PRESIDENTIAL FOREWORD

To the Members of the GREAT Class of 2024:

Greetings from Nassau Hall! My colleagues and I are looking forward to welcoming you to Princeton in a few short months. Your talents, interests, and perspectives will add tremendously to this community, and I am confident that you in turn will develop and grow as a result of the experiences, interactions, challenges, and opportunities that you encounter here.

I am delighted to share with you this copy of the Princeton Pre-read selection for 2020, Jill Lepore's *This America: The Case for the Nation.* The Pre-read is part of a series of activities that will introduce you to the life of the University. I like to think of it as an academic counterpart to the Pre-rade, a joyous ceremony in which you and your classmates march together to enter Princeton through Fitz-Randolph Gate.

When I choose the Pre-read each year, I search for a book that meets several criteria: it must be scholarly, so that it reflects Princeton's intellectual conversation and pedagogy; it must be accessible, and not too lengthy for a summer assignment; and it must speak to an ethical question about the goals that should guide you as a student and a person in today's world.

This America meets all those criteria. Its author, Jill Lepore, is among the academy's most distinguished historians and the nation's most acclaimed writers. Her book is at once brief and ambitious. It addresses big questions, including one of the most important ethical issues of our time: how can Americans, and the people of other nations, see themselves as united in a shared quest for the common good despite differences and disagreements that might pull them apart?

This America is a terrific Pre-read for another reason: it explores what it means to be a scholar and hence what it means to be a college student (especially at Princeton, where we expect all of our students to do research). Lepore, quoting W.E.B. DuBois, argues that the best history "tells the truth" about "the hideous mistakes, the frightful wrongs, and the great and beautiful things that nations do," *and also* "foster[s] a spirit of citizenship and environmental stewardship and a set of civic ideals, and a love of one another" (p. 137).

Is she right? Is there a risk that telling the truth about a nation might sap rather than foster "the spirit of citizenship?" When, if ever, might we have to choose between civic and scholarly ideals? These questions deserve your attention as you enter Princeton, a university that

explicitly aspires to promote vigorous truth-seeking *and* to be, as our informal motto says, "in the nation's service and the service of humanity."

A book like *This America* invites conversation. It demands active engagement and thoughtful argument, rather than uncritical veneration. You will have an opportunity to talk about *This America* with student leaders during Orientation Week, and Professor Lepore will join us that week to discuss the book. Over the course of the academic year, I will host Pre-read seminars in the residential colleges and elsewhere around campus. These discussions are among the highlights of the academic year for me. I anticipate that our conversations will range over many topics, but here are a few you might wish to consider as you read the book:

- Three key terms in Lepore's book are "nation," "nationalism," and "liberalism." What do these terms mean, and how do they relate to one another? How does Lepore both make a case for "the nation" and argue against "nationalism"? Because Lepore discusses not only what "nationalism" means today but also its evolution throughout history, careful attention to that concept is especially important to understanding the book. What are the *multiple* meanings of "nationalism" in *This America* and over the course of American history?

- Lepore takes aim at President Trump's embrace of nationalism. She also criticizes his "most vociferous political opponents," and she endorses Michael Kazin's claim that "having abandoned patriotism, the left lost the ability to pose convincing alternatives for the nation as a whole." (pp. 111, 132) Are any of these claims "politically partisan" and, if so, is that a problem? Could someone agree with Lepore's argument and say, "I don't like what President Trump says about 'nationalism,' but I am an American patriot, and I want America to thrive, which is why on balance I support most of his policies"? More generally, how should scholarly and political argument relate to one another?

- Lepore calls upon us to understand "this America" as "a community of belonging and commitment, held together by the strength of our ideas and by the force of our disagreements" (p. 136). Can this concept of the nation indeed "uphold the aspirations of everyone"? (ibid.) If some Americans feel disrespected or excluded by Lepore's account of the country's history and identity, would that undermine the force of her argument? To what extent do Lepore's arguments about America generalize to other nations?

I look forward to seeing you in late August. In the meantime, I hope that you enjoy *This America* and that you have a terrific summer.

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With very best wishes,

Christopher L. Eisgruber
Princeton, New Jersey
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