



## ***These Truths* by Jill Lepore<sup>1</sup>**

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Book review by Rev. Judy Deutsch<sup>2</sup>, UUJEC Board Member Emeritus

The “these truths” in this book’s title refer to the truths enumerated in our Declaration of Independence. Lepore uses 789 pages of text to tell how, from 1492 to 2016, these truths were not upheld. And she provides a detailed Index and a huge series of Notes.

Toward the end of the book she tells us:

A nation born in revolution will forever struggle against chaos. A nation founded on universal rights will wrestle against the forces of particularism. A nation that toppled a hierarchy of birth only to erect a hierarchy of wealth will never know tranquility. A nation of immigrants cannot close its borders. And a nation born in contradiction, liberty in a land of slavery, sovereignty in a land of conquest, will fight, forever, over the meaning of its history.

And:

The truths on which the nation was founded — equality, sovereignty, and consent — had been retold after the Civil War. Modern liberalism came out of that political settlement, and the United States, abandoning isolationism, had carried that vision to the world, the rule of law, individual rights, democratic government, open borders, and free markets. 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. And yet, the nation came apart, all the same, once again.

There are so many facts, ideas, and issues in small print in this book that I shall focus on only a few of the issues with which Lepore deals.

Perhaps most important to us at this time is the issue of true and fake news. We know that our President lies to the public almost all the time, and I suppose that many of us wonder how so many people believe him. Walter Lippmann wondered if truth derived from reason or faith, and he devised a dialogue in which Jefferson, Socrates, and Bryan spoke about the subject, and in which all the participants agreed to abide by Socrates’s decision. Socrates concluded, “The common people have always known that reason is a religion. That is why they dislike it so violently.” And she tells us that the first political consulting firm, Campaigns, Inc., was formed in 1933 by Baxter and Whitouse, and that it was called the Lie Factory by

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its critics. When Upton Sinclair ran for governor, it arranged to have a different damaging quote from one of his novels printed on one hundred mornings as though they were Sinclair's beliefs. Baxter and Whithouse said that they had one objective — to see that Sinclair wasn't elected governor. Afterwards, they helped many other candidates win, often pretending that their candidates had opponents, even if there weren't any. They said, "...candidates are easier to sell than issues," and in 1948, Baxter said:

The average American doesn't want to be educated, he doesn't want to improve his mind; he doesn't even want to work conscientiously at being a good citizen...[but] he likes a good fight and he likes a good show.

Related to political consulting is polling. And Lepore tells us:

Political consultants tell voters what to think, pollsters ask them what they think. But neither of these businesses gives a great deal of credit to the idea that voters ought to make independent judgments, or that they can.

And then there are the media. There was a post-election panel after Trump's election during which a viewer called out to the entire panel, "Where's news's judgment?" and Zucker, head of CNN, answered, "It's up to the viewer." Since this book has been published, we have seen and heard many related comments from Facebook and Twitter executives.

Very aware of the inequality of wealth and income in our nation, Lepore cites John Kenneth Galbraith's 1960 *The Affluent Society* as saying that poverty hadn't been eradicated, that it had been only forgotten, and Dwight MacDonal as saying in 1963 that prosperity had left the nation both blinded to the plight of the poor and indifferent to their suffering. She points out that Johnson's tax cuts undermined his reform programs (including Medicare and Medicaid), and describes how Reagan's reduction of the tax rate to 20% and his reduction of spending on Aid to Families With Dependent Children and Medicaid hurt the poor, and that under his "reforms" more than a million people lost food stamp benefits. She says, "Beginning in 1973...real earnings for all but the very wealthiest Americans remained flat, or declined," that by 1974 liberalism had begun its long decline and conservatism its long ascent, and that the rise of the Internet in the 1990's contributed to widening income inequality and political instability. She points out that Clinton's administration demolished the Aid to Families With Dependent Children Act, that its repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act resulted in record profits for the securities industry, and that, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the average CEO earned nearly four hundred times as much as the average worker. She points out that African American veterans were unable to take advantage of the GI Bill's housing provisions because of the banks' refusal to give them loans, and that meant that, together with restrictive covenants and redlining, much new housing was whites-only. However, I do not find that Lepore mentions that their lack of accessibility to house ownership meant that African Americans were deprived not only of housing, but also, of the financial gains that purchasing homes at relatively low costs gave to many white citizens.

Another extremely important issue for our time is originalism, the method of interpreting the Constitution in which jurists allegedly seek "to scrape away centuries of accredited interpretations to uncover the Constitution's original meaning and the founders original intentions." Such was and is the method of most of the jurists appointed by Reagan, the two Bushes and Trump. This method is in contrast to the method of liberal jurists, who believe that it is impossible to discern the founders' original intention and who have been accused by originalists as turning the Constitution into a "charter for judicial activism" and misusing history. Warren Burger, a liberal Jurist, said about the originalist interpretation of the Second Amendment, "it is one of the greatest pieces of fraud...on the American public by special interest groups that I have ever seen in my lifetime."

Gun control and the NRA is another issue extremely important for our time. Although before

reading this book I was vaguely aware that the NRA had been different earlier, I did not know that it was founded in 1871 as a sporting and hunting association which not only was unopposed to firearm regulations, but even supported and sponsored them; that in 1964 Malcolm X said, “Article number 2 of the Constitutional amendments provides you and me the right to own a rifle or a shotgun,” an argument that animated the founding of the Black Panther Party; that Republicans and Democrats both had been supporters of gun control legislation; and that it was only in the 1970’s that the official position of the NRA became that the Second Amendment guaranteed an individual’s right to carry a gun, rather than the people’s right to form armed militias to provide for the common defense.

One point in this book exonerated me in my own mind. Although I’m very pro-choice, I have never been able to find the concept of “privacy” in the Constitution (as liberal a jurist as I would have been, had I been one). And I learned in this book that Sarah Weddington, Jane Roe’s attorney, “when asked by Justice Stewart where in the Constitution she placed her argument, said that the privacy right established in *Griswald* seemed a terribly weak foundation on which to build her case. “I do feel that the Ninth Amendment is an appropriate place for the freedom to rest,” she told the Court, and continued, “I think the Fourteenth Amendment is an equally appropriate place.” So much for her and my understandings.

Obviously this book will tell you much more than I have — about our elections, foreign policy, immigration, incarceration practices, nuclear and space programs, presidents, racism, and technology — to name just some of the topics Lepore treats in such a detailed and interesting way. One topic of interest to UUJEC members and many others that she largely skips is the environment. She expects to publish another book in September 2020. Perhaps it will be in there.

And, although I’m not telling you much about what Lepore says about racism, I shall leave you with this little incident. In a debate between Lothrop Stoddard who “rewrote American history as a history of white people” and W.E. Du Bois, Stoddard said:  
 We know that our America is a white America. And the overwhelming weight of both historical and scientific evidence shows that only so long as the American people will remain white will its institutions, ideals, and culture continue to fit the temperament of its inhabitants — and hence continue to endure.  
 Whereupon Du Bois replied, “Your country? How come it’s yours? ....Would America have been America without the Negro people?”