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FURTHER READING

The most thorough and important history of the New Freedom is Arthur S. Link's volume with that title (Link 1956). This is the second volume of Link's five-volume biography of Woodrow Wilson. Two much more recent biographies by John Milton Cooper, Jr (2009) and August Heckscher (1991) are valuable for the ways they set Wilson's role in crafting the New Freedom program within the context of his career, but they add relatively little to Link's history of the landmark pieces of legislation. Of all the presidents of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Wilson was the only one who had a significant scholarly career before taking office, so the details of his intellectual biography are unusually important. In the realm of his economic thinking, the most important work remains that by William Diamond (1943). Wilson's analysis of the economic problems bound up in the New Freedom drew heavily on religious as well as secular sources, and the most informative studies on this topic are John Mulder's monograph (Mulder 1978) and Arthur Link's collection of essays (Link 1971). Students who wish to explore any aspect of Wilson's life and career in depth will find access in university libraries to an unusual collection: the 69 volumes of *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, which Arthur Link edited between 1966 and 1994. The best place to launch a critical understanding of the New Freedom is with Martin Sklar's sweeping survey of progressive political economy (Sklar 1988) and his 1960 article (Sklar 1960 or Sklar 1992). In 2008, W. Elliot Brownlee attempted to take into account Sklar's interpretations, and those of other historians who regard Wilson as a "corporate liberal." In the process he restated the case for seeing Wilson's New Freedom as a serious progressive effort to contain and even reduce the monopoly power of great corporations (Brownlee 2008).

Chapter Seven

WILSON AND RACE RELATIONS

Jennifer D. Keene

During the Wilson administration race relations took a noticeable turn for the worse. Despite winning the support of traditionally Republican-leaning northern black voters in the 1912 presidential election, Wilson did little to advance the civil rights agenda during his presidency. There is near universal agreement among scholars that Wilson accrued a dismal record on race relations as President. Gary Gerstle accurately sums up the consensus view that "in matters of domestic race relations, the characteristics we associate with Wilson – boldness, passion, an insistence on social justice – are difficult to find. He was timid, cold, practically indifferent to questions of racial justice, and incapable of summoning rhetoric that might inspire and transform racial problems seemingly no deeper or more intractable than those besetting the system of international states" (Gerstle 2008: 93–4).

Scholars are divided however on how they approach the issue of racial politics during Wilson's presidency. One body of literature tries to explain the enigma of a president who spoke so passionately about social justice yet remained tone-deaf to the problems of racial prejudice and discrimination. These works dissect Wilson's motivations and mindset for allowing the segregation of federal offices, the White House showing of the racist film *Birth of a Nation*, and his tepid reaction to escalating racial violence during World War I. Another group of scholars focuses less on Wilson's thoughts and more on the reaction within the black community to Wilson's policies. These works highlight how Wilson administration efforts to retard black advancement, particularly of the black middle class, became a catalyst for civil rights protest and community organizing. These scholars argue that the negative racial policies of the Wilson presidency gave civil rights organizations and activists a *raison d'être* which they adroitly exploited to solidify their position within the black community. The birth of the modern civil rights movement during this period is, therefore, as significant as Wilson's racial beliefs and policies.

Wilson: A Southern Man

Was Wilson's southern upbringing enough to explain his subsequent racial views and presidential policies? Wilson scholars have scoured Wilson's boyhood, writings, and pre-presidential political years to answer this question. Born in Virginia in 1856, Wilson lived in Augusta, Georgia during the Civil War and then moved to South Carolina at the war's end when his Presbyterian minister father took a professorship at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Columbia. Witnessing the war's devastation firsthand as a boy left a lasting impact on him. Wilson, however, also had strong familial roots in the North. His father had lived in Ohio for years before moving to Virginia, and a few of his six northern-based uncles served as officers in the Union army during the Civil War. Wilson had his professional and political coming of age in the North: working in Connecticut and Pennsylvania before teaching and serving as President of Princeton University, and then finally becoming Governor of New Jersey. In New Jersey Wilson found it easy to remain silent on the race question. He maintained Princeton's exclusion of black students and made no direct overtures to the state's black population as governor.

Wilson's family never owned slaves, but Wilson absorbed the ideology of white superiority while growing up in the South, according to John Morton Blum, *Woodrow Wilson and the Politics of Morality* (1956). Blum believed that the remnants of his southern upbringing made it easy for Wilson to support racial discrimination throughout his adult life. Wilson biographers Arthur Link and Louis Auchincloss (2000) agreed, concluding that Wilson essentially shared the racial views and biases of his generation and social class. "Although Wilson resented the demagoguery of the more rabid white supremacists and resisted their extreme demands throughout his presidency, he and probably all his Cabinet members shared the southern view of race relations," Link contended (Link 1956: 246). More recently Morton Sosna reaffirmed the view that Wilson's southern background essentially explained his presidential racial policies. "The President, a native Georgian, was a traditional Southerner in both up-bringing and temperament; while Wilson did not make blatant Negro-phobia the hallmark of his political career, he was sympathetic and understanding of men who did," he wrote (Sosna 1970: 30).

Other scholars, however, have probed more deeply to flush out this portrait of Wilson as a "typical" southerner. Michael Dennis agrees that Wilson was a moderate on racial matters when compared to more militant southern segregationists of the time. Racial moderates like Wilson "did not entertain notions of black 'beasts' and racial degeneracy, nor did they propose colonization or extra-legal violence as a method of racial control" (Dennis 2002: 96). Dennis sees Wilson as a product of the New South whose adherents believed that the path to postwar prosperity lay in "national reconciliation, industrial growth, agricultural diversification, and racial control" (Dennis 2002: 77). Like other genteel New South middle-class men, Wilson did not disagree with the goals of conservative white supremacists, just their methods. Wilson viewed moderation as a way to avoid the destructive forces of racial violence while nonetheless maintaining white supremacy. Economic and political progress in his mind required the kind of racial control that segregation offered. With this

mindset Wilson saw no contradiction between supporting racial segregation and Progressive economic reforms. As Adrienne Lentz-Smith argues, "Wilsonianism highlighted the compatibility between social reform and social control, Progressivism and Jim Crow" (Lentz-Smith 2009: 33).

Wilson embraced the ideas popularized by Booker T. Washington that held out the promise to African Americans of incremental advancement through education and hard work within the existing segregated system. While Washington emphasized the potential benefits for blacks, Wilson focused on the advantages for the South. Training a disciplined black working class to focus on limited economic gains, not civil rights, had the advantage of providing the South with a class of industrious farmers and industrial workers who would always stay at the bottom of the social hierarchy. White landowners and factory owners would remain in control of the black labor force, and racial agitation and violence would cease once blacks learned to accommodate segregation. The resulting social stability would allow the region to advance economically with the racial hierarchy firmly intact. Wilson therefore did not embrace moderate rhetoric and racial proposals to inch the nation towards racial equality. Under the tutelage of the white middle class, blacks' economic situation might improve slightly but social equality was out of the question for him.

Nicolas Patler points out that Wilson did not just accept black inferiority but also helped to popularize the notion that blacks had regressed in freedom and needed heavy-handed management from whites to control their depraved tendencies. "In Wilson's political writings dealing with the South, a common theme arises stigmatizing African Americans with such terms as *ignorant and inferior, dark minded, uneducated, menace, dangerous, shiftless, indolent, and incompetent,*" Patler notes (Patler 2004: 76). Patler and Gerstle hold Wilson to a higher standard. Why shouldn't the man who thought so innovatively about economic reform and international politics also have been able to transcend his racial upbringing and join with other liberal Progressive reformers in their pursuit of social justice, they ask? In Wilson's thinking on racial matters, more than a contradiction existed between his desire to purify and spread democracy while turning a blind eye to racial disenfranchisement. Wilson, who as President was intent on imbuing the federal government with the power to make far-sweeping economic reforms, was content to let the South handle the race issue as they saw fit. Wilson, Patler concludes, may not have taken the lead in introducing segregation into the federal government, but "he personally felt separation of the races was morally right" (Patler 2004: 83).

Stephen Skowronek goes one step further, arguing that Wilson's racially tinged southern upbringing and New South mindset affected more than his presidential racial policies. Many scholars hail Wilson as the father of modern liberalism with its emphasis on self-governance and independent statehood. Skowronek asserts that Wilson's historical writings on the Reconstruction era offer valuable clues about the lessons Wilson drew from this recent past to develop his own ideas about liberal democracy. In *Congressional Government* Wilson assailed Reconstruction policies for congressional despotism and violating the constitutional principles of checks and balances. Ignoring states' rights, Wilson wrote, federal election inspectors entered the South to ensure enforcement of the Fifteenth Amendment and federal courts punished state judges who refused to empanel black jurors. The key lesson for Wilson

was that “force had run roughshod over the Constitution; the cause of social stability had fallen prey to the pursuit of abstract rights; a legislative majority animated by principle had acted in blatant disregard of the ‘childlike’ state of the Negro and ‘natural order of life,’” thus putting the entire American democratic project in jeopardy (Skowronek 2006: 391). Wilson’s “southern critique of power politics” during the Reconstruction era concluded that the concentration of power in the hands of a few threatened social stability and economic advancement. In Skowronek’s formulation Wilson’s “reactionary racism” and “liberal idealism” were two sides of the same coin, informing and influencing his liberal ideals about democratic government. Linking key Wilsonian phrases like “self-determination” and “consent of the governed” to this historical context, Skowronek underscores the connection between Wilson’s racially based views and the evolution of principles that became bulwarks of liberal politics. When Wilson envisioned “every people free to determine its own polity, its own way of development, unhindered, unthreatened, unafraid, the little along with the great and powerful [in World War I] he was, in effect, turning the southern voice into the voice of America on the world stage,” Skowronek writes (Skowronek 2006: 396).

Gary Gerstle shifts the focus from the south to the north. Wilson may have been a son of the South who embraced its racial customs, but to Gerstle the northern influence on Wilson’s political thought was apparent in his steadfast opposition to secession, which he viewed as unconstitutional and unwise. Wilson was an ardent believer in the Union, the superiority of a free labor system over slavery, and the importance of industrialization and immigration to creating an American nation. Gerstle resists characterizing Wilson as just another advocate of the “New South” who wanted to remake the South in the image of the North. Instead Gerstle sees Wilson “as a man of the ‘New Nation,’ a nation that had become possible for the first time as a direct result of the South’s 1865 defeat” (Gerstle 2008: 96). In his historical writing Wilson consistently viewed American nation-building as the task of absorbing new people and regions, forging unity around a shared set of political principles and one economic system. Wilson’s interest in economic and political homogeneity did not lead to xenophobia. Proud of his own Scott-Irish heritage, Wilson embraced a “melting pot” view in which immigrants brought values and cultures that benefited the nation-building process. Immigrants allowed for the constant “re-birth” of the nation as they enthusiastically championed America’s distinct democratic and economic values.

“His ability to use America’s encounter with immigrants to develop a dynamic theory of hybridized homogeneity and self-government reveals the independence, boldness, and creativity of his political imagination. And those characteristics make his refusal to think creatively about America’s race problem all the more frustrating and maddening,” Gerstle argues (Gerstle 2008: 102). Wilson’s “racial nationalism” was a view of America in which blacks literally had no place except as laborers. African Americans were a problem to manage – unlike European immigrants they brought nothing of value to the nation’s political or cultural life, their child-like attributes made them ill-equipped to handle the freedom available in a liberal democracy wisely, and their moral lives required constant policing. “As much as he celebrated diversity and hybridity, he always believed that only peoples of European descent could partake of the American experiment in democracy and freedom” (Gerstle 2008: 115).

Segregating the Federal Government

In 1913 Wilson agreed to allow federal agencies to begin segregating their offices, thus curtailing opportunities for educated African Americans to enter the middle class through civil service employment. Small in number, federal employment nonetheless offered the black community access to professional jobs that gave them economic stability, political access, and social standing. “By the end of 1912, all told, there were over 19,000 black people working for the federal government including sixteen in the diplomatic and consular services, with total annual earnings amounting to \$11,300,000,” writes Sosna (1970: 31). The federal government was the largest employer of African Americans in the nation in 1912, and the color-blind civil service test offered blacks a way to demonstrate their merit and compete on an even playing field with white applicants for jobs. “Blacks regularly scored as well as whites on civil service examinations and in some cases made the highest scores in the country,” according to Patler (2004: 3). Within Washington, DC more than 1,800 African Americans worked for the federal government, including 300 white-collar workers, some in senior positions supervising white workers. Educated African Americans secured these stable middle-class jobs through a mixture of merit (passing the civil service exam) and patronage (rewards for their political support for the Republican Party). Federal employment in Washington, DC offered more than lucrative careers for educated African Americans. These jobs also served as the underpinnings for a culturally strong and politically vibrant black community in the nation’s capital. Socially and economically mobile, politically active – this community supported businesses, schools, newspapers, churches, political organizations, and an array of fraternal organizations thanks to the financial security federal employment bestowed. The loss of federal jobs and promotions, therefore, was not just an individual tragedy. Curtailing opportunities in federal employment also severely limited the growth of the black middle-class and the communities they supported.

By the time Wilson assumed the presidency, southern Democrats had re-written the narrative of the civil service system, instituted in 1883 to reduce political patronage. In the southern Democrat re-telling, however, the introduction of a merit-based process for securing federal employment morphed into an insidious Republican plot to humiliate southern whites by putting them under black supervisors. Every black civil service employee took a job and paycheck away from a white person; every black male clerk threatened the honor of white female clerks forced to work in his presence. Segregationists made effective use of the recent feminization of the federal clerical workforce in Washington, DC (90 percent of stenographers were white women by 1912). The presence of white, female workers in federal offices allowed white supremacists to transform middle-class blacks’ ambitions for economic advancement into sexual avarice. “The threat of black professional and economic success was figured as a potential sexual violation – a crime against white purity and its most cherished bearers, white women. African-American ambition, therefore, could instantly morph into sexual assault in the minds of white southerners,” Eric Yellin argues (Yellin 2007: 131).

A newly formed lobbying group, the National Democratic Fair Play Association, pressed for segregation to safeguard the honor of white female federal employees

through mass letter-writing campaigns, petitions, and mass meetings. Kathleen Wolgemuth credits the group's active segregationist campaign with emboldening Postmaster General Albert Burleson to suggest that Wilson segregate federal offices for the first time since the Civil War (Wolgemuth 1959). During a closed April 11, 1913 cabinet meeting, Burleson objected to current practices within the Railway Mail Service where both races worked side by side and shared toilet and dining facilities. According to the account of the meeting recorded in the diary of Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, Wilson offered no objection to Burleson's declaration that he intended to begin gradually segregating work spaces, lavatories, and lunch rooms. A few days previously, Wilson's first wife Edith (born and raised in Georgia) had visited the Treasury Department's Bureau of Printing and Engraving and seen black and white women sitting together in the lunchroom. Her shock and dismay may have made the President receptive to the complaints voiced by his southern Cabinet members during this meeting, Sosna surmises (Sosna 1970: 33). Secretary of the Treasury William McAdoo and Daniels soon followed Burleson's lead and began segregating some of their departmental offices. Defending the newly introduced segregated practices, McAdoo subsequently stated, "there has been an effort in the departments to remove the causes of complaint and irritation where white women have been forced unnecessarily to sit at desks with colored men. Compulsion of this sort creates friction and race prejudice. Elimination of such friction promotes good feeling and friendship" (Wolgemuth 1959: 167).

Why did Wilson agree to the requests of his Cabinet members to segregate their agencies? Henry Blumenthal saw indifference rather than racism at work. In his 1963 essay, "Woodrow Wilson and the Race Question," Blumenthal argued that Wilson's lack of interest in the race question caused him to acquiesce to insistent southerners within his Cabinet and in Congress who wanted to segregate federal offices and not reappoint blacks to federal posts traditionally held by African Americans. Worried about antagonizing southern politicians just as his tariff and currency reform bills went before Congress, "[i]n his judgment, the Negroes' interests would in the long run be best served by the adoption of reforms in the national interest," Blumenthal argued (Blumenthal 1963: 6). Biographer John Milton Cooper cites Wilson's permissive leadership style as the culprit. As President of Princeton, Wilson had let his chairs run their departments as they saw fit, reasoning that they understood their needs better than he did. Applying that same leadership style to his presidential Cabinet, Wilson was ill-equipped temperament-wise to micro-manage agency affairs. "This approach had the advantage of promoting an efficient, smooth-running government; it would show its greatest value after Wilson's stroke in 1919, when the administration could function without him" (Cooper 2009: 204). But one immediate negative consequence of Wilson's tendency to say little during Cabinet meetings was an atmosphere "not entirely to Wilson's liking" that emboldened his southern Cabinet members to initiate their plans for segregated offices, Cooper contends. Whereas other scholars saw Wilson simply acquiescing to the wishes of others due to his leadership style or to protect other parts of his reform agenda, Yellin saw Wilson taking an active role in changing the direction of federal racial policies. "That his management style kept him in the dark as to details should not be used deny Wilson's responsibility in the matter," Yellin counters. "Woodrow Wilson heartily approved of segregation and the black inferiority the system implied" (Yellin 2007: 16). Wilson

chose a different path from his predecessors; "he did not hand out a few token appointments and let those who wanted to hurt black Americans go about their business in the dark corners of the South. No, Wilson brought the South north, and as a good progressive, he sought solution through order," Yellin argued (Yellin 2007: 136).

Like many southern Progressives, Wilson easily reconciled his broader democratic principles with support for segregation. The majority of Americans (who were white) preferred segregation, Wilson argued, making the practice entirely in keeping with the popular will. Nationalizing what had previously been a regional custom was also a way to improve the efficiency of the government (another key Progressive goal) by eliminating strife at the workplace. Besides arousing passions on both sides, arguments over segregation distracted the entire nation from more pressing domestic questions.

Most historians link the segregationist policies of the Wilson administration to this April 1913 Cabinet meeting, but August Meier and Elliott Rudwick (1967) take a broader view. Rather than representing a clear break with the past, they see the Wilson years as accelerating a process to remove blacks from federal employment that began incrementally with Theodore Roosevelt in pursuit of southern votes and reached its zenith with Calvin Coolidge. Christine Lunardini also broadens the question of responsibility by placing less emphasis on what Wilson said and believed, and more on the actions taken by subordinates within the administration once they got permission to segregate. "Because the Post Office is such a far-flung operation, segregation in that department had the widest repercussions. Local postmasters were given the green light to downgrade or eliminate black employees at their discretion, and to segregate work crews in their domains," Lunardini notes (Lunardini 1979: 251). Yellin's detailed study of the actual implementation of federal segregation also suggests that "what occurred in federal offices regarding black employees was ad hoc work of lower-level administrators" (Yellin 2007: 158). In the case of the Treasury Department, for instance, McAdoo's first assistant secretary James Skelton Williams shared McAdoo's desire to institute formal segregation and instructed supervisors to erect signs segregating lunchrooms and restrooms. When Williams was replaced with Charles Sumner Hamlin, a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) activist, Hamlin issued new regulations removing such notices and prohibiting discrimination in promotions. The signs disappeared, but Wilson insisted that the directive to take them down be given verbally to avoid antagonizing southern congressmen. The verbal approach was also adopted to continue the segregationist drive in other federal offices. Eliminating a paper trail afforded Wilson deniability to both civil rights activists who accused him of supporting racist policies and white supremacists who wanted to protect their gains in segregating federal offices.

The segregationist policies of the Wilson administration went beyond segregating federal offices. New regulations in 1914 requiring that civil service applicants attach a photograph to their applications had an immediate impact. The proportion of civil service jobs held by blacks dropped by 4–5 percent from 1914 to 1918. Federal segregation, according to Yellin "was a process of attrition: it involved grinding black clerks down until they were forced either to accept subordinate status or quit the government" (Yellin 2007: 153). As all inhibition against publicly expressing their racist sentiments at work evaporated, white employees felt free to ostracize and

intimidate their black colleagues. Burleson and McAdoo dismissed all black political appointees in the South, and gave southern supervisors the authority to fire or downgrade any black civil servants within the post office or treasury offices. "Of 31 federal patronage positions held by blacks at the beginning of the Wilson administration, only six remained by 1916," notes Dennis (2002: 95). Black federal employees now had few chances for pay raises or promotions, and in many cases experienced pay reductions and demotions. Racial purging, Yellin suggests, better explains the processes at work than racial segregation.

Accelerating plans to segregate the Treasury Department, McAdoo proposed going further than erecting partitions to separate the desks of white and black clerks working in the same office. Wilson approved his plan to assign all black clerks to the Registry Division, excluding them from employment in all other bureaus. This idea fell apart, however, when the Senate refused to confirm the appointment of an African American, Oklahoma Democrat Adam E. Patterson, as Registrar. Wilson did reappoint Judge Robert H. Terrell to the District of Columbia Municipal Court in 1914, but made no further black political appointments until the war.

Although Wilson issued no executive order, and none of these segregation plans were announced publicly, African-American leaders and white liberal reformers soon realized that a systematic effort to segregate the federal government was underway. Even Washington privately voiced disappointment in Wilson. "I have recently spent several days in Washington, and I have never seen the colored people so discouraged and bitter as they are at the present time," Washington wrote to Villard on August 10, 1913 (Link 1956: 248-9). The federal government, seen since Reconstruction as the "only source of hope in a hostile white society" for African Americans was now taking the lead to make official segregation a national, not just regional, practice (Sosna 1970: 35).

Wilson and the Black Vote

Part of black anger at these policies stemmed from the sense that Wilson, whom civil rights leaders had endorsed in the 1912 election, was betraying African-American voters. When President William Taft, the Republican incumbent running for re-election, and the Progressive candidate Theodore Roosevelt openly sought to accommodate southern whites during the campaign, civil rights leaders began to look elsewhere for a candidate to support. Civil rights activists convinced (or, as some would later say, deluded) themselves that Wilson would steer the Democratic Party in a new direction, infusing it with a progressive vision that included tackling the issue of racial injustice. Most scholars agree that this faith was misplaced. Gerstle believes that Wilson had already made known his true racial views in an 1897 speech delivered at the Hampton Institute, a school that endorsed vocational education as the path to gradual racial advancement. This speech contained the three principles that Wilson would henceforth follow. First, "segregation served the interests of white and black Americans" by quelling racial passions and allowing each racial group to make steady progress within the respective spheres. Second, blacks would need "infinite patience" to achieve their goal of social and political equality. Third, white men would determine the pace of change for race relations, not black civil rights activists

(Gerstle 2008: 106). Wilson believed these ideas mirrored those of Booker T. Washington, the founder of Tuskegee Institute, whose Atlanta Exposition Address two years earlier had urged accommodation with segregation to promote racial harmony and to facilitate African-American efforts to improve their economic standing in American society.

These words were forgotten, however, during a July 16, 1912 meeting Wilson had with civil rights leaders in the midst of the presidential campaign. During this conversation Wilson told two founding members of the NAACP Reverend J. Milton Waldron and William M. Trotter (who also founded the National Independent Political League, NIPL) "that if elected he intended to be a President of the whole nation - to know no white or black, no North, South, East or West" (Blumenthal 1963: 4). Subsequent publicity from this meeting highlighted that Wilson intended to protect black civil service jobs and speak out against lynching. A public letter written to Bishop Alexander Walters of the African Zion Church just before the election promised that African Americans "may count on me for absolute fair dealing and for everything which I could assist in advancing the interests of their race in the United States" (Gerstle 2008: 108). Walters worked hard to deliver black votes to Wilson, and as the most influential black figure in the Democratic Party expected political appointments for his allies from the new administration. Leaders as diverse as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois also endorsed Wilson. "Mr. Wilson is in favor of things which tend toward the uplift, improvement, and advancement of my people, and at his hands we have nothing to fear," Washington wrote (Link 1956: 244). Du Bois later claimed that he had withdrawn from the Socialist Party and urged blacks to shift their allegiance from the Republican Party because of the promises Wilson had made (Glazier 1973). So complete was civil rights leaders' faith that Wilson's New Freedom would usher in a new age of improved race relations that Oswald Garrison Villard, the grandson of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, and a crusading journalist in his own right as the publisher of the left-leaning *Nation* and another founding member of the NAACP, approached Wilson immediately after the election and pressed him to create an inter-racial National Race Committee to study and recommend improvements in the life and status of African Americans. Wilson ultimately rejected the idea as "unwise," a harbinger of the greater disappointments to come for the black community.

Unlike Link who views Wilson as backing away from previous pledges, Cooper sees Wilson's guarded language throughout these exchanges as intentionally vague. Patler suggests that the idea that Wilson as President would advocate on behalf of racial equality was "wishful thinking" on the part of civil rights activists. Wilson said enough to raise hopes, but made no concrete promises of any specific actions he might take to improve the status of African Americans. His aim was to avoid conflict, an opacity that allowed others to superimpose their own meanings on his platitudes. Civil rights leaders imbued Wilson's soothing rhetoric with an intent he never harbored. They soon realized their mistake.

The model of "national" leadership that Wilson cultivated may also have led to this misunderstanding between what Wilson meant and what civil rights activists heard. Although highly critical of Radical Republicans and Reconstruction policies, Wilson hailed Abraham Lincoln as a model president whom he tried to emulate. It "was men like this, men at once independent of and sympathetic to all sides, who

attained what Wilson considered a truly national sensibility, the sensibility essential to a genuinely democratic representation of the whole. Such leaders listened to 'all the voices of the nation' but they alone spoke for the integrity of the whole; they comprehended all the different parts without acting for any one of them," writes Skowronek (2006: 395). It was Wilson's job to listen, synthesize, and then decide what was best for the nation – not respond to the "special grievances" of any particular group.

In 1913 Trotter and the NIPL launched a massive petition signature campaign to protest federal segregation. The petition was reproduced in newspapers serving the black and white liberal communities with instructions for the reader to sign and send it back. Eventually 20,000 people from 36 states signed the petition which demanded that Wilson "reverse, prevent, and forbid any such movement by your bureau chiefs, in accord with your promise of fair, friendly, just, and Christian treatment of your Colored fellow citizens" (Patler 2004: 135). On November 6, 1913, Trotter and an NIPL delegation that included the anti-lynching crusader Ida Wells-Barnett presented Wilson with the petition, along with scores of condemning editorials, speeches and letters from prominent politicians, editors, and public figures. An annotated transcript of this White House meeting, including the statement that Trotter delivered and his subsequent conversation with Wilson is reprinted in Christine A. Lunardini, "Standing Firm: William Monroe Trotter's Meetings with Woodrow Wilson, 1913–1914." "Not since Frederick Douglass came to Washington to lobby President Johnson for black suffrage in 1866 had such a bold and demanding black figure stood in the White House face-to-face with a president," Patler asserts (Patler 2004: 137). Wilson feigned surprise to learn that bureau chiefs were officially segregating their offices, and promised to "do the right thing," evasive language that mollified his visitors but resulted in no concrete action on his part.

Trotter and the same delegation (now calling itself the National Independent Equal Rights League) came back nearly a year later on November 16, 1914, resolved this time to demand more than empty platitudes from Wilson. (An annotated transcript of this meeting is also included in Lunardini). Rather than seeking pledges for potential beneficial action, the visitors came demanding an explanation. "Have you a 'new freedom' for white Americans and a new slavery for your Afro-American fellow citizens? God forbid!" asked Trotter (Patler 2004: 178). Wilson at first employed his usual tactic of using vague, conciliatory language, commenting that however much he sympathized, it would take time for the nation's racial passions to cool. Separate but equal, he continued, benefitted blacks by allowing the two races to live harmoniously. Trotter would have none of it. He accused the President of allowing racial prejudice to dictate his administration's policies, adopting policies that humiliated and hurt African Americans and made it unlikely that blacks would support him in future elections. "In an era when it was deemed a prodigious favor for a distinguished black leader to be granted an audience with the president of the United States, Trotter's impertinence was almost beyond belief," David Levering Lewis notes (Lewis 1993: 511). Wilson lost his temper, an exchange recorded by White House stenographer Charles Swem. "Let me say this, if you will, that if this organization wishes to approach me again, it must choose another spokesman . . . You are an American citizen, as fully as American citizen as I am, but you are the only American citizen that has ever come into this office who has talked to me with a tone with a back-

ground of passion that was evident," he told Trotter. "You have spoiled the whole cause for which you came" (Cooper 2009: 270–1). Trotter apologized if Wilson mistook his earnestness for passion. Wilson's true feelings were now exposed, however, and he remained steadfast in asserting that segregation was not "degradation." Trotter left the meeting and recounted the details of Wilson's loss of temper to the waiting newspapermen, unknowingly violating an unwritten rule that prohibited speaking to the press about a private meeting with the President. To Trotter's satisfaction, press reports of his confrontational meeting with Wilson garnered additional national publicity for the anti-segregationist cause.

Historians interested primarily in civil rights history focus on this encounter as evidence that new leaders and strategies emerged during the federal agency segregation controversy. Lunardini credits the two meetings with catapulting "the issue into the national consciousness" with numerous articles in both the liberal and mainstream northern press criticizing Wilson for introducing Jim Crow into the federal government. Trotter, she feels, deserves some credit for forcing the administration to backtrack on efforts to develop formal, institutional segregation. Wilson's biographers concentrate on what these meetings reveal about the President's leadership style. Wilson confided his immediate regret over the confrontation with Trotter to his Secretary of the Navy, who recorded the President's remarks in his diary. Wilson mostly regretted losing his temper, and therefore needlessly creating political enemies. "Daniels, never raise an incident into an issue . . . I was damn fool enough to lose my temper and to point them to the door. What I ought to have done would have been to have listened, restrained my resentment, and, when they had finished, to have said to them that, of course their petition would receive consideration. They would have withdrawn quietly and no more would have been heard about the matter. But I lost my temper and played the fool" (Cooper 2009: 271). The lack of decorum troubled Wilson, not the message he delivered. Civil rights agitators like Trotter failed to understand the larger historical processes at work, Wilson felt. Agitation and confrontation were not simply examples of bad manners; they would do no good in hastening the gradual, evolutionary process of racial uplift. It was no accident that Wilson's display of temper came shortly after his wife Edith died in the White House. According to Cooper, "this was almost the only time when the shadow of grief may have clouded the intelligence and discipline he relied upon to guide him as president" (Cooper 2009: 271).

There was nonetheless a political cost to pay for ignoring the demands of civil rights activists, Link argues. Attempting to appease his southern supporters, Wilson antagonized his northern ones. Northern Democrats hoping to woo black voters permanently to the party, white northern liberals active in the civil rights movement, and the northern liberal press all criticized Wilson's presidential racial policies. Defending his actions to his white critics, Wilson articulated the same argument advanced by many fellow white Progressives who accepted the accelerating segregation of public life in the Jim Crow South as a method for restoring order and civility to public life. Segregation actually protected blacks by cooling the racial animosities that inevitably led to violence, Wilson claimed. "It is as far as possible from being a movement *against* the negroes. I sincerely believe it to be in their interest," Wilson wrote to Villard (Link 1956: 251). In the 1916 presidential campaign, Democrats began assembling several elements of a new political coalition, one that would solidify

in the mid-1930s and last through the mid-1960s. The Democrats set their sights on unifying southern Democrats, farmers and northern labor, but Wilson's dismal record on racial matters meant that no black leader endorsed him for re-election. It would take Franklin D. Roosevelt to draw in Catholics, immigrants, and African Americans to form the 1930s New Deal coalition. Wilson's actions taken in the name of protecting his "New Freedom," during his first administration did more than lose him the black vote in 1916. African-American disaffection for Wilson may also have unwittingly undermined the peace agenda of his second administration, argues Blumenthal. The Great Migration made black votes increasingly important in the 1918 Congressional elections, and their Republican-cast ballots contributed to the Democrats losing control of the House and Senate just as Wilson headed off to the Versailles Peace Conference.

The White House Viewing of *Birth of a Nation*

The White House screening of the 1915 silent film *Birth of a Nation* stands out as the other infamous episode of political blundering on racial matters in Wilson's first administration. The acclaimed director D.W. Griffith based his film on the novel by Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman* (1905). Both the novel and film narrated the South's redemption from the dark period of Reconstruction as a tale in which valiant, white-robed Klansmen saved the South from a litany of outrages committed by recently empowered blacks including political corruption, relentless social climbing, attacks on white women, and the desire to humiliate and subjugate southern white men. Setting the racial order aright involved the legitimate use of violence, something that northern whites eventually accepted after ambitious black politicians and sexually-predatory black soldiers began coveting their daughters. White supremacy, according to the film, became a rallying cry that allowed the South and North to reconcile after the Civil War.

Numerous scholars have focused on the film's historical inaccuracies, but Wilson's apparent endorsement of the silent movie suggested exactly the opposite. "It is like writing history with Lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true" – this widely circulated quote by Wilson made it seem that the nation's "historian-in-chief" vouched for the film's accuracy. Did Wilson ever utter the "writing history with Lightning" phrase? The conventional historical view accepts that Wilson said it, relying on accounts given in Dixon's unpublished memoir, "Southern Horizons," and interviews with Dixon's widow. More recently Wilson biographers have begun to doubt that Wilson spoke these words, viewing Dixon as a master publicist who fabricated this statement to gain maximum exposure for the film. Dixon later bragged about taking advantage of a past acquaintance with Wilson from their student days together at Johns Hopkins to arrange the White House screening, hiding "the real purpose of my film" and instead telling the President that Dixon "would show him the birth of a new art" (Cooper 2009: 272). Cooper points out that no written accounts exist of Wilson's exact remarks during the screening. Additionally, a first-hand account (given 62 years later) by the last living person in attendance claimed "the president did not seem to pay much attention to the movie and left when it was over without saying a word" (Cooper 2009: 272). Gerstle also doubts that Wilson

made the lightening comment, agreeing with Cooper's conclusion that the whole affair "made his racial views look worse than they were" since Wilson never glorified the Klan like Dixon and Griffith.

We may never resolve the dispute over whether Wilson uttered this phrase. We do know, however, that "Wilson did like the film and had written Griffith in March 1915 to congratulate him on 'a splendid production'" (Gerstle 2008: 121). It is also clear that Wilson never repudiated the quote, rejecting advice from his private secretary Joseph P. Tumulty that he publicly deny having ever endorsed the historical accuracy of the film. When faced with the option of confirming blacks' claims that the film presented a racially distorted view of history or allowing Griffiths and Dixon to continue misquoting him, the President opted to remain silent. Wilson's silence during the *Birth of a Nation* controversy, much like his silence during the segregated federal offices tumult, proved a boon to white supremacists. Where Cooper sees another lapse of judgment, Patler sees a deliberate attempt to avoid giving civil rights activists any confirmation that they had legitimate reason for complaint.

Historians agree about the immediate political consequences of this officially condoned misreading of history. The film's hazy, romantic portrait of the Ku Klux Klan contributed to the group's resurgence as a national organization that drew members from both the north and south. The film's racist message, however, also offered the nascent NAACP a cause to rally civil rights activists and white liberals around, offering additional evidence beyond new segregated federal offices that race relations were deteriorating. The subsequent protests, which included efforts to organize boycotts and demand that censors cut-out the most egregious scenes, did little to prevent white Americans from viewing the original film. The outcry may have even helped the film by sparking additional curiosity among the movie-viewing public to view the controversial film for themselves. But the organizational networks, emergence of local leaders, and experience in publicizing their objections nationally were all valuable for an emerging civil rights movement.

Dennis and Skowronek frame the question differently. Rather than focusing on how Wilson handled the *Birth of a Nation* controversy, they analyze Wilson's pre-presidential writings on Reconstruction and find his views nearly identical to the narrative presented in the film. As one of the nation's most respected historians, "Wilson provided a crucial link between an imagined past marred by the folly of Reconstruction and a progressive future brightened, at least for whites, by racial exclusion" (Dennis 2002: 78). Rather than viewing slavery as a racially repressive institution, Wilson saw plantation owners as benevolent caretakers instilling discipline and a valuable work ethic in their black laborers. Wilson defended the black codes against Radical Republican criticism that these legal restrictions on the employment, movement, and civil rights of recently freed slaves reinstated a de-facto slave system. Caste into freedom "unpracticed in liberty, unschooled in self-control, never sobered by the discipline of self-support . . . bewildered and without leaders, and yet insolent and aggressive, sick of work, covetous of pleasure," recently freed slaves hurt both themselves and the South, Wilson wrote (quoted in Dennis 2002: 80). Radical Republicans subjected the South to a period of economic chaos and political corruption until the end of Reconstruction in 1877 ended this "dark chapter of history" (Dennis 2002: 82). Wilson's views of the Ku Klux Klan also corresponded to the interpretation presented in *Birth of a Nation*. Wilson, Dennis writes, believed that

“objectionable as some of their methods may have been, the Ku Klux Klan had merely responded to conditions of social upheaval that gave power to ‘outside adventurers’ and ‘white men without honor’” (Dennis 2002: 85). Underscoring the compatibility between the film’s story and Wilson’s historical interpretations, Griffith incorporated footnotes from Wilson’s history of the United States to authenticate the movie’s anecdotes of black misdeeds during Reconstruction (Cripps 1963).

The Civil Rights Movement Fights Back

Wilson biographers universally lament his weak leadership on racial matters, but scholars remain divided on the ultimate impact of his racial policies. Link, Blumenthal, and Wolgemuth view these policies as a severe setback for African Americans. “Loss of federal offices, anti-Negro bills in Congress by the score, increases in lynching of Negroes, the introduction of segregation into federal departments – these and other actions pointed to a marked decrease in Negro status,” Wolgemuth concludes (Wolgemuth 1958: 173). Yellin agrees that Wilsonian racial policies meant long-term economic loss for African Americans who would not regain their foothold in civil service jobs offering a decent income and benefits until the 1960s. The 1919 race riot that tore through Washington, DC served as a symbol for the losses this community suffered while Wilson was in office, damage never completely undone. Lentz-Smith emphasizes the negative repercussions by arguing that Wilson’s endorsement of segregation in the federal government encouraged cities to push ahead with residential segregation laws and fueled national support for the 1915 invasion of Haiti where the United States “installed a white supremacist regime on the island” (Lentz-Smith 2009: 34).

Frustrated with Wilson biographers who dutifully noted that race relations was a “blemish” on Wilson’s presidency but then quickly moved on to catalog his other domestic and international accomplishments, Patler offered the first book-length account of federal segregationist policies during the Wilson administration. More importantly, he spent less time trying to untangle the reasons for Wilson’s behavior and more on the collective protest by African Americans and white civil rights activists. The adoption of Jim Crow practices within the federal government action galvanized northern-based civil rights activists, he argued. Mobilizing through letter-writing campaigns, petitions, and mass demonstrations, Trotter’s National Independent Political League and the fledgling National Association for Colored People expanded both their membership and influence. Patler cites this as an important period in the civil rights movement because black leaders with strong personalities, ambitions, and competing ideological visions came together to forge a working coalition. This experience of collective action, he argues, would prove invaluable as the movement matured.

Sosna warns against reading too much into these organized protests. The racially hostile climate of the Wilson years forced civil rights organizations to devote their limited resources to fighting against segregation in federal offices and the racial demagoguery of *Birth of a Nation* instead of fighting lynching and disenfranchisement, he argues. Newly emboldened southern congressmen introduced a host of bills (which never became law) to segregate all federal offices and prohibit blacks from

joining the armed services. Besides sucking up the time and energy of civil rights activists, congressional debates over these proposed laws gave racist legislators a national forum for airing their racial views. For these reasons, Sosna argued, “though the proscriptive bills never became laws, it is misleading to interpret their defeat as racial victories” (Sosna 1970: 38).

The entry of the United States into World War I accelerated both the trend towards worsening racial violence and new militancy within the civil rights movement. Maintaining racial peace through segregation remained the rule in the wartime military which inducted nearly 400,000 black soldiers (mostly conscripts) into a strictly segregated army. Black labor was essential for the nation’s economic mobilization in both the rural south and industrial north. The migration of over 500,000 black southern laborers to the North led to several violent racial clashes, the most deadly occurring in East St Louis in July, 1917, and in Chicago and Washington, DC, in 1919. Returning black soldiers, angry about the racial discrimination they encountered within the wartime army, helped infuse these latter two riots with the ethos of “fighting back” – a notion that directly refuted Wilson’s expectation of “infinite patience” on the part of African Americans.

Recent scholarly work on the African-American wartime experience interprets this era as a transformative moment in the civil rights movement, a time when the black community acquired not just the motivation but also the means for launching assaults on Jim Crow (Keene 2005; Lentz-Smith 2009; Williams 2010). In *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I*, Lentz-Smith argues that the war offered many black soldiers a chance to escape the confines of their civilian lives and the “place” assigned to them in the rigid Jim Crow system. Lentz-Smith uses the concept of place extremely well, emphasizing that military service overseas gave soldiers a space “between domestic realities and their international imaginations where they could forge new identities, new nationalisms, and new pictures of themselves” as men (Lentz-Smith 2009: 79). My work on African-American soldiers explores collective protests staged by black soldiers (petition-writing, organized disobedience, work slowdowns, etc.), investigating why the military environment proved so conducive to collective action by young African-American men. Thrust together from morning to night, exposed to an army culture that placed a premium on masculinity, immersed in the wartime rhetoric of democracy, led by educated noncommissioned and commissioned officers well-versed in the goals of the civil rights movement – these factors created ideal conditions for transforming individual complaints and frustrations into collective action. Chad Williams brings to light both the extent of postwar inter-racial violence and the tremendous amount of veteran political activism within the African-American community. Black veteran postwar political activism, although often short-lived, nonetheless engaged thousands of returning servicemen and their families in the civil rights cause. Together these works reveal how the war invested the modern civil rights movement with new members, leaders, strategies, and goals.

The war proved less influential in changing Wilson’s racial views. Wilson made one inquiry to his Attorney General about whether or not the federal government should intervene to quell tensions in East St Louis, and accepted the negative response without question. A month later black regular army soldiers took the streets in Houston following the shooting of a comrade by a white policeman. When order was restored, 15 whites and three blacks had died. The Secretary of the Navy noted

Wilson's comments on the Houston tragedy in his personal diary: "Race prejudice. Fight in Houston, Texas. Negro in uniform wants the whole sidewalk" (Cooper 2009: 408). These words succinctly encapsulated Wilson's unwavering opposition to the civil rights movement. The army immediately executed 13 African-American soldiers, although organized protests by civil rights organizations eventually forced Wilson to commute the death sentences of others.

When unrest in the black community threatened to undermine the war effort, Wilson finally acceded to activists' request that he publicly denounce lynching. In this address he criticized mob violence, expressing sentiments in keeping with his previous abhorrence of social unrest. "Wilson's denunciation of lynching deplored the passion, disorder, and sullied international image of white Americans rather than injury, horror, and death of black Americans," Cooper concludes (Cooper 2009: 410). Wilson's opposition to racial passions from any quarter, whether from violent white supremacists or militant civil rights activists, remained consistent throughout his presidency.

Wilson sailed to France to negotiate the terms of the Versailles Treaty with the same racial views he had held when first assuming office. Even after all of the disappointment suffered during Wilson's two terms in office, Wilson's stirring rhetoric on the principle of self-determination and political liberty on the eve of the peace treaty still managed to inspire several black leaders, including Du Bois and Trotter, to seek audiences with him in Paris, overtures that Wilson once again rebuked. "African Americans found themselves in a position similar to Vietnamese, Egyptians and other people of color who attempted to journey to Paris to bend Wilson's ear: they seemed to be shouting into the wind," Lentz-Smith concludes (Lentz-Smith 2009: 145).

Conclusion

Scholarly interest in racial policies and civil rights activism during Wilson's presidency shows no sign of abating. These works reveal that Wilson's racial policies were a resounding failure, from both his standpoint and from the vantage point of the post-Jim Crow era. The introduction of segregation within the federal government did not prevent racial riots or a spike in lynching during the Wilson presidency. Federal Jim Crow policies instead undercut the emerging black middle-class, exposing the notion of gradual uplift through education and economic attainment for what it was: a myth. Black civil rights activists refused to demonstrate "infinite patience" or let white men dictate the pace of change. New integrationist civil rights organizations such as the NAACP thrived as they mobilized to fight against Wilsonian racial policies, as did the Pan-African oriented Universal Negro Improvement Association founded by Jamaican immigrant Marcus Garvey. African-American soldiers encountered stifling racial prejudice within the armed forces during World War I, but living overseas in a more racially tolerant France along with the migration of African-American civilians north drew additional adherents to the civil rights movement. Quite inadvertently Wilson's racial policies instigated an important transformative moment in the modern civil rights movement, one that Wilson might have led had he been willing to extend his democratic vision of self-government and social justice to African Americans. Rather than examining this period in isolation, scholars of

African-American history have begun linking the Wilson years to the "long civil rights movement," an interpretative paradigm that underscores the transformative importance of this moment. Gerstle and Skowronek suggest that Wilson's racial policies had a similarly dramatic impact on the future direction of liberal reform politics, and this claim deserves further attention by scholars. Often considered a blemish, rather than a defining characteristic of his legacy, more investigation into the reverberations of Wilson's racial policies for the nation could potentially cause scholars to re-consider how they incorporate racial matters into their narrative of the Wilson presidency.

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