

The Reassociation of Ideas and Purposes: Racism, Liberalism, and the American Political Tradition

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Racist and liberal ideals are said to anchor competing political traditions in America, but a juxtaposition of ideals obscures key processes of change in the cultural lexicon and misses much about how a political tradition comes to bear on the development of a polity. Attention to the reassociation of ideas and purposes over time points to a more intimate relationship between racism and liberalism in American political culture, to the conceptual interpenetration of these antithetical ends. Cuing off issues that have long surrounded the reassociation of John C. Calhoun's rule of the concurrent majority with pluralist democracy, this article examines another southerner, Woodrow Wilson, who, in the course of defending racial hierarchy, developed ideas that became formative of modern American liberalism. Analysis of the movement of ideas across purposes shifts the discussion of political traditions from set categories of thought to revealed qualities of thought, bringing to the fore aspects of this polity that are essentially and irreducibly "American."

Scholarly assessments of the American political tradition currently do a better job categorizing ideas and purposes than characterizing their distinctly "American" features. This is a consequence of the long-sustained reaction against "consensus theory" which, in the 1950s, labeled the whole of the American tradition "liberal": the drive to identify the concerns of actors in American politics more precisely led to a sequential disaggregation of different types of thinking—"liberal," "republican," "ascriptive"—all equally abstract and determinate in their respective purposes. As research in this vein was widening the range of aspirations relevant to the study of American politics and sharpening awareness of alternatives contending within it, there was little reason to question its limitations. But now, with competing ambitions starkly exposed, the time seems ripe to think more carefully about what a political tradition is and how it bears on the promulgation of ideas, their range of application, and the development of the polity.

Compare the seminal work of the 1950s with its most fully elaborated retort on the pivotal question at issue: how ideas relate over time to purposes pursued. The consensus thesis put forth by Louis Hartz (1955) proposed that political purposes in America are powerfully constrained by liberal ideas. In *The Liberal Tradition*

in America, Hartz acknowledged that American society was rife with material for fundamental conflict but found the political expression of antithetical ends stifled by the encompassing quality and unrivaled status of liberal precepts. In *Civic Ideals* (1997), Rogers Smith looked more closely at the purposes of political actors in America to debunk the liberal consensus thesis and replace it with a "multiple traditions" thesis (also, Smith 1993). Smith found that some objectives are so durable, divergent, and persistently contested in American politics that a liberal tradition aimed at expanding individual rights can be distinguished from a republican tradition aimed at fostering community bonds and an ascriptive tradition aimed at defending social hierarchies. He acknowledged that Americans will sometimes use liberal-sounding ideas instrumentally on behalf of a different purpose and that arguments for each purpose will be updated strategically in relation to political advances by the others, but these, he pointed out, are the very mechanisms through which the pursuit of antithetical ends persists. In particular, the clash between those seeking to advance individual rights and those seeking to defend racial subordination is shown by Smith to be so consistent across time that even when racists employ the language of liberalism, they appear to be elaborating an alternative tradition and threatening to halt or reverse liberal political development.

It will be observed that, different as they are from one another, neither of these formulations pursue the exchange of ideas and purposes very far, certainly not far enough to credit exchange as a source of distinctive political aspirations. Interactions between ideas and purposes are limited in both assessments by the terms used to categorize them. Something similar might be said of Hartz's observation of the power of ideas to constrain the articulation of purposes and Smith's observation of their instrumental deployment in durable political contests: when formulated as alternatives, these observations stake out a false opposition and truncate attention to formative qualities that might come to adhere to the ideas of actors as they pursue starkly different objectives

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instrumentally under constraints. This article seeks to open up a discussion of these qualities by taking a closer look at exchange—at the reassociation of ideas and purposes—and its attendant effects. Deep-seated currents of racism and liberalism, including their often stark expression, are not discounted in such an analysis; rather, they become points of departure for thinking about the promulgation of cultural composites, ideas characterized by the interpenetration of these antithetical ends and constitutive of action along lines all their own.

The issues that have fallen by the wayside in the wake of consensus theory might be pulled together in a preliminary fashion with reference to one oft-noted example of exchange: the rehabilitation of “the rule of the concurrent majority” in the middle of the 20th century by intellectuals advocating a more diverse representation of social groups in politics and policy making. First promulgated by John C. Calhoun in a defense of the slaveholding South, the rule protects stakeholder interests in society by conditioning the power of majorities on consent of a majority of the minority. Discredited by the Civil War and marginalized for 80 years thereafter, the idea and its author rebounded in midcentury theories of pluralist democracy and later in multicultural theory (Baskin 1969; Safford 1995). Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (1945, 405), an early and influential advocate, discovered in Calhoun “a brilliant and penetrating study of modern society, whose insights remain vital for any minority.” More recently, Lani Guinier (1994) pushed further, enlisting the idea of slavery’s leading defender in novel electoral schemes aimed at maximizing the political clout of former slaves.

The case of the concurrent majority illustrates the audacity to be found in the play of ideas over time, the practice of employing them at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, their daring defiance of set purposes. Equally notable, however, is that the apparent free-for-all behind this exchange has been challenged by some forceful criticisms. One early objection simply denied any real connection between Calhoun and the “neo-Calhounians” who were invoking his ideas. Dismissing Calhoun’s relevance to democratic theory, historian Richard Current (1963) insisted that “the essential Calhounian problem remains that of defending against external attack institutions based on a belief in human inequality.” If the “spirit of Calhoun” lived on at midcentury it was not, according to Current, in the work of liberals advocating pluralism but in “the White Citizens Council of Mississippi” as it plotted to defend apartheid (146). More recently, critics have attacked this reassociation from exactly the opposite direction. They argue that the thought of 20th-century liberals captures the essential meaning of the concurrent majority all too well and that the new left is as vulnerable on that score as the old right. According to the conservative commentator John O’Sullivan, Guinier’s “fancy franchises and concurrent majorities” would, like Calhoun’s, serve to reinforce “mistaken identities” and pull America apart (O’Sullivan 1996; also Gigot 1993).

How, and with what effect, did this idea shift its purpose? To what extent do purposes define ideas; to what extent do ideas define purposes? These questions speak directly to the character, operation, and significance of the American political tradition, but the tools we have been offered to analyze that tradition address them obliquely at best. Hartz, whose masterwork was written just as this shift was beginning, saw the rehabilitation of the concurrent majority as confirmation of America’s seamless liberalism. Calhoun’s focus on the problem of representation—his assiduous reworking of principles of majority rule and minority rights—indicated to Hartz the ideologically constraining force of a common tradition; it also explained why, of all slavery’s defenders, “it is Calhoun whom we are constantly rediscovering,” why “this great reactionary [is] hailed as the chief philosopher of America’s free and easy pressure group system of politics . . .” (Hartz, 173). Calhoun’s determination to defend a social system clearly antithetical to that of its sectional rival in terms that professed his fealty to their shared norms is suggestive of general and far-ranging processes by which ideas are redeployed and insinuated back into the life of the polity. But just as surely as Hartz’s holistic understanding of the American political tradition alerted him to such exchanges, his characterization of that tradition as wholly liberal forestalled any serious exploration of their effects. How the desperate defense of slavery driving Calhoun’s work might have come to bear on later uses of his ideas goes unaddressed in Hartz’s analysis because ideational exchange under conditions of liberal consensus is, by definition, reflexive and productive of little but more of the same.

In a “multiple traditions” frame these issues become less accessible still. There is no mistaking Calhoun here. He stands out clearly as a dogged defender of racial ascriptivism, one who was out to thwart the advance of liberal ideals notwithstanding the liberal trappings of his own thought. What then of the neo-Calhounians? Though Smith’s analysis allows for exchanges of a strategic sort, it is unlikely that midcentury liberals were appealing to Calhoun’s ideas to counter the political advances of latter-day ascriptivists; if anything, it was Jim Crow that was on the defensive at midcentury. Smith’s frame seems more compatible with the conclusion reached earlier by Richard Current—that the connection between Calhoun and his latter-day admirers is more apparent than real. But that begs critical questions. Is the liberal connection to Calhoun merely a historical curiosity, or do connections like that insinuate themselves into the very purposes later labeled “liberal”? Ideas like the concurrent majority may be ascriptive or liberal according to the immediate political aims of their users, but are they, on that account, devoid of any intrinsic meaning or political significance of their own?

If the American political tradition is nothing more than the sum of its parts, if its different strands do not intertwine and fuse in ways that are themselves culturally formative, then we might expect to find that racists spouting liberal ideas are just blowing smoke. But if, as seems to be the case, American racists

generate ideas that are at times taken up by American liberals—that become constitutive of American liberalism—we might benefit from a different way of thinking about both. As a first step, it seems reasonable to suppose that politics in which very different purposes contend will generate ideas that defy generic labels. By reassociating ideas and purposes over deep cultural divides, political actors are apt to articulate principles with meanings of their own, to elaborate through ideas culturally distinctive senses of purpose. It is on these counts that juxtaposing an “ascriptive tradition” against a “liberal tradition” risks reification (Katznelson 1999) and encumbers more direct assessments of how racist and liberal objectives impact one another.

The next section of this article identifies a few of the different processes by which ideas move through time in politics, and the remainder traces a second example of reassociation in greater depth. The subject is another southerner who had some northern exposure, another thinker-statesman with national political ambitions, another articulate reactionary who inspired modern American liberalism. Less commented upon than the Calhoun example, this case is no less current in its reverberations, and because the exchange in question is encompassed within the thought and practice of one person, it will facilitate closer analysis of how, and with what effect, these shifts occur.

Woodrow Wilson comes to us in starkly contrasting guises as a Southern apologist for the Ku Klux Klan (Wilson 1902, V, 57–62) and as the cosmopolitan voice for “the silent mass of mankind everywhere” (Wilson 1917). Often one of these Wilsons is discounted, but to highlight his reactionary racism or lionize his liberal idealism is simply to submerge uncomfortable facts on the other side.¹ The interpretative problem is not resolved, as some Wilson admirers would have it, with reference to a sudden transformation, to a “later” Wilson who was substantially different from the “early” Wilson.² Nor is it resolved, as critics at the time proposed, by charging that Wilson was just insufferably “shifty” and “reversible.”³ As is shown here, in those arenas in which he was to have his greatest impact on American thought and culture, Wilson was remarkably consistent, expressing the same basic ideas throughout his working life. The case is revealing precisely because there is one Wilson, a thinker-statesman who, like Calhoun, was led by his racism to rework received ideals and promulgate principles now associated with lib-

eral democracy in America. A reactionary Wilson did not turn liberal; American liberalism turned Wilsonian.

A PLAYBOOK FOR THE MOVEMENT OF POLITICAL IDEAS

Jack Balkin (1993), a legal theorist concerned with what happens when judges extract ideas from a common corpus and apply them in new contexts, coined the term “ideological drift” to describe changes to be observed over time in the moral and political valence of shared values. Because “normative argument is a boat we are all in together,” there is, Balkin argued, no impartial way to arrest this drift; persistent interrogation of the cultural lexicon is a political act, part of the struggle for the helm. It is, moreover, an essential act. As people rely on cultural resources to understand their changing environment, manipulation of those resources is vital in enabling them to keep pace with, and make sense of, what is going on around them.

In this formulation, a political tradition is the medium in which various cultural ideals are found and through which people encounter new contexts and seek their meaning. The apparent free-for-all to be observed in the application of ideas to purposes reflects political contests ongoing within the culture; ideological drift follows cultural shifts, signaling both a discovery of new meaning and a change in the balance of power. Instrumentalism courses through the creative acts that manipulate ideas to authorize alternative purposes. More subtle, and less well attended in Balkin’s presentation, is the concomitant constraint implicit in the act of repairing to a common corpus of ideas in the articulation of those alternatives. To make the analysis of “ideological drift” more systematic, I propose sorting out the different dynamics at work. I will distinguish three moves: the appropriation of ideas within the tradition, the transposition of ideas from one context to another, and the interaction of appropriated ideas with new purposes in the reconstruction of meaning.

Appropriation of the ideas of others is commonplace in politics and hardly limited in America to matters of race. Political actors are continually seeking out what is culturally resonant and turning it to their own purposes. According to historian Gordon Wood (1969), the American founding itself turned on a brazen act of appropriation: disillusioned conservatives grasped hold of the concept of popular sovereignty—the most radical idea promulgated during the Revolutionary era—to justify a Constitution designed to check the power of popularly elected legislatures. An equally potent move several decades later drew on another paradox of Revolutionary thought: that elites in the 18th century “could more safely preach equality in a slave society than a free one” (Morgan 1975, 380). This allowed the 19th century’s great emancipator, Abraham Lincoln, to rest his case for a second American revolution on the words of a slaveholder, Thomas Jefferson. As these exchanges indicate, actors seldom adopt the ideas of others holistically. If Lincoln found the authority of Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, Calhoun

¹ Richard Hofstadter, another exponent of the consensus view, arguably captured these juxtapositions and recombinations better than Hartz did. His characterization of Calhoun—“The Marx for the Master Class”—and Woodrow Wilson—“The Conservative as Liberal”—is suggestive of thinkers whose ideas reach across divergent purposes. But Hofstadter’s insistence that *The American Political Tradition* rests on “the common ground of common ends” is exactly what recent scholarship has called into question and the issue this essay seeks to reopen (Hofstadter 1948).

² For a statement of the “remarkable metamorphosis” thesis see Leuchtenburg (1961, 2).

³ Roosevelt and Lodge were particularly insistent on this theme (Skowronek 1997, 454–59).

found the authority of Jefferson in the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions. Free to pick and choose, actors appropriate sources of authority in bits and pieces, stylizing and combining ideas to make their purposes resonate. Selective appropriation facilitates the movement of ideas across purposes, even their application to antithetical ends.

Though transposition usually accompanies appropriation, the two moves are usefully distinguished. Balkin's treatment of drift stresses transposition: the idea of a "colorblind Constitution" changed its political valance quickly once affirmative action became an issue. An idea earlier pressed to great advantage by civil rights insurgents then became available to their opponents. Or consider the idea of *laissez faire*: at the start of the 19th century, it implied the liberation of individual entrepreneurship; by the end, it had become a defense of overweening corporate power. As these examples indicate, shifting the context of an idea can alter substantially its political associations and practical appeal. For those contesting control, the implications of historical contingency as it attends the alignment of ideas and purposes are profound. Changing contexts are forever testing the relative competitiveness of received formulations. New circumstances create opportunities to scoop a prevalent idea for a different purpose or to combine ideas in new ways, reformulating purposes themselves.

A third move follows directly: the reconstruction of meaning. Conservative Framers may have grasped the radical idea of popular sovereignty instrumentally to counter proponents of legislative supremacy, but doing so put all aspects of their cumbersome Constitution on a radical foundation ripe with implications of its own (Ackerman 1991, 213–21). The reassociation of ideas and purposes can be a creative act of first-order significance, one that, for better or worse, alters the meaning of both. A political tradition may be said to bear on the development of the polity when the promulgation of alternatives is at once informed by received ideas and productive of purposes absent in prior formulations, and both effects should be manifest in the distinctive qualities of the composites arrived at. Suffice it to say at this point that elements of what were contrary ideals can be insinuated into the newly formulated synthesis. Depending on the opportunities presented, we might expect these hybrids to exhibit the interpenetration of those antithetical ends.

Unpacking these elements of "drift" is akin to genealogical research: it requires a record full enough to follow the relevant moves and associations over time. This is what makes an investigation of cultural construction in the political thought of Woodrow Wilson so promising. Long before he entered the practice of politics in America, Wilson wrote extensively and influentially about it. Moreover, Wilson's leadership in office became a cultural touchstone, an ideal now enshrined as "Wilsonism." Indeed, the most imposing obstacle today to a candid reconstruction of Wilson's political ideas and of their entry into the culture may be their subsequent elevation to iconic status in the liberal tradition.

WILSON AND WILSONISM

Harley Notter's 1937 classic, *The Origins of the Foreign Policy of Woodrow Wilson*, opens by quoting the 28th president on the eve of his reelection in 1916: "... the chief advantage I find in being President of the United States," Wilson said, "is that you can get a hearing for things you have thought all your life." Over the next 650 pages, Notter puts Wilson's words to the test, and finds that, in fact, "all the essential elements of thought governing Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy were determined, and in several instances specific policies were formulated, before he took the oath of office as President of the United States" (Notter, v).

Notter's analysis begins, as do virtually all studies of Wilson, with a nod to his Southern roots and a speculation about how his boyhood experience of the Civil War and Reconstruction might have affected his future thinking about war and peace. But theology does the heavy lifting for Notter. *Origins* connects Wilson's extensive Presbyterian ancestry and his upbringing as the son of a prominent minister of the church to his lifelong interest in intellectual and moral leadership and to his "profound regard for the verdict of history, i.e. the future opinion of a present action" (10–16). Most telling of all is the connection between the covenant theology that figured so prominently in the boy's family and the international covenant he would later champion as essential to world peace. The body of Notter's book follows Wilson's academic commentaries on British and American statesmen to show how these values were projected onto their examples to shape his political stance, and in the end, when Notter turns to a summary of Wilson's thought, he is able to distill three precepts that Wilson pulled together into a vision all his own. The first is universalism—faith in a moral code of respect for law and humanity that could rightly be applied to all nations and peoples. The second is self-determination—insistence that the different peoples of the world had a right to rule themselves free of the domination of others. The third is providential mission—belief that the United States was charged to serve the cause of freedom and promote world progress toward that end (651–54).

Safe to say, Notter's summary captures what has come to be understood as "Wilsonism." Moreover, as the first scholar to dig out of Wilson's early life and intellectual program a near-perfect correspondence between the man and the doctrine—as the first to argue at length that Wilson and Wilsonism were one and the same—Notter crafted an iconographic portrait, a symbolic representation of motives and principles, vision and action, ideals and purposes that all midcentury Americans could embrace in thinking about their past and seizing their future. Notter's Wilson was an idealist, a humanitarian, a cosmopolitan, a reformer, a liberator, a missionary, a champion of freedom; he showed how Americans might move beyond their tradition of isolation without abandoning faith in the exceptional character of their polity, how the exceptional character of their polity might be used to bring about something positive and extraordinary in world affairs.

This is the Wilson who captured the democratic imagination worldwide in 1917 (Knock 1992) and whose imprint on liberal thought in America deepened over succeeding decades (Ninkovich 1999).

But did Notter, who would soon become involved in planning for the United Nations in the administration of Franklin Roosevelt, merely find what he was looking for in Wilson? Or, to borrow a question from a later president, where's the rest of him? Robert LaFollette, the progressive senator from Wisconsin who supported Wilson over Theodore Roosevelt in the 1912 election but later attacked Wilson's peace treaty as an "atavistic reversion" of the man to a previous political persona, observed during the treaty debate that "prior to his becoming a candidate for governor of New Jersey, Woodrow Wilson was known among those who were at all familiar with anything he had written as a pronounced reactionary" (*Congressional Record* [CR] November 6, 1919, 8003).

Our contemporary ears are even more sensitive to the noise in Notter's synthesis. What are we to make of Wilson's charge that the universal truths articulated by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence were Jacobin imports, that sentiments so "exotic," "false," "artificial," and "insincere" were misplaced in America's founding document, and for that reason, that Jefferson himself should not be ranked among the "Great Americans" (Wilson 1893b, 374)? What are we to make of Wilson's defense of American suppression of the Philippine insurrection (Wilson 1901b) and his lament over the contamination of American bloodlines by the "sordid and hapless elements" immigrating from southern and eastern Europe (Wilson 1889b; Wilson 1902, V, 212)? This is the president who purged the federal civil service of blacks who held responsible executive positions, the one who supported the segregation of the executive departments and made the federal government, for the first time since the Civil War, an active agent of racial discrimination (King 1995; Sosna 1970; Williamson 1984; Wolgemuth 1958, 1959). This is the liberator who arranged an early screening of D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* at the White House (the first White House screening ever) and who pronounced its incendiary celebration of national redemption by the Ku Klux Klan "all so terribly true" (Rogin 1987). This is the idealist who, in Paris, overruled a majority vote in favor of inserting a statement of support for the principle of racial equality into the preamble to the League of Nations charter (Ambrosius 1987, 120; Lauren 1978), the cosmopolitan who, back home, oversaw the forcible suppression of "hyphenated Americans" in the first "Red Scare" (Knock 1992; Steigerwald 1994).

The relationship between Wilson and Wilsonism is anything but straightforward; the dissonances are conspicuous and deeply problematic. I do not mean to suggest that evidence on the seamier side negates the profound cultural impact of Wilsonism as it is generally understood. Nor do I mean to ignore the strategic environment in which political leaders act, to discount their need to calculate power and advantage pragmatically under constraints, or to charge them with

hypocrisy for compromises made in seizing the main chance. Least of all do I mean to split hairs about the racism of political leaders in the *fin-de-siecle* West or to imply that Wilson's racial views were far afield of his contemporaries in progressive America (Haney-Lopez 1996; King 2000; Ngai 1999). On the contrary, I mean to highlight and problematize the real Wilson difference. Notwithstanding the dissonance between Wilson and Wilsonism, we know that this racist charted a course in world affairs that the other leaders of his time fiercely resisted, that he spoke a language demonstrably different from theirs, that his words gave new expression to American ideals, and that his program rallied oppressed peoples around the world.

What we do not know much about is the interpenetration of antithetical ends in American political thought, or how, in this instance, Wilson's manifest and persistent racism led to, and affected, the articulation of new ideals that liberals would come to embrace as their own. That is a line of inquiry bypassed in Notter's iconographic portrait. Correct in his thesis that Wilson was consistent, that his academic work foretold his wartime ideals, Notter skewed our understanding of his achievement by submerging important sources of his inspiration. With contemporary scholars calling attention to a very different Wilson (Ambrosius 1991; Rogin 1987), it remains to examine this exchange of ideas and purposes more directly and to consider its significance for assessing the American political tradition at large.

WILSON AND THE SOUTHERN CRITIQUE OF POWER POLITICS

Born in 1856, Wilson's first memories were of Lincoln's election and the onset of war (Wilson 1909a, 33). Growing up in Augusta, Georgia, in a family supportive of the Southern cause, Wilson saw the wounded accumulate in his father's church, watched Confederate troops march to meet Sherman's advance, and witnessed victorious Union soldiers display Jefferson Davis in disgrace. "A boy never gets over his boyhood," he later remarked, "and never can change those subtle influences which have become part of him, that were bred into him when he was a child. . . . The only place in the world where nothing has to be explained to me is the South" (Wilson 1909b, 631).

Wilson reached manhood during Reconstruction, and he began considering political issues seriously at a time when leaders of the now-lost cause were searching for terms by which they might secure "a more cordial reunion." The most prominent early advocate of "new thinking," thinking that might facilitate a shift from defiance to accommodation, was Benjamin Hill, a Confederate senator from Georgia who went on to serve after the war as a U.S. congressman and senator. Hill became the first Confederate leader to give a major postwar address in a northern city (New York), and his entreaty to his region's oppressors to liberate his people from their "foul domination" earned him the nickname "the Moses of the South" (Pearce 1926).

Wilson clipped news of Hill in a scrapbook where he recorded the notable events and people of his time (Wilson 1881).

In his most widely circulated speech, a paean to the American flag, Hill (1876) rejected the fatalistic, “truckling” attitude that was hobbling southern whites and took aim instead at “the spirit of exactions” that animated the North. The speech was, on its face, simply a replay of the old trope of “liberty and Union” as it had been elaborated in the South before the war; its transposition to postbellum America, however, bid to turn the tables, to reappropriate the cause of Union from those who were thought to have saved it (Kersh 2001). Secession, Hill now admitted, was “madness,” and with the abolition of slavery an accomplished fact, all southerners were, he thought, prepared to accept the indissoluble bonds of nationhood and rally to the cause of a “more perfect patriotism.” As common ground on which this renewal of the national spirit might be staked, Hill offered “the principle of Union.” The Union, he insisted, never referred to a region of the country; it referred always to a “system of government,” a system in which liberty thrives by providing common protection against outside threats to local governments that remained themselves “free, independent and unrestrained” in the governance of their internal affairs (361). A Union cannot make war on itself: “the Union never made war on the South,” and “the South never made war on the Union” (367). The war represented “an insatiable thirst for power under the influence of sectionalism” (370); it reflected the rise in the North of “a party whose animating spirit of sectionalism was animosity to southern institutions” and a correspondingly disastrous reaction in the South. Sectionalism, northern and southern, was the “great enemy” of Union, for the true unionist is “faithful to the whole system,” whereas sectional demagogues seek to overpower one part with another (363). “Sectionalism under any pretext, sectionalism for any purpose is disunionism” (371), and race-inspired sectionalism was the cruelest hoax of all: “The whole African race, whether slaves or free, were not worth the American Union. One hour of the American Union has done more for human progress than all the governments formed by the African race in six thousand years. And the dear noble boys of the white race, North and South, who fell in the late war, fighting each other for the negro, were worth more in civilization and happiness than the whole African race of the world” (368).

No one will mistake Hill as the advocate of an advanced form of liberal democracy. In fact, one could not ask for a better illustration of Smith’s contention that racists in America continually rework ideas about liberty to defend their privileged position within ascribed hierarchies. Nonetheless, Hill grappled with a state of affairs ripe with untapped implications. A forcible assertion of interest had backfired with devastating effect on privileged whites in the postwar South, the exactions of those who had proven their dominance in a test of power had cut deep, and appeal to a loosely knit confederation protective of its separate members had become a last, desperate plea to salvage a threatened way

of life. Reasserting the common ground of Union in this way deployed a cultural ideal strategically to fend off intrusive force, deflect the changes it portended, and gain immunity from further interference. Union was not unity, but a nonaggression pact among those with otherwise divergent ends in view, a connection that would protect each from the others.

Southern political thought in the postwar period was propelled on one side by this keen sense of vulnerability in the larger whole, and on the other by this keen sense of local privilege, and no one would more fully distinguish himself in thinking along these lines than Woodrow Wilson. Reconceptualizing the means of protecting local prerogatives from predations of national power drove Wilson’s intellectual agenda long before the outbreak of World War I. (Ambrosius 1991). It set his academic work at a distance from that of his progressive counterparts in the North, who were far more interested in the programmatic uses of newfound power (Eisenach 1994), and later, in Wilson’s political career, it prompted far less circumspect nationalists like Theodore Roosevelt to denounce him as an opportunist and an imposter (Cooper 1983, 258, 306). *The New Republic*, founded in 1914 as an organ of the New Nationalism, decried the local biases of Wilson’s “unregenerate Democracy,” even as he was breaking the gridlock that had hampered national action under the Republicans (Croly 1914; Forcey 1960, 88–98; Link 1954, 80). Suspicion of the authenticity of Wilson’s progressivism would never be far from the surface, and its source is not difficult to trace. Wilson employed a different standard of authenticity; much like Hill, he reclaimed that value for the South and turned it into a taunt to the new nationalists of the North. “Ours is a region unspoiled as yet by the too rapid and overwhelming set of foreign and material forces,” he told his fellow Virginians. “[We are] a people preserved apart to recall the nation to its ideals and to its common purpose for the future. What a sweet and noble revenge it would be could we save the nation we have been thought to hate” (Wilson 1895a, 290).

Wilson’s efforts to grapple with the Civil War and its aftermath produced reflections on governance that were as fresh, profound, and far-ranging as they were Southern in outlook. His first book, *Congressional Government* (Wilson 1885), is still famous for its attack on formalistic readings of the Constitution, for its realism in assessing the workings of American government, for its call for more responsible forms of leadership, and for its openness to alternative governing arrangements that might be more fully attuned to the changing demands of the times (also Wilson 1897a, 1897b). On all these counts, the book struck a chord with those who were at the time promoting a more vigorous democracy and activist government (Beard 1908), and it is largely for these reasons that the book is still read today. On inspection, however, Wilson’s discontent with formalism was very different from what other democratic visionaries had in mind.

Congressional Government opened with a searing indictment of the federal system as it had emerged from the Civil War. Wilson did not see a more perfect

Union; he saw a congressional despotism cloaked in a Constitution whose original purposes it had mocked and twisted beyond repair. The Constitution's "quintessential principle"—the state check on national power—"ha[d] proved, of all the constitutional checks, the least effectual" (32–34). Among the many violations of that principle which Wilson found noxious, the deployment of federal supervisors of elections was singled out for special treatment. These officers, perhaps the premier institutional expression of a new, national democracy, operated in southern states to check violations of voting rules which, after the Fifteenth Amendment, included the voting rights of black men: "The election supervisor represent[ed] the very ugliest side of federal supremacy" for "his rather hateful privileges . . . result in impairing the self-respect of state officers of election by bringing home to them a vivid sense of subordination to the powers in Washington" (40). And lest anyone misunderstand exactly what this new state of affairs portended, Wilson spelled it out further: "The tide of federal aggression probably reached its highest shore in the legislation which put it into the power of the federal courts to punish a state judge for refusing, in the exercise of his official discretion, to impanel Negroes in the juries of his court, and in those statutes which gave the federal courts jurisdiction over offenses against state laws by state officers" (43).

In the 1890s, Wilson wrote general histories of the United States, *Division and Reunion* (1893c) and *A History of the American People* (1902), that pressed forward his critique of penetrating national power as it had been unleashed by the North against the South. Long discredited and seldom read today, these were popular works written at the height of Wilson's academic influence. The chapter on "Reconstruction" which opens Volume V of *A History* became, along with Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*, the inspiration for Griffith's revolutionary achievement in moviemaking (Rogin 1987, 91–100, 190–98). Wilson begins that chapter with "Mr. Lincoln's death" as it unleashed the Republican majority in Congress to exact "something more than mere submission" from the defeated belligerents (6). Their object, as Wilson's saw it, was to bring the white South into "utter humiliation." Rather than "look into the facts, they let their sentiment and their sense of power dictate their thought and purpose" (22). Congressional Republicans were indifferent to the insolent bands of freedmen who roamed the South at night "looking for pleasure and gratuitous fortune" (19–22). They sent in outsiders "who did not know the region with which they were dealing," but who were determined at all cost "to put the white South under the heel of the black South" (49). Their radical leaders "could not keep their hands off the race question" (97); ignoring clear warnings from the field, they pressed a course that threatened a "veritable overthrow of civilization" in the recently rebellious states (50). Finally, when it became clear "that the dominance of the Negroes in the South was to be made a principle of the very Constitution of the Union," the "real leaders" of the southern communities "took the law into their own hands." They began "to do by secret con-

cert and association what they could not do in avowed parties." Negroes were thrown "into a very ecstasy of panic to see these sheeted 'Ku Klux' move near them in the shrouded night; and their comic fear stimulated the lads who excited it to many an extravagant prank and mummery." Theirs was "lawless work at best," but their resort to "the power of fear" had as its chief object "to silence or drive from the country the principle mischief-makers of the reconstruction regime, whether white or black" (57–62).

This history asserted the South's case for self-determination in the postwar era and extended its appeal. Upending the transformative vision of liberal democracy that rumbled out of the Civil War, it helped to seal the reputation of Reconstruction as a disastrous example of democracy's excesses, to excuse, if not validate, the work of vigilantes, and to legitimate the new regimen of Jim Crow. The fact that Griffith not only drew on Wilson's work in making *Birth of a Nation* but also appealed to Wilson's authority in promoting it attests to the deep cultural impact of this part of his career.

There was, however, more to Wilson's thought than an academic echo of Ben Hill. What distinguished his tale from that of the run-of-the-mill redeemer was his perception of a categorical change in governance signaled by the calamity of Reconstruction. Wilson stressed realism over formalism so as to address head-on an entirely new state of affairs: force had run roughshod over the Constitution; the cause of social stability had fallen prey to the pursuit of abstract rights; a legislative majority animated by principle had acted in blatant disregard of the "childlike" state of the Negro and "natural order of life." The effects of power concentrated and unleashed against others on behalf of programmatic interests were, as Wilson saw them, stark and all-consuming; they had threatened the Republican party's survival, and ultimately, they jeopardized the legitimacy of modern government itself (Wilson 1902, V, 98). There was little point now in entertaining romantic visions of restoration or indulging in nostalgia for failed solutions. Unlike Hill, Wilson held out no hope for a return to original understanding; events had dispelled the conceit that government could be limited and vested rights protected by resort to the old balance of powers. The ease with which Reconstruction had "brushed theories and technicalities aside" demonstrated that concentrated power and the forcible imposition of programmatic interests were stark facts, and ever-present threats, of contemporary politics (Wilson 1901a, 12).

Wilson italicized the point in *The State*, a comparative study of political development he wrote between *Congressional Government* and the histories: "government now does whatever experience permits or the times demand" (Wilson 1889a, 651). In a later, stand-alone article titled "The Reconstruction of the Southern States," he gave it a forward-looking twist: the war and its aftermath had "uncovered the foundation of force upon which the Union rested"; it had now "brought us to the threshold of an unlooked-for future"; it had opened the door to empire, "an affair of strong

government, and not of . . . the delicate compromises of structure and authority characteristic of a mere federal partnership” (Wilson 1901a, 11–15).

If Wilson’s insight was that this penetrating force could not now be denied, his problem was how still to keep it in harness. To that end, he turned to the most politically potent precepts at his disposal: the Republican party’s own precepts. Addressing himself to the principles of democracy and nationalism, Wilson set about to appropriate the ideals that had been unleashed against the other values he held dear. It was not his endorsement of these principles that was to distinguish his thought, but the way in which he reworked and redeployed them. Preaching the gospel of nationalism and democracy, Wilson would seek at every turn to preempt their transformative implications. His academic work articulated a vision of democracy that would protect his world, one that would promote what he called a “safe nationalization of interest and policy” (Wilson 1897a, 231).

APPROPRIATING DEMOCRACY

The extent of Wilson’s effort to seize the high ground of democracy is evident in the reassociations of our own day where Wilsonism has been equated with the very aspects of that ideal he most wanted to resist. Some, looking primarily to the domestic scene, now take Wilson to task for abandoning the constraints on democracy imposed by the Constitution in favor of a plebiscitary politics based on direct personal appeals. According to these critics, Wilson replaced the Framers’ regard for republican institutions with a contrary faith in the mobilization of public opinion for popular causes and, in so doing, promoted a hyperbolic politics inflamed by demagogic leaders and incessant promises of programmatic reform (Ceaser 1979; Ceaser et al. 1982; Tulis 1987). Exhibit A for Wilsonism of this sort is the president’s tour to drum up popular support for his peace program and force the recalcitrant Senate to heel.

Whatever these critics have to tell us about how Wilson’s example has been perceived and emulated, it is notable that Wilson himself saw matters the other way around (Bimes and Skowronek 1998). He was not the one overturning constitutional constraints; that was already an accomplished fact. He was not the one replacing republicanism with demagoguery; that was the work of the 19th century (Wilson 1890, 658). Wilson turned to the problem of leadership precisely because institutional checks on power had failed to provide the desired stability and protection. Taking his cues from the programmatically driven liberalism of the Civil War Republicans, he argued that if leadership were not properly operationalized for a new age, there would be no stopping power-drunk demagogues and no immunity from their grand designs. Wilson did not appeal to exemplary nationalists and democratizers to agitate for a release from old constraints or to vent intrusive new enthusiasms; he appealed to them for guidance on how governance in a nationalized, democratized polity might be most safely navigated, how “the sentiment

of the efficient majority, the conviction of the major part” might yet be tempered, how the minority could still avoid being “crushed and overwhelmed” (Wilson 1901a, 12). If we now tag Wilson an advocate of what he most feared, it is because his style was to confront directly what he thought could no longer be denied, and to do so in way that would encourage those who might not see the threat exactly as he did to follow his lead. It was by incorporating these new standards that he sought to gain the leverage necessary to define and recast them.

Consider further the current association of Wilsonism with neoconservative internationalism (Boot 2004; Muravchik 2002; Podhoretz 1999). In these usages, Wilson speaks for an ideologically charged foreign policy, a policy that justifies toppling dictators, liberating oppressed peoples, and spreading American ideals of democracy and freedom. It will be recalled, however, that Wilson was himself loath to fight the German autocrats, and as the Irish quickly learned, he was quite selective when it came to liberating oppressed peoples (Steigerwald 199, 467–75). Wilson directed his principle of self-determination to those who had been under the control of the states against which World War I had been waged; his primary interests lay in stabilizing relations among the great powers, in containing their crusades and binding them together in a way that would protect each from the others.⁴ Through mutual protection, he sought to minimize the risk of future wars and to immunize an America now irrevocably thrust onto the world stage from the palpable dangers and temptations of its newfound power. It was in that spirit that he subordinated everything else at Paris to an allied commitment to join his League of Nations; it was in that spirit that he adjudicated the territorial claims of the allied powers and parceled out spheres of influence to each up front.

Indeed, if there was one refrain that united the disparate Republican factions in the Senate which arrayed themselves against American involvement in the League of Nations, it was precisely this: that once in the League, American power would be deployed on the side of repressors, not of liberators. The obligations of mutual protection would, they ventured, charge America to defend the postwar status quo and draw the country into military actions enforcing the authority of the victors over their various dominions; it would keep subject peoples outside of Europe repressed and snuff out the liberating light of revolution. As Illinois Senator Lawrence Sherman put it, “if this league had existed” when France was considering its disposition toward the American Revolution, “it would have forbidden the sword of Lafayette to be drawn with Washington’s and would have crushed the infant Republic beneath the

⁴ It should be said that some among today’s neoconservatives are quite sensitive to the problems posed by invoking Wilson in this way and often find themselves protesting the attempts of today’s liberals to tag them with the “Wilsonism” epithet. As Paul Wolfowitz put it to George Will, “I can’t tell you how much I resent being called a Wilsonian” (Will 2005). Boot accepts the Wilsonian label for the “Neocons” with the qualifier that they are “hard Wilsonians” (Boot 2004; also Ceaser 2000).

armies of George III and Louis XVI" (*CR* May 23, 1919, 167). According to Wisconsin Senator Robert LaFollette, Wilson's "covenant close[d] the door in the face of every people striving for freedom. . . . [T]he first act of revolution in India, Korea, Egypt, or Ireland [would be] be interpreted as a 'threat of war' and a disturbance of the 'peace of nations'" (*CR* November 18, 1919, 8727).

Wilsonism is difficult to pin down and susceptible to movement across the political spectrum because it drew ideas together in a way that joined antithetical ends. How was that accomplished? At the heart of this reworking of ideals sits Wilson's lifelong devotion to the master theorist of political amalgamation, Edmund Burke: "If I should claim any man as my master," Wilson confided, "that man would be Burke" (Wilson 1893a, 316). Wilson was drawn to Burke's organic understanding of politics and to his disdain for "abstract liberty," "abstract reasoning," "abstract premises," "abstract ideas." Both comported well with the white South's insistence on a natural order in societal relationships (Williamson 1984). Burke's brief for "progress" as something best achieved slowly through accommodation with what exists inspired Wilson's own distinction between the crude impulse to change things and the fine art of political reform (Wilson 1893a). The organic theory of political development implied both a willingness to adjust and a disposition to preserve. It supported Wilson's broadside critique of rigid formalism and his demand for greater realism, but it also cautioned against the grand designs of those who would employ either to jettison old restraints on the uses of power. "It is the discovery of what they can not do," Wilson advised, "that transforms reformers into statesmen" (Wilson 1899, 269).

In a mature democracy like the United States, where people were to be ruled by mobilized opinion and policy imposition, due regard for the organic integrity of the polity would require all concerned to exercise restraint, to take account of circumstances, and do "nothing but that which is expedient" (Wilson 1890; also Bragdon 1967, 262). Wilson repeatedly warned leaders to be wary of advocates—lawyers, experts, special pleaders—who will tell them what they *can* do with their powers (Wilson 1893a, 337; 1909b, 643; 1911, 9–10). Their job was more like that of the poet, to immerse themselves in the life of the nation with an eye toward capturing the fundamental truths of its condition. The "facts" needed to govern a modern democracy were those given by the norms, customs, and habits of the people as they were. In consulting these, the leader would discover "a unity of spirit, though in a diversity of operations"; he would learn "to reconcile our interests and extract what is national and liberal out of what is sectional and selfish" (Wilson 1897b, 301). Properly trained to see that "synthesis, not antagonism, is the whole art of government, the whole art of power," the leader would "leave self out of every question" and do only what needs to be done to preserve that unity of spirit; he might, when conditions ripened, take the next step necessary to accommodate a new state of affairs, but he would avoid "rash ex-

cesses" and never force an issue (Wilson 1897a, 227; 1908, 106). Wilson charged leaders to wait on new ideas, acting only after they had become "commonplace" in public opinion (Wilson 1886, 369; 1891, 367); their invariable objective should be to "perpetuate approved opinions, energize accepted convictions," and otherwise to "unite into a consistent whole the various anomalies and contending principles that are found in the minds and affairs of men" (Wilson 1891, 360; 1893a, 339). Holding the line between democracy and demagoguery in this way meant keeping interests and causes tightly under wraps; it demanded "disciplined," "self-possessed," "self-controlled" people, people willing to approach politics as "a slow thing of movement together" (Wilson 1891, 345–68). As President Wilson explained to a delegation of suffragists asking for his support, "I am by my own principles shut out . . . from starting anything" (Stuckey 2004, 161).

A turn from constitutional questions to administrative questions was, for Wilson, indicative of the new state of affairs, and he took the lead in introducing America to the bureaucratic principles and practices being advanced in modern Europe (Wilson 1886). The issue, as Wilson saw it, was how principles associated with the concentration and release of state power would come to bear on American democracy, and this prompted him to argue forcefully for severing the connection between reform of the instruments of administration and consolidation of the government. Writing just 1 year after he had renounced the federal deployment of election supervisors, Wilson was not looking to fortify a newly nationalized democracy. He asked instead how techniques geared "to the needs of a compact state," might be "made to fit highly decentralized forms of government" (363). If something had to give in this reconciliation of principles, it should not, Wilson insisted, be the American commitment to local control: "Doctrinaire devices must be postponed to tested practices . . . Our duty is to supply the best possible life to a *federal* organization, to systems within systems . . . keeping each unquestionably its own master . . ." The challenge ahead would be to ensure that "our series of governments within governments be administered" so that it is always "the interest of the public officer to serve, not his superior alone but the community also . . ." (379). Wilson's method of embracing new principles of government so as to redirect and defuse their transformative implications yielded, in this instance, an early statement of the international posture he would adopt in Paris, of the possibility of preempting the design of concentrated power by turning the American design back upon the European states. "If we solve this problem [of administration], we shall again pilot the world . . . Instead of a centralization of power, there is to be a wide union with tolerated divisions of prerogative. This is a tendency toward the American type—of governments joined with governments for the pursuit of common purposes, in honorary equality and honorable subordination" (380).

The Burkean case for preservation—for carefully contained political responses to change—became for Wilson the principal source of hope for protecting

traditional prerogatives and resisting the leveling tendencies of concentrated power. The message was always double-edged. On one hand, Wilson celebrated the contentious pluralism of modern America—the diversity of its interests, opinions, and practices, its multifarious publics and contending principles, the various ideas “waiting to be stirred in the minds and . . . masses of men.” On the other hand, he charged politicians to consult habits and customs, to subordinate the self to the essential integrity of the whole, to eschew the “narrow calculations” of the parts, to avoid sharp departures, to defer to community sentiment, to respect independent authorities and traditional divisions of prerogative, to act on a principle only after it had become a commonplace. All that weighed in against the special claims of aggrieved interests and in support of established social relations. Elevating respect for America’s pluralism while insulating it from federal power kept America’s diversity firmly in the control of local authorities: “every community should be governed for its own interests, as it understands them, and not for the satisfaction of any other community” (Wilson 1890, 659). Thus, as he inveighed against a paternalistic government of experts, Wilson defended the judicial instinct to protect “ancient convictions and established principles against the clamor of class interests and the changeful mood of parties” (Wilson 1908, 195). As he celebrated “leaders of men” and capitalized on their power to shape opinion, he urged them to keep their sights low, on the “winding channels of the river” and not “on the stars” (Wilson 1890, 662; 1909a, 39). At a time when TR was assaulting age-old judicial prerogatives and long established party organizations, when he was aggrandizing personal power in the name of a self-proclaimed national stewardship, Wilson was renouncing “spasmatic ways” of leadership and defending established governing arrangements. “I believe that the ancient traditions of a people are its ballast . . . You must knit the new into the old. If I did not believe that to be a progressive is to preserve the essentials of our institutions, I for one would not be a progressive” (Wilson 1912, 245).

Similarly double-edged were Wilson’s thoughts about imperialism and colonial rule. Wilson was well aware of Burke’s critique of British colonial policy (Mehta 1999). In fact, he dwelled on Burke’s opposition to British policy toward the colonial rebellion in America, to his indictment of the use of force to extract loyalty and compel submission. (Wilson 1893a; 1901b, 211–12). But the American colonists were for Wilson a civilized people, a kindred people, and on that count, his critique of power politics stopped short of a full rebuke of the imperialist impulse. Implicit in his organic view of society was a conception of progress toward independence as a natural evolution. Widely deployed in the late 19th century to justify racist and imperial ambitions, this developmental teleology offered a rationale for nations at more “advanced” stages of civilization to assume a paternalistic tutelage over those that were more “backward.” Wilson’s critique of power politics combined in this way with his inbred sense of racial hierarchy to stake out a distinctive po-

sition, one that supported both a tutelary empire to be extended over Filipinos and black Americans and anti-imperial diatribes against the advanced powers of the white race vying to dominate one another. “The fact is this,” Wilson said of the revolt in the Philippines, “that liberty is the privilege of maturity, of self control, of self-mastery and a thoughtful care for righteous dealings—that some people may have it, therefore, and others may not” (Wilson 1901b, 218). Dividing the less advanced parts of the world into mandates to be managed by one or another of the mature powers under the auspices of the League was for Wilson a way of avoiding great power conflicts *and* of promoting democracy, the latter now a developmental proposition dependent on the long-term supervision of the more primitive by the more exemplary. As he had put it earlier, “. . . it is the aid of our character they need, and not the premature aid of our institutions” (Wilson 1900, 19).

APPROPRIATING NATIONALISM

In his defense of John Bright, a resolute opponent of the southern war effort, Wilson asserted: “Because I love the South, I rejoice in the failure of the Confederacy” (Wilson 1880, 618). Like other advocates for a “New South,” Wilson argued that the region stood to be stronger and safer in a Union purged of slavery than it would have been in a Confederacy committed to trying to save it. “The future lies with all those men who devote themselves to national thinking” (Wilson 1909b, 644).

For Wilson, however, national thinking turned on the problem of sustaining some accommodation among diverse and changing parts. As he saw it, the Civil War had been caused by uneven development in the different sections of the nation in the decades after the ratification of the Constitution. One section had rapidly transformed itself into an interdependent society demanding greater unity; the other had not: “Neither change of thought nor change of political conditions in the nation at large had altered the thought of the South with regard to the character of the government; for she herself had not changed, and her thought had kept steadfastly to the first conception of the Union” (Wilson 1893c, 211–12). The implication that the South had been formally correct in its reading of the Constitution caused considerable consternation among northern intellectuals (Bragdon 1967, 239–40). But it sufficed for Wilson that the North was organically correct. The original Constitution had, as a matter of fact, ceased to function as an instrument of national life, and a different instrument had to take its place if its various parts were to develop further.

Wilson saw that slavery lay at the heart of this “derangement” of sectional relations. If accommodation to local anomalies was necessary for securing the allegiance of the parts, it was equally clear that accommodation could, at some point, threaten stability overall (Wilson 1890, 664). The charge of the national statesman followed directly: to expurgate threats to the whole with a minimum of collateral damage to

surrounding relationships; and on that score, Wilson claimed Abraham Lincoln as his model. At a time of heated passions and extreme opinions, Lincoln made the adjustment required while studiously avoiding excess. He acted with “prudent purpose and a quiet reserve of strength. He was not afraid to take the initiative, but he would not take it too rashly or too soon.” He was devoid of any “love of personal power for its own sake” and determined “to do substantial justice” to those who stood to suffer the greatest loss (Wilson 1893a, 218, 255). He “understood the South as no other Northern man of his generation.” (Wilson 1893b, 378)

Wilson styled Lincoln as he styled himself. Lincoln was a “composite figure”; he had lived in the different parts of the nation, absorbed their different ways of life, and overcome the local prejudices borne of limited experience. His was not the thought of a section or a group or an interest, nor was his “a professional point of view”; he did not set out to “to realize a particular formula or make for any definite goal.” Rather, his was “the common thought” of America, “detached from every point of view and therefore superior . . . to every point of view.” It was men like this—men at once independent of and sympathetic to all sides—who attained what Wilson considered a truly national sensibility, the sensibility essential to a genuinely democratic representation of the whole. Such leaders listened to “all the voices of the nation” but they alone spoke for the integrity of the whole; they comprehended all the different parts without acting for any one of them (Wilson 1909a, 33–47; 1893b, 387; 1895b, 55–59). Their faithfulness to the whole bolstered their determination to do what had to be done to preserve the nation while resisting all claims for special treatment from self-serving parties.

This was not the Lincoln who in the 1850s singled out Jefferson’s abstract principles as the nation’s only true guide, the Lincoln who in 1861 drew a hard line against compromise, the Lincoln who in 1863 replaced the Constitution with the Declaration of Independence as “the only ground of legitimate union for the American people” (Wills 1992, 120), or the Lincoln who, on the eve of his assassination, was contemplating how much further he might go on behalf of those principles. Wilson’s Lincoln determined only to ease the growing pains of the organic nation; each step Lincoln took was, for Wilson, an expedient calculated to hold the nation together, minimize the disruption, and secure the future allegiance of the disgruntled part. Wilson’s Lincoln was the leader who opted for a technically correct and limited proclamation that would emancipate slaves as a war measure: “[His] cool, judicial tone and purpose in affairs was deeply disquieting to all who loved drastic action.” On the other hand, when it came to restoring ties of affection and kinship, Wilson’s Lincoln was quick to set technicalities aside and wary of probing too deeply into the legal meaning of the act of secession. In his promises of “full forgetfulness” and “restoration,” there was “too much consideration for the southern people to suit the views of ordinary partisans” (Wilson 1902, V, 4–6).

With this as his standard of “national thinking,” Wilson repudiated both the Radicals who controlled Lincoln’s party in Congress and the southern Democrat who succeeded him in the White House. Significantly, Wilson did not accuse Andrew Johnson, as he accused the Radicals, of abandoning Lincoln’s policy; on the contrary, he thought the two presidents were of one mind in resisting the victor’s peace. Both looked to “the healing and beneficent effects of a plan of reconstruction which should make as little of the antagonism and as much of the community of interest between the sections as possible.” But Johnson was neither magnanimous nor tactful; he was “incapable of prudence, scornful of soft words, a bitter hater, cast by nature for the rough contacts of personal combat and debate.” His determination to destroy his opponents squandered whatever opportunity there was to mute differences in the service of a culturally benign national synthesis. Johnson uttered “invectives against Congress so intemperate, so coarse, so hot with personal feeling that those who heard him looked upon him almost as a man distraught, thrown from his balance. He, not the leaders of Congress, seemed the radical, the apostle of passion; and his passion, men could say, was against the Union, not for it” (Wilson 1902, V, 34).

Wilson’s repudiation of Johnson’s leadership obscured but did not erase the southernism and racism in his own position; so too his studied embrace of Lincoln. Wilson had not thrust himself into the vanguard of those advancing either a more assertive nationalism or a more thoroughgoing democratization of politics in the postwar era. What he had done was to advance alternative versions of nationalism and democracy, versions that studiously avoided a commitment to equality and studiously protected the incongruous practices of localities. A national democracy that attended exclusively to commonplace norms evoking the integrity of the whole was attractive precisely because it would limit the programmatic application and penetrating force of modern political power. It would give reign to different ways of life so long as they did not interfere with one another; it would acknowledge disparate social elements while excluding from national discourse their disparate interests and demands.

This vision cut equally against northern moralists and southern populists. Their approaches were misplaced, Wilson concluded, precisely because they turned an interest of a part into a program for transforming the whole. Wilson’s approach, in contrast, seized the cause of democracy so as to purge it of all causes and celebrated a nation content instead to express “the common meaning of the common voice.” Such a democracy would rise above “the accidental and discordant notes that come from the voices of a mob” and distill a position that rings “concurrent and concordant like the united voices of [a] nation” (Wilson 1909a, 42; 1909b, 637). Idealism of this sort would alter the meaning of popular empowerment itself, associating it with the far less driven, and far more accommodating, idea of national consensus.

Wilson’s response to what he saw as most threatening in the modern state was at this point entirely

intellectual; as a practical matter, his endorsements of democracy and nationalism were precarious. Everything hinged on finding (or, in the case of Professor Wilson, training) leaders of the proper disposition and interpretive skill. And yet, as corporate consolidation, national competition, and imperial ambition tightened their grip on the world, Wilson's formulations gained new resonance. A leader pressing these themes in this new age might find a burgeoning constituency among people feeling suddenly adrift in the received options. Even the nationalists at the *New Republic* found events after 1914 disillusioning and swung behind Wilson's reelection (Forcey 1960, 263–86). A conception of politics driven by ascriptivist concerns was about to be reborn as a new liberalism.

THE GREAT TRANSPOSITION: "HAIL THE CHAMPION OF THE RIGHTS OF MAN"

"Peace without victory"; self-determination; the equality of states; renunciation of indemnities and annexations; rejection of the balance of power; promotion of the community of powers, of collective security under a league of nations, of a world safe for democracy—these were the principles Wilson enunciated in 1917, and these were the principles that catapulted him into the top ranks of democratic visionaries in world history. The political identity of these principles was supplied by the new war at hand, a war that had, until that moment, been conspicuously devoid of high moral purpose. Wilson's principles repudiated the obdurate combination of nationalism, militarism, and imperialism that had sustained that war, and they held out an alternative vision of cooperation, deliberation, common interest, and mutual respect. Progressive parties and groups rallied to this standard in Great Britain, France, Germany, and Russia. People sickened and dispirited by what the modern will to dominate had set loose on the world hailed Wilson as the leading champion of the rights of man, the great emancipator, a Lincoln for the 20th century. Some who hailed him at home did so despite the fact that their people had been subject to his administration's racial discrimination (DuBois 1919); others who rallied to his words would soon find themselves charged by his administration with subversion (Knock 1992).

These were not new principles for Wilson. Nor is it wholly innocent to say, as Wilson himself said, that they were "American principles, American policies," that "we could stand for no other" (Wilson 1917, 539). With uncanny consistency, Wilson was reiterating principles he had developed in lifelong reflections on the Civil War and Reconstruction, principles inspired by a distinctly white southern view of American democracy as it had emerged from those events. When Wilson envisioned "every people free to determine its own polity, its own way of development, unhindered, unthreatened, unafraid, the little along with the great and powerful" (539), he was, in effect, turning the southern voice into the voice of America on the world stage. Wilson did not want to demonize the German people,

for they were, like the South in Civil War and the American colonists in rebellion against the Crown, a kindred people to be handled with patience and understanding. Nor did he want to exact retribution from their defeat. Wilson enunciated principles that would put Germany on the right path, correcting the mistaken course chosen by its leaders but resisting terms that would have to be "accepted in humiliation, under duress, or at an intolerable sacrifice" (536). In the words of his academic work, he would try to make "as little of the antagonism and as much of the community of interest as possible."

Wilson's foes responded to these principles in kind. Theodore Roosevelt thought Wilson's approach to Germany was like "fighting the Civil War under Buchanan"; Henry Cabot Lodge drew an ignoble contrast between Wilson's accommodating spirit and the American way of war exemplified by Ulysses Grant (Knock 1992, 109). Recent scholarship has done much to expose the broad ground over which Wilson and Lodge agreed and to specify the finer points in their dispute (Cooper 2001), but all this fine tuning tends to keep assessments of the conflict highly personalized. The profound ideological inversion at issue in the treaty debate—the cultural shift in the meaning of liberalism—remains submerged in an operative preoccupation with the miscues, missteps, and personal quirks that scuttled each chance for compromise and drove the principals toward their tragic impasse.

That the mutual animosity between Lodge and Wilson prompted the latter to act in a manner not unlike that which he himself had identified as disastrous to the cause of Andrew Johnson is dramatic irony indeed.⁵ But this antipathy was well founded, anchored in a keen sense of the real game afoot. Wilson, like Johnson, was out to gut the animating spirit of Republicanism. While laying claim to all that the party of Lincoln had achieved, Wilson, like Johnson, was threatening to render counterproductive and obsolete the ethos of national power that had come with it. In fact, Wilson's principles thoroughly scrambled the terms of American political debate, challenging the Republican party's exclusive hold over the nation's higher purposes and reducing Lodge to oblique tactics of coalition and reservation. Wilson had already preempted the Republican's progressivism in just this way. In his hands, TR's vision of a newly fortified national government, of a strong bureaucratic state that would not just police corporate power but join forces with it in venting great national ambitions, had given way to a far less assuming interest-group liberalism, a reckoning with corporate power that promised little more than to protect each in its own (James 2000; Sanders 1999; Sklar 1988). Now, in the war and its aftermath, Wilson

⁵ More ironic still is the fact that after he left the presidency, Wilson confessed to his daughter that "it was best after all that the United States did not join the League of Nations" (Reid 1934, 236). On reflection, he thought that had he prevailed it would have been "only a personal victory." This bit of self-criticism was a perverse affirmation of one of the central tenets of Wilsonian democracy, that reform should only proceed on principles that people already understood instinctively as a commonplace assumption of their own lives (Reid 1934, 236).

was again targeting the Republican party's birthright claims, indicting its great-power nationalism, deflecting its high-handed moralism and crusading liberalism, and replacing all with an idealism of his own. Wilson's proposal packaged a historic change in America's international profile in arrangements that would be more protective of current relationships, arrangements that would contain the power of the nation-state not, as before, by cultivating semi-independent sovereignties to operate below it, but by installing a new international organization to operate above it.

Wilson's cultural achievement is evident in the scattershot and contradictory character of the arguments of those who coalesced politically to defeat him. Identifying his treaty with one or another of the old alternatives, these opponents left Wilson the champion of something genuinely new. First there were the southern racists who associated the League with Republican principles of equality and who took seriously W. E. B. DuBois's suggestion that American participation would open a back door to racial agitation for that cause (DuBois 1919). Democratic Senator James Reed of Missouri, spokesman for this view, could not understand the weakness of southern senators in the face of a president who appeared to threaten their most basic interests. "If a Republican president had brought the league here . . . there is not a Democrat who would not have been standing by my side fighting to the last ditch to rescue the country from the threatened danger." Reed detailed the composition of what he called a "colored league of nations; that is to say, the majority of nations composing this league do not belong to the white race of men." According to the League's rules, "these creatures of the forest, who sacrifice children to their idols, were," he observed, "to have a place in the councils of nations equal to the vote of the United States." He implored "the men of the South and the men of the West" (the latter alerted to race issues by Asian immigration) to consider the revolutionary nature of this idea and "to remember history": "You may think you can control the votes of these black races, and they may be controlled upon many important questions, but you will never control them on a question where race equality is to be decided. Men of the South, . . . there has never been a time when you could control their votes, and why? Because they said the Republican party had given them equality in the world; that the Republican party had declared that they were men; and no amount of persuasion, nothing short of something that looked like sheer force, has been evoked to keep them from the polls. The best you have been able to do is to keep them from having the vote; and I warn you, men of the South, I warn you that when the representatives of these black races—and they are a majority—assemble around the council table of the league of nations, when the question of race equality comes up, they will vote for race equality, because it has been the dream of their hearts, it has been the hope of their souls" (CR May 26, 1919, 235–46).

As we have seen, Republicans themselves tended to cast their opposition very differently, charging that the League was little more than an agreement to enforce

the postwar status quo, a new Holy Alliance that, in Lodge's words, would "suppress the rights of nationalities and every attempt of any oppressed people to secure their freedom" (CR August 12, 1919, 3778; Root 1919, 270). There were, however, significant variations on this theme. When LaFollette picked it up, it was to assail Wilson as a hypocrite, to charge him with selling out the progressive ideals he had enunciated for America and returning to his old reactionary ways. At issue here was what had become of the principle of self-determination in the course of the agreements Wilson had hammered out with imperial interests in Paris. Republican Senator William Borah of Idaho, perhaps the fiercest of the irreconcilable opponents of the treaty, put it this way: "if you can build a League of Nations upon the principles announced by the President in his several speeches, including all the principles, it would command the support of many who now oppose it, and the opposition of many who now support it" (CR March 16, 1919, 4393). Senator David Walsh, a "new," anti-Ku Klux Democrat from Massachusetts, pressed a similar though more sympathetic line: Wilson had been deceived by the imperialistic powers and outmaneuvered in his intention to act on principle (CR October 9, 1919, 6618–23; November 10, 1919, 8200, 8207). The progressives at the *New Republic*, now thoroughly compromised by their repeated reversals on the implications of Wilsonism, also determined that the best way to save the president's vision was to attack his treaty (Forcey 1960, 290–2). These were objections to what Wilson had been able to accomplish of behalf of his professed ideals, to the practical limits of his treaty, not to the new standards he had enunciated for American involvement in the world. The problem for these critics was that the treaty did not go far enough in living up to its progressive billing.⁶

This was not Lodge's position. Of all the senators, Lodge was the most fully attuned to the ideological inversion afoot. Though he too repudiated the league as a forcible imposition of the status quo, he studiously avoided even an implicit endorsement of the principle of self-determination. As Lodge saw it, Wilson's principles were not Republican or progressive but all-too-clearly southern; the "right" of self-determination was a gloss on the right of secession, one all the more dangerous for its new democratic pretensions. That is why Lodge insisted on eliminating a general statement of that right from a senate resolution supporting the cause of Irish independence: "It is . . . pure hypocrisy to have

⁶ These different terms of opposition, seemingly irreconcilable at the level of principle, did not define hard and fast positions in practice. Hiram Johnson of California made common cause with the midwestern progressives by denouncing Wilson's capitulation to secret agreements that would carve up the world and "destroy freedom." But, when he turned to issue of Asian immigration, he made common cause with southern racism: "As a Californian, I am not ready to submit any race problems we have to the jurisdiction of the council of the League of Nations or to the league itself . . . I will not leave to foreign powers whether [immigration] is a domestic or an international problem. You gentlemen from the South would resent the suggestion that a race problem of yours should be decided by nations bound to the race affected by secret treaties" (CR, June 2, 1919, 507).

such a suggestion come from a country which fought for four years to destroy the right of self-determination.” Lodge would consider resolutions in favor of the liberation of subject peoples case by case and on the merits, not as a matter of principle. “We should fight again if one or more States of this Union tried to break up the Union, and we all know we should prevent it. Are we prepared to make a sovereign nation out of the Virgin Islands, which we bought from Demark for our own self-defense, or yield control of the Panama Canal to a plebiscite on the Isthmus? We know very well that we are not ready to do so” (*CR* March 18, 1920, 4503–7). Lodge wanted to uphold the hard won prerogatives of American national power and to use them in pressing the nation’s interests at its own discretion (Cooper 2001, 356). He did not begrudge the allies the spoils they had gained in Paris; he wanted to meet them as they were and to preserve America’s freedom to act as a full and independent partner in the stewardship of the world.

Wilson was not adopting Republican principles, nor was he reverting to some prior reactionary persona. He was plowing ahead with his own ideals, ideals that were poised at this point to take on a life of their own. Wilsonism would enter the political culture as much in reflected opposition to the values advanced by Reed and Lodge as through Wilson’s own words and actions, and if these disparate lines of attack had anything in common apart from opposition to the treaty, it was that each objection implicitly placed Wilson’s principles in the advanced democratic position.

Wilson promoted the league much as he had other governmental arrangements. It was not a fixed or rigid scheme; nor was it strictly a legal form to be parsed by lawyers, a sounding board for the passions of politicians, or a target for the codicils of every party with a special interest in its operation. It was, rather, the instrument of an evolving whole, “the skeleton of a living organism.” All along Wilson had argued that advanced democracies should direct themselves only to the next step necessary to avoid a self-destructive competition for dominance and move forward in an orderly fashion. He had confronted the disparate and mutually threatening powers of the world accordingly, pulling them into a new association that would make it less likely that they would intrude on one another. Entered into in that spirit, Wilson thought the league offered the world a chance, its only real chance, to avoid the deadly implications of the present course on which all were compelled to seek their own advantage by concentrating their power.

Those critics who decried the divergence between Wilson’s principles and his actions in Paris missed something in the drift of those principles themselves. For all the idealism that has come to surround it, Wilsonism harbored a conception of liberalism that was less lofty than latitudinarian. Accommodation was its newly featured ideal. Wilson brought to modern America a liberalism that elevated the value of mutual adjustment over the determination of the Civil War era to “realize a particular formula” and “make for any definite goal”; a liberalism at once more open to plural-

ism and more ambivalent about the programmatic uses of power. Thus, Wilson did not think that American participation in the League would make the United States complicit in suppressing the spirit of liberation; carving up the world among the allies had been an expedient, something that had to be done to join the powers-that-be behind the one new idea that promised a level of stability sufficient for existing democracies to flourish and new ones to emerge at their own pace. He would leave to indigenous peoples themselves the option of changing their governments as times permitted and conditions allowed; once constituted, the League would adapt itself to the variable advance of democratic capacities as they manifested themselves. Similarly, Wilson did not think it proper for the United States, or any other country, to take up the cause of spurring revolutionary movements around the world (on that score the Russian Revolution complicated his vision considerably); nor did he craft the League as an instrument for leveraging world opinion against racial discrimination in the United States. On the contrary, the point was to protect each from the designs of the others and allow all to develop by their own lights.

THE INTERPENETRATION OF ANTITHETICAL ENDS

Wilsonian liberalism bespeaks a pivotal exchange of ideas and purposes in American politics, a reassociation that repositioned liberalism itself with regard to both radical reaction and robust reform. Recalling Hartz’s explanation for Calhoun’s appeal to later Americans over that of less circumspect apologists for slavery like George Fitzhugh, it might be said that Wilson’s engagement with common values—liberalism, nationalism, democracy—elevated him far above crude race-baiters like Ben Hill and Jim Reed as an icon of the American political tradition. But there is just as much in Wilson’s appropriation of these values to support Smith’s claim that word usage is not determinative, that though an invocation of liberal values may command greater deference in American politics than direct appeals to racism, the packaging may just facilitate a more timely defense and pursuit of illiberal objectives. Wilson did nothing to liberalize race relations in his time; indeed his rhetorical sensitivity to the altered state of the polity in which he moved made him all the more effective in subverting that goal.

The invocation by contemporary liberals of ideas like the concurrent majority and self-determination does not vindicate Hartz or prove Smith wrong, but neither does it argue for a merger of two assessments, each of which seems half right. That there is something to be said for both is good reason to suspect that each conceals a more subtle and important truth. Rather than discount illiberal purpose in Wilson’s thought and practice or discount the liberating implications of his ideals, it should simply be acknowledged that Wilson’s defense of the Jim Crow South was instrumental to the construction of modern American liberalism. Therein

lies the limits of labels, the difference between identifying this or that tradition “in” America and assessing “the American political tradition” (Gunnell 2001). In the final analysis, Wilsonism and Calhounism defy heuristic abstractions like liberalism and ascriptivism because they are so thoroughly inculcated with antithetical ends. They are composite formulations and, as such, irreducibly American.

That very different sorts of ideas and purposes course through American political culture is undeniable and well documented by evidence presented in this article. The multiple traditions thesis must, in that sense, be counted a genuine advance on the notion of a liberal consensus. That thesis is limited, however, by its own reification of liberalism (Katznelson 1999). The basic conception is that of antithetical ideals pacing one another, more specifically of racism pacing, and at times arresting and reversing, liberal political development. If it is insufficient today to say that Wilsonism is just another expression of America’s innate liberalism, it is equally insufficient to note that liberal and racist elements compete in American political culture. By the end of his career, Wilson was not just pacing liberal advances, nor was he just straddling separate camps; he was assuming the forward position in the development of American liberalism and doing so with the same ideas he had developed previously to resist it.⁷ More to the point, even as Wilson’s ideas came to compete with starker expressions of ascriptive racism (like those of Reed), they recast American liberalism itself to be more protective in their own way of his other concerns.

Once we observe ideas formulated for one purpose becoming associated with another, the question becomes how purposes themselves absorb different influences, how racism and liberalism become mutually constitutive within the culture. What is it about the initial formulation of an idea that allows it to range across a deep cultural divide? What is its effect on the articulation of other purposes? What values were

⁷ In recent work, Desmond King and Rogers Smith (2005) have adopted the language of intercurrent political orders to specify and deepen the case for examining American political development through the lens of conflict between the liberal-reform and racist purposes. In this new formulation, these contending purposes are anchored in different and simultaneously operating institutions of government and in the political coalitions that variously promote, defend, and challenge them. This advances Smith’s original postulate in several ways: it provides firmer empirical grounding for a persistent and underlying conflict between racism and liberalism, it helps to control for shifts in their institutional and coalitional supports over time, and it directs attention to the way this conflict structures developments that might otherwise seem unrelated. But if the turn from “traditions” to “orders” firms up the original postulate of competing purposes pacing one another over time, it also preserves binary opposition as the core premise. Although political orders array institutions, coalitions, and ideas, the question remains as to whether these arrays exhaust the developmental significance of any of these elements. As shown here, “Wilsonism” has roots in the conflict between transformational liberalism and racial ascriptivism, but its ultimate expression in the League debate is difficult to categorize at an ideational, coalitional, or institutional level as liberal or racist, transformative or defensive. These difficulties speak directly to a significant exchange of ideas and purposes within the culture, to the role of ideas in recasting purposes themselves, and to the limits of a binary scheme.

created by the interpenetration of these antithetical ends?

Wilson and Calhoun perceived categorical shifts in the capacities of democratic government in their day, and it alarmed them. Calhoun eyed the rise of mass parties and the threat posed to slavery by the newfound power of majorities; Wilson, the nationalization of politics and the threat posed to local hierarchies by interests mobilized for programmatic action. The critical move illuminated in the comparison is the shared determination of these thinkers to use the very principles that threatened them as a basis for shifting political discussion onto a different plane. This, it might be recalled, was the Framers’ move as well. Rather than insist on the more exclusive and divisive formulations current among their allies, they chose to elaborate upon standards accepted by their opponents. This choice sent Calhoun deep into thought about outstanding issues that democrats themselves might perceive in the principle of majority rule and Wilson deep into thought about outstanding issues in their new nationalism. Each sought, in leapfrog fashion, to override the lineup of ideas on the ground by extending it, and, by pushing forward in this way, each found himself holding at the end a position different from that of anyone else on the field.

Staking a reactionary cause on democratic principles may be a purely instrumental act, but it is not for that an inconsequential one. The vocabulary of democracy can be constitutive in its own right. To the extent that the ideational foundation of the cause shifts, new meanings will be generated, meanings with implications that will reflect back on principles and causes alike. Indeed, the paradox of new formulations reached by this method is that these larger implications turn out to be quite radical. In countering the drift of democracy in their day, Wilson and Calhoun lighted on principles of democracy that, if momentarily safer, were exceedingly context sensitive and volatile over the long haul. Generally considered, self-determination and the concurrent majority raise questions about power and authority that will apply to any collective political project. Taken to their logical extremes, each of these ideas threatens to dissolve governance altogether into an ever-expanding, ultimately anarchistic array of group prerogatives and interest privileges. With their antipower thrust, these ideas are free to range widely across political purposes.

Of course, interpenetration works both ways. When taken up later by others on a different end of the ideological spectrum, these ideas retained something of their original value. Even as they drifted leftward, self-determination and the concurrent majority carried forward their initial sponsor’s fear of the transformative potential of a mobilized collectivity, their appeal to consensus as a discipline on higher level impositions, their preference for a mutually protective kind of pluralism. The affinity of the old South for nationalism of this sort lends a self-effacing tone to democratic radicalism in contemporary America; concerns about the legitimate uses of national power tie old reactionaries and contemporary liberals together in a defense of difference and diversity.

No higher order synthesis is implied by the interpenetration of antithetical ends. Wilsonism was no mere compromise, but the fact that it did more than split the difference, the fact that it cleared new ground of its own, does not by itself make it morally superior. Whatever Wilson's aspirations for superseding in dialectical fashion the cultural antagonisms of his day, the problem of national authority at the heart of his construction of liberalism did not go away. In later years, another thinker-statesman of the South, one with his own dubious credentials on race matters, would tap the spirit of Wilsonism again by rallying liberals against "the arrogance of power" (Fulbright 1966). No less telling, however, was the perception, growing acute at that same time, of a paradox in the liberal's own handiwork, of "the end of liberalism" as it had been brought about by their critique of formalism and by the disembodied government they had built in the name of pluralism (Lowi 1969). Late-20th-century conservatives did not need to stretch for a rationale; their insurgency fed on the opacity of public authority and national resolve within American liberalism itself.

There was nothing preordained about this. Modern American liberalism was a human construction, and as such, it testifies to individual creativity and political agency in cultural formation. Wilson's achievement reminds us that a political tradition is not a coherent set of political ambitions but a common grammar through which ambitions are manipulated and redefined; it shows us that political development need not spin around contending ideals for contending ideals can fuse together in new conceptions with political trajectories all their own. Today, with conservative majorities cued to the programmatic uses of national political power and their opponents seemingly bereft of a compelling rationale of their own, the most important lesson to be drawn from Wilson's example may be strategic. It challenges contemporary liberals to abandon set defenses in favor of brazen acts of political preemption. The Wilsonian way is to engage prevailing political premises so as to associate them with an alternative purpose and open thereby the unforeseen path.

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