

Like most colleges and universities that have been in existence for a long time, Princeton's history includes people and events that make many of us uncomfortable. Educational institutions are, after all, part of the fabric of American society. Since we cannot eradicate the past, the question is what use we should make of it. Woodrow Wilson exemplified aspects of the racism that has permeated American history, but he also proposed that students and faculty confront all of the nation's problems in their classrooms and seek solutions for them. If we are to surmount injustice, surely we must understand its development as objectively as possible and think our way to fundamental reforms. Wilson did not imagine studying racism in the classroom, but his vision of the university's role can and should be applied to that issue as well as others.

In 1896 the Board of Trustees of the College of New Jersey announced that in honor of its sesquicentennial, the college, which had been focused on undergraduate education, would transform itself into Princeton University, which would also offer postgraduate education, training in specialized areas, and research. As part of the ceremony announcing the new direction, the trustees invited the college's 39-year-old Professor Woodrow Wilson to deliver a major address. He chose as his topic "Princeton in the Nation's Service."

The "service" Wilson had in mind was to inculcate in students "the consciousness of the solidarity of the race, the sense of the duty of man toward man, of the presence of men in every problem, of the significance of truth for guidance as well as for knowledge . . ." The university, he said, must equip its graduates with comprehension and expertise that would enable them to analyze and solve the challenges facing the nation as well as those of their own professions. He would return to that theme repeatedly over the next years, most notably in his inaugural address as Princeton's president in 1902, when he spoke about "Princeton for the Nation's Service."

Wilson believed that the university should not be an ivory tower, remote from the world, but that it "must be of the nation," engaged with all of the social, political, and cultural challenges facing the country. That mission, it seems to me, is at least as urgent today as it was in 1896.

Can a man who spoke of “the solidarity of the race” be a reliable guide for us in the 21st century? Of course what Wilson meant by “the race” was the human race, not an ethnic sub-division of it, but like most white Americans of his generation, he assumed that white men would lead the way, not only at Princeton but in the nation and the world.

Americans and other people around the world have admired Wilson for being ahead of his times in modernizing the federal government to deal with industrialization and urbanization, and in pioneering a new international order. In terms of race and gender, however, he was of his times—that is to say, he was beginning to grasp that there were issues confronting the nation but felt no urgency to espouse changes.

Wilson was a product of his nineteenth century Southern background. He was born in Staunton, Virginia, in 1856, lived with his family in Augusta, Georgia, during the Civil War, and moved with them to Columbia, South Carolina, and Wilmington, North Carolina, during Reconstruction. His father, a Presbyterian minister, although born in Ohio, was a supporter of the Confederacy. There is little direct evidence about how Woodrow saw the Civil War during his childhood, but he did write as an adult that the war was a good thing in that it brought an end to slavery and made possible the “New South” of industrialization and economic progress for both races, albeit he assumed that the former slaves would stay in an inferior position.

As a historian, Wilson defended the white overthrow of Reconstruction as justified by the oppression of whites by what he described as ignorant black majorities in Southern state governments. Accepting Booker T. Washington’s arguments, he contended that under segregation African Americans would have opportunities for education and economic advancement that minimized competition with whites. He denied that they were ready for full equality and discouraged black students from applying to Princeton.

There seems to be no evidence that Wilson’s long residence in the North softened or changed his racial views. He opposed the racist demagoguery of Southern politicians like South Carolina’s “Pitchfork Ben” Tillman, but his more genteel endorsement of segregation and state rights was not very different from the racial outlook of moderate Southerners and most Northerners of his day. Like many of them, he was also contemptuous of the new immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe who poured into the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

When he ran for President in 1912, Wilson faced a dilemma. He was anxious to gain the votes of African-American voters in the North, but the bulk of the Democratic Party was white, Southern, and committed to racial separation. Like other politicians facing similar situations, he resorted to equivocation. To a black clergyman he wrote, “Should I become President of the United States they [African-Americans] may count upon me for absolutely fair dealing for everything by which I could assist in advancing the interests of their race.” The statement sounded liberal and won Wilson the endorsements of several civil rights leaders but promised nothing substantive. Few people suggested that there was anything the federal government should do about segregation in the states, and Wilson would later argue that separating the races in the federal bureaucracy actually benefited African-Americans by providing them with opportunities reserved for them and by protecting them from racial conflict. Those caveats left the Democrats free to ignore civil rights.

Black voters, offended by such hair-splitting, felt betrayed when President Wilson allowed racist cabinet members such as Secretary of the Treasury William Gibbs McAdoo and Postmaster General Albert Burleson to institute crude segregationist policies in their departments. Although some departments—notably Agriculture—resisted the push for segregation and let black and white employees work side by side, overall the number of black federal workers declined by 4 to 5% during the Wilson administration, and the status of those who remained sank. When civil rights organizations protested, Wilson either ignored them or bluntly rejected their arguments. Near the end of the war, as a wave of lynching and race riots swept the United States, the President mostly ignored the situation, although he eventually issued a tepid denunciation of lynching.

A number of historians have pointed out that the number of African Americans in the federal civil service had been declining before Wilson came to office, and that the trend had accelerated during Theodore Roosevelt’s administration as Republicans sought to build support in the white South. Other historians contend that the main problem was Wilson’s management style, which left his subordinates free to run their departments as they thought best. Those studying the period must decide for themselves whether, or to what degree, these qualifications soften the charge of racism against Wilson.

By the time that Wilson ran for reelection in 1916, most black voters who had been attracted to the Democrats in 1912 had returned to the Republican Party (the party of Lincoln and emancipation), despite the fact that the Republicans and their nominee, Charles Evans Hughes, offered no more to African Americans than the Democrats. At best, we must recognize that Wilson ignored racial issues and failed to apply to them the principles of social justice that generally characterized his domestic policy.

Wilson's racial views also created a tension within his foreign policy. He is best remembered for his success in leading the United States through World War I, his promotion of a League of Nations based upon equality among nations, and his support of "self determination" for ethnically identifiable populations. It is difficult to see how all of that squared with his support of segregation at home. The Woodrow Wilson School would seem to offer an ideal venue for a long term exploration of not only Wilson's personal place in American race relations, but also the role of race in American foreign policy and international relations.

My sketchy discussion of Wilson's racial views is hardly more than a starting point if Princeton wants to reach a thoughtful conclusion about what its relationship with him should be. The topic of race in America has inspired dozens of books, articles, and contemporary accounts that ought to be read and evaluated, and more are being added every year. The members of the Princeton family can, as Wilson urged, serve the university and the nation by examining and reexamining the nation's long and complex experience with this major issue of our time.

But this is not all. Against a full understanding of Wilson's racism (however that is defined) Princeton needs to weigh the whole of his public career as academic, governor of New Jersey, and President. Equally importantly, the university community needs to remember and evaluate the importance of his contributions to the university—the changes that raised it from a rather backward denominational college to a leader among American universities. These would certainly include the revision and modernization of the curriculum, the introduction of the preceptorial system, the hiring of a talented faculty, the establishment of the Graduate College, the reconstruction of the physical campus, and by no means least, extraordinary achievements in fundraising that must excite the envy of most modern university presidents.

This process of thoughtful evaluation, it seems to me, is precisely what the Board of Trustees has set in motion. As one who is not a Princetonian, but who has spent many happy and fruitful hours on the campus deepening my understanding of Wilson, I am honored to be a part of this undertaking. I appreciate the opportunity to contribute, and I wish you success in your quest. You have the opportunity to render a great service to the university and the nation.

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