. No harm in trying. But especially in the US, where public intellectuals don’t count for much, it will take a lot more than that.