The ideas for this book were seeded in 2017, a time when so many of us were becoming increasingly concerned about the various threats posed to liberal democracy in America and beyond. Antidemocratic populists across the globe were ascending to power in once secure democratic nations, and attacks on global alliances made it seem as if the liberal international order was splintering. With the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency, I—along with so many others—watched with consternation and concern as to how (or even, more distressingly, if) the core institutions of democracy would accommodate a person whose rise had been predicated upon violating norms.

I am writing this conclusion in 2021, mere weeks after the violent attack on the US Capitol by a riotous mob of insurgents who vandalized and ransacked the building, attacked and injured police officers, called for Vice President Mike Pence (who was in the Capitol building at the time) to be hanged for his role in
officiating over the Senate’s expected approval of the Electoral College vote, and seem to have been prepared to kidnap legislators in the interests of halting the peaceful transfer of power from one elected administration to the next. The insurrection was more than an unhinged protest against a fair and free election; it was a blow aimed at the very institutions of constitutional democracy. In storming the Capitol building, the rioters sought both to desecrate the physical emblem of democratic process and majority rule, and disrupt a constitutional mechanism designed to ensure the orderly transfer of power. One could hardly have imagined a more fitting and tragic conclusion to a presidency defined by eroding norms and anti-institutional fervor.

Because of the social distancing strictures imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, no one could have reasonably expected that the 2021 presidential inauguration several weeks later would be “normal.” There was little doubt that the time-honored pageantry of elegant balls, boisterous parades, and well-attended speeches would bend to public health imperatives, and force a scaled down celebration. But as much as we understood and expected a more muted set of festivities, we were ill-prepared for the specter of our nation’s capital being sealed off from its citizens by twenty-five thousand national guardsmen assigned to protect the city from further acts of violence. Seeing the city surrounded by concrete blockades, seven-foot-high fencing topped with razor wire, and guardsmen moving in formation was haunting and somber, more akin to how political power is asserted or seized in countries with weak or nonexistent democratic traditions. It is an unfamiliar sight for how power is meant to be transferred in the world’s oldest functioning democracy.

The concerns that motivated this book seem more salient than ever: liberal democracy and its institutions remain more fragile
than many of us imagined, and we cannot for a moment take their survival and flourishing for granted. It is thus incumbent upon the institutions that are implicated in the liberal democratic experiment to work more intentionally, tirelessly, and energetically toward the realization of its promise. And if, as I have argued throughout these pages, the university stands among these bulwark institutions that are indispensable to liberal democracy, then it is crucial that our universities act in a manner that is commensurate with this role and correlative obligation.

Throughout this book, I have sought to develop a holistic mapping of the role that the university plays in liberal democracy by focusing on four key functions: promoting social mobility, educating for citizenship, checking power with facts and knowledge, and modeling and promoting pluralism. In each of these functional areas, I showed how universities in the United States evolved to take on these responsibilities and how well (or poorly) they are requring them today. Then I suggested avenues for reform.

Here is what I have proposed:

1. *End legacy admissions and restore federal financial aid.* To promote social mobility, selective colleges and universities must redouble efforts to make their institutions accessible and affordable to all talented students. This will not be solved by zero-tuition mandates—which run the risk of depriving public universities of cash and displacing some financial burden on poor families in order to supplement the tuition of affluent families—or by eliminating standardized testing. What we need instead is a massive recommitment of the federal government to the historic government-university compact through programs like Pell Grants and assistance to public universities at the state
level. But there is also a move that colleges and universities can enact immediately to mitigate the imbalanced transfer of advantage from parents to children in a way at odds with the democratic promise of mobility: ending legacy admissions. As I argued in chapter 1, in a highly competitive admissions process, every student admitted to a school deprives another student of a seat. Legacy students tend to be wealthier and whiter, and to have college-educated parents, which means that there are fewer seats for low-income, underrepresented minority, and first-generation applicants. Eliminating legacy admissions is an essential step for creating opportunity and burnishing the promise of higher education as a place for all meritorious students.

2. Institute a democracy requirement for graduation. To better educate citizens, colleges and universities need to infuse their campuses and curricula with opportunities to engage and learn about democracy. For too many decades, American higher education has been content to let K–12 education carry the burden of an education in democracy. Recent civics research tells us that good citizenship consists of a multifaceted set of competencies: a knowledge of democratic history, theory, and practice; skills of reasoning, persuasion, and interaction with political institutions and community organizations; an embrace of core democratic values like tolerance and the dignity of all people; and aspirations toward cooperation and collective action. Instilling these competencies is something well within the capacity of universities, which receive students precisely as they are on the cusp of assuming the responsibilities of citizenship. But universities—which have mostly been content with volun-
teer service opportunities to stand in for a robust democratic education—must go much further than they have in recent decades. To begin, colleges and universities that acknowledge their role in citizenship education should ensure that every student they teach is required to engage in some training in democratic citizenship.

3. *Embrace open science with guardrails.* For universities to fulfill their role as stewards of expertise in an era where the very nature of fact in our public debates seems to be eroding, we need first to address one of the deepest problems facing the scientific research enterprise: the reproducibility crisis. If important scientific claims cannot be replicated, then how can the public and policy makers believe what we publish? The COVID-19 pandemic shined a light on the extraordinary promise of technology as a source for democratizing knowledge, for weeding out spurious science, and for burnishing the trust of the public in expertise. The scientific community has proven how swiftly research, data, and insights can be shared, and the results they have achieved both for science and for democracy have been extraordinary. But we have also seen that such unfettered openness comes with its own set of risks: the absence of some of the traditional gatekeepers of scientific publication creates the potential for false claims bearing the imprimatur of a trustworthy researcher or institution to spread through social media. The answer to this dilemma is for our research universities to embrace open science with guardrails, moving toward greater speed and transparency in research while simultaneously building new mechanisms for preserving the review and integrity of research in an ever more open world.
4. Reimagine student encounters on campus and infuse debate into campus programming. Finally, to foster pluralism on their campuses, colleges and universities will need to undertake a reassessment of what opportunities students from different backgrounds have to encounter one another and whether they’re being taught to speak across their differences effectively. American higher education has, on the whole, done an admirable job of diversifying student bodies, but it has often neglected to consider how students engage with one another after they arrive. Addressing this will require a more purposeful approach to pluralism. Universities should structure their campuses to ensure that students receive opportunities to interact with one other across different backgrounds and perspectives. One key reform is to institute—or, as the case may be, reinstitute—random first-year roommate assignments in residence halls. Beyond that, universities should take more proactive steps to promote thoughtful and healthy engagement when students interact—not by policing student behavior after the fact, but by modeling what healthy debate looks like as part of the educational function. One concrete action here would be to revert the trend on campus of prioritizing lone speakers, and instead construct debates around policy or social issues as a campus ideal.

These reforms are possibilities rather than prescriptions. The four areas of need I describe in this book are urgent, but the answers for each might well be different on different campuses. As I have insisted throughout this book, part of the rich bounty of the diversity of colleges and universities across the United States is that it offers boundless scope for experimentation and innovation. Although I have drawn some of these reforms from my own
experience at the University of Toronto, the University of Pennsylvania, and Johns Hopkins University, others are derived from peer institutions that have successfully developed innovations worthy of replication. The many examples I have shared underscore the degree to which there is, across the vast landscape of the United States, considerable experience to draw upon if we, the community of American universities, decide that the time is nigh for us to more sedulously prosecute an agenda that is tethered unabashedly to liberal democracy’s revival.

But demonstrating that there are several examples where institutions have decided to “lean into” the task of promoting liberal democracy does not necessarily mean that our campuses will rally to the call for a more purposeful and holistic realization of this role. The task of galvanizing our institutions for this role will invite opposition and critique, and there will be no shortage of reservations expressed.

Some will doubt the capacity of universities to have any meaningful impact on the state of American democracy. They will claim that the university is simply too remote, its role too inconsequential to respond to the challenges currently besetting American democracy. They will argue that rather than focusing on internal reform, the institution should direct its gaze outward, lending its intellectual energies to the task of reforming other institutions of democracy. The country is in urgent need of racial justice, voting rights reform, or curbs on redistricting, among other things, and the university is an important source of ideas on how to achieve these ends. The fear might be that attention to the agenda I have suggested for the university will divert scarce intellectual energy and effort from the pressing problems of the world around us toward a “small bore” set of reforms that only affect members of our arguably cloistered campuses.
Of course, there is no reason that the university cannot simultaneously pursue both inward and outward looking reforms. To borrow a phrase made famous by President Lyndon Johnson, our universities can walk and chew gum at the same time. The agenda I’ve articulated here is not so overwhelming that it risks exhausting the university’s time-honored role in fueling public debate over institutional and policy reform through our research and educational activities. For me, one of the exciting aspects of the reforms I have detailed is how they enlist individuals in virtually every facet of the university, including many who are not traditionally implicated in the discussions surrounding the university’s role in liberal democracy, which have tended to focus on the role for, and content of, a liberal arts education. This debate is typically rooted in the faculty of arts and sciences schools, but the program I propose here engages colleagues in those divisions while also touching stakeholders in areas as diverse as admissions, student life, and housing. This means that more of the university’s community of staff, students, and researchers can see themselves and their actions as being directly linked to the university’s guardianship responsibilities for liberal democracy.

More than that, I believe that there are vast benefits to be realized from working to strengthen our own institutions’ standing in democracy. For one, the reforms I have outlined in areas such as education and research are intended to strengthen our capacity and reach to inform public debate on matters of democracy in direct and immediate ways. Beyond that, in light of the deep hostility to the university harbored by contemporary populists—for the way we are seen to have perpetuated intergenerational advantages in our admissions, conferred degree credentials that widen economic inequality, or acted in a manner that is regarded
as condescending or contemptuous of the less educated—one can expect that reforms intended to strengthen the university’s accessibility, or that take more seriously the responsibilities of inculcating ideals of citizenship in our students, or provide greater assurance of our capacity for the accuracy of our claims, would have important symbolic value in tempering corrosive populist cynicism. After all, the populist narrative that is hostile to elite institutions and meritocratic values does not see the university as peripheral to its cynicism and distrust, but as a central enabler of it. And if we have demonstrated resolve and courage in adopting reforms that are difficult, and that trench on vested interests and well-established patterns of behavior in our own institutions, then our credibility in advocating reforms that are equally difficult to devise and implement by others will be enhanced.

I am not so naive to believe that the faithful adoption of the program I have detailed will be the silver bullet that heals American democracy. Yet the implementation of concrete reforms along these lines has the potential to draw poison from the wounds that are festering in so many parts of our country. It would matter if America’s most elite universities publicly and irrevocably repudiated their time-honored use of legacy admissions—a practice, as I argued earlier, that manifests a stark and indefensible assault on bedrock notions of equal opportunity. It would matter if our universities and colleges were to summon the resolve to unabashedly embrace the challenge of ensuring that every graduating student understood the democratic ideals at the heart of our republic, their connection to the ideas and influences of the enlightenment, the laws and institutions that our founders conceived to give flight to them, the many ways we have fallen short, and the possibilities for remediation. It would matter if our universities embraced
the ambitious ideals of a science that is more transparent and open. And it would matter if our universities could demonstrate in clear and unequivocal terms the bounty of pluralism that comes from living, studying, and arguing cheek by jowl with people who bear little resemblance—culturally, politically, racially, or religiously—to the clusters of sameness that surround most American families.

I can well imagine that even if the salutary prospects of this agenda are conceded, many will doubt universities' will, or even capacity, for reform. Here the claim might be that universities are by design far too fragmented, far too heterogeneous to be able to muster the intensity of commitment needed to prosecute this agenda. In this vein, Clark Kerr, the celebrated and visionary chancellor of the University of California system, once memorably described the modern American university as "a series of individual faculty entrepreneurs held together by a common grievance over parking." In this frame, it may well be the case that a well-intentioned university president or board of trustees may want to seize the mantle of this agenda, but they are no match for the university's true denizens—the deans, the chairs, and the faculty—who will have little truck for a project that offers only distant and uncertain future rewards but entails real costs today: painstaking and protracted debates over curricular reform and the essence of American citizenship, changes to admissions policies that risk alienating alumni or donors, or disruptions of familiar patterns of faculty research production or dissemination.

From the time that I took on my first academic leadership position a quarter century ago, I have had to contend with this relatively bleak narrative about the prospects for change in the academy. It is hard to deny that the norms and structures of the university don't lend themselves to rapid and dramatic decision-
making. The leader advocating change must surmount many hurdles: the innate skepticism of the faculty, the multiple fora in which stakeholders must be consulted and input sought, the need to articulate detailed arguments that are based on clearly defined principles and concrete fact, and, of course, the endless, endless consultation.

These “up-front” costs don’t mean that change can’t happen, only that it proceeds at a different pace than what one finds in other organizations. It requires infinite patience on the part of its advocates. The clear articulation of principles and goals. The careful assembly and dissemination of relevant facts and data. And deference to the role and prerogatives of a multiplicity of different stakeholders, each of whom holds an expectation of having a voice in the proposed course of action. But at the end of these seemingly interminable deliberative processes, there is the prospect of not only nontrivial change, but also durability.²

In building the case for engaging, in a holistic and systematic manner, the university’s role in liberal democracy, and in considering the ways in which this role can be augmented and made more relevant to our moment, leadership will need to convince the university’s many stakeholders that liberal democracy is worth the fight. But in so doing, it is important to be clear as to what is in play. I am not suggesting that in declaring our support for liberal democracy that we are championing any particular form of liberal democracy. Decisions regarding how communitarian a democracy should be, how goods are to be allocated, or how historical wrongs are to be remedied all fall squarely within the remit of legitimate debate over how liberal democracy’s promise is best realized. The claim I make here is more foundational: the university cannot, as an institution, be agnostic about, or indifferent to, its opposition to authoritarianism, its support for human
dignity and freedom, its commitment to a tolerant multiracial society, or its insistence on truth and fact as the foundation for collective decision-making.

Would such an explicit commitment to liberal democracy by the university in the various domains I have discussed risk subverting our commitment to academic freedom? For instance, is there a chance that a faculty member or student who were to argue in a research or a classroom setting for the superiority of authoritarian political arrangements over liberal democracy be subject to discipline? Here, I think that one can safely cabin off these activities from the university’s more global commitment to the imperatives of liberal democracy in the spheres I have discussed. Faculty and students should be free to analyze and argue for different political institutions and ideologies in their academic pursuits, and their right to do so should be vigorously protected. Indeed, in protecting this right of dissent in our scholarship and teaching, we demonstrate our fidelity to one of liberal democracy’s core commitments—the freedom of thought and expression. The animating genius of liberal democracy—and one of the reasons it demands protection—is that it permits, and even encourages, criticism of liberal democracy itself.

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The insurrection at the Capitol building may have failed, but the forces that fueled it have not left us. We cannot be blithe about democracy’s prospects. It is incumbent upon our fellow citizens and our bulwark institutions to look unflinchingly and intensely at how we came to this place where our democracy feels as if it is coming undone. There is no better place to start this conversation, this self-reflection, than the university. Not only must this indispensable institution seize this opportunity to understand
what ails our liberal democracy, but it must also go further in discerning its own role in fostering liberal democracy, its contributions and its failures, and then must act with fierce and unstinting resolve in remedying the places where it has stumbled. It is hardly hyperbole to say that nothing less than the protection of our basic liberties is at stake.