

THESE TRUTHS

a History of the United States

JILL



LEPORE

Introduction

THE QUESTION STATED

THE COURSE OF HISTORY IS UNPREDICTABLE, AS IRREGULAR as the weather, as errant as affection, nations rising and falling by whim and chance, battered by violence, corrupted by greed, seized by tyrants, raided by rogues, addled by demagogues. This was all true until one day, Tuesday, October 30, 1787, when readers of a newspaper called the *New-York Packet* found on the front page an advertisement for an almanac that came bound with tables predicting the “Rising and Setting of the Sun,” the “Judgment of the Weather,” the “Length of Days and Nights,” and, as a bonus, something entirely new: the Constitution of the United States, forty-four hundred words that attempted to chart the motions of the branches of government and the separation of their powers as if these were matters of physics, like the transit of the sun and moon and the comings and goings of the tides.¹ It was meant to mark the start of a new era, in which the course of history might be made predictable and

a government established that would be ruled not by accident and force but by reason and choice. The origins of that idea, and its fate, are the story of American history.

The Constitution entailed both toil and argument. Knee-breeched, sweat-drenched delegates to the constitutional convention had met all summer in Philadelphia in a swelter of secrecy, the windows of their debating hall nailed shut against eavesdroppers. By the middle of September, they'd drafted a proposal written on four pages of parchment. They sent that draft to printers who set the type of its soaring preamble with a giant W, as sharp as a bird's claw:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

As summer faded to fall, the free people of the United States, finding the Constitution folded into their newspapers and almanacs, were asked to decide whether or not to ratify it, even as they went about baling hay, milling corn, tanning leather, singing hymns, and letting out the seams on last year's winter coats, for mothers and fathers grown fatter, and letting down the hems, for children grown taller.

They read this strange, intricate document, and they debated its plan. Some feared that the new system granted too much power to the federal govern-

ment—to the president, or to Congress, or to the Supreme Court, or to all three. Many, like sixty-one-year-old George Mason of Virginia, a delegate who'd refused to sign it, wanted the Constitution to include a bill of rights. (“A bill might be prepared in a few hours,” Mason had begged at the convention, to no avail.)² Others complained about this clause or that, down to commas. It was not an easy thing to read. A few suggested scrapping it and starting all over again. “Cannot the same power which called the late convention, call another?” one citizen wondered. “Are not the people still their own masters?”³

Much of what they said is a matter of record. “The infant periods of most nations are buried in silence, or veiled in fable,” James Madison once remarked.⁴ Not the United States. Its infancy is preserved, like baby teeth kept in a glass jar, in the four parchment sheets of the Constitution, in the pages of almanacs that chart the weather of a long-ago climate, and in hundreds of newspapers, where essays for and against the new system of government appeared alongside the shipping news, auction notices, and advertisements for the return of people who never were their own masters—women and children, slaves and servants—and who had run away, hoping to ordain and establish, for themselves and their posterity, the blessings of liberty.

The season of ratification was an autumn of ordinary bustle and business. In that October 30, 1787, issue of the *New-York Packet*, a schoolmaster announced that he was offering lessons in “reading, writing, arithmetic, and merchants’ accounts” in rooms near city hall. The estate of Gearey, Champion,

and Co., consisting chiefly of “a large and general Assortment of Drugs and Medicines,” was to be auctioned. Many-masted sailing ships from London and Liverpool and trim schooners from St. Croix, Baltimore, and Norfolk had dropped anchor in the depths of the harbor; sloops from Charleston and Savannah had tied their painters to the docks. A Scotsman offered a reward for the return of his stolen chestnut-colored mare, fourteen hands high, “lofty carriage, trots and canters very handsome.” A merchant with a warehouse on Peck Slip wanted readers to know that he had for sale dry codfish, a quantity of molasses, ground ginger in barrels, York rum, pickled codfish, writing paper, and men’s shoes. And the *Columbian Almanack* was for sale, with or without the Constitution as an appendix, at the printers’ shop, where New Yorkers might also inquire after two people, for a price:

TO BE SOLD. A LIKELY young NEGRO WENCH, 20 years of age, she is healthy and had the small pox, she has a young male child.

The mother was said to be “remarkably handy at housework”; her baby was “about 6 months old,” still nursing. Their names were not mentioned.⁵ They were not ruled by reason and choice. They were ruled by violence and force.

Between the everyday atrocity of slavery and the latest news from the apothecary there appeared on [page 2](#) of that day’s *New-York Packet* an essay titled THE FEDERALIST No. 1. It had been written, anonymously, by a brash thirty-year-old lawyer named Alex-

ander Hamilton. “You are called upon to deliberate on a new Constitution for the United States of America,” he told his readers. But more was at stake, too, he insisted; the wrong decision would result in “the general misfortune of mankind.” The United States, he argued, was an experiment in the science of politics, marking a new era in the history of government:

It seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.⁶

This was the question of that autumn. And, in a way, it has been the question of every season since, the question of every rising and setting of the sun, on rainy days and snowy days, on clear days and cloudy days, at the clap of every thunderstorm. Can a political society really be governed by reflection and election, by reason and truth, rather than by accident and violence, by prejudice and deceit? Is there any arrangement of government—any constitution—by which it’s possible for a people to rule themselves, justly and fairly, and as equals, through the exercise of judgment and care? Or are their efforts, no matter their constitutions, fated to be corrupted, their judgment muddled by demagoguery, their reason abandoned for fury?

This question in every kind of weather is the question of American history. It is also the question of this book, an account of the origins, course, and consequences of the American experiment over more than four centuries. It is not a simple question. I once came across a book called *The Constitution Made Easy*.⁷ The Constitution cannot be made easy. It was never meant to be easy.

THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT rests on three political ideas —“these truths,” Thomas Jefferson called them—political equality, natural rights, and the sovereignty of the people. “We hold these truths to be sacred & undeniable,” Jefferson wrote in 1776, in a draft of the Declaration of Independence:

that all men are created equal & independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent & inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, & liberty, & the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these ends, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

The roots of these ideas are as ancient as Aristotle and as old as Genesis and their branches spread as wide as the limbs of an oak. But they are this nation’s founding principles: it was by declaring them that the nation came to be. In the centuries since, these principles have been cherished, decried, and contested, fought for, fought over, and fought against. After Benjamin Franklin read Jefferson’s draft, he picked up his quill, scratched out the words “sacred & undeniable,”

and suggested that “these truths” were, instead, “self-evident.” This was more than a quibble. Truths that are sacred and undeniable are God-given and divine, the stuff of religion. Truths that are self-evident are laws of nature, empirical and observable, the stuff of science. This divide has nearly rent the Republic apart.

Still, this divide is nearly always overstated and it's easy to exaggerate the difference between Jefferson and Franklin, which, in those lines, came down, too, to style: Franklin's revision is more forceful. The real dispute isn't between Jefferson and Franklin, each attempting, in his way, to reconcile faith and reason, as many have tried both before and since. The real dispute is between “these truths” and the course of events: Does American history prove these truths, or does it belie them?

Before the experiment began, the men who wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution made an extraordinarily careful study of history. They'd been studying history all their lives. Benjamin Franklin was eighty-one years old, hunched and crooked, when he signed the Constitution in 1787, with his gnarled and speckled hand. In 1731, when he was twenty-five, straight as a sapling, he'd written an essay called “Observations on Reading History,” on a “little Paper, accidentally preserv'd.”⁸ And he'd kept on reading history, and taking notes, asking himself, year after year: What does the past teach?

The United States rests on a dedication to equality, which is chiefly a moral idea, rooted in Christianity, but it rests, too, on a dedication to inquiry, fearless and unflinching. Its founders agreed with the

Scottish philosopher and historian David Hume, who wrote, in 1748, that “Records of Wars, Intrigues, Factions, and Revolutions are so many Collections of Experiments.”⁹ They believed that truth is to be found in ideas about morality but also in the study of history.

It has often been said, in the twenty-first century and in earlier centuries, too, that Americans lack a shared past and that, built on a cracked foundation, the Republic is crumbling.¹⁰ Part of this argument has to do with ancestry: Americans are descended from conquerors and from the conquered, from people held as slaves and from the people who held them, from the Union and from the Confederacy, from Protestants and from Jews, from Muslims and from Catholics, and from immigrants and from people who have fought to end immigration. Sometimes, in American history—in nearly all national histories—one person’s villain is another’s hero. But part of this argument has to do with ideology: the United States is founded on a set of ideas, but Americans have become so divided that they no longer agree, if they ever did, about what those ideas are, or were.

I wrote this book because writing an American history from beginning to end and across that divide hasn’t been attempted in a long time, and it’s important, and it seemed worth a try. One reason it’s important is that understanding history as a form of inquiry—not as something easy or comforting but as something demanding and exhausting—was central to the nation’s founding. This, too, was new. In the West, the oldest stories, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, are odes and tales of wars and kings, of men and gods, sung and told. These stories were memorials, and so

were the histories of antiquity: they were meant as monuments. “I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment,” Thucydides wrote, “but as a possession for all time.” Herodotus believed that the purpose of writing history was “so that time not erase what man has brought into being.” A new kind of historical writing, less memorial and more unsettling, only first emerged in the fourteenth century. “History is a philosophical science,” the North African Muslim scholar Ibn Khaldun wrote in 1377, in the prologue to his history of the world, in which he defined history as the study “of the causes and origins of existing things.”¹¹

Only by fits and starts did history become not merely a form of memory but also a form of investigation, to be disputed, like philosophy, its premises questioned, its evidence examined, its arguments countered. Early in the seventeenth century, Sir Walter Raleigh began writing his own *History of the World*, from a prison in the Tower of London where he was allowed to keep a library of five hundred books. The past, Raleigh explained, “hath made us acquainted with our dead ancestors,” but it also casts light on the present, “by the comparison and application of other men’s fore-passed miseries with our own like errors and ill deservings.”¹² To study the past is to unlock the prison of the present.

This new understanding of the past attempted to divide history from faith. The books of world religions—the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Quran—are pregnant with mysteries, truths known only by God, taken on faith. In the new history books, historians aimed to solve mysteries and to discover

their own truths. The turn from reverence to inquiry, from mystery to history, was crucial to the founding of the United States. It didn't require abdicating faith in the truths of revealed religion and it relieved no one of the obligation to judge right from wrong. But it did require subjecting the past to skepticism, to look to beginnings not to justify ends, but to question them—with evidence.

“I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense,” Thomas Paine, the spitfire son of an English grocer, wrote in *Common Sense*, in 1776. Kings have no right to reign, Paine argued, because, if we could trace hereditary monarchy back to its beginnings—“could we take off the dark covering of antiquity, and trace them to their first rise”—we'd find “the first of them nothing better than the principal ruffian of some restless gang.” James Madison explained Americans' historical skepticism, this deep empiricism, this way: “Is it not the glory of the people of America, that, whilst they have paid a decent regard to the opinions of former times and other nations, they have not suffered a blind veneration for antiquity, for custom, or for names, to overrule the suggestions of their own good sense, the knowledge of their own situation, and the lessons of their own experience?”¹³ Evidence, for Madison, was everything.

“A new era for politics is struck,” Paine wrote, his pen aflame, and “a new method of thinking hath arisen.”¹⁴ Declaring independence was itself an argument about the relationship between the present and the past, an argument that required evidence of a very particular kind: historical evidence. That's why most

of the Declaration of Independence is a list of historical claims. “To prove this,” Jefferson wrote, “let facts be submitted to a candid world.”

Facts, knowledge, experience, proof. These words come from the law. Around the seventeenth century, they moved into what was then called “natural history”: astronomy, physics, chemistry, geology. By the eighteenth century they were applied to history and to politics, too. *These truths:* this was the language of reason, of enlightenment, of inquiry, and of history. In 1787, then, when Alexander Hamilton asked “whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force,” that was the kind of question a scientist asks before beginning an experiment. Time alone would tell. But time has passed. The beginning has come to an end. What, then, is the verdict of history?

This book attempts to answer that question by telling the story of American history, beginning in 1492, with Columbus’s voyage, which tied together continents, and ending in a world not merely tied together but tangled, knotted, and bound. It chronicles the settlement of American colonies; the nation’s founding and its expansion through migration, immigration, war, and invention; its descent into civil war; its entrance into wars in Europe; its rise as a world power and its role, after the Second World War, in the establishment of the modern liberal world order: the rule of law, individual rights, democratic government, open borders, and free markets. It recounts the nation’s confrontations with communism abroad and

discrimination at home; its fractures and divisions, and the wars it has waged since 2001, when two airplanes crashed into the two towers of the World Trade Center eight blocks from the site of a long-gone shop where the printers of the *New-York Packet* had once offered for sale a young mother and her six-month old baby and the *Columbian Almanack*, bound with the Constitution, or without.

With this history, I've told a story; I've tried to tell it fairly. I have written a beginning and I have written an ending and I have tried to cross a divide, but I haven't attempted to tell the whole story. No one could. Much is missing in these pages. In the 1950s, the historian Carl Degler explained the rule he'd used in deciding what to leave in and what to leave out of his own history of the United States, a lovely book called *Out of Our Past*. "Readers should be warned that they will find nothing here on the Presidential administrations between 1868 and 1901, no mention of the American Indians or the settlement of the seventeenth-century colonies," Degler advised. "The War of 1812 is touched on only in a footnote."¹⁵ I, too, have had to skip over an awful lot. Some very important events haven't even made it into the footnotes, which I've kept clipped and short, like a baby's fingernails.

In deciding what to leave in and what to leave out, I've confined myself to what, in my view, a people constituted as a nation in the early twenty-first century need to know about their own past, mainly because this book is meant to double as an old-fashioned civics book, an explanation of the origins and ends of democratic institutions, from the town meeting to the party system, from the nominating convention to

the secret ballot, from talk radio to Internet polls. This book is chiefly a political history. It pays very little attention to military and diplomatic history or to social and cultural history. But it does include episodes in the history of American law and religion, journalism and technology, chiefly because these are places where what is true, and what's not, have sometimes gotten sorted out.

Aside from being a brief history of the United States and a civics primer, this book aims to be something else, too: it's an explanation of the nature of the past. History isn't only a subject; it's also a method. My method is, generally, to let the dead speak for themselves. I've pressed their words between these pages, like flowers, for their beauty, or like insects, for their hideousness. The work of the historian is not the work of the critic or of the moralist; it is the work of the sleuth and the storyteller, the philosopher and the scientist, the keeper of tales, the sayer of sooth, the teller of truth.

What, then, of the American past? There is, to be sure, a great deal of anguish in American history and more hypocrisy. No nation and no people are relieved of these. But there is also, in the American past, an extraordinary amount of decency and hope, of prosperity and ambition, and much, especially, of invention and beauty. Some American history books fail to criticize the United States; others do nothing but. This book is neither kind. The truths on which the nation was founded are not mysteries, articles of faith, never to be questioned, as if the founding were an act of God, but neither are they lies, all facts fictions, as if nothing can be known, in a world without truth. Be-

tween reverence and worship, on the one side, and irreverence and contempt, on the other, lies an uneasy path, away from false pieties and petty triumphs over people who lived and died and committed both their acts of courage and their sins and errors long before we committed ours. “We cannot hallow this ground,” Lincoln said at Gettysburg. We are obliged, instead, to walk this ground, dedicating ourselves to both the living and the dead.

A last word, then, about storytelling, and truth. “I have begun this letter five times and torn it up,” James Baldwin wrote, in a letter to his nephew begun in 1962. “I keep seeing your face, which is also the face of your father and my brother.” His brother was dead; he meant to tell his nephew about being a black man, about the struggle for equality, and about the towering importance and gripping urgency of studying the past and reckoning with origins. He went on,

I have known both of you all your lives, have carried your Daddy in my arms and on my shoulders, kissed and spanked him and watched him learn to walk. I don't know if you've known anybody from that far back; if you've loved anybody that long, first as an infant, then as a child, then as a man, you gain a strange perspective on time and human pain and effort. Other people cannot see what I see whenever I look into your father's face, for behind your father's face as it is today are all those faces which were his.¹⁶

No one can know a nation that far back, from its infancy, with or without baby teeth kept in a jar.

But studying history is like that, looking into one face and seeing, behind it, another, face after face after face. “Know whence you came,” Baldwin told his nephew.¹⁷ 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.