



SMU

SOUTHERN METHODIST UNIVERSITY

1

William P. Clements Department of History

January 14, 2016

Brent Henry
Vice Chair, Princeton University Board of Trustees
Chair, Wilson Legacy Review Committee

Dear Mr. Henry,

First, I would like to express my thanks to you and the committee for inviting me to contribute some thoughts about Woodrow Wilson's broader legacy. It might be useful for you to know that I received my PhD from Princeton in 1982 and that for two years I was a part time research assistant on *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, edited by Arthur S. Link. Along with scholarly articles on various aspects of his presidency, I have written a book on Wilson and the League of Nations and have co-authored a briefer volume on Wilsonianism with John Ikenberry, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and Tony Smith. I also have written about the history of American politics in the twentieth century, with an emphasis on liberal reform. The courses I teach at SMU deal mainly with the history of American politics and foreign policy.

To begin, Woodrow Wilson is neither fondly remembered nor well understood by most Americans. Nevertheless, he occupies a secure position within the exclusive pantheon of great presidents. The domestic legislation that he signed into law and the new directions he charted in foreign policy during the First World War shaped the politics and diplomacy of the United States throughout the twentieth century and beyond. Among all presidents, only Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson have matched Wilson's record in enacting a significant legislative program. Like FDR's New Deal and LBJ's Great Society, much of Wilson's program, known as the New Freedom, is still with us today. It included the creation of the Federal Reserve System and the Federal Trade Commission, tariff reform, and the first federal laws to establish the eight-hour day and to restrict child labor. As for the realm in which he carved out his most monumental legacy, no chief executive has ever set in motion a more original plan for reducing the risk of war than Wilson did in the Covenant of the League of Nations. Therein, one of his fellow peacemakers at Paris in 1919 credited him with having actuated "one of the great creative documents in human history."

Yet few presidents, after accomplishing so much, experienced a reversal of fortunes like the one that happened to Wilson in his second term. A lot of it owed to the Democratic Party losing their majorities in Congress in November 1918. And much of it had to do with the stroke he suffered in October 1919. It engendered the worst instance of presidential disability in U. S. history and occurred at a moment in world history when the Great War had come to an end and ratification of the Treaty of Versailles and American membership in the League of Nations hung in the balance.

Dedman College

PO Box 750176 Dallas TX 75275-0176

214-768-2984 Fax 214-768-2404

<http://www.smu.edu/history>

For a wide range of reasons Wilson remains a controversial president. He has continued, cyclically, to compel attention. In the 1920s, for example, pundits and scholars were most interested in the nature of his neutrality policy toward the belligerents during World War I and in why, after two-and-a-half years, he finally asked Congress to declare war on Germany in April 1917. In 1944-45, as World War II drew to a close, their main focus became why the U. S. had failed to enter the League.

The Covenant of 1919 was no slender proposal. It included provisions for settling disputes between nations through arbitration, for the reduction of armaments among the great powers, and for the imposition of collective economic and military sanctions against any nation that attacked another. Ratification foundered because League membership held grave implications for national sovereignty and unilateral action. Many Republican senators would agree to join only if the charter included reservations intended, said Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, to “release us from obligations that might not be kept” while “preserving rights which ought not be infringed.” As Gilbert Hitchcock, the Democratic leader in the Senate, put it: “Internationalism has come, and we must choose what form the internationalism is to take.” Most of the League’s detractors, then, were not isolationists; they were, rather, conservative internationalists who believed Wilson had consigned, or would consign, too many vital national interests to the will of an international authority. But because the Senate rejected the League and a second terrible war came in 1939, the idea that America had a “Second Chance” had taken hold by 1944-45. The creation of the United Nations seemed to vindicate Wilson. Even so, the UN adopted the forgoing reservations, and historians and political scientists subsequently debated whether Cold War foreign policy represented the triumph or the negation of Wilsonian principles.

In the 1980s, as Third World countries began to assert themselves in the General Assembly, President Reagan dubbed the UN “anti-American,” withheld financial support, and hinted about the possibility of American withdrawal from the organization. When the administration began publicly to discuss the feasibility of limited nuclear war, it caused none other than George F. Kennan, the author of the containment doctrine, to have second thoughts about his own previous criticisms of Wilson’s peacekeeping proposals. “War itself, as a means of settling disputes,” Kennan began to argue, was “no longer a rational means of affecting the behavior of other governments.” In 1989 he wrote, “I now see Wilson as ahead of any other statesman of his time.” The father of the League was a man “of broad vision and acute sensitivities [who] . . . did not live long enough to know what commanding relevance that many of his ideas would acquire before the century was out.” Mikhail Gorbachev, too, alluded to Wilson in his exertions to end to the Cold War. “Our ideal is a world community of states with political systems and foreign policies based on law,” he said in his celebrated address to the UN in December 1988. About Gorbachev’s appeal for disarmament and the “demilitarization of international relations,” the *New York Times* remarked, “not since Woodrow Wilson presented the Fourteen Points” had any world statesman demonstrated such vision.

In the post-Cold War era, Wilson came into a different kind of vogue. After the speech on the Persian Gulf crisis by the first President Bush in September 1990, references to “new world order” and to Wilson became commonplace. Brian Urquhart called the ensuing war “the first exercise in the unanimous collective security that we’ve been talking about since the days of Woodrow Wilson.” In 1994 Henry Kissinger opened his volume, *Diplomacy*, with “The Hinge: Theodore Roosevelt or Woodrow Wilson.” He preferred TR, the unilateralist. So questions about Wilson’s applicability received conflicting answers. In *On the Law of Nations* (1992) Senator Daniel P. Moynihan suggested, “The Wilsonian project is still before us.”

Early in the new century scholars proffered how this might be so. Robert McNamara and James Blight, in *Wilson’s Ghost* (2001), held up the tragedy of the 28th president as a parable for our own time. The subtitle is *Reducing the Risk of Conflict, Killing, and Catastrophe in the 21st Century*. The authors thus issued a summons for an end to unilateral interventions, a “a bottom-up reinvestment” in the United Nations, and reductions in the world’s nuclear arsenals. In 2002 Michael Mandelbaum published *The Ideas That Conquered the World: Peace, Democracy, and Free Markets in the Twenty-first Century*. The first chapter is titled “Wilson Victorious.” Then the second Gulf war sparked yet another extensive cycle of meditations on Wilson, with an emphasis on democracy (“the expansion of freedom”) and questions about interventionism and “pre-emptive” wars. The war in Iraq also set off a sharp and ongoing debate among scholars over whether George W. Bush was a Wilsonian and over the meaning of Wilsonianism in history and as it has come to be practiced today.

And so it is worth remembering that the things that worried Wilson, worry us: questions about armaments and the avoidance of war, about sovereignty as it relates to unilateralism and multilateralism, and about the future of the United Nations and the United States’ relationship with it—that is, of international cooperation itself. (“We must find ways to work together to achieve Wilson’s vision,” Anne-Marie Slaughter observed in 2009, “a world made safe for democracy, prosperity, beauty, knowledge, and human flourishing.”) All of this suggests the centrality of Wilson in the making of American foreign policy and the shaping of world politics now for virtually a century. It also constitutes the most important aspect of Wilson’s legacy and helps to explain why Princeton’s school of public and international affairs bears his name.

Then there is this to consider. Wilson’s inauguration, at the height of the Progressive movement, opened a new chapter in the modern presidency. He was the first president since John Adams to appear before Congress in person and did so on more occasions than any president to this day. He was the first as well to hold regular press conferences and to champion the idea of free trade and free markets. Wilson also revitalized the notion of party government, as if he were prime minister, by sitting in on committee meetings on Capitol Hill and driving the Democrats toward legislative goals.

His methods resulted in a historic breakthrough in October 1913, when Congress enacted the Underwood-Simmons bill, the first downward revision of the tariff since the Civil War. This, the New Freedom’s initial assault on the “special interests,” was

followed in December by a complete restructuring of the currency system. The Federal Reserve Act helped to curb Wall Street's domination over the nation's finances, balanced the needs of small and large banks by establishing the twelve regional Federal Reserve banks, and, through the creation of the Federal Reserve Board, imposed federal supervision over the whole complex. It is generally regarded as Wilson's single greatest legislative achievement. Afterwards, in grappling with the problem of the trusts, he signed the Clayton Act, an antitrust law of modest scope; then, upon the urging of progressives, he endorsed the idea of a regulatory agency empowered to exercise continuous governmental supervisory authority over big business. The result was the Federal Trade Commission Act of September 1914. On the second anniversary of his inauguration, he signed a long-stymied bill to establish and uphold safety standards for America's maritime workers. In two years he had accomplished more than most presidents do in two terms.

Yet Wilson would not have won reelection--nor could he have made a plausible case for the sort of peace he was beginning to envision--if he had not been willing to move further to the left of center in American politics. The Democrats had prevailed in 1912 only because the Republicans were split between Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft. By 1916, TR had reconciled with the G.O.P.'s conservatives, and Wilson seemed destined to be a one-term president. That winter, however, he created a sensation by appointing Louis D. Brandeis, the "People's Lawyer" hated by corporate interests, to the Supreme Court. In the summer he secured passage of the most significant social welfare legislation theretofore in American history--the Keating-Owen bill, which imposed restrictions on child labor, and the Adamson Act, which established the eight-hour day for 400,000 interstate railroad workers and became the hottest partisan issue of the 1916 campaign. Finally, he signed Kern-McGillicuddy, a federal workman's compensation measure, a federal farm loan act, and a revenue bill weighted against corporations and the wealthy to pay for a military preparedness program. Wilson's leadership in the enactment of these measures, in tandem with his having thus far kept the country out of war, secured his close victory. The legislation elicited handsome praise from every corner, especially from the American left. In the autumn of 1916, both Jane Addams and the radical journalist John Reed endorsed his reelection. The *Masses* called him "the ablest progressive yet produced by our politics," and Mother Jones, the 82-year-old crusader for the rights of working people, pronounced him the first president ever to "demand that the toilers be given an even break." ("I am a socialist," she explained. "But I admire Wilson for the things he has done.")

Notwithstanding this impressive record, the New Freedom had some serious limitations. The most egregious one emanated from the president's consent to the formal introduction of racial segregation in the federal workplace, notably in the two departments with significant numbers of black employees, Treasury and the Post Office, headed by William Gibbs McAdoo of Georgia and Albert S. Burlison of Texas. Only under extreme pressure from African-American leaders and the northern liberal press did Wilson (to a limited extent) countermand his subordinates in late 1914.

Wilson entered office at a time when the United States not only emerged as a leader on the world stage, but also consolidated apartheid at home. Between 1890 and 1904, the large majority of African Americans throughout the South lost the right to vote, while lynching there became a weekly occurrence. In 1896, in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court sanctioned segregation in public accommodations on the basis of “separate but equal.” Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute and the country’s most influential African-American voice, did much the same (for his own reasons) in his famous “Atlanta Compromise” speech in 1895. For their part, many northern states enacted laws forbidding interracial marriage and practiced other forms of discrimination. On the day before Wilson’s inauguration, a huge parade on behalf of woman suffrage marched down Pennsylvania Avenue; ironically, its northern white organizers would allow a small number of black women to take part only after they agreed to be segregated within the men’s section of the parade.

Naturally, African Americans were wary of the first southern-born president since before the Civil War. But Wilson had lived outside the South for some thirty years and during the campaign he had attempted to persuade northern blacks of his good intentions. Like many black militants in the North in 1912, W. E. B. DuBois, editor of the NAACP’s *The Crisis*, had grown disenchanted with the Republican Party’s backpedaling under Roosevelt and Taft. As Scott Berg, Arthur Link, Nancy Weiss Malkiel, and Manning Marable have pointed out in their scholarly works, segregation in federal departments actually had begun under Roosevelt and Taft. “Racial segregation already had become pervasive in federal government offices under Republican administrations in the years before Wilson’s presidency,” Marable, for example, has written in an essay about DuBois and Wilson, citing the imposition, by 1910, of segregation in the Census Bureau, various facilities in the Capitol, and in the workers’ dining room in the White House. Then, too, TR and Taft both made overtures for the support of white southerners in 1912. In a leap of faith, DuBois declared that Wilson “will not seek further means of ‘Jim Crow’ insult, he will not dismiss black men from office, and he will remember that the Negro . . . has a right to be heard.” Thus DuBois endorsed him because he offered leadership that seemed to “reflect his learning rather than his background” and he favored a national commission to investigate race relations, proposed by Oswald Garrison Villard, a leading white civil rights advocate and editor of the *Nation*. When Villard followed up later, however, Wilson backed away, citing concerns about incurring the wrath of southern Democrats in Congress upon whom passage of his progressive legislative program depended. Such was partly the case, but hardly the whole truth (though both Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy would invoke the same political exigency to civil rights leaders to excuse their own inaction).

By the late spring of 1913, offices, cafeterias, and restrooms in McAdoo’s and Burluson’s departments had been segregated, with more to come. Booker T. Washington wrote to Villard after visiting the District in December: “I have never seen the colored people so discouraged and bitter as they are at the present time.” Wilson struggled to explain the policy as a way of “rendering them . . . less likely to be discriminated against.” Villard replied to the president, “Instead of allaying race prejudice, it has simply emphasized it.” Just as regrettably, the practice was the prelude to demotions and

reductions in the percentage of African Americans employed in those offices. (Wilson did attempt to appoint several men to patronage positions that blacks customarily held, but southern senators blocked confirmation in every instance.) In November 1914 the situation came to a head when the black activist William Monroe Trotter had an audience at the White House. A Harvard graduate and the great grandson of one of Thomas Jefferson's slaves, Trotter, too, had personally endorsed Wilson in 1912. Now he upbraided him with the harsh truth and accused him of breaking his promise to be "President of all the whole nation." Wilson practically ordered him out of his office. Frank Cobb of the New York *World* and a staunch supporter of the president, sided with Trotter. The segregation was "a small, mean, petty discrimination, and Mr. Wilson . . . ought to set his heel upon it now," he editorialized the next day. "It is a reproach to his Administration and the great political principles which he represents."

Things did not improve the following year. For 1915 marked the death of Booker T. Washington, the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Civil War, and the release of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. Of that violently racist motion picture, Wilson allegedly said after an ill-advised private showing in East Room, "It is like writing history with lightning." There is no evidence that he ever uttered those words; he did, however, refer to it as "a very unfortunate production." But his association with the film, alongside the segregation policy, was "lightning" enough to render him a villain among presidents in the quest for equality and racial justice.

Racism was embedded in the core of American society and political culture even before the inception of the United States. The contradictions and hypocrisies that characterize Woodrow Wilson predated him among presidents and persisted for decades after him. When we consider not just Wilson, but also some other brilliant or great chief executives—Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln, for example—we honor them in part because they so eloquently espoused the fundamental rights of citizenship in a republic. In a sense, these three constitute a trinity. No other presidents ever communicated the ideals of democracy more effectively, to their fellow citizens and the peoples of the world alike, even as they violated principles for which they ostensibly stood. In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson defined the meaning of liberty and equality; yet he promoted the advancement of slavery far to the west of the original thirteen colonies. And at Monticello he counted some two hundred slaves among his personal property, of whom only five were granted freedom in his last will and testament. (Jefferson was not the lone slaveholding president among the Founders; they included Washington, first president under the Constitution, and Madison, the "father" of the Constitution.) As for Lincoln, no American played a greater role in the abolition of slavery; yet, not long before issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, he told several black leaders, "You and we are a different race. . . . It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated." And until near the end of his life, colonization of the freedmen remained Lincoln's panacea for the dilemma of race and democracy. Finally, the president who declared during World War I, "The world must be made safe for democracy," expanded and formalized segregation in the federal workplace well beyond what it had been when he entered office.

Republican presidents in the 1920s declined to modify segregation in the federal bureaucracy or speak to voting rights for southern blacks. The party of Lincoln instead continued TR's and Taft's efforts to develop a "lily-white" Republican electorate in the South. In the 1930s, Franklin Roosevelt raised the hopes of African Americans. The Works Progress Administration supported one million black families, for instance. But other New Deal programs, such as the Federal Housing Administration, abetted segregation. Very few black youths benefitted from the Civilian Conservation Corps; rarely did they make up more than five or six percent of the entire program, and in Mississippi and Georgia, where more than half the populations were black, 98 and 100 percent of the CCC boys were white. The Agriculture Department and the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps stayed strictly Jim Crowed under FDR. In the struggle against Hitler, U. S. armed forces segregated even the blood plasma of black and whites in the hospitals that nursed the wounded. The NAACP's priorities in the 1930s listed voting rights and the upswing in lynching. But when pressed for federal anti-lynching legislation or a law to prohibit the poll tax, Roosevelt pleaded expediency. "I can't alienate certain votes I need for certain measures that are more important at the moment," he said to black leaders repeatedly, referring to the South and to his economic legislation. The president took African Americans into his counsel from time to time but a leading authority concludes that it was the New Deal rather than FDR that counted most--for he was the friend of the poor man, only incidentally of the black man.

Harry Truman often is credited with advancing civil rights because of his executive order of July 1948 to desegregate the armed forces. But it was Eisenhower who saw to its actual implementation. Most scholars emphasize that election-year politics forced Truman to embrace the cause to the extent he did and that he otherwise did little else for civil rights; they also note that he often used crude racial language in private conversation. Into the 1950s, even as the government's work force was being integrated, the most striking social aspect of Washington, DC, was its racial segregation. Despite the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. the Board of Education* in 1954, during Eisenhower's reign, most of the city's public facilities remained segregated, from playgrounds and parks to restaurants, swimming pools, and theaters.

Some might find it surprising that many scholars of the civil rights movement underscore how slow John F. Kennedy was in facing the issue squarely. According to Harvard Sitkoff, he saw it as "a conundrum to be managed, not a cause to be championed." He barely mentioned a civil rights law in his first year, not at all in his final State of the Union address, and only five months before Dallas did he at last endorse it. JFK was conscious of both an unstoppable civil rights movement and public opinion in the former Confederacy. Without southern votes in Congress, he insisted to civil rights leaders (not unlike FDR or Wilson), liberal programs such as Medicare would fail. Whereas his Justice Department initiated fifty-seven suits involving voting rights, he appointed infamous segregationists to federal judgeships in the South and tarried two years in fulfilling a promise to issue an executive order to end discrimination in federally subsidized housing. One admiring biographer salutes Kennedy's moral commitment to the movement by 1963, then describes his leadership as "disconcerting" and "wavering," a response "to intense pressure from black activists."

No thoughtful person can fail to be struck by, or can ignore, the hypocrisy of democratic pretensions in the history of our nation's race relations. Woodrow Wilson presents a complicated and disappointing example of presidential racism largely because he is associated as well with presidential greatness. How can the two be reconciled? Put simply, they cannot. Since the early 1950s, historians and political scientists have severely condemned him on this account. Most of them have done so even as they otherwise might laud Wilson for his endeavors to introduce some measure of public control over the nation's finances or to shield children and factory workers against some of the consequences of industrial capitalism, along with his other contributions to the evolution of activist progressive government. Yet, whatever his claim to transcendent historical significance, in the end it rests upon his having set in motion what Senator J. William Fulbright once characterized as "the one great new idea of the [twentieth] century in the field of international relations, the idea of an international organization with permanent processes for the peaceful settlement of international disputes." These are the essential reasons behind Princeton's commemoration of Wilson through its school of government.

At the same time--indeed, because Wilson spoke and wrote about democracy with unequalled rhetorical grace and power--critical mindedness about the worst blot on his presidency is entirely legitimate. The history of the Voting Rights Act since 1965, alone, offers ample evidence of the importance of vigilance in preserving such fundamentals rights. Few have made a stronger case for this proposition than the Princeton historian who devoted the bulk of his career to writing a five-volume biography of Wilson and to editing the sixty-nine-volume edition of *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, a project the University underwrote for thirty years and published. "No people can meet the challenges of their own time successfully without a thorough knowledge of their past," Arthur S. Link wrote in 1987 in the preface to his college-level text, *The American People, A History*. "We can be set free to deal with the problems of the present and future only if we confront the truth that our nation has been guilty of genocide, slavery, continuing racism and sexism, aggression, persecution, and other violations of our own best historic ideals. We cannot truly love our country unless we are willing to know the truth which alone can energize us to continue to strive for a government and society that our noblest women and men have sacrificed so much to achieve."

Sincerely,



Thomas J. Knock
Altshuler Distinguished Teaching Professor
Clements Department of History
Southern Methodist University