



January 4, 2016

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

Dear Mr. Henry:

Thank you for your invitation to contribute to the Princeton Board of Trustees's review of Woodrow Wilson's legacy. Your work has the potential for taking seriously the demands by Princeton students—indeed, students across the country—that our nation's universities reassess the racial inclusivity of their campuses to uncover oversights and failures in their current approaches.

What are the students protesting? And why now? In questioning Princeton's treatment of Wilson's legacy, the students are going after something larger than building names: They are questioning the extent to which Princeton has made the institutional changes necessary to ensure that all members of its community feel included, appreciated, and supported. Such full participation is both morally just and necessary for a relevant and effective education of all students. Interrogating Wilson's racism is important because, as I will explain, Wilson played a critical role in establishing arguments and practices that support institutional inequities even in our own time. Wilson was called a racist by his contemporaries, and so we risk no anachronism in examining his record today. Yet, it is my hope that the Princeton's assessment of Wilson's legacy will provide an opportunity not just to evaluate the beliefs of one man a century ago but to examine Princeton's institutional practices and culture today.

You have asked that I share my understanding of Woodrow Wilson and his legacy. My focus in this letter will be on the history and meaning of racial discrimination in Wilson's presidential administration, because it is there that I can offer the most original research and deepest insights. I am sure others will provide excellent reviews of Wilson's time at Princeton, the progressive achievements of his gubernatorial and presidential administrations, and his leadership in international affairs. Those achievements have earned Wilson distinction as a significant figure in the history of Princeton, the United States, and on the world stage. I do not seek to devalue Wilson's progressive legacy, though as you will see below, that legacy is fundamentally connected to the depth and impact of his racism. The good and the bad of Wilson's legacy are not easily disentangled. I hope, too, that the Board has solicited letters from those who can comment knowledgeably on other topics critical to a full assessment of Wilson's legacy, including civil liberties during World War I and the United States's occupation of Haiti

Department of History
28 Westhampton Way
University of Richmond, VA 23173
(804) 289-8332

as.richmond.edu

in 1915.

My response below is divided into three sections: First, I will provide a summary of the racial attitudes, policies, and practices of Wilson's U.S. presidential administration. This is crucial for understanding how Wilson's administration changed the lives of African Americans. Second, I will explain Wilson's personal role in these policies and practices. Finally, I will offer a few thoughts on the broader assessment of Wilson's legacy. All three sections draw from my book, *Racism in the Nation's Service: Government Workers and the Color Line in Woodrow Wilson's America*, published by The University of North Carolina Press in 2013. The book offers a more detailed narrative as well as references to the evidentiary basis for my conclusions.

Racism in Practice in Woodrow Wilson's Federal Government

The image of "federal segregation" that predominates in memory and in many history books pictures Woodrow Wilson ordering a sweeping spatial reorganization of government work to separate black and white workers. No proof exists that he ever did so, and the reality, while not exculpatory for Wilson's ultimate responsibility, was not so simple. A panoply of humiliations—separate bathrooms, segregated lunchrooms, and separations between white and black employees doing the same work—did appear throughout the federal government under Wilson. Yet the results were even more devastating than a focus simply on physical separation could possibly convey. Federal segregation cannot capture what it meant for African Americans that, under Wilson, the recorder of deeds for the District of Columbia was a white man for the first time in thirty-five years or that a clerk making \$1,200 a year was suddenly reduced to a laborer at \$500 a year. The cruelty of many black workers' circumstances in Wilson's government was registered in their exhaustion, mental isolation, and loss of pay. Black clerks were not simply fired or separated out: they suffered the pain of reduced status and income in a system that no longer valued their work. Discrimination in the federal government after 1912 involved the erection of a ceiling above black employees that capped their economic and social mobility.

To understand the significance of these changes, one must first know what came before. For decades after the Civil War, federal employment was a powerful means of social mobility for African Americans. The decent salaries of government clerks paid for a full and dynamic life in a capital city with comparatively little racial discrimination. Washington was an island of possibility for ambitious black men and women at a time when racism cordoned them off from vast sectors of the economy and set limits on the jobs they could manage to get. Never free of hardship and racism, the District of Columbia and its federal offices nonetheless offered a promising future for African Americans in a nation in which disfranchisement, peonage, violence, and terror were hallmarks of black life. Government employment and Republican politics safeguarded Washington as a place of relative opportunity for black Americans.

Black men and women employed by the government in 1900 were functional members of the state apparatus doing the nation's business. Their numbers grew steadily well into the new century. In 1912, every dollar printed by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing bore the signature of the black man who served as register of the Treasury. Black men also served as auditor for the

Navy Department, U.S. consul in Cognac, France, and collector of the Port of New York. More than 400 African Americans, mostly men, worked as white-collar clerks in Washington, some in supervisory positions over white workers. Many formed what was known in political circles as “the black cabinet,” a group of leaders who advised every president from Abraham Lincoln onward. The politically savvy, educated, and reasonably well-off black population in the capital represented the highest ideal of progress for African Americans. That they made their living in government offices placed them at the very center of the American republic.

The prominence and prosperity of educated black Washingtonians had already attracted a racist backlash that preceded Wilson’s arrival in Washington. Disfranchisement of black voters in the 1890s, developing “race science,” new economic concerns, and leadership changes all contributed to declining racial egalitarianism among white Republicans, including presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft. But, white supremacy arrived in Washington in full force with Woodrow Wilson and his Democrats in 1913. A distinct change in climate accompanied the arrival of the Wilson Administration.

Wilson brought with him to Washington an administration filled with white supremacists. Daniel Calhoun Roper, a South Carolinian who served as Wilson’s first assistant postmaster general, remembered in his 1941 memoir that northern support of black southerners during Reconstruction had taught him “that I, together with my family and all the whites in our part of the country, lived under a black and fearful cloud. We had to fight for the sunshine of liberty.” Several others in Wilson’s cabinet were willing to join Roper in the fight for white liberty. Navy secretary Josephus Daniels had participated in the violent 1898 coup in Wilmington, North Carolina, that demolished one of the last municipal governments in the South that included both black and white officeholders. Daniels had helped incite the riot by using his newspaper, the *Raleigh News and Observer*, to publicize reports that black men were raping white women in Wilmington. Attorney General James C. McReynolds, whom Wilson appointed to the Supreme Court in 1914, was, according to one legal historian, “a notorious racist” and anti-Semite who had famously refused to be anywhere near another of Wilson’s later nominees, Louis Brandeis. McReynolds’s replacement at the Department of Justice, Thomas W. Gregory, delivered a speech in 1906 in which he explained that the Reconstruction-era Ku Klux Klan had served a noble cause. “If the reconstruction laws were unconstitutional, and wrong and vicious in theory, their practical application to the situation was even worse,” the nation’s top lawyer had declared.

For Gregory, as for others in Wilson’s cabinet, African Americans brought only corruption to American politics. (Gregory quoted Wilson’s *History of the American People* in support of his view that, given the circumstances, the KKK had no choice but, in Wilson’s words, to “act only by private means, as a force outside of the government, hostile to it, proscribed by it, of whom opposition and bitter resistance was expected, and expected with defiance.”) Finally, the man Wilson chose for postmaster general, head of the department with the most black employees nationally, was Texan Albert Burleson. During the campaign, Burleson had declared that the Democratic Party was the only political party that could be counted on to keep “the negro out not only of its own ranks but [also] out of the governmental affairs of the Southern States.” Even Secretary of the Treasury William McAdoo, known for his railroad-tunnel building in New York, was a member of that city’s whites-only Southern Society and held firm to his boyhood in central Georgia.

These men set about the work of demolishing black mobility and power in Washington. Cafeterias in federal buildings were among the first places to be segregated. Their social nature made them opportune sites for administrators to take a stand against “social equality.” Postal worker Stephen Plummer reported to the NAACP the difficulties segregation caused for black workers in 1915. “If they patronize the lunch room, they are not allowed to go to the counter and buy food but must go to the kitchen door, where there is no one to wait upon them but the cook, and usually he is at the counter until all white employees have been served.” Plummer added that the situation in the government lunchroom was actually worse than out on the street. “The lunch rooms in the neighborhood discriminate, but any colored man can go to the counter and buy what he wants and walk out, but here in the Post Office in a cafe run by the Government, a colored man can’t even go to the counter.” Most brought their lunches and ate in segregated bathrooms or other out-of-the-way places where they could find some peace. Clerk Swan Kendrick preferred to go hungry, since there was no “place near the War Dept. where one can get anything fit to eat. I mean, of course, a ‘Colored’ one.”

From lunchrooms, humiliations spread out to other areas of government work. Lafayette Hershaw, a black government lawyer in the Interior Department and a founder of the NAACP, reported that most of the Post Office Department’s black clerks had been placed in the Dead Letter Office and separated from white clerks by a row of lockers running down the center of the room. Segregated bathrooms in the Government Printing Office forced black employees to walk around the enormous building to use the toilet. In addition, one woman noted the extra humiliation for women using a bathroom originally designed for men. The urinals in the “Colored Women’s” restroom disgusted her and the other women in the GPO.

The Treasury Department soon earned the strongest reputation for segregation. It employed the most African Americans in D.C., all of whom came under the control of Assistant Secretary John Skelton Williams, a white Virginian whose hate for African Americans was already a matter of public record. Williams discovered, for example, that white and black workers worked side-by-side throughout the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. The NAACP soon confirmed that separate toilet and dressing rooms were officially in effect in the bureau and that workers had been “paired according to race.” Demands by civil rights leaders led administrators to remove official segregation notices so long as black workers agreed to pretend they were still up and act accordingly. There are no surviving complaints by white Treasury employees about sharing toilets with black coworkers. Nonetheless, segregationists, including Wilson, always maintained that they were responding to the needs and desires of the majority of federal employees.

Along with segregation and a host of related indignities came an attack on black ambition. If segregation in that era had a patina of progressive and impersonal management practice, the discrimination against individual careers was startlingly personal. John Skelton Williams did not just want white and black workers in Treasury separated; he wanted to reduce the status of black federal employees in every way possible. Williams ordered the BEP director not to recommend black workers for promotion and even changed the way African Americans were addressed by the department. “While ordinarily letters were addressed—’Sir’ or ‘Madam’ and signed ‘Respectfully yours,’” one Treasury official reported, under Williams, “when addressed to colored employees, the words Sir or Madam and the ending Respectfully yours--

were omitted.” Williams went so far as to have letters already drafted to black men and women rewritten to omit respectful salutations.

Those who displayed the most ambition were especially targeted. Treasury clerk Thomas H. R. Clarke, for example, came under Williams’s gaze during the summer of 1913. Clarke was an active Republican whose career had been helped along by important connections; he was well known and well paid – and protected by civil service regulations. Within a year of Williams’s arrival, Clarke was demoted, transferred, and finally forced to resign. Well-connected, Clarke was one of the few federal workers who escaped successfully into Washington’s black business enclave. But when that economy collapsed in the 1930s, Clarke, by then sixty-seven years old, tried to return to the civil service. Like most Americans, he was looking for secure employment in the midst of the Great Depression. Leaving government work in 1914, he had missed the installation of a federal employee pension system in 1920. Though Clarke was denied reinstatement, Franklin Roosevelt appointed him deputy recorder of deeds in 1935, a job with a higher profile but fewer job protections. Clarke’s older brother David managed less well during Williams’s tenure. Dismissed from his \$1,000-a-year Treasury clerkship in June 1913, the elder man was reinstated as a laborer earning \$660 a year and died two years later.

The racism evident in the case of Thomas Clarke and others appears to fit into a larger pattern, even if most black clerks did not have such dramatic forced resignations. Most commonly, it appeared as if their careers suddenly ground down. Barriers, inconveniences, and indignities cropped up that narrowed the promise of civil service employment for all African Americans. Under Wilson, black clerks were less likely to be promoted—and more likely to be demoted—than in previous administrations. An examination of the careers of 97 black civil servants between 1909 and 1916, from Taft’s presidency through Wilson’s first administration, shows that there were 66 promotions and 8 demotions/dismissals under Taft and 23 promotions and 35 demotions/dismissals under Wilson. For the 49 black clerks making \$1,000 a year or more in the selection, there were 48 promotions and 4 demotions between 1909 and 1912, while there were 11 promotions and 22 demotions or forced resignations between 1913 and 1916.

Some African American clerks were promoted during the Wilson administration. Three of the 49 black clerks in my selection earning \$1,000 or more when Wilson took office received promotions during the first term. Even so, segregation meant that employees could be promoted in pay but suffer a loss in status or responsibility that resulted in greatly attenuated careers. Some were promoted to racial isolation: Arthur Gray and Thomas Dent, who earned promotions in the 1910s, were segregated into their own corner in the Commerce Department’s Division of Statistics and set to work on reports relevant to black America only. Separated out from the majority of the staff and the bureau’s main work, these men were made to feel marginal, regardless of their pay. Finally, only four of those ever promoted during Wilson’s two terms were advanced beyond the \$1,200 Class 1 clerkship. No black clerk was allowed to ascend to the uppermost supervisory positions (Class 4 clerk, \$2,000 per year and up) within the civil service system as they had in the past

Government work in Washington lost its promise of mobility, and as promotions became rarer, it would seem increasingly natural to Washingtonians that black workers would predominate in the lower grades of the civil service. While the demotions, dismissals, and forced resignations bear witness to discrimination, in some ways it was the lack of promotions that most indicated a change. Fenwick Bush, a skilled helper in the GPO, earned twenty-five cents per hour

for thirteen years, before finally being swept up in the wartime statutory raises in 1918. Clerks John H. Cook, Charles R. Douglass (son of Frederick Douglass), Charles E. Hall, and Robert A. Pelham Jr., among others, all went at least ten years without a salary increase. Lawrence Wooden, also a Post Office clerk, earned promotions every year between 1909 and 1914, then was summarily reduced without cause. The case for black women appears to have been even worse: Laura Joiner was held at her \$1,000-a-year clerkship in the Interior Department from 1903 until 1921; Lucretia Mott Kelly, also of the Interior Department, went without a pay increase from 1893 until the inflationary reclassifications of 1919. Though all government clerks complained of being underpaid, and increasingly so in the 1910s, black clerks in particular seem to have been held back.

In addition to reductions and separations, growing suspiciousness and a willingness to entertain racist accusations also marked this era of deteriorating working conditions for black employees. In 1929, almost ten years after messenger Bernard Quiller resigned from the Library of Congress, his supervisor still remembered that Quiller's ambition in the 1910s had irritated a white assistant librarian. She found Quiller to be "impudent," a word African Americans recognized as signaling a black person's refusal to play the hapless subordinate. Even Swan Kendrick, whose status actually rose during the Wilson administration, was accosted by a white building guard in the War Department's washroom. The guard insisted that Kendrick was forbidden to use the washroom. The flood of racism finally reached Kendrick directly, and he resigned. "The colored people of Washington have never recovered from the blow that struck them in the time of Woodrow Wilson," concluded a national report on segregation in Washington in 1948. "The example set by the government has been one of exclusion and segregation in menial jobs." Discrimination in Washington was never merely another example of southern Jim Crow: it was evidence of the white supremacy at the heart of the nation.

Woodrow Wilson's Part

Wilson himself disclaimed any direct hand in departmental business. The president was focused on his legislative program in the year or so in which government administrators most aggressively imposed segregation, and his officials were free to work on their own most of the time. Wilson said almost nothing about segregation, and he appears to have paid little attention to its details. Nonetheless, Wilson did know that segregation was being pursued, and he did approve of it. In a July 1913 letter to Oswald Garrison Villard, owner and editor of the *New York Evening Post* and a founding member of the NAACP, Wilson described segregation as a "departmental" affair for which he took no responsibility. Nevertheless, he "sincerely believe[d] it to be in [black people's] interest." Wilson heartily approved of segregation in his government and the black inferiority the system implied.

Even still, Wilson remained above much of the racist fury of his administration. In part, Wilson's disconnect reflected his management style. But it also grew out of his particular form of racism. Wilson, born in Virginia and raised in South Carolina and Georgia during the Civil War and Reconstruction era, viewed the hysterical blackphobia of white southern politicians as unseemly. The Lost Cause mythology exhibited little pull on him; he had always favored a restored Union over a resurgent Confederacy. He was as offended by the grotesque injustice of lynching as by all forms of mob violence. There is even evidence that Wilson came to

understand that his connection to D.W. Griffith's 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation* was shameful. While Wilson could speak passionately about white southern heritage, viewed black people as inferior, and reportedly loved his "darky" jokes, he did not fill his speeches with racist diatribes like many southern Democrats. As a Mid-Atlantic governor, he did not have to rely on black scapegoats to get elected. During the 1912 presidential campaign, Wilson had pledged his "willingness and desire to deal with that race fairly and justly" and said little else afterward. Wilson diverged markedly from the stereotypical unreconstructed white southerner. Nor was Wilson a "race scientist" on the order of some progressive leaders, like Theodore Roosevelt or David Starr Jordan. Wilson spoke warmly of eastern European immigrants and vetoed immigration restrictions.

In fact, as the new president, Wilson did not immediately move to end black political power in Washington. There were plenty of black Democrats ready and willing to serve in his administration, and Wilson did nominate Adam Patterson of Oklahoma to succeed James Napier in the historically black position of register of the Treasury. White southerners were outraged. Senator James Vardaman of Mississippi spoke for the southern Democrats when he threatened to block Wilson's and the party's entire political agenda if the president tried to force through Patterson's nomination. Patronage was always a tricky game of balance between the president and Congress, and the party unity promoted by the spoils system required both racial and party loyalty. "I would rather see the tariff and the money legislation defeated than this nomination confirmed," Vardaman declared. He and his colleagues from Georgia and South Carolina had vowed to their constituents that they would fight for white supremacy in Washington, and they were not about to waste party dominance in both houses of Congress and the White House. When neither McAdoo nor Wilson spoke up in defense of his appointment, Patterson withdrew his nomination. Three days later, Wilson nominated another Oklahoman, Gabe E. Parker. Parker, a Choctaw Indian, was confirmed easily.

In the end, Wilson's administration deliberately dismantled the patronage machine that had promoted and protected black government officials. If Democrats wanted to argue that the administration was almost entirely white because there were no black Democrats, Wilson and Patterson knew otherwise. In his first term, Wilson made only one other attempt to appoint an African American to a federal position in Washington, the pro forma reappointment of Robert Terrell to a D.C. municipal judgeship. The famous black men of Washington's "black cabinet" were pushed out. Taft had appointed eighteen black men, including an assistant attorney general. Further back, Benjamin Harrison had made seventeen black appointments; William McKinley had appointed twenty-two African Americans; Theodore Roosevelt had made twenty appointments; and even Democrat Grover Cleveland had fought his own party's congressional delegation for at least four appointments of black men. Between 1880 and 1920, fifty black men would serve as U.S. consuls around the world. Wilson did follow one precedent by appointing a black man, New York Democrat James L. Curtis, as minister to Liberia in 1915, and he retained some previously appointed black consuls usually serving in majority black countries. By 1920, only four black men held any kind of appointed federal post and three were consuls serving abroad. This virtual disappearance of black appointees in Washington represented the first clear sign of a new racial regime in the American state.

For all his pose of goodwill and appeal to liberal principles, then, Wilson also thought little of destroying the structures that preserved African American equality if it served the

welfare of other Americans. To achieve his aims of party unity and smooth government, Wilson brought into his administration Josephus Daniels, John Skelton Williams, and plenty of other politicians who, though more preoccupied by race, were useful to his agenda in other ways. Wilson claimed to care deeply for African Americans—indeed, he said, “I know myself, as a southern man, how sincerely the heart of the South desires the good of the Negro and the advancement of his race on all sound and sensible lines”—but his brand of racism meant his concern did not extend to granting them political power.

Thus Wilson’s role in a heartbreaking story of discrimination and derailed lives was different from the standard narrative that “Wilson segregated the federal government,” but that does not mean it didn’t matter. It mattered a great deal. Wilson was the most prominent progenitor of discriminatory and discursive practices that allowed him and his top appointees to claim simultaneously the mantles of progressive politics and white supremacy. Politics is made up of methods of talk as well as policy ideas, and Wilsonians narrowed issues of citizens’ rights to managerial concerns of “efficiency” versus “corruption.” They racialized efficiency (made it white), just as they racialized Republican corruption (made it black). Progressive critiques of patronage, of which Wilson was an important source as both a scholar and a politician, thus maligned black politicians—almost always identified as Republicans—as corrupt and associated racial integration with dirty politics. This process was about more than Wilson’s roots in the South or the Democratic party: it was about how “good government” became the special preserve of white men.

It is not anachronistic to condemn Wilson’s racism because his contemporaries did so with great force. One famous episode in the fight against federal segregation is important to understand in depth, because it illustrates how Wilson’s way of talking diminished the possibilities for racial equality in America. It also provides an answer to the question of whether or not Wilson was ever offered a compelling counter argument against segregation.

On November 12, 1914, Wilson met with the civil rights activist William Monroe Trotter for the second time in a year to discuss his administration’s policies toward black federal employees. In a previous encounter, Wilson had urged Trotter and a delegation of civil rights activists to be “patient and tolerant,” but since that time, he had given African Americans little reason to be either. The result of the second meeting was a confrontation that revealed just how difficult it could be to penetrate the fundamental racism of Woodrow Wilson. More important, it would also help to set the terms on which white supremacy would be justified in national government for decades afterward.

Wilson was clearly uncomfortable with Trotter. The brilliant and demanding black leader understood Wilson far better than Wilson did him. All too aware of Wilson’s refusal to see him as an equal, Trotter nonetheless demanded to be heard. He pushed Wilson hard to live up to the principles of American democracy and the “New Freedom,” Wilson’s liberal campaign program. But Wilson’s response, a grumpy and patronizing reiteration of his pledge to run a just and well-managed government, revealed his inability to grasp Trotter’s forceful rights claims. The two men faced each other from different planes.

Trotter reminded the president that his administration had not fulfilled his promise to him and other black Democrats to deal fairly with black Americans. Trotter spoke powerfully and steadily. He elevated what Wilson saw as a question of public administration to one of American

citizenship and liberty. Segregation in Washington was distinct from segregation elsewhere. If African Americans could be “segregated and thus humiliated by the national government at the national capital,” Trotter said, “the foundation of the whole fabric of their citizenship is unsettled.” Hoping to provoke his liberal sympathies, Trotter cut to the marrow of Wilson’s progressive politics: “Have you a ‘new freedom’ for white Americans and a new slavery for your Afro-American fellow citizens?” Wilson’s secretary Joe Tumulty later told journalist Oswald Garrison Villard that the speech “was one of the most eloquent he had ever heard.”

In his answer, Wilson’s famous patrician demeanor and didactic tone were largely absent. He sounded exasperated and tired, falling back awkwardly upon platitudes. Narrowing Trotter’s demands for equality, he imagined Trotter as merely representing one of the many interest groups within American politics that he had long found loathsome. Wrapping himself in the cloak of a morality higher than politics, Wilson played victim. He talked of the burden he felt in the White House. “God knows that any man that would seek the presidency of the United States is fool for his pains,” he moaned. “The burden is all but intolerable, and the things I have to do are just as much as a human spirit can carry.” Trotter’s blackness unnerved Wilson. The assertive Trotter calling out the incomplete vision at the heart of the “New Freedom” was a nightmare. Though his mental state was shaken by his wife’s recent death and war in Europe, Wilson would never have had a way of processing Trotter’s outrage. Wilson’s meeting with Trotter revealed the way in which his “democratic universalism” applied only to white people.

Gathering himself, Wilson returned to his usual well-wishing talking points on “race relations,” a kind of cold speech that disclosed Wilson’s assumption that black people were something other than real Americans. He spoke as if welcoming a visiting group of foreigners. “The American people, as a whole,” he promised Trotter, “sincerely desire and wish to support, in every way they can, the advancement of the Negro race in America.” It was simply “unwise” to expect prejudices to vanish overnight, and, therefore, it would be rash not to obey the wishes of white workers. For if things moved too quickly, “friction between the white employees and the Negro employees” would be the inevitable result. “We are all practical men,” Wilson declared, invoking his manly and progressive empiricism. “We know that there is a point at which there is apt to be friction, and that is in the intercourse between the two races. . . . We must strip this thing of sentiment and look at the facts.” Federal administrators had no intention of being unjust, Wilson explained; “they have intended to remedy what they regarded as creating the possibility of friction, which they did not want ever to exist.”

Wilson’s repeated use of the word “friction” was meaningful. It was an appeal to the kind of civil service reform he had long advocated, though now merged with a racist disregard for African Americans. In 1887, as a young political scientist, Wilson had proposed a rational “study of administration” that sought the means to “destroy all wearing friction” in the management of government. On both sides of the Atlantic, mechanical metaphors became standard in progressives’ discussions of institutions and bureaucracies, reflecting their hope that scientific management might bring order and harmony to the chaos of industrial capitalism. Friction, explained bureaucracy’s famous interrogator, Max Weber, was the enemy of efficient management. Progressives clung to notions of dissolving “friction” and promoting bureaucratic efficiency as essential to government reform. To Wilson’s policy muse, Louis Brandeis, “efficiency is the hope of democracy.”

In the mouths of segregationists, this discourse turned white and black workers into mere “colliding interests” with segregation as the neutral solvent rather than an act of discrimination. “Race friction” as a concept erased the individuality of the people involved, even as those who talked of it varied in their sympathy for African Americans (nearly everyone in the period, black or white, used the term). Government efficiency, as Weber explained, was a profoundly impersonal matter, and the mechanical metaphor necessarily dehumanized human relations, reducing racism to an inevitable function of circumstances. It had a discursive power that insisted upon, indeed naturalized, the belief that black and white people could not be expected to get along as equals. It was this ability to further a racist assumption while also promoting a progressive agenda that gave that specific word so much power for Wilsonians.

Facing Trotter, “friction” was thus a useful metaphor for Wilson. Eliminating friction meant rising above “collegial interests” to see administration as merely a matter of moving parts that could be made to move more smoothly. When Trotter tried to make apparent the human toll of racial discrimination, Wilson retreated to Bureaucratic Speak, with its comforting assurances that anything that increased efficiency was in the interest of all Americans. This creed was integral to Wilson’s approach to government. Every Wilsonian cause—from tariff reduction to civil service management to rural credits to monetary reform—carried the virtue of efficiency. As president of the United States and an articulate spokesman for administrative reform, Wilson made a powerful case for ignoring the demands of black Americans in the service of efficient government.

Perhaps most important, Wilson’s call for smooth administration depicted Trotter as the radical activist demanding drastic change. It was Trotter, not Wilson, who was trying to imagine a new kind of government management. It was African Americans, not southern Democrats, who were creating “friction” by moving too quickly to alter the terms of American citizenship. Such a formulation performed a powerful erasure: suddenly fifty years of competent and peaceful black government service had never happened. Wilson leaped from the “unwise” empowerment of slaves in the 1860s to the “unwise” equality Trotter was demanding. Whatever Wilson’s beliefs about the potential for human evolution and the possibility of uplift, black Americans were no more ready for full citizenship in 1914 than they had been after the Civil War. “Practical men” knew this, even if Trotter did not.

Trotter resented Wilson’s paternalism: “We are not here as wards. We are not here as dependents. We are not here looking for charity or help,” he informed the president. “We are here as full-fledged American citizens, vouchsafed equality of citizenship by the federal Constitution.” If Wilson wanted to talk management, Trotter had moved on to fundamental rights and equality. But the meeting was over.

Many, like Wilson, read black men demanding equality as a physical threat. A well-meaning and liberal Wilson overwhelmed by an aggressive black man would be the meeting’s lasting image. Trotter and his delegation were not politicians or citizens; they were, read one supportive letter to Wilson, a “gang of negroes” whose “insulting and uncalled for manner” revealed “that the more you educate a negro the smarter he thinks he is, and the meaner he gets.”

In those first years of the Wilson administration, white supremacists achieved two major victories: They vanquished the Republican patronage machine that had been so crucial for black mobility, and they established federal discrimination as a progressive reform for the whole

nation. Wilson successfully connected white supremacy to the progressive and moral imperative of efficiency, and efficient administration continued to serve as a justification for discrimination by bureaucracies and by the state in general. The packaging of tales of “racial friction” in consistent rhetoric helped to embed a belief in American culture and politics that black and white Americans sharing space was necessarily a combustible circumstance—one to be avoided at almost any cost.

Woodrow Wilson’s Legacy?

From tariff reform to the income tax to the creation of the Federal Reserve to meaningful antitrust reform, Woodrow Wilson’s achievements make him one of the United States’s most successful progressive politicians. Add in his leadership in the allied victory in World War I, and Wilson rises in the estimation of many to a level of historic greatness. And yet, as I hope has become apparent, Wilson also played a leading role in one of the defining injustices of American life: the systematic denial of rights and dignity to African Americans. Wilson’s justification of racial discrimination was critical to the changing place and power of black citizenship within the twentieth-century American state. Wilson always maintained that the goals of his administration were fairness and efficiency. But there was a heartlessness there, too, that must temper our admiration. His unempathic and obstinate response to civil rights protests mattered—mattered more than those of other racists—because, as he spoke, the negotiated practice of drawing the color line became governing theory: segregation and discrimination were necessary for good, clean, and modern government—the impact on the lives of ordinary black Americans notwithstanding.

Far from being merely ignorant “men of their times,” Wilson and his administration sought to do something new when they delegitimized public objections to segregation by marking any protest as both insubordinate and fallacious. African Americans and some allies never accepted this argument, of course, but the vast majority of white Americans did not question it. In this way, federal discrimination, including administrators’ explanations of it, played its part in the national institutionalization of white supremacy in the United States in the early twentieth century.

African Americans were profoundly disturbed by discrimination in federal offices, and they and their white allies never stopped protesting it. But most of the black civil servants working in Washington when Wilson took office in 1913 did not live to see the color line erased. That generation experienced both the opportunities of the earlier era and the betrayal of those opportunities as the racial regime shifted. No longer did their abilities, education, and political loyalty serve as productive elements in a government career. Black civil servants could not repel the racial exclusion that the more powerful Wilsonians were intent on enacting. They resisted but did not overcome.

The leaders of Princeton University face a difficult problem. I will not attempt to make an argument for removing Wilson’s name from the School of Public and International Affairs. That seems beyond the role of a historian, and I share the concern of many of my colleagues that tearing down monuments and nameplates *might*—though not necessarily *must*—lead to a self-

satisfied, ahistorical scrubbing of a past that is still quite pertinent today. Yet, I do ask that you take seriously the demand of students that the university reckon with how it understands and represents Wilson's legacy. Wilson was a racist whose unexamined convictions on this front led to the destruction of people's lives. That fact must be combined with his dangerous civil liberties policies in World War I and his military's vicious occupation of Haiti as counterpoints to Wilson's more admirable achievements.

Failing to acknowledge Woodrow Wilson's full history will always hamper the university's wider project of building an inclusive community where all students (and faculty and staff) are able to thrive. Universities must do more than grant access to traditionally under-represented groups on their campuses. Asking students of color to study in a school or live in a dormitory named for a man who did not want them there without any recognition of this fact indicates a lack of seriousness about changing the institution to meet the educational needs of its students.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Eric S. Yellin, Ph.D. (GS '07)