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Political Science

The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History

Jill Lepore
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The Whites of Their Eyes is a fascinating attempt to raise the level of US public policy debate. It is also a critique of the uses of history in politics and a brief, informative account of the ordinary people who lived at the time of the American Revolution.

Lepore notes the Revolution is used by both the left and the right in American politics, and, when used, it trumps all other argument. Currently, it is the rally point for the Tea Party movement, which claims that we need to return to the truths asserted by the Founding Fathers in order to solve current problems. Lepore persuasively demonstrates how erroneous this position is: “The founders were not prophets. They believed that to defer without examination to what your forefathers believed is to become a slave to the tyranny of the past.” Or, as Abraham Lincoln eloquently said: “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate for the stormy present…As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.”

According to Lepore, the Tea Party practices “historical fundamentalism” which is marked by “the belief that a particular and quite narrowly defined past—‘the founding’—is ageless and sacred and to be worshipped; that certain historical texts—‘the founding documents’—are to be read in the same spirit with which religious fundamentalism is read…that the Founding Fathers were divinely inspired; that the academic study of history…is a conspiracy and, furthermore, blasphemy; and that political arguments grounded in appeals to the founding documents, as sacred texts, and to the Founding Fathers, as prophets, are, therefore, incontrovertible.”

The assertion that the United States was founded as a Christian country is but one example of incorrect historical fundamentalism advanced by the Tea Party. Lepore counters “…if the founders had followed their forefathers, they would have written a constitution

establishing Christianity as the national religion." When the US Constitution was adopted, all but two states had a religious test for holding office, but the Constitution prohibited any such test; when the Bill of Rights was adopted, all but three states had an official religion, but the First Amendment forbid such an establishment.

Lepore is the David Woods Kemper '41 Professor of American History and chair of the History and Literature Program at Harvard University. One of her books, *New York Burning*, was a Pulitzer Prize finalist. Professor Lepore is a prolific writer and highly regarded scholar.

The Whites of Their Eyes is a valuable contribution to current discussions of public policy and should be read by anyone interested in serious political debate.

John Michael Senger