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January 20, 2016

Mr. Brent Henry, Esq.
Vice Chair, Princeton University Board of Trustees
Chair, Wilson Legacy Committee
Princeton University
Princeton, New Jersey

Dear Mr. Henry:

I am pleased to write this letter in response to your enquiry on behalf of Wilson Legacy Committee of the Princeton Board of Trustees.

I became acutely aware of the significance of Woodrow Wilson while researching my biography, *IDA, A Sword Among Lions, Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching*. In my opinion, his segregationist and racially exclusive policies as president of Princeton University and as the 28th President of the United States are sufficient grounds for the refusal to honor his name in an institution that values diversity and the standards of a liberal arts education.

As, according to historian Nancy J. Weiss, the Chief Executive of the first administration to officially sanction segregation in the federal government, Wilson's legacy is more pernicious and far-reaching than the sum of his racial policies. That the President was also responsible for some of the most important reform legislation in U.S. history does not mitigate his legacy but, as I will explain, deepened its negative implications for not only African Americans, but the country at large and even the prospects for international peace. This becomes evident when examining his policies within their historical context.

In November of 1913, civil rights leaders, led by Ida Wells and the militant Boston editor, Monroe Trotter, met with the President in the White House to protest his segregationist policies and to present him with a petition signed by 20,000 complainants from 36 states.

Just the year before, candidate Wilson, a southerner and a Democrat, had sought out many of the same leaders that came to see him in November. Then, as reported by W.E.B. Du Bois in the NAACP's *Crisis*, he had impressed them with his "big" progressive ideas, promises of giving blacks their fair share of federal jobs, and of dispensing with the vestiges of "'Jim Crow' insult." If elected, Wilson promised, he would "be a President of the whole nation—to know no white or black, no North, South, East or West."

Convinced, Trotter and Du Bois, among others, abandoned the Republican party to champion Wilson who subsequently received the largest number of African American votes ever cast for a Democratic candidate.

Imagine their dismay when they discovered that within a matter of months after the inauguration, the Treasury and Post Office Departments as well as the Bureau of Engraving and Printing had been mandated to have racially separate offices, lunch rooms and lavatories for the first time since the Civil War. Moreover, in short order diplomatic posts and other prominent positions traditionally reserved for blacks were reduced in rank or removed altogether. New applicants were required to provide photographs to avoid the mistake, as opined in the black press, of hiring high-scoring African Americans only to belatedly discover their race. Newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* suspected that the test-scores were being manipulated to the detriment of blacks.

While previous administrations were hardly free of racial bias and or even successful efforts toward racial separation, never had such policies had the imprimatur of the President, himself. The rationale given by Wilson's southern cabinet members and by the President himself was that such policies did not reflect any animus toward African Americans but were necessary to avoid "racial friction."

The development, on its face was bad enough. The loss and/or diminution of federal employment severely narrowed one of the few paths of upward mobility, dignified work, and economic stability that affected generations of black families. But in addition, the signal set by the administration's first term encouraged Congress to present, the greatest number of racially discriminatory bills—24—in the history of that body.

State legislatures, including those in the North such as Illinois, Ida Wells's home turf, took the cue and proposed a flurry of like-minded bills. Though many bills in both instances were fought against successfully, the die was cast. Washington, D.C, the nation's capital, became a segregated city. The culture of racial separation was now inscribed onto the very center of the nation.

Commenting on Wilson, Oswald Garrison Villard, an NAACP official and editor of the *New York Evening Post*, wrote that he "fails utterly to see that to discriminate in this democracy against anyone, is to bring his whole carefully reared edifice crashing to the ground."

Indeed, simultaneous to these developments on the racial front was Wilson's "edifice" of a comprehensive agenda of reform. Called the New Freedom, the President successfully overcame powerful lobbies to pass tariff, anti-trust, and banking reform legislation. A Federal

Trade Commission was established; child-labor was prohibited, farmers were able to get loans, an eight-hour work day was legislated. Wilson endorsed women's suffrage.

For black leaders especially, the juxtaposition of reform and racism was galling. In a second meeting with the President, Monroe asked Wilson if he meant to have a "New Freedom" for whites and a "new slavery" for blacks?

The question for Wilson held no irony. For him, progressivism and racial control were not at odds but co-dependents. As his writings show, he was a believer in the New South creed that insisted that needed reforms and regional progress would be achieved by national reconciliation, industrial growth, agricultural diversification—and racial control.

The latter made the other elements possible and for Wilson, a paternalist of the highest order who would regale black leaders with stories about his "old black mammy", such control was best gained through racial cooperation (co-optation as others would see it) as long it was under the control of a white hierarchy and did not lead to the inevitable—and unmanageable—conflict that accompanied the equality and proximity of the races. As he explained to Trotter, the separation of blacks and whites was not an indignity but in the best interest of African Americans because it avoided the inevitable.

Such ideas also help one to understand how Wilson could be such an innovative educator at Princeton while dutifully discouraging black applicants with what appears to be a 100 percent success rate. He advised African Americans that not being at Princeton was in their best interest for they would feel uncomfortable at the institution; but what appeared paramount in his thinking was that the presence of blacks would disturb the social peace of a campus which had so many white southern students.

As President of the United States such views, born and nurtured in the South, were writ large upon the nation. His very success as a reformer helped to link progressivism, democratic reform, and equality to racial segregation; and perhaps more insidiously, racial control to economic progress. I would argue that policies that reflected such ideas were largely responsible for the country undergoing what was arguably the most violent period in American history during the years of his administration. In the summer of 1919 alone, race riots and mob violence foisted on blacks occurred in more than thirty cities across the U.S.—many of the worst taking place in northern cities where blacks and ethnic whites competed with one another for jobs.

Moreover, Wilson's legacy reaches further than his years as President. One can see its consequences in today's inner cities, racialized state violence, mass incarceration, and wealth inequality. It also reverberates abroad in the wake of his efforts toward global peace in the form of his proposed Fourteen Points and League of Nations.

According to the historian Samuel Eliot Morrison, while Wilson was negotiating the Treaty of Versailles, a story circulated in Paris about a conversation he had with France's prime minister, Georges Clemenceau.

The Frenchman told Wilson that nothing could prevent a future war unless they could agree on three fundamental principles: to declare and enforce racial equality, to ensure freedom of immigration, and to advocate a policy of free trade throughout the world. Wilson rejected all three.

The race question, he reportedly said, was a very sensitive topic in the United States and neither southern nor West Coast senators would ratify a treaty with such a stipulation. Free immigration was not acceptable because the United States was determined to exclude “Orientals” and was in the process of considering restrictions on European immigrants. And though he was for free trade, and his administration had already lowered tariffs, he did not believe that the Congress would agree to a customs union with Europe, Asia, and Africa.

After hearing Wilson’s response, Clemenceau replied that the only other means of maintaining peace was to “remain strong ourselves and keep our past and potential enemies weak.” Indeed, Allied policies toward Germany did in fact keep one of their “past” enemies weak—but not for long.

For many, the legacy of Woodrow Wilson has two, apparently contradictory parts. On the one hand, he was a great progressive and reformer—as a transformative college president, a corruption-busting governor, an international visionary, and particularly as a determined President whose “New Freedom” reforms were some of the most important in the 20th century. On the other hand, he sanctioned segregation at the highest levels of government. That one was the corollary, not the antithesis, of the other means that they cannot be viewed separately but must be weighed as a single and ultimately ruinous heritage.

Sincerely,
Paula J. Giddings
Elizabeth A. Woodson 1922 Professor

