I am the son of a European Jewish refugee who, along with his parents and two siblings, entered Canada from Warsaw, Poland, in March 1939, narrowly escaping the cataclysm that engulfed European Jewry. Not one of the scores of my father’s relatives who remained in Europe—grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins—survived. What makes the story of my father’s great good fortune all the more remarkable was the studious indifference of the Canadian government toward European Jews from the time of Hitler’s seizure of power in 1933 to the end of the Second World War in 1945. This indifference was memorably captured in the curt, chilling reply of a government official to the question of how many European Jews Canada would allow into the country: “None is too many.” In total, during this twelve-year period, Canada accepted only five thousand Jewish refugees, which historians Irving Abella and Harold Troper deemed the worst record of any refugee-admitting country in the world. My family constituted five of those five thousand.

The framed passport of my father and grandfather, along with their entry visa to Canada, continues to hang in my parents’ home
in Toronto. It stands as a powerful reminder of the terrifying nightmare my family left behind in a continent riven by despotism, violence, and organized hatred; of the blissful succor they eventually found in Canada; and of the disquieting knowledge that autocracy underpinned by bigotry and an indifference to human life is never as far away as we would like to believe. A reminder, in short, that liberal democracy can never be taken for granted.

For my family, life in democratic Canada became inseparable from the bounties of higher education. It was here that my father, my aunt, and my uncle obtained degrees at the University of Toronto. I would later receive my undergraduate and law degrees from there, too. Universities made possible the promises of democracy. It is, in part, why I have dedicated my career to them.

It is hard for me not to wax quixotic about the role of universities. For more than four decades, I have inhabited several universities in different capacities—student, professor, dean, provost, and, most recently, president. In each of these roles, I have felt privileged to be able to work in an institution that is truly a place apart. A place where, at its best, reason and fact are venerated; where individual acts of imagination and insight that challenge orthodoxies receive support and encouragement; where ideas are hatched that change our understanding of the world around us, bring us closer to truth, and offer the prospect of human advancement. It is a place where fellow citizens from all walks of life can transcend their circumstances through the acquisition of knowledge and the cultivation of mastery, and where scientific investigation generates technologies and therapies that materially improve human flourishing. And so it will come as little surprise that there is seldom a moment of doubt around my decision to devote my life to this most extraordinary institution.
It is not that I am impervious to the idiosyncrasies, excesses, and petty absurdities that can afflict the university. More than once, I have been exposed to (or been forced to manage) the small university politics over issues of office space, seating arrangements, or honorific titles that undergird Henry Kissinger’s famous quip that “university politics are vicious precisely because the stakes are so small.” I have experienced times where an institution that is supposed to be scrupulously devoted to rationality—to the careful probing and evaluation of claims of truth—has succumbed to the thrall of movements or enthusiasms of questionable validity that are only reappraised and repudiated with the passage of time. And I have seen the extent to which our espoused devotion to merit has been challenged, and perhaps even deformed, by admissions patterns in so many elite universities, both private and public, that only serve to further advantage the already advantaged.

Despite these flaws, however, I continue to believe that the university stands as one of our most important social institutions, a noble institution imbued with a noble calling.

Over the past several years, my long-standing faith in the university has been fortified and enriched by a growing recognition of how this singular institution is intimately—and ineluctably—bound to the project of building and nourishing the system and habits of government that we call liberal democracy: the idea that democratic rule cannot be unbridled and must submit to clearly prescribed constraints, like the rule of law, that protect individual freedom and stand as a necessary counterbalance to the excesses of majority rule. Recognition of the university’s indispensable role in modern liberal democracy, coupled with my strong concern over the precarity of liberal democracy in the United States and in other established democratic states, is what motivated
me to write this book. Universities are not merely bystander institutions to democracy but deeply implicated in, and essential for, its success. It is imperative in this moment of democratic backsliding that our universities more self-consciously vindicate their obligations to this most precious and fragile form of self-governance.