The last several years have seen mounting opposition to the current international political order, culminating in Britain’s decision to leave the European Union, and Donald Trump’s election to the American presidency. Strikingly, these very same years have also witnessed a radical public reevaluation of Woodrow Wilson, a figure who has long been associated with American participation in global institutions. Wilson is now increasingly remembered not only for supporting a new global political order in the aftermath of the First World War, but also for countenancing the American racial order that had come into being in the aftermath of the Civil War. As a historian, Wilson strongly criticized the Reconstruction effort to grant equal civil and political rights to black citizens. As president, he presided over the segregation of the federal government and held a showing of D. W. Griffith’s 1915 film Birth of a Nation in the White House.

In 2015–2016, Princeton University debated whether to scrub Wilson’s name from its School of Public and International Affairs. Meanwhile, scholars such as Erza Manela, Adam Tooze, and Adom Getachew have increasing questioned whether Wilson’s great international project, the League of Nations, was not itself bound up with his views on racial hierarchy. Most notably, Article 22 of the League’s covenant placed former colonies under the “tutelage” of “advanced nations,” which would have the “responsibility” of preparing them to deal with “the strenuous conditions of the modern world.”

In his new book Power without Victory: Woodrow Wilson and the American Internationalist Experiment, Trygve Throntveit has taken on the ambitious task of redeeming the ideal of a global political order that Wilson represented. To a substantial degree, Throntveit also seeks to rescue Wilson himself as a political visionary. While not denying Wilson’s many flaws, Throntveit believes that they can be clearly distinguished from Wilson’s positive goals for both American and global politics. Whether or not one ultimately agrees with his argument, it will henceforth be impossible to talk about Wilson and the League of Nations without referring to Throntveit’s book, which is really three books in one: an intellectual history of the ideas behind the League of Nations; a political history of the League of Nations from the initial negotiations in 1919 in Versailles to its defeat in the United States Senate; and, finally, a biographical account of Wilson as a scholar and politician.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, Wilson’s aim was more
than just to defeat the Central Powers. He hoped to create a truly global institution that would prevent such a war from ever arising again. What was so radical about the League of Nations, Throntveit argues, was its ambition to make deliberation and discussion, rather than force, the mechanism for solving all international disputes. Any time a conflict broke out between two nations, they would be required to bring it before the League for arbitration. The League’s decision would be binding: if any nation circumvented the League and attacked one of its members, that would trigger a break in peaceful relations with every other nation. In addition to replacing war by discussion and negotiation, the Covenant of the League of Nations also called for major armament reductions, for fair labor conditions, and for the freedom of commerce and transit across the globe.

Throntveit contends that Wilson’s League of Nations was dramatically more ambitious than the global institutions that emerged following the Second World War. Given the anger which America’s comparatively minimal commitments to the United Nations and Paris Climate Accord regularly give rise to today, Throntveit also notes how stunning it is that the League of Nations found wide public support across the United States. Had Wilson adopted a different political strategy, Throntveit persuasively argues, it very well could have passed the Senate, changing the history of the twentieth century.

Wilson’s ideal of a global political body that would bring an end to war was supported by many of the great luminaries of American Progressivism, including W.E.B. DuBois, John Dewey, Thorstein Veblen, and Jane Addams. However, Throntveit especially highlights the contributions that were made by the three editors at the fledgling New Republic: Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann, and Walter Weyl. Throntveit claims that it was through dialogue with them, over the course of the First World War, that Wilson came to support a global governing body. In a sense, the League of Nations was as much their creation as it was Wilson’s.

Croly and Lippmann were both students of the famous Harvard philosopher William James, whose writings also had a profound effect on Weyl, Dewey, and Addams. In Throntveit’s view, James’s philosophy served as something like the essential philosophical and normative foundation for the League. James, famously, was a philosophical pragmatist. He denied that there was a single lasting Truth, and instead argued that truths were constantly developed and confirmed through experience. James viewed both individual experimentation and collective deliberation as essential for arriving at both scientific knowledge and moral understanding.

While James wrote little about politics, Throntveit is convinced that much of American progressivism flowed from his philosophy. In particular, the idea of a political institution that would pool together the various nations and cultures of the globe and solve international challenges through discussion was, in Throntveit’s view, Jamesian. So was the very ambition of engaging in a political experiment of this magnitude.

While Wilson was never a student or disciple of James, Throntveit detects a strong affinity between their views. Before becoming a politician, Wilson was one of the most important intellectuals in the United States, eventually serving as president of Princeton University. As a historian and political scientist, Throntveit argues, Wilson saw public deliberation and political experimentation as crucial values. According to Throntveit, Wilson’s ideal of “self-government,” in which a community comes to decisions together through discussion, shared much in common with James’s ideal of “the Ethical Republic.”
One might quibble with the extent to which Throntveit sees James lurking behind every facet of American progressive thought during this period. The connection between James and Wilson seems particularly strained at times. However, Throntveit offers a convincing reconstruction of how Wilson and other American progressives thought about the ideals of political community and political deliberation, as well as the value of individual experimentation.

Where Power without Victory proves least persuasive is in its treatment of Wilson himself. In his quest to recover Wilson’s vision of a global political community, Throntveit seriously downplays the flaws in Wilson’s thought. To be clear, Power without Victory is admirably open about Wilson’s imperfections. Throntveit covers Wilson’s acquiescence to the American racial order, his defense of American imperial rule in the Philippines, and his devastating military misadventures in Latin America—devoting an entire chapter to these topics. He also discusses the extraordinary crackdown on domestic political dissent that Wilson oversaw during the First World War, as well as the stubborn and high-handed way in which he fought for the League of Nations after the war.

Yet for Throntveit, none of these failings ends up having anything whatsoever to do with Wilson’s broader political vision. Rather they all end up being personal failings of Wilson the individual: “They were products of his worst flaws rather than his best ideals.” Wilson’s racism was thus the result of “blindness,” “indifference,” and “prejudice.” His wartime crackdown on dissent came from “an odd mix of cynicism and naiveté.” and so on. By relegating everything problematic or distasteful to Wilson the person, Throntveit walls off Wilson’s political philosophy, leaving it immaculate, untouched, and ripe for re-appropriation today. Indeed, Throntveit claims not only that Wilson’s racist attitudes and imperialist actions were distinct from his liberal democratic vision, but also that they were flagrantly at odds with it. They “contradicted his ideals,” and “mock[ed] his democratic and internationalist pretensions.”

What Throntveit overlooks is how Wilson’s very vision of progressive democracy could easily be used to justify racial hierarchy and empire—as well as global cooperation and anti-monopolism. If Wilson shared James’s affection for individual experimentation and collective deliberation, he also believed that it was quite difficult for individuals and societies to live in accordance with those values. What is natural is to follow the dictates of custom and tradition, not to take individual initiative regarding how to live one’s life, and to come to collective decisions through argument and deliberation. Wilson believed that only a very advanced civilization was capable of achieving and sustaining a progressive way of life responsibly, replacing status with individuality, and domineering custom with open deliberation.

As a scholar, Wilson explicitly argued that only the “the stronger and nobler races” had been able to make this great leap, and thus became “the chief, the central races of history.” While Wilson would go on to claim that other peoples could achieve liberal democracy as well, he regularly emphasized the role of “advanced” civilizations in guiding them on this path—and the need for unequal political arrangements in the meantime. While the Philippines was under American colonial rule, for instance, Wilson argued that the United States would teach the people living there “order as a condition precedent to liberty, self-control as a condition precedent to self-government.”

In making these arguments, Wilson was deeply influenced by nineteenth-century British writers such as Henry Maine, E.A. Freeman, Walter Bagehot, and John Stuart Mill, who had likewise frequently
justified empire with reference to the liberal values of individual liberty and political deliberation that defined more “advanced” nations.

Given the nationalism and militarism that so regularly defines American politics, it is clear why one would want to recover Wilson’s political progressivism, with its powerful support for global cooperation and international institutions. Yet our eyes must also be open to the darker potentialities of progressivism, lest the ideological commitment to freedom and discussion become complicit in the very nationalism and militarism that it claims to transcend.

William Selinger is a lecturer in the Committee on Degrees in Social Studies at Harvard University. His book manuscript, Parliamentary Liberalism, won the 2017 Montreal Political Theory Manuscript Award. He is now beginning work on a second book project, which will explore how democracy emerged as a global political ideal in the early twentieth century.