

## *Affirming America*

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*These Truths: A History of the United States*, by Jill Lepore,  
W. W. Norton.

*This America: The Case for the Nation*, by Jill Lepore,  
Liveright.

ONCE HEARD an eminent historian praise a colleague's new volume as "a synthesis masquerading as a textbook." It was plainly meant as praise, but it got me thinking about the virtues of textbooks, not all of which are commonly found in syntheses. Readability is paramount: narrative momentum, abundant and colorful detail, deft phrasing. Comprehensiveness is essential: not everything can be included, but nothing fundamental should be left out. A sense of proportion is necessary: one or two hobbyhorses are fine, but they shouldn't run away with the book. Not *too* much originality: other scholars' important new discoveries, interpretations, methodologies may be acknowledged in a textbook, but discoveries of one's own should probably be first announced elsewhere. And a light ideological touch: not too many missiles lobbed at the scholarly consensus or the conventional wisdom.

*These Truths*, by the Harvard historian Jill Lepore, has all or nearly all these virtues. Readability especially: Lepore takes stylistic risks, trusting her ear for metaphor, and usually succeeds. (Her failures can be wince making, though: the book's last two paragraphs, for example, would almost certainly not have made it past her editor at the *New Yorker*, where she is also a staff writer.) Anecdotes, capsule biographies, piquant quotes are profuse and well chosen. And she keeps things moving with remarkable skill—through eight hundred pages, gliding rapidly from one subject to another, there are no jumps, no abrupt transitions. The book is meant, she declares in the introduction, "to double as an old-fashioned civics book, an explanation of

the origins and ends of democratic institutions.” Fortunately, for those who remember the stifflingly boring civics textbooks of earlier decades, there is nothing old-fashioned about it, and nothing newfangled either. It is full, lively, fair-minded, and fast moving.

*These Truths* (the title refers to the truths held to be self-evident in the Declaration of Independence) calls itself a “political history,” a history of American governing institutions and ideas. Within that arc, Lepore keeps a number of story lines in motion, intersecting and intertwined in a sort of historiographical polyphony: the relations between Europeans and their descendants and the indigenous peoples of the Americas; the long ordeal of African Americans in and after slavery; the saga of immigration and the vicissitudes of immigration policy; and women’s struggles for equality, from Abigail Adams’s failure to get her husband John to take women’s rights seriously to Phyllis Schlafly, who took those rights very seriously and fought against them bitterly. Another skillfully interwoven thread is the history of propaganda, of the techniques and technology of political persuasion from the Age of Federalism to the Age of Facebook.

Unfortunately, Lepore’s conception of the “political” mostly leaves out political economy. Highly attentive to some forms of power and resistance, she neglects others no less important: class conflict at home and military/political intervention abroad. What it does, *These Truths* mostly does very well. But it leaves some things undone, some subjects unplumbed, that are essential to rendering the American experience whole. The result, despite Lepore’s writerly gifts, reads at times like a sanitized vision of US history that perfectly suits her reviewers and her audience—the liberal wing of the upper and upper-middle class.



This history of America begins inauspiciously. When Columbus landed on the island of Haiti/Hispaniola, there were approximately three million inhabitants. Fifty years later, there were five hundred. Disease killed most of them, but Spanish rapacity, which sent many Indian slaves to work in gold and silver mines, also killed quite a few. The Spanish professed sincere concern for the Indians’ spiritual

well-being. They devised a proclamation, the *Requerimiento*, and read it aloud to the Indians (who often, as Lepore points out, did not understand a word of Spanish). It offered Indians the choice of either conversion to Christianity and fealty to the Spanish crown or else dispossession and enslavement. Some Spanish missionaries, notably Bartolomé de Las Casas, protested, not without effect, that Indians were human and had rights. But someone had to mine that gold and silver.

Anglo-American rapacity was less crude, perhaps because there were no precious metals near the first settlements. The political economy of the northern colonies centered on small farms, crafts, and furs obtained from the Indians; that of the southern colonies (including the British West Indies) on large plantations of tobacco, sugar, and cotton worked by African slaves. While the Spanish coveted treasure, the English coveted land; and they discovered, providentially, that they were more entitled to the Indians' land than the Indians were. According to the influential John Locke, "God gave the World to Men," but "it cannot be supposed he meant it should always be common and uncultivated. He gave it to the use of the industrious and Rational." The industrious and rational were those who practiced agriculture. That the Indians had won an often comfortable subsistence from the American land for thousands of years before the English arrived was a matter of indifference to Locke's God. In later chapters, Lepore quotes Andrew Jackson and Theodore Roosevelt reflecting complacently on the benign inevitability of the white man's supersession of the unprogressive aborigine. She might also have quoted Tocqueville's sublime sarcasm:

In the nineteenth century the dispossession of the Indians usually takes place in a regular and wholly legal manner. . . . The Spanish, for all their unexampled barbarism, could not succeed in exterminating the Indian race, nor even prevent it from exercising some rights. The Americans have achieved both—tranquilly, legally, philanthropically. . . without violating a single one of the great principles of civilized morality in the eyes of the world. It would be impossible to destroy a people while professing greater respect for the laws of humanity.

In the last generation, historians have imposed on themselves an obligation, partly methodological and partly moral, to acknowledge the agency of the subaltern: that is, to make oppressed people out to be subjects as well as victims. Some historians discharge this obligation awkwardly or perfunctorily, but Lepore, who has written award-winning books on a seventeenth-century Indian war (*The Name of War*) and an alleged eighteenth-century slave conspiracy (*New York Burning*), makes Indian and slave resistance the centerpiece of her treatment of the Colonial period without making pre-Revolutionary history into a morality play. “Fear of war and rebellion haunted every English colony, lands of terror, and of terrifying political instability and physical vulnerability.” Specialists doubtless know that, but most general readers probably don’t.

The Revolution and the Founding are much more familiar. Lepore defamiliarizes them in some measure by introducing characters for whom the Revolution was not fought and the Constitution was not written: George Washington’s slave Harry; James Madison’s slave Billey; and Benjamin Franklin’s sister Jane (whose biography Lepore has written). Harry escaped from Mount Vernon to join the British army in fighting the colonists, along with thousands of other slaves who took up Britain’s offer of freedom in exchange for military service. Billey simply refused to return with Madison to Virginia from Philadelphia, an antislavery city that would probably not have compelled him if Madison had tried to force the issue. Jane Franklin followed her brother’s career with pride, encouraging him and commenting, often shrewdly, on current affairs, but always limited by her lack of education, her poverty, and her twelve children. Lepore is at her best in these historical rescue operations and numerous others throughout the book, at once revealing and affecting.

Civics books traditionally were not only, or even primarily, works of history or social science. They were catechisms, meant to induct new citizens into a political community. One wouldn’t expect to find in them criticisms of that community’s institutions, much less of its constitution. And yet the American Constitution is and has always been badly in need of criticism. Lepore is very good on the scandal

of the three-fifths clause and recounts the conflicts over slavery at the Constitutional Convention in terms that point ominously to the more fateful conflicts seventy years on. But she is unduly sympathetic to Madison's and many other delegates' anxieties about the "tyranny of the people" and an "excess of democracy," which seem to have had less to do with protecting unpopular opinions than with preventing attempts to tax the wealthy. Whether or not a majority of the Constitutional Convention were bondholders, as Charles Beard argued more than a century ago, they were certainly determined to make debt relief more difficult and to reduce the influence of popular majorities in the states. The result was an imperfectly democratic scheme. In an important book, *How Democratic Is the American Constitution?* (2001), the eminent political scientist Robert Dahl soberly and devastatingly enumerates the defects of the American constitutional system and suggests a path toward genuine democracy. Arguments like Dahl's should certainly find their way into contemporary civics books. This is a key moment when Lepore's inattention to elites' hegemony limits her analysis.

After the distractions of revolution and nation building, Americans resumed their large-scale theft of Indian lands. "Indian removal," the euphemism for treaty breaking and forced deportation, was far less controversial than slavery. The superiority of European American civilization to Native American civilization was so obvious to white Americans that no solution to the Indian problem was ever conceived except to continue pushing them westward. To contemporary readers, on the other hand, it is the greed, cruelty, and hypocrisy of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American political leaders that are obvious, although just what would have been a fair accommodation with the Indians, a reasonable balance between "progress" and stasis, is far from obvious. Lepore does not speculate.

Lepore approaches the Civil War through the words of Lincoln, Garrison, and Frederick Douglass, as well as those of Maria Stewart, David Walker, and other, less well-known African Americans. It was a single grand drama of emancipation, she insists. After quoting from the Gettysburg Address, she writes: "[Lincoln] did not mention slavery.

There would be those, after the war ended, who said that it had been fought over states' rights or to preserve the Union or for a thousand other reasons and causes. Soldiers, North and South, knew better."

Why this casual dismissal of the economic interpretation of the Civil War? Of course the war was about slavery, but of course it had a few (if not a thousand) other causes as well. Lincoln made clear in a famous letter of 1862 that his one and only war aim was to preserve the Union and that he would only free the slaves if it would serve that purpose. The New York draft riots of 1863 showed how little some Northern soldiers cared about emancipation or blacks generally. As late as 1864 the House refused to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment, abolishing slavery. Most important, the North and South had very different plans for the West. The South had to expand—its soils were becoming exhausted—but the planter elite wanted large plantations worked by slaves, not small farms worked by free whites. The North also had to expand: immigrants were streaming in, capital-labor conflict was beginning to be felt, and Northern businessmen and bankers foresaw huge profits in the West. Before, during, and after the war, the Republican Party was at least as active in promoting national economic development as it was in agitating for abolition or securing racial equality in the South; and in the first postwar decade, the Party's zeal for Reconstruction dwindled swiftly.

Lepore's impulse, here and throughout the book, to foreground race and the heroic black struggle toward liberty is a productive one, frequently issuing in luminous prose like this passage, about the exodus of slaves toward the Union Army when news of Lincoln's proclamation reached them:

It was an American Odyssey. "They came at night, when the flickering camp-fires shone like vast unsteady stars along the black horizon," W. E. B. DuBois later wrote, "old men, and thin, with gray and tufted hair; women with frightened eyes, dragging whimpering hungry children; men and girls, stalwart and gaunt." They came, too, in daylight, and on horseback, by wagon and cart. They clambered aboard trains. They packed food and stole guns. They walked and they ran and they rode, carrying their

children on their backs, dedicating themselves to the unfinished work of the nation: freeing themselves.

This powerful passage captures the central meaning of the Civil War for African Americans: emancipation. But for white northerners there were more compelling concerns—the preservation of the Union, and the protection of the West for development through free labor. Lepore's overemphasis on the moral causes of the Civil War to the neglect of its material causes reveals an impoverishment of historical vision.



The postwar Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to enfranchise blacks (though the Fourteenth proved all too successful in enfranchising corporations, the result of one of the Supreme Court's many illogical and probusiness decisions down the centuries). And neither mentioned women—the first of many disappointments for the women's suffrage movement at the hands of both parties. The Chinese immigrants who streamed into the West from the 1850s on were widely despised and ineligible for citizenship. The Republican Party, which had a certain moral grandeur in its abolitionist days, largely lost it after the Civil War, while the Democratic Party was the party of Southern whites and entirely racist. Nativism among the population, corruption among the political elite, greed and arrogance among the economic elite: America in the late nineteenth century was an uninspiring spectacle.

Perhaps most fatefully, the material basis of American democracy began to erode in those years. In 1820, 80 percent of Americans were self-employed. Economic independence was thought to be an indispensable prerequisite of full citizenship. Lincoln voiced this culture's aspirations and expectations: "The prudent, penniless beginner in the world labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land for himself, then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him." But after the Civil War, the banks and bondholders once again (as they had after the Revolutionary War) prevailed on Congress to enact hard-money

policies. This meant crushing taxes and low crop prices for farmers. Many farmers were overwhelmed by debt and lost their land (90 percent of farmland in some states belonged to creditors), and all were squeezed between interest payments and the exactions of the supply and freight monopolies. In the attempt to make them, in effect, tenant farmers or to push them off the land and make them wage workers, farmers saw a radical threat to democracy.

They responded with the most radically democratic movement in American history: the Farmers' Alliance, with thousands of lecturer-organizers, millions of members, and a viable, scalable plan for reorganizing the political economy of farming on a cooperative basis. When the banks declared war and denied them all credit, they recognized that they would have to fight for national political power. They formed the People's Party, which did remarkably well on its own in the election of 1892 but merged into the Democratic Party in 1896. When the Democratic candidate, William Jennings Bryan, lost, Populism faded away.

Lepore does not have much use for Populism, partly because she mistakenly identifies it with twenty-first-century right-wing populism—a very different creature—and also because the Populists reneged on their early promises to blacks and women. She writes that “the People's Party rested on a deep and abiding commitment to exclude from full citizenship anyone descended from anyone from Africa or Asia.” There was no such commitment, only a craven and unprincipled compromise with the virulent racism of the Democratic Party. On the contrary, the early years of the Populist movement saw unprecedented cooperation between lower-class blacks and lower-class whites. As the great historian C. Vann Woodward wrote, “Never before or since have the two races in the South come so close together as they did during the Populist struggles.” As so often before and since, race was used to divide what threatened to become an interracial class movement. This is a civics lesson Lepore unaccountably neglects.

The third-party banner passed from the People's Party to the Socialist Party. Unlike the Populists, the Socialists did not contest mass production and the independent producers' resulting loss

of control over their work. They were chiefly concerned with wages and safe working conditions. Even so, the Socialists did surprisingly well, electing many local and state officials and publishing several newspapers. But Woodrow Wilson, his attorney general, A. Mitchell Palmer, and Palmer's young assistant, J. Edgar Hoover, took advantage of emergency wartime powers and the Bolshevik scare to crush the Socialists, just as state and federal troops had crushed one strike after another in the late nineteenth century. Capitalism's decisive victory in America—as elsewhere—had less to do with its superiority as an economic system than with naked force.

In the Progressive Era, as in all the others, alongside Lepore's every recounting of election or ideology, of the First World War or the Snopes Trial, of Supreme Court decisions or the rise of IBM, sound the book's recurring motifs of black aspiration and rebuff, anti-immigrant hysteria, and feminist militancy. Wilson, the intellectuals' president, who brought the *New Republic* into the White House and preached self-determination to European heads of state, had the most blinkered racial prejudices, segregating the entire civil service. Popular nativism issued in the Immigration Act of 1924, assigning quotas favoring the more "desirable" Northern European countries, while Mexicans brought in to work the California orchards and vineyards were ineligible for citizenship. And although women finally won the right to vote in 1920 with the Nineteenth Amendment, that victory coincided with the decline of the theatrical, outdoor brand of politics that had produced it, which owed much to the revival meeting, a sphere in which women had taken a prominent role.

What succeeded it was a far less participatory style of politics, dominated by mass advertising and professional campaign management. Lepore introduces Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter, founders of Campaigns Inc., the world's first political consulting firm. She makes a strong case that political consulting and polling have been "the single most important forces in American democracy since the rise of the party system." A force for ill, unfortunately, especially in the case of consulting. Whitaker and Baxter pop up repeatedly in the course of Lepore's narrative, deploying the dark arts of Madison Avenue

at the behest of conservative politicians and the American Medical Association to defeat progressive candidates and doom enlightened, humane initiatives. Among their victims were Upton Sinclair's gubernatorial campaign, Harry Truman's national health plan, and Earl Warren's California health plan. They were also instrumental in the rise of Richard Nixon. As they explained their method: "Simplify, simplify, simplify. A wall goes up when you try to make Mr. and Mrs. Average American Citizen. . . think." Their distinguished progeny include Lee Atwater, Frank Luntz, Paul Weyrich, Dick Morris, Karl Rove, and all too many others.

If *These Truths* feels at once authoritative and informal, that is doubtless because it's beribboned with hundreds of quotes and illustrations from contemporary journalism: from Revolutionary-era printers and the almost comically partisan pre-Civil War press to the (sometimes) yellow press of Hearst and Pulitzer and the dignified early days of television, with Murrow and Cronkite. Lepore also draws a few journalists: an (overly) admiring portrait of Walter Lippmann; an affectionate, moving sketch of the war correspondent Ernie Pyle; and several shots of the witty and courageous foreign correspondent and columnist Dorothy Thompson in action. (Comparing their views as Lepore samples them, I would certainly rather have Dorothy Thompson's opinions about weighty matters of politics and morality than Walter Lippmann's.)

In the 1950s and 1960s black Americans took center stage for the first time. Lepore's treatment of these years is particularly full and stirring: profiles of Thurgood Marshall and Martin Luther King, detailed accounts of court and legislative battles, descriptions of Selma and the March on Washington. This historical moment embodied the culmination of centuries of black struggle. It was also, along with Johnson's brief and ill-starred Great Society, the high point of post-World War II liberalism. Since then, American political history has been a dispiriting story of pitifully ineffective Democrats, increasingly coopted by Wall Street, and pitilessly effective Republicans, determined to roll back the New Deal while distracting their voters with lurid falsehoods about welfare queens, homegrown terrorists, and immigrants.

It is a denouement—a debacle—for which the book has not prepared us. The coordinated, relentless assault by capital against labor over the last four decades is only intermittently, and then fleetingly, acknowledged, which reflects the book's major flaw. *These Truths* does full justice, in most respects, to the political history (and prehistory) of the United States. But not in all respects. Class and empire are seriously underrepresented, almost missing entirely. There are only a handful of references to American labor history and, by my count, only two paragraphs about strikes, one of them about the very well-known railroad strikes of the 1870s and 1880s. There have been thousands of strikes in American history, directly affecting millions of workers and indirectly affecting many millions more. No doubt many other subjects are equally important, but none is more important, not even “these truths,” which after all must be judged a fraud if they can bring us no closer to ending the exploitation and insecurity that has been and remains the lot of most Americans.

As for most non-Americans, they have benefited very little from any commitment by our government to “these truths.” Unmatched in power and wealth throughout most of the twentieth century, enjoying an almost completely free hand, the United States either overthrew social-democratic governments or supported authoritarian (sometimes brutally so) governments in Angola, Argentina, Brazil, Cambodia, Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Greece, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Nicaragua, Paraguay, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, South Vietnam, Thailand, Turkey, Uruguay, and Zaire. Though our government assures a credulous populace and intelligentsia that democracy and human rights—“these truths”—are the soul of American foreign policy (a pretense at which the rest of the world laughs bitterly), the actual principles animating that policy were set out lucidly in a Top Secret memo by the head of the State Department's policy planning staff in 1948:

We have about 50 percent of the world's wealth, but only 6.3 percent of its population . . . in this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us

to maintain this position of disparity without detriment to our national security. To do so we will have to dispense with all sentimentality and day-dreaming; and our attention will have to be concentrated on our immediate national objectives. We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction. . . . We should cease to talk about vague and—for the Far East—unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of living standards, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are then hampered by idealistic slogans, the better.

That was the universally revered George Kennan.

No one can fit everything important about American history into a single book, even one eight hundred pages long. But Lepore declares it her purpose in *These Truths* to tell her fellow citizens “what they need to know about their own past,” and surely Americans urgently need to know about class conflict and about America’s lawless and violent foreign policy. Lepore writes that throughout American history “these truths”—“this nation’s founding principles”—have been “cherished, decried, and contested, fought for, fought over, and fought against.” In the spheres of class and empire, however, they have mostly been ignored.



*This America* takes much of its material from *These Truths* and has a similar civic-educational purpose. Lepore has previously grappled with resurgent American nationalism by spending a year observing the Tea Party up close, an experience she chronicled in *The Whites of Their Eyes* (2010). *This America* is more worried about Trump supporters than Tea Partiers. The former are less rationalist and libertarian than the latter, more faith based and communitarian (and as a result, less lavishly funded by the Kochs and other billionaires). Trump supporters take their inspiration from Jesus rather than Ayn Rand, from “America the Beautiful” rather than from an originalist reading of the Constitution. They care more about dignity and jobs than about taxes and regulations. They are much more responsive to evocations

of past American greatness than to complaints about lost liberties. In all these respects they resemble the right-wing populists in power or approaching power in Western and Central Europe; and like their European counterparts, they do not subscribe to the fanatical anti-statism of the American one percent. The best name for them seems to be “nationalists.”

“Illiberal nationalists,” in Lepore’s terminology. Illiberal nationalism is “something fierce, something violent: less a love for your own country than a hatred of other countries and their people and a hatred of people within your own country who don’t belong to an ethnic, racial, or religious majority.” It embraces “nativism, racism, and recourse to aggression.” These viral strains have been present throughout American history, alongside another, more benign nationalism. This “liberal or civic nationalism” is a commitment to America’s constitutive ideals: as Lepore defines them, “political equality, natural rights, and the sovereignty of the people.”

*This America* is very good at describing these two nationalisms and their frequent, sometimes alternating and sometimes simultaneous, appearances in American history. But it’s not very good at accounting for them, either in their individual occurrences or as types. Illiberal nationalism has something to do with “mass politics, mass communication, and mass migration.” Yes, but what? No answer is forthcoming. Is there some complex of historical or socioeconomic conditions that predictably results in an insular and hostile outlook? Are illiberal nationalists’ grievances sometimes valid, even if tainted with prejudice? Lepore doesn’t pursue these questions, which leaves her armed only with disapproval when face-to-face with the present danger. Here is the primal scene of *This America*, to which Lepore refers repeatedly:

“We’re putting America first and it hasn’t happened in a lot of decades,” Donald Trump said at a rally in Houston, Texas, in the fall of 2018, before a crowd sixteen thousand strong. “We’re taking care of ourselves for a change, folks,” he said, nodding his head. Supporters waved KEEP AMERICA GREAT signs and FINISH THE WALL placards. He warned of a conspiracy designed to

“restore the rule of corrupt, power-hungry globalists.” The crowd booed. “You know what a globalist is, right? A globalist is a person that wants the globe to do well, frankly, not caring about our country so much. And you know what? We can’t have that. You know, they have a word, it sort of became old-fashioned—it’s called a “nationalist.” And I say, really, we’re not supposed to use that word. You know what I am?” He poked his chest. “I’m a nationalist, okay?” The crowd roared. “I’m a nationalist!” His voice rose. “Use that word! *Use that word!*”

What did Trump’s hearers think they were hearing? And why did they like it? Lepore is too horrified to speculate. I would guess that “corrupt, power-hungry globalists” is key. There actually are such people. It is true, as Trump said, that they do not care about our country much, though it is not true that they want the globe to do well. What they want is a world completely permeable to multinational corporations and banks, with no local obstacles to profits: obstacles like labor protections, occupational health and safety regulations, capital controls, minimum wage laws, environmental regulations, liberal intellectual property regimes, restrictions on profit repatriation, and a decent social-safety net, to which foreign investors might be expected to contribute. They want, in other words, the world of the “free trade” agreements that the neoliberal Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations gave them, or tried to give them. These economic arrangements have deindustrialized the country, costing millions of jobs and destroying the communities in which Trump’s supporters live.

Does Trump understand all this? Who knows? During the 2016 campaign, it sometimes seemed as if he did. But his cabinet is almost entirely composed of globalists, as were Clinton’s, Bush’s, and Obama’s (and as Hillary’s would certainly have been). Do Trump’s supporters understand this? I don’t pretend to know, but I’m pretty sure no Democrat has tried to explain it to them. Until one does, they’ll go on blaming immigrants, students, blacks, the liberal media, and (with somewhat more justice) the Democratic Party for their problems.

Nationalism and immigration are closely connected in American history. The large immigration of Chinese, beginning in the mid-

nineteenth century, was economically useful, but they were not eligible for citizenship. Later, between 1880 and 1920, twenty million Europeans arrived in the United States. Many Americans were anxious, and “people keen for political power searched for rationales for exclusion, discrimination, and aggression,” rationales that included eugenics and “race science.” In 1924 the United States enacted its first immigration restrictions, favoring immigrants from some countries over others. The restrictions have been modified and are now generally thought fairer, but they have not been abolished.

Frederick Douglass argued that they ought to be, in a stirring address called “Composite Nation,” which Lepore often cites. She herself seems to agree: “To restrict immigration, a practice associated with the rise of illiberal nationalism, is to regard foreigners who arrive from friendly nations as invading armies. In the United States, founded as an asylum for the oppressed, this was a very hard turn.”

Open borders and unrestricted immigration: it is a generous vision. But it may be too late to urge generosity on this scale. In the midsummer of American prosperity, during the social-democratic 1950s and 1960s, the United States might have carried the world on its back, economically. But we’ve squandered our incomparable endowment: on the Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan wars; on the Reagan, Bush, and Trump tax gifts to the rich; on maintaining seven to eight hundred military bases abroad for forty years or more; on the F-35 fighter-bomber and other advanced weapons; and on epic tax evasion by the rich, including trillions stashed abroad in tax havens, all bound to increase now that Trump has slashed funding for the IRS. Something like \$10–20 trillion has been wasted in these and other ways. The United States is no longer a rich country; it is a poor country where many rich people live, and they have no interest in helping immigrants.

Besides, the rest of the world is, for the most part, no longer clamoring to come here. The exceptions are Mexico and Central America, and they are a special case. We wrought havoc in those societies: in Mexico, through NAFTA, which ruined hundreds of thousands of small farmers, as well as through our stubborn refusal to legalize

drugs, which turned Mexico into a narcotics entrepôt; and in Central America through our support of right-wing militaries and paramilitaries in the 1980s, which left El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala with tens of thousands of armed and violent men who had no commitment to a government of laws. We owe every potential immigrant from those countries an apology and a welcome; and we owe those countries reconstruction aid, on their terms.

*This America* is an admirable little book: consistently eloquent and full of interesting history. But when it speaks to the present moment, it's not as helpful as it might be, falling back instead on inspirational rhetoric. "There is no more powerful way to fight the forces of prejudice, intolerance, and injustice than by a dedication to equality, citizenship, and equal rights, as guaranteed by a nation of laws." Who could disagree? "A new Americanism would mean a devotion to equality and liberty, tolerance and inquiry, justice and fairness, along with a commitment to national prosperity inseparable from an unwavering dedication to a sustainable environment the world over." Yes, yes, but what's wanted now is a convincing story about what turned Middle America into a decaying, drug-ridden wasteland, and then someone to tell that convincing story to the Middle Americans who, in their rage and despair, gave us our present nightmare.

Will the Democratic Party tell them? The last Democratic presidential candidate simply ignored them, and the current party leadership is allergic to the one Democrat who might connect with them, Bernie Sanders. If any particular groups of people could nudge and shame establishment Democrats into a dialogue with the deplorable fellow citizens who resent and despise them, it is probably those with a chair at Harvard or some other elite university and those with a berth at the *New Yorker* or some other elite journal of opinion. Someone with both has, I would think, a special responsibility.