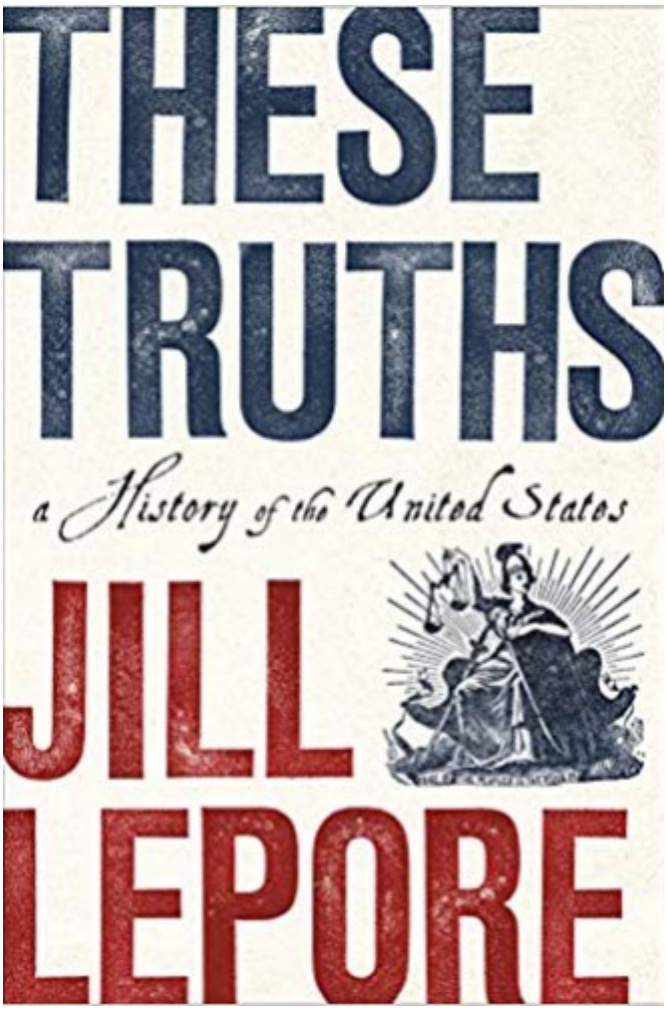
Jill Lepore’s book is the civics course Americans need

At the heart of her narrative is the fate of two political ideals: liberty and popular sovereignty.

by Robert Westbrook in the April 24, 2019 issue

In Review



These Truths

A History of the United States

by Jill Lepore
Norton

“What one begs American people to do, for all sakes, is simply to accept our history.”
—James Baldwin (1965)

Jill Lepore must be numbered among the indispensable American intellectuals of our time. She is a Harvard historian of prodigious energy and talents and an academic with impeccable credentials. Yet she has also, unlike most of her fellow professors, sought and—from her post as a staff writer at the *New Yorker*—found an enormous audience of citizens without PhDs.

“To write history is to make an argument by telling a story about dead people,” Lepore tells her students. If too many strictly academic historians care too little about the storyteller’s art, too many popular historians underplay the demand for conceptual imagination, persuasive logic, deep research, and compelling evidence. Lepore is a master of intertwined narrative and argument. No one is doing more to try to heal Americans of their inveterate historical amnesia.

One of the principal challenges of writing a one-volume account of American history is deciding who and what to include and who and what to leave out. The futile effort to leave nothing out often leads historians to abandon any attempt at cohesive argument, piling up as much information and including as large a cast of characters as a publisher will allow. The result is a closely printed textbook that few people read except for students coerced into doing so.

On the other hand, making hard choices about what story to tell about the United States and who to call upon is bound to elicit howls of protest from those who object to the limited scope of the narrative and the number of important dead people who do not make the cut. I once had a job interview with the president of a liberal arts college who was quite exercised that the American historians there were not teaching students about the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842. I failed to share his concern and didn’t get the job.

Lepore is well aware that much that could be said about the course of American history is absent from her 900-page book, (including the Webster-Ashburton Treaty). “Some very important events haven’t even made it into the footnotes,” she readily confesses, “which I’ve kept clipped and short, like a baby’s fingernails.” She can only

take care, as she does, to use the indefinite article in her book's subtitle (*A History of the United States*) and invite others to provide an alternative version if they wish. The proper questions for a critic are whether her necessarily partial story gets at something centrally significant to American history and ties much of it together as a whole, whether she tells that story ably, and whether she provides dramatis personae up to the task.

Lepore's choice of a thematic spine is guided by her desire to write a book for citizens, one that will provide "what . . . a people constituted as a nation in the early twenty-first century need to know about their own past." Consequently, hers is chiefly a political history, and it clearly reflects her alarm over the course of American politics over the last generation.

The fate of two American political ideals—articulated in the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—is at the heart of Lepore's narrative. The first of these is *liberty*, defined in republican terms as the independence of all citizens from dominance or the arbitrary, uncontrolled power of one person over another. And the second is *popular sovereignty*, defined again in republican terms as the rule of virtuous citizens ("We the People") by "reflection and choice" rather than "accident and force," as *The Federalist Papers* put it.

Lepore explores the fate of two ideals: liberty and popular sovereignty.

From the outset, the American experiment has been haunted by the manner in which an often eloquent commitment in principle to liberty for all has been hedged and repeatedly, sometimes flagrantly, contradicted in practice. This contradiction was most obviously on display from 1619 to 1865 in the vigorous pursuit of liberty for white men amid the enslavement of African Americans. One might call this the "Morgan Paradox" after another extraordinary American historian, Edmund S. Morgan, who laid out its origins in 17th-century Virginia in his *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975). Few challenges are more significant for American historians, Morgan argued, than "to explain how a people could have developed the dedication to human liberty and dignity exhibited by the leaders of the American Revolution and at the same time have developed and maintained a system of labor that denied human liberty and dignity every hour of the day. . . . The paradox is American, and it behooves Americans to understand it if they would understand themselves."

Having been justified by an ideology of race, which removed black people from the category of those Americans entitled to liberty, slavery nestled into the American constitutional order for decades until the paradox became unbearable for half the country. A heavily compromised promise of liberty for all persisted after the Civil War and the collapse of radical Reconstruction into less stark but no less real forms of racial dominance. The Morgan Paradox mutated and endured. Lepore forcefully extends its story to the present day, if not quite up to the moment recently when Republican congressman Mark Meadows of North Carolina paraded a mute black woman in front of a mass-market television audience like a slave on the auction block and offered her up as evidence of Donald Trump's postracial bona fides. It is Frederick Douglass, arguably the most moving critic of the paradox both before and after the Civil War, who stands at the moral center of her book. Lepore also uses the liberty/domination paradox to bring into her story other racial and ethnic groups whom it has afflicted.

In the latter portions of *These Truths* Lepore devotes increased attention to women's struggles for equality. As she observes, "the men who wrote and ratified the Constitution had left women, sex, marriage out of it," ignoring Abigail Adams's plea to "remember the ladies." Women were compelled to argue for full constitutional rights by way of an analogy of their situation to that of African Americans. She also offers a perceptive discussion of the shortcomings of the Supreme Court's defense of women's reproductive rights in *Roe v. Wade* on the grounds of privacy rather than equality. "That the framers of the Constitution had not resolved the question of slavery had led to a civil war," Lepore remarks. "That they regarded women as unequal to men nearly did the same." This is hyperbole. Nonetheless, she makes a good case for putting feminism at the center of the culture wars and the widening partisan divide of the past 50 years (as well as a provocative argument for battles over gun ownership as "a rights fight for white men").

I do think Lepore missed something by not better incorporating the role of class inequality into her narrative of the liberty/domination paradox. To be sure, she periodically credits its significance. She notes that the American Political Science Association recently concluded that "growing economic inequality was threatening fundamental American political institutions," and she herself declares that "a nation that toppled a hierarchy of birth only to erect a hierarchy of wealth will never know tranquility." But a sustained treatment of this dimension of the liberty/domination theme is absent, including much of any account of those Americans who have

struggled to dissolve this paradox. She says that “instead of Marx, America had Thoreau.” But she might have said that instead of Marx, America had Orestes Brownson and his eerily proto-Marxist 1840 essay “The Laboring Classes.”

The labor movement from the Jacksonian-era Locofoco Party to the Congress of Industrial Organizations is largely absent from *These Truths*. Essentials of the Populists’ program—such as the subtreasury plan for placing farm credit in the hands of the federal government instead of private banks and the nationalization of the railroads—are ignored in favor of an extended discussion of Populists’ racism and xenophobia, which other historians have established was no more (and occasionally less) pronounced than that of other Americans. And given Lepore’s wide reading in the best of current scholarship and her emphasis on constitutional history, it is surprising that she made no use of the important work of legal historians William Forbath, Ganesh Sitaraman, and others who have described the threat of class inequality to what they argue is a Constitution that presupposes a relatively egalitarian distribution of wealth.

Foreign policy also rests awkwardly in the pages of this book and is treated skimpily, though it too might have served Lepore’s central themes. The largely forgotten Korean War, for example, merits but a third of a paragraph. I am not trying to make a case for including the Webster-Ashburton Treaty, but surely one should number among the troubling expressions of the liberty/domination paradox Jefferson’s call for an American “Empire of Liberty.” That imperial ambitions sit with republican liberty as uneasily as other modes of inequitable power has been the conviction of many—including many Americans (think, say, of Mark Twain, William James, and William Fulbright)—since the fall of the Roman Republic. Slabs of “offshore America” float free of this book’s themes, and many of those that do appear have a dutiful, textbook quality to them missing from the rest of the book.

Lepore’s narrative of the destiny of a second American ideal, popular sovereignty, centers on what she sees as its troubling relationship with the means of communication that are a necessary condition of reasoned public deliberation by democratic citizens. As she demonstrates, this relationship has been a concern of Americans since at least James Madison’s brief but important essay “Public Opinion” (1791), which held out hope that newspapers could ensure a politics of truth. “It was an ingenious idea,” she says. “It would be revisited by each passing generation of exasperated advocates of republicanism. The newspaper would hold the Republic together; the telegraph would hold the Republic together; the Internet would hold

the Republic together. Each time, this assertion would be both right and terribly wrong."

Here in a nutshell is the second major element in the story of *These Truths*. Lepore's treatment of media and public discourse grows steadily more expansive over the course of the book. The emphasis is on how things have gone terribly wrong as mass media have favored citizens less with truth than with "truthiness" (Stephen Colbert) or, worse, lies posing as "alternative facts" (Kellyanne Conway). "Beginning in the 1990s," Lepore argues, "the nation started a long fall into an epistemological abyss. . . . The nation had lost its way in the politics of mutually assured epistemological destruction. There was no truth, only innuendo, rumor, and bias."

But the nation had long been walking up to this abyss. The book's concluding section devotes more attention than any survey of American history I know to analyzing the development of political advertising, campaign consulting, polling, computer technology, and social media—all of which paved the way to Fox News and Russian Internet bots. The pioneering public relations expert Edward Bernays declared in 1928, without any intended irony, that "the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society."

Lepore agrees with Bernays but zeroes in on the irony, sometimes with her most impassioned prose. The arrival of the unholy alliance of computer technology and Bernays's successors, she says, witnessed "the great atomization—the turning of citizens into pieces of data, fed into machines, tabulated, processed, and targeted, as the nation-state began to yield to the data state." Here, "the Internet hastened political changes that were already under way."

> A model of citizenship that involved debate and deliberation had long since yielded to a model of citizenship that involved consumption and persuasion. With the Internet, that model yielded to a model of citizenship driven by the hyperindividualism of blogging, posting, and tweeting, artifacts of a new culture of narcissism, and by the hyperaggregation of the analysis of data, tools of a new authoritarianism. . . . In a wireless world, the mystic chords of memory, the ties to the timeless truths that held the nation together, faded to ethereal invisibility.

Here too, right though she is, I think Lepore is missing something important to her argument. Pioneering political consultant Clem Whitaker said that "the average

American doesn’t want to be educated; he doesn’t want to improve his mind; he doesn’t even want to work, consciously, at being a good citizen.” Absent the condescension, Whitaker was onto something that some Americans—Jefferson, John Dewey, Hannah Arendt—have recognized all along. Despite the Constitution’s opening invocation of popular sovereignty, the document that the founders produced provided little to no institutional space for its exercise. Another paradox perhaps. Without such spaces, without a polity in which the exercise of citizenship matters in an ongoing way to ordinary people because it has an impact on the decisions that shape their lives, popular sovereignty was bound to wither and leave us with what Walter Lippmann called a “phantom public.”

Without the ongoing exercise of citizenship, “the people” becomes a political phantom.

Ever since Jefferson in 1816 called for the inclusion of local, democratic “ward republics” in the American constitutional structure, Americans have been trying in theory and in practice to figure out a way to make popular sovereignty more than a phantom. Lepore takes Lippmann, whose *Public Opinion* (1922) she discusses at length, as the emblematic Progressive. She tells her readers that for him and “an entire generation of intellectuals, politicians, journalists, and bureaucrats who styled themselves Progressives—the term dates to 1910—the masses posed a threat to American democracy.”

But this account ignores Lippmann’s much more democratic rivals among Progressives—Dewey, Jane Addams, Herbert Croly—who tried to envision a way to reconstruct popular sovereignty rather than abandon it. Lepore cites C. Wright Mills on the difference between a mass society and a community of publics. The way to tell the difference between them “is the technology of communication: a community of publics is a population of people who talk to one another; a mass society receives information from the mass media. In mass society, elites, not the people, make most decisions, long before the people even know there is a decision to be made.”

What she does not say is that Mills was here channeling Dewey’s radically democratic response to Lippmann, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), and like Dewey was calling for a politics that would build a community of publics. And a few years after Mills, Tom Hayden and Al Haber, who had been reading Dewey and Mills, would write *The Port Huron Statement* (1962), a manifesto of Students for a Democratic Society and another important document in the story of pushback

against the collapse of popular sovereignty that goes unmentioned in *These Truths*.

Even if Lepore in some respects falls short on her own terms, it would be churlish in the end not to salute her for realizing her ambitions as fully as she does. She has laid down a marker for anyone who would try to contain the history of the United States within a single volume. She says that “the work of the historian is not the work of the critic or of the moralist.” I find it hard to believe that she really believes this assertion. In any case, she has fashioned a work of history that is at the same time a telling work of social criticism and of expansive moral imagination.

She also says that her book “is meant to double as an old-fashioned civics book.” It does. This is not a particularly distinguished genre, but her contribution to it is among the best ever published, despite its shortcomings. She is right to say that “the past is an inheritance, a gift and a burden. It can’t be shirked. You carry it everywhere. There’s nothing for it but to get to know it.” We Americans might all profitably include her effort to get to know our past among the books we stuff in our backpacks to read by flashlight as we try to ascend from the deep, dark hole into which our republic has fallen.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Knowing the truths.”