

# افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد  
بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد  
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم  
از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

European Languages

زبانهای اروپائی

OCTOBER 19, 2018

by JOHN DAVIS  
21.10.2018

## The Last History of the United States



Photo Source Boston Public Library | [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)

The words “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...”, from America’s Declaration of Independence, stands as one of the finest historical examples of what Hitler, and later Goebbels, called the big lie. Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf* (1925) “that in the big lie there is always a certain force of credibility; because the broad masses of a nation are always more easily corrupted in the deeper strata of their emotional nature than consciously or voluntarily...” In Jill Lepore’s *These Truths—A History of the United States* (2018), she painstakingly exposes the truth that America is founded on hypocrisy.

The greatest fear of the Founding Fathers was democracy. Their intent was to establish a white aristocracy of wealth largely based on the productivity of African slaves. Lepore shows that they succeeded beyond their wildest dreams of avarice and power. She shows that big lies and little lies have subsequently sustained the illusion of democracy in the United States and the façade of inclusivity and freedom it presents to the world. The nation's underlying hypocrisy is rarely challenged; instead, political factions compete to demonstrate (or at least propagandize) their fealty to its foundational "truths". Along the way, the means of communication, from broadsheet to newspaper, radio, TV, computers and now the internet have serially compounded the ability of partisans to disseminate their truths – to propagandize more effectively.

The narrative she weaves, over almost 800 pages, is more requiem than history – the ship of state, in her telling, now wallows adrift on a rising ocean bereft of a mainsail. Those who most revere the country's constitution had, she writes, "pulled up the ship's planking to make bonfires of rage: they had courted the popular will by demolishing the idea of truth itself, smashing the ship's very mast". Lepore closes her tome by calling on a new generation of Americans "to steer the ship through wind and wave". In 1933, Walter Lippman wrote, in the depths of the depression, that "The fixed points by which our fathers steered the ship of state have vanished". Now, in 2018 and similarly despairing, Lepore cautions that these young Americans, "would need to learn an ancient and nearly forgotten art: how to navigate by the stars".

If those stars represent for Lepore some guiding elemental truth, it will surely only be revealed once the clouds of polluting hypocrisies that have thus far beguiled the government and its people have fully cleared our beautiful spacious skies. Lepore, her tendentiousness muffled in elaborate veils of metaphor (as befits a Harvard historian), goes some way towards clearing the air.

Modernity began, she suggests, when people commenced arguing about the nature of truth. Hers is a political history; her truths are embedded in ideals. Yet the story of America is also told in the physicality of its lands and their extraordinary material abundance. The European extraction of the wealth of the Americas made possible the rise of capitalism: she notes that Adam Smith believed that the discovery of the Americas and the passage to the East Indies were the two most important events in the history of mankind.

Capitalism, funded by the New World's gold and silver, was only able to metastasize once it could feed on a surplus of commodities. Cotton, sugar and tobacco were the mainstays

of the American slave states – production that was powered by the overseer’s whip upon the backs of African slaves, in what Edward E. Baptist calls the ‘whipping machine’. Cotton was King and in Britain it was spun into cloth almost exclusively, after about 1830, in coal-powered steam mills. Fossil fuels and the whip thus cohered in the production of this dominant commodity. The Atlantic slave trade was ended in 1808, but the vast global market for cotton led to this country’s internal slave trade in which, as Lepore writes, a million African slaves were sold and shipped west between 1820 and 1840.

Britain’s industrial secrets had been smuggled into the United States early in the nineteenth century, and the Anglo-American Industrial revolution produced both country’s extreme, but highly concentrated, wealth. That wealth was produced by a noxious amalgam of coal and slavery – each component having left a dark stain on America. Lepore acknowledges both. Indeed, the political struggle to maintain the ideal of white supremacy against the claims of Native Americans and then African Americans and non-white immigrants is the leitmotif of her work.

Lepore’s history is driven by the past politics of the United States, but like all historians she filters her facts through the present. If Modernity began with a questioning of truth, Post-Modernity was born of cultural relativity, studied in the academy in terms of structuralism and post-structuralism. Truth in the body-politic is now, Lepore suggests, scattered into shards of diverse identities, each claiming its own reality.

Hers is, perhaps, the last significant one-volume history of the United States (continuing a tradition best exemplified by [Charles and Mary Beard’s work](#) from 1921 and Zinn’s [People’s History](#) from 1980) that focuses on ideologies and the propaganda that sustains them. The next such work of any significance must surely be a post-human history that arises out of a re-mapped cosmology – based on an historical awareness imposed by the sixth extinction and the climate apocalypse, first engendered, lest we forget, by a coal-burning industrial revolution. Jill Lepore can only offer perfunctory rhetoric: “a nation born in revolution” she writes, “will forever struggle against chaos”.

Nearly forty years ago, Zinn railed against the corrupting influence of money in politics. In the afterword to his signature work he warned that America’s social problems “would not be solved without some great social movement of the citizenry” and those without wealth “would have to demand access in their own way”. In her epilogue, Lepore notes that just after Trump withdrew the United States from the Paris climate accord, “a trillion-ton iceberg the size of the state of Delaware broke off of Antarctica”. She leaves that

iceberg dripping in the textual room – a non-human object as an avatar of our post-human future, now vividly foretold in the latest IPCC report.

Enlightenment philosophers had theorized that from a state of natural, perfect equality, men might create a civil society – government – for the sake of order, and the protection of property. Our founding fathers punted on ‘perfect equality’ but were nevertheless genuinely concerned to create order and protect property. Our history shows that we continue to struggle with equality at least partly because order has often meant the death, oppression or incarceration of non-whites. Whatever fractured and unequal order has been achieved, it is now menaced by more than social unrest. The basis for the American state is existentially threatened by the climate apocalypse and the weather terrorism it births. Two words of current significance: Hurricane Michael.

The reasoning that informed the framers of the United States Constitution and which for over two hundred years has formed the basis of the American State, albeit honored primarily in the breach, has been rendered moot by the advent of weather terrorism. Jill Lepore’s book is thus truly a requiem for civil society and the American way of government. No state can survive if it fails the most basic test of maintaining order and protecting property. The climate apocalypse is an existential threat against which the U.S. government has demonstrated itself to be helpless. The hardening of infrastructure and the geographic reassignment of vulnerable populations are its only discernible responses – and neither strategy can satisfactorily quell the random attacks of a rampant climate.

We are now merely walk-ons in the terrifying story that the weather tells of our environmental misdeeds. Our ongoing activities that depend on the liberating of sequestered carbon continue a demonic tale now told by its consequential phenomena rather than by its instigators and victims. It is history in the making, but we humans no longer control the narrative. So it is that the truths embedded in our nation’s founding and which continue to be the base material of our contested societal constructs, and which Lepore glosses with such consummate rhetorical skill, cannot save her book from an ultimate and overwhelming irrelevance.