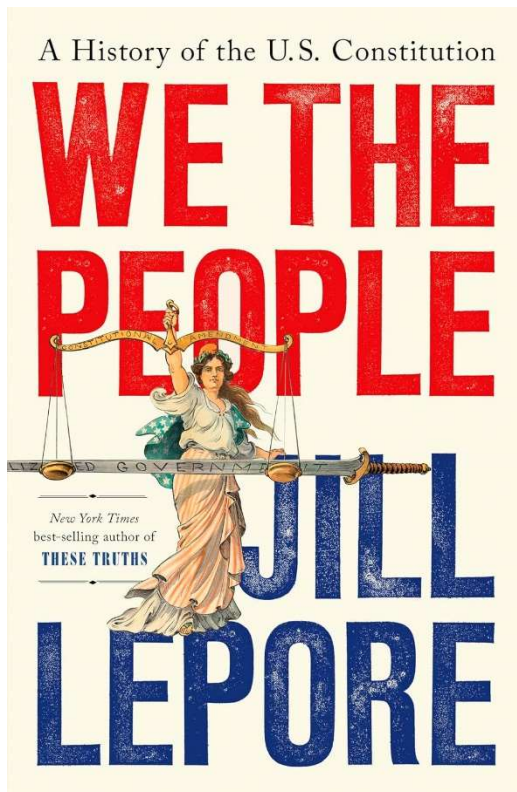


‘We the People’ highly recommended

Posted: Sunday, January 4, 2026

“We the People: A History of the U.S. Constitution” by Jill Lepore. New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation (a division of W.W. Norton & Company), 225, 720 pages, \$39.99 (hardcover).



“Every ordered society is governed by a set of core rules, customs, and principles,” Jill Lepore explains near the beginning of “We the People: A History of the U.S. Constitution,” her timely and much-needed addition to the dialog that dominates much of our discourse these days. “This is true for every species that lives in a structured community: a pack of wolves or a pod of whales, a hive of honeybees or a colony of ants, a herd of deer or a flock of geese, a clan of elephants or a tribe of apes and even a forest of trees.”

“Only humans devise constitutions,” she adds poignantly. “Devising constitutions, or fundamental laws, is so elemental to human society that the collective noun might be a constitution of humans. Since long before the keeping of records, humans erected governments, codified laws, anointed rulers, imposed or banned religious practices, federated or severed states, claimed territory, and established sovereignty. Once writing was invented, rulers of ancient human societies began recording laws, etching them into clay and stone in the hope that they would last, binding one generation to the next.”

How’s that for stage setting?

The buildup Lepore employs to introduce readers to her latest monumental undertaking is more than justified. Before reading “We the People,” I thought I had a pretty good understanding of the U.S. Constitution and how it came to be the defining document of the ongoing experiment that our country represents. After all, we have been studying it in one form or another since reaching school age, with each successive grade adding a new level of complexity and nuance to our collective understanding of what makes our way of life unique among all the other nations inhabiting the planet.

Boy was I wrong.

Honestly, I learned something new on virtually every page of this deceptively intricate and unusually comprehensive chronology of a sacred text that many swear by without having a true understanding of how it was initially created and, just as important, how it has continued to evolve in substance and interpretation right up to the present day. Many times I was amazed at the longevity and relevance of several key flashpoints, such as the ongoing controversy surrounding the Electoral College. Consider the following from “Let Us Examine the Word White,” the fourth chapter:

“Discontent with the Electoral College did not end with the death of the Federalist Party. In Andrew Jackson’s first annual message to Congress, on December 8, 1829, he asked the legislature to pass a constitutional amendment... Jackson’s interest in this amendment was self-interest. In the presidential election of 1824, he’d won the popular vote but lost the election. Jackson had earned 152,901 votes and John Quincy Adams 114,023, and he’s bested Adams in the Electoral College, too, 99-84, but because two other candidates split the remaining 78 votes between them, Jackson had not won a majority. Under the terms of the Twelfth Amendment, the decision went to the House, where the speaker, Henry Clay, managed a win for Adams who, once inaugurated, named Clay as his secretary of state in a move that became known as the ‘corrupt bargain.’”

Sound familiar?

“We the People” is one of the more extensively researched tomes (and clocking in at 720 pages, I believe it warrants that moniker), with 75 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the Introduction, 13 chapters arranged in four sections, and Epilogue that form the main narrative. Part One, “The Invention of the Constitution, 1774-1791,” entails the first three chapters; Part Two, “The Contest over Interpretation, 1803-1896,” is comprised of chapters four through seven, Part Three, “The Pattern of Amendment, 1905-1959,” consists of chapters eight, nine and ten, and Part Four, “The End of Amendment, 1961-2016,” which is made up of chapters eleven, twelve and thirteen. The manuscript is also liberally augmented with a variety of historical illustrations that serve to bring the narrative to life in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. The prose is accessible to the casual reader, although those with some exposure to basic legal concepts and applications – and those possessing more than a rudimentary understanding of the overarching history of the United States – will no doubt be able to appreciate Lepore’s manuscript on multiple deeper levels.

The David Woods Kemper ’41 Professor of American History at Harvard University as well as a Professor of Law at Harvard Law School, Lepore is also a staff writer for The New Yorker. She has a B.A. in English from Tufts University (1987), an M.A. in American Culture from the University of Michigan (1990), and a Ph.D. in American Studies from Yale University (1995). The first in her family to attend college, she initially majored in Mathematics before switching to English. Her essays and reviews have also appeared in The New York Times, The Times Literary Supplement, The Journal of American History, Foreign Affairs, the Yale Law Journal, The American Scholar, and the American Quarterly. Her previous books include “The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party’s Revolution and the Battle for American History” (2010), “The Story of America: Essays on Origins” (2012), “The Secret History of Wonder Woman” (2014), which won the 2015 American History Book Prize, “This America: The Case for the Nation” (2019), and “If Then: How the Simulmatics Corporation Invented the Future” (2020).

Near the end of “We the People,” Lepore does an exceptional job of summarizing where we are now – and where we are likely to go in the future - with respect to how the Constitution will continue to influence and shape our collective destiny. Note the following from chapter 13, “The Constitution is Dead!”

“It wasn’t only amendments that Congress couldn’t pass in the decades between Reagan and Trump; legislation stalled, too, and while the economy grew, income inequality, rates of poverty, and maternal and infant death rates all rose. With a handful of notable exceptions, including the Affordable Care Act and the Inflation Reduction Act, neither Democrats nor Republicans, however much they continued to fight over an elusive Middle America, were able to make any real headway at turning back the suffering caused by industrial decline, a global marketplace, the alienation caused by the emergence of the internet and social media, and the public health crisis caused by a series of drugs, from crack to over-the-counter opioids to fentanyl sold on the streets. By 2018, for the first time in a century, American life expectancy was consistently falling. College-educated Americans prospered, but high school graduates of the white working class, and those with less

education, found few paths out of poverty in the age of global finance capitalism. Public health researchers coined the term deaths of despair to describe the vertiginous rise in the number of deaths among white working-class adults due to suicide, alcoholism, and drug overdose.”

What does all of this have to do with the Constitution? Pick up a copy of “We the People” and find out. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, WKU.

www.bgdailynews.com