'These Truths' : Jill Lepore's vibrant history of America

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By Glenn Altschuler

The Declaration of Independence famously enumerated truths American revolutionaries deemed self-evident.

All men were created equal. They were endowed with inherent and inalienable rights, including the preservation of life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Their political leaders would derive their powers from the consent of the people they governed.

Since 1776, Jill Lepore, a professor of history at Harvard University, staff writer at The New Yorker, and author, among other books, of “The Story of America,” reminds us that Americans have fought over the meaning, implications and implementation of these principles. Along the way, it became abundantly clear that the “truth” was anything but self-evident.

Ms. Lepore highlights these themes in “These Truths: A History of the United States,” a piquant, provocative and dazzling history of America. Like Thomas Paine, she writes with fury, flash, and flourish. Her book is a tale of a centuries-old struggle over facts, opinions, and “simple and clarifying truths” in a marketplace of ideas that has never been free. It’s a tract for our times.

Ms. Lepore’s narrative is dominated by America’s original sin: race-based oppression. The compromise at the Constitutional Convention in which each slave counted as three-fifths of a person in determining the number of representatives assigned to each state in Congress all but guaranteed that the South would dominate the federal government, she reminds us.
Almost eight decades after the abolition of slavery, an African-American could legitimately respond to Franklin Roosevelt’s efforts to secure for the world freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear by proclaiming, “White folks talking about the Four Freedoms, and we ain’t got none.”

“These Truths” also foregrounds the fight for women’s rights. Advocates of protective legislation in the 20th century, Ms. Lepore points out, made a Faustian bargain: laws based on the idea that women depended on men, and on government, impeded efforts to achieve women’s rights. And she juxtaposes the gains made by feminists in the 1970s with the successful effort of conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly to defeat the Equal Rights Amendment.

As she generalizes, Ms. Lepore sometimes gets ahead of her skis. The Marshall Plan, she writes, was part of President Truman’s “move to the right.” By distinguishing between “tax eaters” (recipients of Aid to Families With Dependent Children and Medicaid) and “taxpayers” (recipients of Medicare, veterans’ benefits and farm subsidies), she declares (without acknowledging that such distinctions were as old as the republic), “1960s liberals crippled liberalism.”

Polarizing debates over women’s rights, the family as the basic unit of society, and abortion, she asserts, brought the United States “to the brink of a second civil war.” Polls, she insists, should not be trusted.

Far more often, however, Ms. Lepore’s analysis, which is grounded in dissatisfaction with liberalism as well as conservatism, is compelling. Reproductive rights and gun rights arguments, she indicates, “rest on weak constitutional foundations; their very shakiness is what makes them so useful for partisan purposes: Gains seem always in danger of being lost.”

Acknowledging that adultery “is not a national catastrophe,” Ms. Lepore insists that “Bill Clinton was no more subjected to a lynching than Clarence Thomas.” And she compares the “favored modes” of the alt-right (women-hating trolls and neo-Nazi memes) to those of the alt-left (“clickbait and call-out, sentimental, meaningless outrage ... and sanctimonious accusations of racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia”).

Most compelling is Ms. Lepore’s documentation of conflicts over truth throughout U.S. history. Thomas Jefferson, she reveals, once suggested that newspapers be divided into four sections: Truths, Probabilities, Possibilities, Lies. Attributing his defeat for governor of
California to political consultants, Upton Sinclair opined that voters were being led by “a lie factory.”

“These Truths” warns that social media, which promised an ethos of collaboration and transparency, has become a breeding ground for extremists. With conservatives joining academic postmodernists in an assault on the idea of objectivity, Ms. Lepore writes, ratings (i.e. popularity) have become the arbiter of truth.

With the electorate cast adrift in a fact and context-free environment, “the ship of state has lurched and reeled.” It will fall to a new generation, she concludes, without much confidence, to fathom its depths, and somehow find 'a way to “forge an anchor in the glowing fire of their ideals.”

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