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## 4. Race and Nation in the Thought and Politics of Woodrow Wilson

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In both the domestic and international arenas, Woodrow Wilson stands as one of the giants of American history. While president, he became a key architect of modern liberalism. Internationally, he elaborated an ambitious and compelling vision of a world without war, where every people would have the right to independent statehood and self-governance. We have known for some time that millions of people in France and Italy turned out to greet Wilson when he arrived in Europe in 1918 to begin fashioning the international institutions that would make his vision a reality. Now we are learning that millions beyond Europe, in places such as colonial India and war-torn China, were similarly inspired. Wilson's dream of a world transformed flamed out in 1919 and 1920. Nevertheless, it remains the case that no other American president has ever sparked the breadth or intensity of international optimism and adulation that Wilson did when he sailed to Europe in 1918 to establish a new kind of world order.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, 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

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the system of international states. He was deeply racist in his thought and politics, and apparently he was comfortable with being so.

Much has been written about Wilson's racial attitudes. One popular school of thought, associated with Arthur S. Link, grounds his racism in his white southern heritage. In this view, virtually no white southerners of Wilson's time were prepared to regard blacks as their equals, with the same claims as whites on the promise of American life—liberty, equality, and opportunity. If they could not overturn two results of the Civil War—the defeat of the Confederacy and the destruction of slavery—white southerners still believed that they could return blacks to a subordinate and servile position vis-à-vis whites. Indeed, the years of the South's reintegration into the nation, 1890–1925, were also the years when segregation became legal, blacks were disenfranchised in the southern states, lynchings soared to all-time highs, and numerous states outlawed interracial marriage.<sup>2</sup>

Wilson was not a rabid white supremacist who condoned or celebrated lynchings and other forms of violence designed to terrorize blacks and keep them in their place. His sympathies were drawn instead to the moderate white, elite southerners who viewed segregation as a progressive arrangement that upheld social peace by keeping whites and blacks at a safe distance from each other. Still, these moderates never put blacks on the same plane as whites, viewing the former as an inferior population of questionable worth as Americans, and expecting them to remain so for a very long time. Thus, when Wilson assumed the presidency in 1913 and appointed to his Cabinet more white southerners than had served in any other presidential Cabinet since before the Civil War, it hardly seems surprising that his administration moved quickly to resegregate the federal civil service. As Link remarked long ago, Wilson “was characteristically a Southerner in his attitude toward the Negro.”<sup>3</sup>

In many respects, Wilson was a man of his region and his time. He was born in Staunton, Virginia, in 1856, and he lived his first eighteen years in Augusta, Georgia, and Columbia, South Carolina, where his father, Dr. Joseph Ruggles Wilson, was first minister of the First Presbyterian Church (Augusta) and then a professor at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary (Columbia). When war broke out in 1861, Joseph cast his lot with the Confederacy and, in his personal act of secession, helped to found the Southern Presbyterian Church that broke away from the national church that same year. Later, the church where he was the minister was used by the Confederate army as a military hospital and a stockade. When the family moved to Columbia after the war had ended, it encountered a city still devastated by General William Sherman's march to the sea in 1865.

Woodrow's boyhood, then, was thoroughly intertwined with the South at war. He developed deep attachments to the culture and pride of the South on the one hand while being extensively exposed to the destructiveness and suffering caused by war on the other. Though his family never owned slaves, it relied for household labor on black servants both before and after the Civil War. The South's culture, race relations, and devastation from war left lasting impressions on him.<sup>4</sup>

However, we cannot understand Woodrow entirely in terms of his residence in and experience of the South. His family also had strong northern roots. His father had lived in Ohio for twenty-nine years before coming to Virginia. Woodrow's six Wilson uncles in Ohio, Iowa, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and New York were Republicans, opposed to slavery, and Unionist. Several of them were high-ranking officers in the Union Army. Their brother Joseph's ardent Confederate sympathies did not sit well with them.<sup>5</sup>

We do not know much about Woodrow's attraction to the northern branch of his family. We do know, however, that once Woodrow earned his doctorate in political science from Johns Hopkins University, he chose three northern towns as the places in which to ply his professional trade: Middletown, Connecticut; Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania; and Princeton, New Jersey. Moreover, one of his earliest essays, written when he was at the University of Virginia Law School from 1879 to 1882, suggests that both the South and the North exerted pulls on him. “Because I love the South,” he wrote, “I rejoice in the failure of the Confederacy. . . . Even the damnable cruelty and folly of Reconstruction was to be preferred to helpless independence.”<sup>6</sup> The love of the South comes first in this formulation. But not many sons of the South in the late nineteenth century would have expressed joy about the Confederacy's collapse. Wilson did so because another love competed in his mind with his love of the South, and that was a love of what northerners called the Union, and what Wilson, the southerner, called the nation: a country stretching from the Atlantic in the East to the Pacific in the West, from Canada in the North to the Gulf of Mexico in the South. Nothing could be allowed to violate the integrity of this nation; nothing could be allowed to divide the American people to the point where they would kill each other and tear the nation apart—not slavery, states' rights, or regional pride. The place of the South was in the nation, not apart from it. Wilson parroted fully of Abraham Lincoln's argument that the claims of the nation on the loyalties of all Americans were supreme and inviolable.

Biographers of Wilson like to emphasize the sea changes he underwent during his career, from professor to politician, from conservative to progressive, from a student of Congress to an advocate of world parliaments.<sup>7</sup> But he never

strayed from the love of the American nation that appeared in his earliest writings in the 1870s and 1880s. He viewed secession as a foolish and illegitimate act.<sup>8</sup> He believed that an economic system grounded in slavery could never have held its own against the free labor economic system of the North. Moreover, Wilson liked to imagine a future in which the South would become like the North in its commitment to free labor, industry, immigration, and economic dynamism. This stance in the 1880s and 1890s marked him as a man of the New South. But this appellation does not quite get it right, for Wilson saw himself 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. Wilson's love of nation, and his insistence on the priority of the nation over the states, drew on Unionist and even Republican sentiments. Thus we can begin to see that descriptions of him as simply a white southern man of his time do not quite work. We cannot assume that we can understand everything about him by referring to his identity as a white southerner. Indeed, Wilson developed a dynamic notion of American nationality that celebrated America both for the varieties of its peoples and for its ability to fuse the best traits of each people into one culture. This view is not one we commonly associate with white southerners of Wilson's era.

That Wilson advanced a bold and inclusive theory of American nationality makes his failure to find a place in this theory for blacks all the more consequential. Few were as perturbed by his inflexibility on this matter as were leaders of the African American community. They were drawn to Wilson by the power, daring, and apparently liberality of the man's political imagination. And though they were repeatedly disappointed by him, they kept on coming back to him, hoping against hope that this man who seemed to promise America and the world so much would embrace the cause of African American equality. He never would.

### Making the American Nation

Trained as a political scientist in the 1870s and 1880s, Woodrow Wilson turned his energies to historical writing in the 1890s, publishing *Division and Reunion* in 1893 and the multi-volume *History of the American People* in 1902.<sup>9</sup> Though both works aimed to be comprehensive in their coverage of politics and society in American history, they also were organized around a central theme: the making of the American nation. More particularly, Wilson wanted to tell the story of how all the people who settled or who had been born in America came to see themselves as part of one nation, one economic system, "knit and united for a

common history of achievement."<sup>10</sup> Familiar figures played their parts in Wilson's rendition of America's rise: the intrepid English colonizers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who explored the New World; the brave frontiersmen of the eighteenth century who cleared the land of Indians and began the westward push; and that special generation of Founders who engineered America's break with Britain and then devised a magnificent Constitution. But, in Wilson's telling, none of these groups and individuals did enough to give Americans the common consciousness, the unity of thought and feeling, that were so essential to successful nationhood. That unity and consciousness were a product of three seminal nineteenth-century events: First, northerners developed a new theory of nationality in response to the nullification crisis of 1830 and the emerging southern doctrine of states' rights, making national allegiance paramount and casting secession from the Union as illegitimate.<sup>11</sup> Second, the market revolution that had burst forth in the 1820s and 1830s was rendering America, almost overnight, a country "bound together by railway and telegraph, busy with enterprises which no State or section could imprison within local boundaries, quick and various, as in the old days, but now at last conscious of its unity and its organic integrity."<sup>12</sup>

The third factor promoting nationalism was the ordeal of secession, war, and Southern defeat. From Wilson's nationalist perspective, the Civil War was both inevitable and necessary. It was inevitable because the leaders of the white South, the plantation owners who also dominated the region's political class, were too proud to give up their way of life without a fight; it was necessary because "economic and social difference between the states" had grown so large that it "threatened to become permanent, standing forever in the way of homogeneous national life."<sup>13</sup> Thus, the Civil War, despite the horrendous suffering it caused, was a positive development, for it had allowed American nationalism to flourish to a degree it had never previously achieved. As he assessed the significance of the war for American nationality, Wilson could barely contain his enthusiasm. "National consciousness," he wrote, had been "disguised, uncertain, latent until that day of sudden rally and call to arms." Now it was "cried wide awake by the voices of battle, and acted like a passion . . . in the conduct of affairs. All things took their hue and subtle transformation from it. . . . The stage was cleared for the creation of a new nation."<sup>14</sup> And when the South was finally defeated and then welcomed back into the Union in 1877, America finally stood upon the threshold of greatness. A hundred years after the country's birth, Wilson declared, the "national spirit was aroused and conscious now at last of its strength."<sup>15</sup>

Wilson's celebration of national strength and unity was not unusual among those in the United States and elsewhere who had taken upon themselves the task of writing the history of their nations. Indeed, history as a discipline arose to tell the story of nations' rise, and most members of this early generation of historians in the United States and Europe (of which Wilson was a member) wrote about their nations in similarly romantic and teleological ways, as though the whole point of history was to reveal the paths their countries pursued to national consolidation and distinction. It was generally assumed by these late-nineteenth-century scholars, as Eric Hobsbawm shrewdly pointed out some years ago, that the great nations were those that were large in territory and population, and robust in their economic activity.<sup>16</sup> Equally important was an emphasis on national homogeneity in thought and feeling. Indeed, in the fixation on homogeneity, we can detect the fear everywhere driving nationalists: that the very real heterogeneity within every nation's borders put these entities at chronic risk of cultural division and political failure.<sup>17</sup>

Wilson partook fully of this obsession with homogeneity, a word that recurs again and again in his writing.<sup>18</sup> In his telling, the constitutional polity to which America aspired, one that prized individual freedom and self-government, required self-discipline, maturity, and virtue from its citizens. Drawing on conservative, even Burkean, notions of community, Wilson argued that these characteristics would be strongest among people who already possessed "a distinct consciousness of common ties and interests, a common manner and standard of life and conduct, and a practiced habit of union and concerted action in whatever affected it as a whole." Individuals in cohesive communities would be better able to discern their common purpose and sacrifice or restrain their own interests at critical moments for the sake of the general welfare and the rule of law. The conflict and friction that were endemic features of human social interactions could thus be kept within bounds. People would then be "free" to pursue their lives in relative independence, and government could be both effective and unobtrusive.<sup>19</sup>

There would seem to be a basic contradiction between Wilson's political theory, which posited that only settled and homogeneous societies could achieve effective self-government, and the historical reality of America, which, as a result of immigration, seemed to be perpetually composed of diverse groups of newcomers. Wilson's theory might have led him, by the 1890s, to join the many conservatives, South and North, who wanted to limit full citizenship to those who were descended from the country's original Anglo-Saxon core. But he would meet these conservatives only halfway; he fully sympathized with their desire to bar non-Europeans, most notably blacks, from the

American polity, but he rejected their desire to bar further immigration from the non-Anglo-Saxon parts of Europe or to treat those southern and eastern Europeans already in the United States as second-class citizens.

Wilson's pro-European immigrant stance may have been rooted in the immigrant character of his own family. Other than Andrew Jackson, no other president possessed an immigrant background as proximate as that of Wilson. His mother, née Janet E. Woodrow, had been born in England in 1826 to Scottish parents, the Reverend Thomas and Marion Woodrow. The entire Woodrow family, including the parents, Janet, and her six siblings, immigrated to New York in 1836 and soon after moved on to Ohio. Wilson's paternal grandfather, James Wilson, was a Scots-Irish immigrant from Northern Ireland, as was his paternal grandmother, who became Mrs. Margaretta Wilson while the two still lived on the Emerald Isle. The married couple emigrated to Philadelphia when they were young, also moving on to Ohio, where they raised eight children.<sup>20</sup> Wilson developed a lifelong pride in the contributions of the Scots, the Scots-Irish, and the Celts to American democracy and nationality. Wilson might have drawn a sharp line between the contributions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century immigrants from the British Isles and Germany who had come at earlier moments in American history and those from eastern and southern Europe who began arriving in such large numbers in the 1880s and 1890s. On at least one occasion, he did just that. But his conviction about the centrality of immigrants to the making of America usually overcame whatever nativist reflexes he possessed. Indeed, his position on immigration was progressive for a man of his regional and class background.

Wilson believed, on the one hand, that European immigrants often became more ardently patriotic than the native born, and thus they revived American ideas during periods of nationalist languor. On the other hand, he argued that America's strength emerged from the ability of different strains of European immigrants to fuse their cultures and values together and produce a new mold. The homogeneity that Wilson so valued was the product, by his own account, of periodic episodes of cultural renewal, with diversification of the population through immigration leading to new and ever stronger fusions. He never used the word "hybridity" to describe this second process, and he only embraced the notion of America as a "melting pot" in the twentieth century. But his recognition of the centrality of this process to the making of America is apparent in his earliest historical writings and in his coverage of the earliest periods of American history.

In granting immigrants a central role in the making of the American nation, Wilson endowed his previously static and conservative theory of nationhood

with a dynamic and progressive quality. His contemplation of the issues of diversity in America helped him to imagine how a League of Nations might work—how, in other words, a world of culturally different nations might successfully support an international government grounded in shared constitutional principles and a common political culture. And it makes his refusal to allow non-Europeans to participate in these processes of cultural interpenetration and fusion all the more significant, consequential, and, in the eyes of his African American contemporaries, infuriating. For these contemporaries believed they had found in Wilson not an unthinking white southerner but a bold thinker who would fashion an American nation where blacks would finally be granted their full rights.

Wilson laced his argument about how America emerged from the melding or hybridization of different European peoples throughout the pages of his *History of the American People*. In describing the English seamen of the sixteenth century, he noted how many of them came from Devonshire in southwest England, “in the midst of that group of counties . . . in which Saxon mastery did least to destroy or drive out the old Celtic population.” The “sense of mystery and . . . ardor of imagination” that he associated with the Celts thus “enriched the sober Saxon mind,” and it was this mixture of imagination and sobriety that made the English explorers such a clever, diligent, and successful group.<sup>21</sup> In describing the settlement of British North America, Wilson invariably praised those colonies where the most extensive mixtures of European peoples had occurred: Pennsylvania in the seventeenth century, where the French, Dutch, Swedes, Germans, Finns, and Scots-Irish mixed with the English; Massachusetts in the eighteenth century, where the arrival of the Scots-Irish allowed it to transcend its pinched Puritan character; South Carolina, where the settlements of “Scots-Irish, Huguenots, and Swiss Palatinate Germans” made the colony as diverse as Pennsylvania and New York; and Georgia, where Wilson admired the mixing of “Italians skilled in silk culture,” “sober German Protestants,” and “clansmen from the Scottish Highlands.”<sup>22</sup>

Even the arrival of hundreds of thousands of impoverished Irish Catholics in the early nineteenth century, which triggered the first major nativist movement in American history, did not elicit anti-immigrant comments from Wilson. There is barely a trace of anti-Catholicism in his writings, and though he recognized the social strains that this massive immigrant wave placed on American institutions, he insisted on seeing it in positive terms. The nation-building prowess of Jacksonian America, he believed, rested in critical ways on the “great tide of immigration” that washed over the country in the antebellum years.<sup>23</sup>

Wilson did succumb briefly to the widespread prejudice expressed against the new immigrants of the 1890s, those from eastern and southern Europe. In one notorious passage in the last volume of his *History of the American People*, he demeaned the new immigrants as men coming out “of the lowest class from the south of Italy and men of the meaner sort of Hungary and Poland, men out of the ranks where there was neither skill nor intelligence.” It was “as if the countries of the south of Europe were disburdening themselves of the more sordid and hapless elements of their population; and they came in numbers which increased from year to year.”<sup>24</sup> He would pay dearly for having published this passage, at no time more so than in the election of 1912, when his Progressive Party opponents distributed the offending statement to Poles, Italians, and Hungarians in the major industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest, creating an uproar in those communities.<sup>25</sup>

Wilson was compelled to spend much more time than he wished writing letters to irate members of these immigrant groups, trying to persuade them that this passage was an aberration.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, he was right to do so, and his speeches to immigrant groups once he became president reveal the depths of his appreciation for the contributions that all European immigrants had made to the United States and his belief that their arrival had invariably invigorated and renewed American democracy and freedom. In a July Fourth oration given in Philadelphia in 1914, he declared: “We opened our gate to the world and said: ‘Let all men who wish to be free come to us and they will be welcome.’ We said, ‘This independence of ours is not a selfish thing for our own exclusive private use. It is for everybody to whom we can find the means of extending it.’”<sup>27</sup>

Also, in 1915, in a speech to immigrants who had just been sworn in as American citizens, Wilson expressed his appreciation to them for bringing to America a regard for patriotic ideals that often exceeded that of the native born; in the process, they had made themselves a vital source of American democratic renewal. “This is the only country in the world,” he exclaimed, that experiences a “constant and repeated rebirth,” and the credit went to the “great bodies of strong men and forward-looking women out of other lands” who decided to cast their lot with America.<sup>28</sup> That same year, he reprimanded a Daughters of the American Revolution audience clamoring for immigration restriction: “Some of the best stuff of America has come out of foreign lands, and some of the best stuff in America is in the men who are naturalized citizens of the United States.”<sup>29</sup> These are the kinds of sentiments that twice led him to veto immigration restriction bills.<sup>30</sup>

Wilson expected twentieth-century immigrants, like the ones who had come before them, to Americanize. “We have brought out of the stocks of all the world all the best impulses and have appropriated them and Americanized and translated

them into the glory and majesty of a great country," he declared in 1914.<sup>31</sup> He was not as intolerant of Old World cultures as was his Progressive rival, Theodore Roosevelt. Wilson said: "I certainly would not be one even to suggest that a man cease to love the home of his birth and the nation of his origin—these things are very sacred and ought not to put out of our hearts." Nevertheless, he expected immigrants to become "in every respect and with every purpose of your will thorough Americans."<sup>32</sup> He uttered those words in 1915, before the time when war pressures would impel him and his administration to insist rigidly on "100 percent Americanism." The excesses of this campaign for conformity were real, but they should not distract us from understanding the durability of Wilson's conviction that immigrants were a dynamic, essential force in the making of the American nation and American democracy.<sup>33</sup> At times, he even went so far as to suggest that a democratic community without sources of foreign replenishment would lose its ardor for liberty and freedom. As he asserted in 1915, "a nation that is not constantly renewed out of new sources is apt to have the narrowness and prejudice of a family; whereas, America has this consciousness, that on all sides it touches hearts with all the nations of mankind."<sup>34</sup> Here we see him beginning to build the bridge in his own thought from America as a pacific home to a wide array of immigrant groups to a world where countless nations could live together in peace, governed by the rule of law. His belief that diversity was a currency that, in America, had facilitated new and higher forms of hybridized national consciousness helped to nurture in him a hope that an international diversity of national identities and interests could be similarly transformed into a common global consciousness.

This is not a man easily passed off as just another white southerner, as a man whose entire body of thought was shaped by the region where he had been born and by the regional experience of slavery, secession, and war. 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. This is not just my judgment but also the judgment that his African American contemporaries made as a result of their encounters with him during his presidency. But before we consider their views, we need to explore Wilson's racial attitudes.

### Race and Nation

What immediately strikes a reader of Woodrow Wilson's *History of the American People* is the dissimilarity between his treatment of European immigrants and

his treatment of African immigrants and their descendants. The curiosity and empathy that are so central to his discussion of Europeans is missing from his discussion of African Americans. He does not seem to regard them as suitable citizens for America's cultural or political community. Nowhere does he allow them to play a positive role in fashioning the American nation, let alone enter the assimilatory mainstream that was creating hybridized Americans. He grounded his negative view of slavery almost entirely in his conviction that it was holding the white South back economically and sundering the white nation into two incompatible parts, not that it was morally wrong for some humans to hold others in bondage. To the contrary, he found virtue in the system of plantation slavery. "There was almost always moderation," he wrote, "a firm but not unkindly discipline, a real care shown for their [the slaves'] comfort and welfare." Masters taught their slaves handicrafts and meted out justice fairly, he claimed. They treated their domestic slaves with "affection and indulgence" and did everything they could to avoid breaking up slave families. They behaved responsibly and dutifully toward field slaves, even though the latter were "indolent" and "like a huge family of shiftless children" who often did not earn their keep. Where the masters managed their plantations, in other words, slavery proved to be, in his view, a humane system.<sup>35</sup>

That African Americans may have suffered, either materially or psychologically, from chattel slavery is not a thought to which Wilson gives expression. Once he moves into the history of Reconstruction (1865–1877), his analysis is driven alternately by his contempt for African Americans and their aspirations to be free and self-governing and by anger at northern whites who actually believed that the South and America could be reconstructed by putting "the white men of the South . . . under the Negroes' heels."<sup>36</sup> The freedmen, he wrote, "had the easy faith, the simplicity, the idle hopes, the inexperience of children. Their masterless, homeless freedom made them the more pitiable, the more dependent, because under slavery they had been shielded, the weak and incompetent with the strong and capable." Given their limits, it was hardly surprising that many swelled the ranks of "vagrants, looking for pleasure and gratuitous fortune." Nor was it surprising that the freedmen became easy targets for carpetbaggers "swarming out of the North" to fatten their wallets on southern misfortune. These northern adventurers, Wilson wrote, "became the new masters of the blacks," who could not, of course, become their own masters. They (the carpetbaggers) "gained the confidence of the Negroes, obtained for themselves the most lucrative offices, and lived upon the public treasury."<sup>37</sup> In small southern towns, freedmen themselves became the officeholders, even though they were



“men who could not so much as write their names and who knew none of the uses of authority except its insolence.” In these towns, Wilson intoned, the “policy of the [Republican] congressional leaders wrought its own perfect work of fear, demoralization, disgust, and social revolution” and brought the South to the edge of ruin.<sup>38</sup> For him, the demoralization caused by Reconstruction seemed to outweigh what slavery itself had produced.

To a student of American history, Wilson’s account of Reconstruction’s “horrors” hardly constitutes a surprise. The tale of nefarious northern opportunists allying with credulous southern freedmen to prostrate the white South had become, by the early twentieth century, the dominant view of Reconstruction not just in the South but throughout the country.<sup>39</sup> It was used to justify the extreme measures that whites in the South had used to regain their power, extol the virtues of white supremacy, and argue for the return of African Americans to conditions of servitude. It would take the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s to overturn the authority of this interpretation and allow historians to explore the period with fresh ideas and questions. Today, as a result, we recognize this earlier view of Reconstruction for what it was: a racist exercise meant to justify the white South’s quest to regain its power and to shape the white supremacist terms under which it would be reunited with the rest of the nation. This racism informed public opinion throughout the country when Wilson was writing his history of America. As I have argued elsewhere, the tradition of racial nationalism, of viewing the United States as a nation suitable only for people of white European descent, was growing stronger in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, not weaker. Thus Wilson’s attempt to imagine an American nation in which blacks had no place was not extreme for the time. Few white readers of his work would have challenged him on the veracity or integrity of his interpretation.<sup>40</sup>

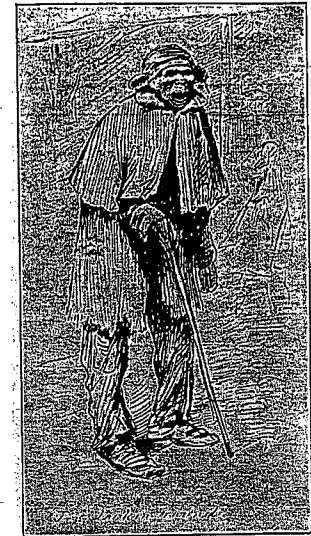
In his *History of the American People*, Wilson occasionally seems to group blacks with the animal world. A drawing of an aged African American man depicts him with monkey features. Underneath the drawing, this caption appears: “A Superannuated Darky in Richmond Virginia.”<sup>41</sup> (See illustration on next page.) Wilson used the term “darkey” (or “darker”) freely and publicly. As late as 1910, when campaigning for the New Jersey governorship, he organized his comments to a group of more than one thousand supporters around the parable of an “old darkey” and a mule who would not obey him.<sup>42</sup> In 1903, while president of Princeton University, he elicited a hearty laugh from a group of Princeton alumni in Baltimore by telling them a “coon” joke. Why, he asked, did the groundhog go back in its hole that February? Because he “was afraid

the President of the United States,” a reference to Theodore Roosevelt, “would put a ‘coon’ in it.” This joke ridiculed Roosevelt’s decision to appoint a black man, William Crum, a “coon,” to the position of collector of the Port of Charleston.<sup>43</sup> Wilson seems to have stopped telling these stories in public once he became governor, but some evidence suggests that he still told them in private throughout the years of his public service as governor and then as president.<sup>44</sup>

More frequently, Wilson represented blacks not as animals but as children and as lacking the traits usually associated with adults—conscience, knowledge, discipline, maturity, and the ability to understand abstract concepts such as freedom and responsibility. In his worst moments, he framed their childishness as inborn and unalterable. In his better moments, he believed that he and other elite white southern men had a paternal responsibility to oversee “Negro development” and to prepare them for the day when they would reach adulthood and earn full membership in the American polity.

In a seminal speech that Wilson gave in 1897 at the Hampton Institute, a Virginia vocational school for blacks similar in mission to Tuskegee, for the first time he merged his traditional southern paternalism with a nascent Progressive conception of society as a machine that would only work well if its component parts were properly adjusted to each other. The nominal topic of his speech was “liberty,” but his real message was that segregation offered all Americans, white and black, the best opportunity for racial peace and social advancement. “What is the liberty of society?” he asked. It was not to grant everyone within that society opportunity to do as they wished. It was not to enjoy the basic freedoms of speech, religion, mobility, and opportunity. Nor was it to enjoy the right to vote or the right to enter any public place. No, liberty meant “the subjection of men to the right laws of society, and their adjustment one to another in the life of communities.” “The search after freedom,” he intoned, “is the search after the best adjustment.”<sup>45</sup>

Wilson did not specify the “right laws” to which he was referring, but it seems likely that he had in mind the Jim Crow legislation whose constitutionality the Supreme Court had just upheld in its famous 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision.<sup>46</sup>



Drawing of an African American man appearing in Wilson’s *History of the American People*, vol. 8, 153.

Like many southern white moderates, he viewed segregation as the best hope for racial peace and social progress in the South.<sup>47</sup> By calling for the "best adjustment," he was not suggesting that the Jim Crow laws be implemented slowly because of the manifold difficulties involved in engineering a complete separation of the white and black races. Instead, he wanted to habituate blacks to segregation and to acclimatize them to the notion that their movement toward political and social equality would have to proceed at an infinitesimally slow pace. "No man ought to be impatient to see it speedily effected," he warned. "It must come from day to day. Any man who expects to bring the millennium by a sudden and violent storm of reform is fit for a lunatic asylum. . . . It takes infinite patience to learn a trade, to read a book; it takes infinite patience to solve [even] a simple problem." Using the metaphor of a machine to describe the complexity, interconnectedness, and fragility of society, he said: "The freedom of the machine comes from the perfect adjustment of all its parts." Without such perfect adjustment, the machine "would go to pieces and every part would suffer its separate destruction."<sup>48</sup>

In this Hampton Institute speech, Wilson laid out the principles that would guide his approach to black-white relations throughout his political career: first, that segregation served the interests of white and black Americans and should remain in force for many years to come; second, that blacks could aspire to equality and freedom as long as they understood that achieving that goal would require from them "infinite patience"; and third, that blacks could not themselves determine the pace of racial change. This was the job of a third party, perhaps a group of wise and well-intentioned white men of the South, perhaps the government, who would take it upon themselves (or itself) to balance the aspirations of blacks against the interests of other communities of Americans.

The sentiments animating Wilson's 1897 Hampton speech mirrored those undergirding the famous Atlanta Exposition address that Booker T. Washington had given two years earlier. In that 1895 speech, Washington had controversially accommodated himself and his black supporters to the emerging Jim Crow regime, declaring that they understood "that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing."<sup>49</sup> Wilson early on recognized his affinity to this group of conservative black leaders (including, in addition to Washington, men such as Robert Russa Moton, president of the Hampton Institute) who had accepted segregation as the best strategy for black progress and black-white comity.

Wilson publicly demonstrated his support for Washington by inviting him to attend his installation as Princeton University president in 1902. At the installation

itself, Washington was asked to don his academic robes and march with the other 150 invited guests—a great honor, no doubt, for Washington, the only black guest who seems to have been invited. But Washington still had to endure the humiliation of segregation. Wilson and his handlers had determined that Washington should not be housed with a Princeton faculty member, as was the case with every other visiting dignitary, and that he could not be asked to join the other guests at either of the two installation dinners hosted by Wilson and his wife.<sup>50</sup>

Officially, of course, Washington had to accept these arrangements, for he had himself declared that "in all things purely social we [the white and black races] can be as separate as the fingers."<sup>51</sup> But this proud man must have been burning up inside as he trudged in the evenings to a black boardinghouse in town and made plans for his separate dinners. Wilson seems not to have been discomfited by this arrangement. Nor was he troubled by the fact that no African Americans would be accepted for undergraduate study at Princeton University during the years of his presidency. In his eyes, Princeton's status as a lily-white institution was in the nature of things. In 1909, he instructed an assistant to write a young African American who had inquired about applying to his university that "it is altogether inadvisable for a colored man to enter Princeton." None would until 1947.<sup>52</sup>

### The Politics of Race, 1912–19

Given Woodrow Wilson's unwavering support for segregation, it seems surprising, at first glance, that in the fall of 1912, when he had become the Democratic nominee for president of the United States, a group of militant black leaders decided to cast their lot with him. This group included W. E. B. Du Bois, editor of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's paper, *The Crisis*; William Monroe Trotter and the Reverend J. Milton Waldron, both of the National Independent Political League; and Bishop Alexander Walters of the African Zion Church and president of the National Colored Democratic League. These men were not ignorant of Wilson's past record on race, but they were willing to give him a chance to show that his future record would be different. They no longer saw a place for blacks in a Republican Party headed by conservative William Howard Taft, and they were angry with Theodore Roosevelt for excluding southern black delegates from participation in the Progressive Party convention in 1912.<sup>53</sup> They had also become intrigued with Wilson and with his ambitious reform program, the New Freedom. Because Wilson seemed to have changed his politics so much since the late nineteenth century with regard to economic



reform, these black leaders allowed themselves to hope that he was also in the process of changing his views on the race question.

During the campaign itself, Wilson seemed solicitous of black views. He granted Trotter and Waldron a meeting with him in July 1912 and a group of New Jersey black leaders an audience two weeks later. At an August meeting with Oswald Garrison Villard, editor of the progressive *New York Evening Post* and one of the country's leading white advocates for racial equality, Wilson assured Villard that he would "be President of all the people, that he would appoint no man to office because he was colored, any more than he would appoint him because he was a Jew or Catholic, but that he would appoint him on his merits."<sup>54</sup> And then, in late October, only a few weeks before the election, Wilson sent a public letter to Bishop Walters that seemed to indicate that he had embraced the cause of Negro rights. Wilson began the letter by assuring "my colored fellow-citizens of my earnest wish to see justice done to them in every matter, not mere grudging justice, but justice executed with liberality and cordial-group feeling." He then complimented "colored people" for making "extraordinary progress toward self-support and usefulness" and indicated his desire to see blacks "encouraged in every possible and proper way." He concluded by making this pledge: "Should I become President of the United States they [blacks] 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."<sup>55</sup>

This letter actually promised very little to blacks. It did not uphold the principle of racial equality, call for an end to segregation, denounce lynching, or commit Wilson to giving blacks the share of government appointments to which they had become accustomed under Republican administrations. But in Wilson's pledge "for absolute fair dealing," African American leaders thought they detected the same passion for social justice that Wilson had infused into his New Freedom campaign. Thus, many blacks voted for him in 1912, hoping that, were he to be elected, they would be among the beneficiaries. Wilson's "personality gives us hope," Du Bois wrote at the time. "He will not advance the cause of oligarchy in the South, he will not seek further means of 'Jim Crow' insult, he will not dismiss black men wholesale from office, and he will remember that the Negro in the United States has a right to be heard and considered."<sup>56</sup> Du Bois and other black leaders would soon be bitterly disappointed.

Rumors that Wilson and his administration intended to reintroduce segregation into the federal civil service began circulating within a few days of the election. By the spring of 1913, two of Wilson's Cabinet appointees, Albert Burleson, the postmaster general, and William A. McAdoo, the secretary of

the Treasury, both white southerners, were segregating their departments. Instituting segregation meant undertaking two broad initiatives: first, separating white and black employees at work and lunch and in dressing rooms and restrooms; and second, making sure that no white employees were working under black supervisors. Imposing segregation was bound to provoke a quick and sharp reaction from blacks, because jobs in the federal service at both the entry and supervisory levels were among the best ones available to blacks anywhere in the United States. Moreover, many of these jobs were held by elite members of black society, for whom not just a paycheck but status in their home community was at stake.<sup>57</sup>

Black leaders began inundating Wilson with telegrams, letters, and petitions protesting the resegregation of the federal civil service.<sup>58</sup> They charged that Wilson had broken his campaign pledge for "absolute fair dealing" and, by supporting segregation, had violated the American principle of equality. The volume and fury of the protests took Wilson by surprise, and he felt compelled to answer his critics. In the process, he revealed himself to be the segregationist he was, and the holder of the same principles regarding black progress that he had first revealed during his Hampton Institute speech in 1897.

In a letter to Villard in July 1913, Wilson wrote that segregation was being implemented "as much . . . [for] the Negroes as for any other reason, with the approval of some of the most influential Negroes I know, and with the idea that the friction, or rather the discontent and uneasiness, which had prevailed in many of the departments would thereby be removed." The friction to which he referred was real; whites formed majorities in most federal departments in which blacks worked, and many of them did not want to work in integrated circumstances or under the authority of a black supervisor. By the spring of 1913, the leaders of a white supremacist group of federal employees, the euphemistically named National Democratic Fair Play Association, along with their southern allies in Congress (including Senator James K. Vardaman of Mississippi), had seized the opportunity given to them by Wilson's electoral victory to press their case for "protecting" the rights of whites in federal employment. By the summer of 1913, they had worked their supporters into a frenzy, convincing them that many white female federal employees risked assault by the predatory black males who worked alongside or over them.<sup>59</sup>

Wilson thus did have a fractious federal work force to deal with, and he felt constrained in his search for a solution by having pressure applied to him simultaneously by the black egalitarian left and the white supremacist right. His solution was the classic one preferred by Southern white moderates of his era: to stress that

segregation was the best way forward, that this policy "would be in the interest of colored people, as exempting them from friction and criticism in the departments," and that he had the support of influential and clear-thinking black leaders.<sup>60</sup>

That Wilson responded by extolling the virtues of segregation infuriated Villard who, until this time, had been Wilson's close ally. "How I wish your Administrative heads who have brought about this thing," Villard wrote Wilson, "could for forty-eight hours be blacked up and compelled to put themselves in the Negro's place—how differently they would feel!"<sup>61</sup> Wilson pleaded with Villard for understanding, and when Villard refused to give it to him, he stopped corresponding with him, leaving McAdoo to present the administration's case.

In an October 27, 1913, letter to Villard, McAdoo defended the administration's segregationist position one more time. McAdoo insisted that he was "without prejudice against the Negro" and that he possessed "every desire to help him." But he would not countenance integration, "the enforced and unwelcome juxtaposition of white and Negro employees when it is unnecessary and avoidable without injustice to anybody, and when such enforcement would serve only to engender race animosities detrimental to the welfare of both races and injurious to public service." Like his boss, McAdoo's approach to the question of black opportunities in federal employment was dominated by a determination to reduce friction and promote adjustment. Like his boss, he had convinced himself that he was guided by the purest of motives, for he was without "prejudice against the Negro."<sup>62</sup>

It remained for the militant and mercurial William Monroe Trotter to break through Wilson's and McAdoo's facade of best intentions. At a first meeting between Trotter and Wilson in November 1913, Trotter had laid out his objections to segregation in the federal civil service. The meeting was cordial. Though Wilson made no hard promises, Trotter and his delegation came away from the meeting believing that Wilson would do something to reverse his administration's segregationist policy.<sup>63</sup> By the time of their second meeting in November 1914, sentiments on both sides had hardened. Trotter once again delivered an impassioned plea to end segregation in federal employment. Wilson responded to Trotter as McAdoo had done to Villard, expressing both his sincere interest in the well-being of blacks and his conviction that segregation was in their best interests. Trotter refused to back down or show Wilson the deference that the president expected was his due. To the contrary, Trotter took offense at Wilson's attempt to smother him and his delegation in paternalist good feeling. "We are not here as wards," he admonished Wilson. "We are here as full-fledged American citizens, vouchsafed equality of citizenship by the federal Constitution. Separation and distinction marking, because of a certain blood in our veins . . . is something that must be a humiliation."<sup>64</sup>

Trotter refused to accept the notion that segregation was due to some abstract "friction between the races." It was due instead to "race prejudice on the part of the official who puts it into operation." Trotter was referring here not to Wilson himself but to the heads of the various government departments. But then Trotter confronted Wilson directly: "Mr. President, we are sorely disappointed that you take the position that the separation itself is not wrong, is not injurious, is not rightly offensive to you."<sup>65</sup>

Wilson was furious at the temerity of this black man who had dared to speak to him this way in the White House. "Your tone," Wilson stiffly told Trotter, "offends me. . . . You are the only American citizen that has ever come into this office who has talked to me in a tone with a background of passion that was evident. . . . You have spoiled the whole cause for which you came."<sup>66</sup> A few minutes later, the meeting was over. Trotter of course was never invited back to the White House. Wilson later regretted that he had lost his temper but not that he had stood his ground.<sup>67</sup> Nothing would convince him that segregation was not in the interests of both the black and white races.

Nevertheless, the protests by blacks and their white allies seem to have had some effect on the Wilson administration, if only to slow down the spread of segregationist policy into departments that, by 1914, it had not yet reached. Also, some evidence suggests that the Wilson administration felt pressured by 1914 to make a greater effort to maintain the number of blacks in appointive federal offices at levels relatively similar to the number in previous presidential administrations. In 1914, the Wilson administration, for example, backed the reappointment of Robert H. Terrell as a municipal judge in Washington despite the opposition of radical white supremacists in Congress.<sup>68</sup> But black protests did not shake Wilson from his belief in the virtue of segregation or cause him to question his conviction that it would be a century or more before blacks would be ready for full equality with whites. Nor did the intensity of black protests over federal service segregation in 1914 cause Wilson to be wary about allowing his name to be used as an endorsement for D. W. Griffith's racist film about Reconstruction, *The Birth of a Nation*, when it was released to great fanfare in early 1915.<sup>69</sup> In 1916, few blacks voted to give Wilson a second term. Du Bois, who in 1912 had resigned from the Socialist Party to register as a Democrat and vote for Wilson, now advised his fellow African Americans to vote for the Socialist Party candidate.<sup>70</sup>

World War I seemed to force the door toward a redress of racial inequalities ajar once more. A desire to enlist all Americans in support of a war about which many remained skeptical impelled some members of the Wilson administration to reach out to African Americans. Secretary of War Newton Baker, called to

Washington after having served as the progressive mayor of Cleveland, was the administration figure who led the way. Baker would not challenge the principle of segregation in the armed forces, but he did succeed in addressing black concerns in a number of other areas. He won Wilson's assent to the appointment of Emmett J. Scott, a Tuskegee Institute officer and a close friend of Booker T. Washington, as special assistant to the secretary of war in charge of relations between the U.S. military and black community. Baker increased the number of black infantry regiments and the number of black officers serving in the army. He won clemency for ten black soldiers sentenced to death as a result of their participation in a 1917 riot in Houston.<sup>71</sup>

In general, Wilson kept his distance from racial issues during wartime, preferring to let his Cabinet officials address them. But the East St. Louis race riot of July 2, 1917, temporarily stripped him of his detachment. Tense relations between the city's white and black populations had exploded into violence, leading to the deaths of almost fifty people, 80 percent of them black, and the destruction of large areas of the city's black residential areas. Throughout this terrifying day, in which whites inflicted deaths on blacks through lynching and other forms of torture, the city police and National Guardsmen did almost nothing to restore order. A disturbed Wilson had written Attorney General Thomas Gregory asking him to see whether "any instrumentality of the Government . . . could be effectively employed to check these disgraceful outrages."<sup>72</sup> The directness and passion of Wilson's words stand in contrast to most of his previous comments on the race question. Given the progressive character of Secretary Baker's initiatives regarding black soldiers and the way in which the East St. Louis riot appeared to puncture Wilson's complacency about the race issue, it is possible to construe wartime pressures along with popular longings for democracy that Wilson's wartime idealism had unleashed as creating a climate in which those committed to racial equality might make some headway. This was certainly the stance taken by Du Bois, who believed that if blacks joined wholeheartedly in Wilson's war for democracy abroad they would advance the cause of racial democracy at home.<sup>73</sup>

But once again, Du Bois and other black leaders were mistaken. It took a full year after the East St. Louis riot for Wilson to denounce the evils of racial mob violence in public, and that denunciation came only after months of pressure from black leaders and Secretary Baker, and in response to an anti-American German propaganda campaign designed to expose the racial evils of American life.<sup>74</sup> Even then, Wilson refused to authorize a federal investigation of the riot or to use the constitutional war powers that he so readily deployed

against political radicals, German sympathizers, and "slackers" to construe white violence against blacks as a threat to the war effort and to subject its perpetrators to prosecution.<sup>75</sup>

In truth, the war had done more to worsen than to improve race relations in the United States. The military enforced segregation in its ranks and, as a rule, excluded black servicemen from combat duties for the duration of the war. The Wilson administration's decision to nationalize the trains under McAdoo's supervision created an opportunity to extend the principle of segregated train cars to every part of the nation. Conditions of wartime mobilization had increased tensions between the white and black races, not just in East St. Louis but in most urban centers of industrial production in the North and West. The mass migration of southern blacks to these centers generated far more black-white interaction than had been customary at workplaces, in neighborhoods, and on systems of public transportation. These interactions, in turn, increased interracial tension and then interracial violence, most of it directed by whites against blacks. In 1919 alone, seventy-one blacks were lynched as race riots tore through twenty-six American cities. Wilson gave one eloquent and impassioned speech denouncing mob violence in 1918 but then fell mute on the subject. The terrifying race riots in Washington and Chicago in 1919 did not elicit any public comment from him.<sup>76</sup>

If they had, it would not likely have been enough to satisfy blacks. Wilson never regarded blacks as his equals. His approach to questions about race was almost always grounded in a language of adjustment. He stressed reducing friction and managing interactions between two races that, he believed, would have been better off not inhabiting the same space. He rarely talked about the rights of blacks, and he never talked about Negroes being merged into or enriching American nationality. On one occasion, he did grant that blacks had human souls and were, in that respect, "absolutely equal" to whites.<sup>77</sup> But he rarely granted blacks the status of "Americans." In truth, he never believed that blacks belonged in or to America. They were a problem population to be managed in the best possible and most humane fashion but never to be joined with those groups of European descent who constituted the American nation. In his eyes, blacks had made no contribution to the making of the American people. Given this stance, it is hardly surprising that by the time Wilson sailed for Europe with the eyes of the world upon him, many African Americans had turned their gaze away from him, convinced that he would never support their quest for equality, participation, and integration. Bitter and angry, these blacks were in the process of turning to a different kind of savior, Marcus Garvey, who promised

them what Wilson would not: full membership in a proud nation. Garvey's nation, of course, was to be African, not American.<sup>78</sup>

More surprising is the number of black leaders who, in 1919, still had not given up on Wilson. Robert Moton was hoping that Wilson would issue him a personal invitation to participate in the Paris peace conference.<sup>79</sup> Trotter knew that such an invitation would never come his way, but that did not stop him from going to France in 1919 and asking Wilson for an audience. Wilson ignored Trotter's overtures.<sup>80</sup> Du Bois was in France for the peace conference, too, and he sought a meeting with Wilson as well. That he did not achieve, but he did gain an interview with Wilson's key aide, Colonel Edward House, to press his case for the importance at Versailles of addressing the future of Africa and its peoples. Du Bois won nothing from House, and he would later report that "here as elsewhere my conception of Wilson as a scholar was disappointed. At Versailles he did not seem to understand Europe nor European politics, nor the world-wide problems of race."<sup>81</sup> Throughout the negotiations at Versailles, Wilson showed little inclination to extend his principles of self-determination and equality among nations to nonwhite nations beyond Europe, most famously in his refusal to support a Japanese request that article 21 of the League of Nations Covenant be amended to outlaw any discrimination in national or international affairs on the basis of race or nationality.<sup>82</sup>

It seems noteworthy that Du Bois, as late as 1919, still had a capacity to be "disappointed" by Wilson on matters of race. Du Bois, after all, had already experienced two major disappointments with this Democratic president: first, in 1913, when Wilson failed to deliver on his 1912 election promise to promote black interests; and then in 1918, when Wilson had made it clear that he had no intention of using his "war for democracy" to push hard for racial equality in the United States. Why, then, did Du Bois even bother to petition Wilson in 1919? Why did he still seem to hope that this man, so opposed to racial equality, would now deliver?

Du Bois may have gone to Versailles simply because he recognized that, quite apart from what Wilson did or did not believe or do, the peace conference and the establishment of a League of Nations were events of world historical importance. But it may also have been the case that Du Bois and other black leaders could not give up on Wilson because they saw him as an unusually bold and imaginative politician—"a scholar" in Du Bois's parlance—whose vision of a hybridized American nationality and whose desire to use his insights about America to pursue a dream of world peace, international justice, and self-determination expressed their own deepest aspirations. Black leaders refused to concede, in other words,

that Wilson was simply another white southerner unable to rise above the popular prejudices of his era, region, and race. They wanted to believe in Wilson, they wanted to be part of his vision of a dynamically diverse America. They saw him welcome European immigrants into his American nation, and they saw him extend his sympathies to nonwhite Mexicans who were struggling to make a democratic revolution in their own country.<sup>83</sup> They demanded again and again that he demonstrate the same solicitude and sympathy for African Americans in their struggle for equality. They never got what they wanted, but they apparently never gave up hoping that they would. Wilson infuriated and disappointed black leaders to no end. He should us, too.

Wilson's thoughts and actions on the race question earn him a spot on a roster of distinguished white Americans who were apostles for American democracy while being racists at the same time. From the very beginning of the American republic, as I have argued elsewhere, the United States propagated, alongside its civic creed, a racial nationalism that conceived of the country in racial terms, as a home for white people, which meant those of European origin and descent. From Thomas Jefferson to Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and even, arguably, Franklin Roosevelt, many of those who fashioned America's universalist and democratic political creed were also the architects of its racial nationalism—a paradox that has been one of the most fascinating, enduring, and disturbing aspects of U.S. history.<sup>84</sup> It took a very long time, about two hundred years, for the hold of racial nationalism on the American political imagination to be broken and for the nation to commit itself to true equality.

In every period of U.S. history, we can find individuals and groups who have sought to overturn America's tradition of racial nationalism. We can certainly identify such people in Woodrow Wilson's time. But Wilson himself was not among them. 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. His progressivism aimed to ensure that America would continue to be a white republic.

## Notes

1. Erez Manela, "Imagining Woodrow Wilson in Asia: Dreams of East-West Harmony and the Revolt against Empire in 1919," *American Historical Review* 111 (December 2006): 39 pars., <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/111.5/manela.html>; Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Breaking the Heart of the World: Woodrow Wilson and the Fight for the League of Nations* (New York: Cambridge University

Press, 2001); Lloyd E. Ambrosius, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Diplomatic Tradition: The Treaty Fight in Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

2. Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: The Road to the White House* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1947). On the South's reintegration into the nation on white supremacist terms, see John W. Cell, *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Joel Williamson, *A Rage for Order: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and Rachel E. Moran, *Interracial Intimacy: The Regulation of Race and Romance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

3. Link, *Wilson: Road to the White House*, 3. Link would later modify this view. See Arthur S. Link, "Woodrow Wilson: The American as Southerner," *Journal of Southern History* 36 (February 1970): 3-17. On segregation as a progressive arrangement, see Cell, *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy*, chaps. 4-7; and William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

4. Link, *Wilson: Road to the White House*, 1-2; Erick Montgomery, *Thomas Woodrow Wilson: Family Ties and Southern Perspectives* (Augusta: Historic Augusta, Inc., 2006). On the question of slavery and the Wilson family: In Staunton, the family's household servants seem to have been slaves leased to it by the Presbyterian Church. In Augusta, the servants were free blacks, probably from the town's sizable free black community. Conversation with John Milton Cooper, Friday, January 19, 2007; Montgomery, *Thomas Woodrow Wilson*, 39.

5. Montgomery, *Thomas Woodrow Wilson*, 61-63; Link, "Woodrow Wilson: American as Southerner," 5; Anthony Gaughan, "Woodrow Wilson and the Legacy of the Civil War," *Civil War History* 43 (September 1997): 225-42, used in Web version, [http://find.galegroup.com/itx/printdoc.do?&prodId=ITOF&userGroupName=loc\\_ma...WXHK](http://find.galegroup.com/itx/printdoc.do?&prodId=ITOF&userGroupName=loc_ma...WXHK).

6. Gaughan, "Woodrow Wilson and the Legacy of the Civil War," 1; Link, *Wilson: Road to the White House*, 3.

7. See, e.g., Link, *Wilson: Road to the White House*; Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: The New Freedom* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1956); and Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1910-1917* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954).

8. This is apparent even in Wilson's small book on Robert E. Lee, in which he casts the South's greatest hero as a reluctant secessionist. Woodrow Wilson, *Robert E. Lee: An Interpretation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1924).

9. Woodrow Wilson, *Division and Reunion* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1921; orig. pub. 1893); Woodrow Wilson, *History of the American People, Documentary Edition* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1917; orig. pub. 1902), 10 vols. The inclusion of

numerous illustrations, maps, and primary documents expanded this 1917 edition from its original five volumes (in the 1902 edition) to ten.

10. Wilson, *History of the American People*, vol. 7, 30.

11. *Ibid.*, vol. 7, 23-28; vol. 8, 58.

12. *Ibid.*, vol. 8, 58.

13. Gaughan, "Woodrow Wilson and the Legacy of the Civil War," 5-6 of Web version.

14. Wilson, *History of the American People*, vol. 8, 121. Wilson further asserted: "The motives of politics, the whole theory of political action; the character of government, the sentiment of duty, the very ethics of private conduct were altered [by war] as no half century of slow peace could have altered them." *Ibid.*

15. Wilson, *Division and Reunion*, 286.

16. E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

17. "The real question after all," Wilson remarked to the Southern Society of New York in 1904, "is nationality, the getting to understanding alike and thinking alike." This had to be the goal of all great nations. Gaughan, "Woodrow Wilson and the Legacy of the Civil War," 6; Gary Gerstle, "Race and Nation in the United States, Cuba, and Mexico, 1880-1940," in *Nationalism in the Americas*, ed. Don Doyle and Marco Pamplona (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 272-303.

18. See, e.g., Wilson, *Division and Reunion*, 273; and Woodrow Wilson, *The State: Elements of Historical and Practical Politics* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1889), 296.

19. Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947; orig. pub. 1908), chap. 1; the quotation is on 26.

20. Montgomery, *Thomas Woodrow Wilson*, 5-11.

21. Wilson, *History of the American People*, vol. 1, 25-26.

22. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 136; vol. 3, 49-51; 64-65.

23. *Ibid.*, vol. 7, 132-35.

24. *Ibid.*, vol. 10, 98-99.

25. Link, *Wilson: Road to the White House*, 384-90; Hans Vought, "Division and Reunion: Woodrow Wilson, Immigration, and the Myth of American Unity," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 13 (Spring 1994), [http://sas.epnet.com/DeliveryPrintSave.asp?tb=0&\\_ug=sid+C3638CC0-7606-4EC...WXHK](http://sas.epnet.com/DeliveryPrintSave.asp?tb=0&_ug=sid+C3638CC0-7606-4EC...WXHK), 3-5. See also *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur S. Link et al., 69 vols. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966-94) (hereafter, *PWW*), vol. 24, 131-32, 241-43, 299-303, 404-7.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Woodrow Wilson, "Be Worthy of the Men of 1776," Address at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, July 4, 1914, in *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Authorized Edition, The New Democracy: Presidential Messages, Addresses, and Other Papers (1913-1917)*, 2 vols., ed. Ray Stannard Baker and William E. Dodd (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1926), vol. 2, 143.

28. Wilson continued: "And so by the gift of the free will of independent people it is being constantly renewed from generation to generation by the same process by which it

was originally created. It is as if humanity had determined to see to it this great Nation, founded for the benefit of humanity, should not lack for the allegiance of the people of the world." Woodrow Wilson, "Too Proud to Fight," address to several thousand foreign-born citizens, after naturalization ceremonies, Philadelphia, May 10, 1915, in *Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Authorized Edition, The New Democracy*, ed. Baker and Dodd, 318–22.

29. Woodrow Wilson, "Be Not Afraid of Our Foreign-Born Citizens," Address to the Daughters of the American Revolution, Washington, October 11, 1915, in *ibid.*, 375–81.

30. On the vetoes, see Vought, "Division and Reunion," 7–8.

31. Woodrow Wilson, "Men Who Think First of Themselves Not True Americans," Address Delivered at the Unveiling of the Statue of Commodore John Barry, Washington, May 16, 1914, in *Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Authorized Edition, The New Democracy*, vol. 1, 110.

32. Wilson, "Too Proud to Fight," 319. On Theodore Roosevelt's intolerance of Old World cultures, see Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), chap. 2.

33. On the World War I campaign for conformity, see *ibid.*, chap. 3.

34. Wilson, "Too Proud to Fight," 321.

35. Wilson, *History of the American People*, vol. 8, 50–53. Wilson did write in harsh terms about large antebellum plantations located in remote areas and owned by absentee masters. These enterprises, Wilson noted, were managed by "brutal [white] men, themselves mere hired drudges, who cared for nothing but to get the exacted stint of work out of" the slaves. But Wilson then used his critique of the masterless plantations to defend those plantations where the masters did reside. *Ibid.*, 52.

36. *Ibid.*, vol. 9, 38.

37. The "ignorance and credulity" of the blacks "made them easy dupes." *Ibid.*, 18–20, 46–52.

38. *Ibid.*, 49–52.

39. This view came to be associated with William Dunning, John W. Burgess, and their students, who made up the "Dunning School." See William A. Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic 1865–1877* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1907); John W. Burgess, *Reconstruction and the Constitution, 1866–1876* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902); and Claude G. Bowers, *The Tragic Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929).

40. On the new post-civil rights revolution interpretation of Reconstruction, see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), and Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003). This interpretation had been laid out fifty years earlier by W. E. B. Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992; orig. pub. 1935). The historical profession, however, largely ignored Du Bois's work. On the growing strength of racial nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Gerstle, *American Crucible*, chaps. 1–3.

41. Wilson, *History of the American People*, vol. 8, 153.

42. *PWW*, vol. 21, 390–91.

43. *Ibid.*, vol. 14, 358.

44. See the excerpt from the Diary of Raymond Blaine Fosdick from December 8, 1918, when he, President Wilson, and the American delegation to the Versailles Peace Conference were sailing for France. Fosdick reports on how he and President Wilson "swapped negro stories, his easily out-rivalling mine," while taking a break from their work on the Paris Peace Conference. Reproduced in *ibid.*, vol. 53, 340–41.

45. *Ibid.*, vol. 10, 127–34.

46. *Plessy v. Ferguson: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Brook Thomas (New York: Bedford Books, 1997).

47. See Cell, *Highest Stage of White Supremacy*; Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

48. *PWW*, vol. 10, 127–34.

49. Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986; orig. pub. 1901), 155–56.

50. Louis R. Harlan and Raymond W. Smock, eds., *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, 13 vols. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972–84), vol. 6, 548. The editors of the Washington papers report that Washington did attend a luncheon sponsored by the Henry Gurdon Marquand family and may have attended a Princeton class of 1879 dinner the night of Wilson's inaugural. But Washington received no invitation to the dinners that the Wilsons themselves hosted.

51. The quoted phrase is from Washington's 1895 Atlanta Exposition address, reproduced in *Up From Slavery*, 155–56.

52. *PWW*, vol. 15, 462. By the time of Wilson's Princeton presidency, several African Americans had earned advanced degrees from various departments at Princeton or from the independently run Princeton Theological Seminary; and at an earlier time, several African Americans had studied privately with Princeton President John Witherspoon. But none had been formally admitted to the jewel of Princeton, the undergraduate student program, a prohibition that Wilson reinforced.

53. Gerstle, *American Crucible*, chap. 2.

54. From the diary of Oswald Garrison Villard, August 14, 1912, in *PWW*, vol. 25, 25–26.

55. *Ibid.*, 448–49. Wilson wrote the letter on October 21, 1912.

56. Quoted by David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), 423.

57. On the history of blacks in the federal civil service, see Eric Yellin, "In the Nation's Service: Racism and Federal Employees in Woodrow Wilson's Washington," PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 2007. See, also, Mary-Elizabeth Murphy, "How Our Girls Are Humiliated: African Americans Protest Civil Service Segregation in the Jazz Age, 1921–1929," seminar paper, University of Maryland, 2005, in the author's possession.

58. A total of 20,000 people in thirty-six states signed one antisegregation petition delivered to Wilson in November 1913 by William Monroe Trotter and other black leaders; in *PWW*, vol. 28, 491–500.



59. *Ibid.*, 185–88. Yellin, “In the Nation’s Service,” provides the best treatment of the fight over federal civil service segregation during the Wilson administration.

60. Letter from Wilson to Villard, August 29, 2006, in *PWW*, vol. 28, 245–46.

61. Letter from Villard to Wilson, September 18, 2006, in *ibid.*, 289–90.

62. Letter from McAdoo to Villard, October 27, 1913, in *ibid.*, 453–55.

63. Christine A. Lunardini, “Standing Firm: William Monroe Trotter’s Meetings with Woodrow Wilson, 1913–1914,” *Journal of Negro History* 64 (Summer 1979): 244–64. Lunardini both reproduces transcripts of Trotter’s meetings with Wilson in their entirety and provides insightful commentary on those meetings through a series of detailed notes.

64. Trotter spelled out for the president the humiliation that, he argued, was at segregation’s core. Segregation, Trotter declared, “creates in the minds of others that there is something the matter with us—we are not their equals, that we are not their brothers, that we are so different that we cannot work at a desk beside them, that we cannot eat at a table beside them, that we cannot go in the dressing room where they go, that we cannot use a locker beside them, that we cannot even go into a public toilet with them.” *Ibid.*, 259.

65. *Ibid.*, 260.

66. *Ibid.*, 260.

67. *Ibid.*, 263 n. 5.

68. *Ibid.*, 263–64 n. 6; letter from Villard to Wilson, March 5, 1914; letter from John Sharp Williams to Wilson, March 31, 1914; and letter from Wilson to Williams, April 2, 1914; all in *PWW*, vol. 29, 319, 377, 394.

Eric Yellin’s examination of a sample of randomly selected black federal employees suggests that most of those who suffered demotions or dismissals under Wilson experienced them during the first year and a half of Wilson’s presidency (March 1913–October 1914). This suggests that the rate of demotion and dismissal slowed after Trotter’s second meeting with Wilson. See Eric S. Yellin, “President of All the People: Woodrow Wilson and White Man’s Democracy,” paper delivered at Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, Atlanta, January 2007, 6.

For more on segregation of the federal service under Wilson, see Yellin, “In the Nation’s Service”; Kathleen Long Wolgemuth, “Woodrow Wilson’s Appointment Policy and the Negro,” *Journal of Southern History* 24 (November 1958): 457–71; Kathleen L. Wolgemuth, “Woodrow Wilson and Federal Segregation,” *Journal of Negro History* 44 (April 1959): 158–73; Henry Blumenthal, “Woodrow Wilson and the Race Question,” *Journal of Negro History* 48 (January 1963): 1–21; Morton Sosna, “The South in the Saddle: Racial Politics during the Wilson Years,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 54 (Autumn 1970): 30–49; Cleveland M. Green, “Prejudices and Empty Promises: Woodrow Wilson’s Betrayal of the Negro, 1910–1919,” *The Crisis* 87 (November 1980): 380–88; Kenneth O’Reilly, “The Jim Crow Policies of Woodrow Wilson,” *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 17 (Autumn 1997): 117–19; Nancy J. Weiss, “The Negro and the New Freedom: Fighting Wilsonian Segregation,” *Political Science Quarterly* 84 (May 1969), 61–79.

69. Wilson was not quite the cheerleader for *The Birth of a Nation* that his good friend and indefatigable *Birth* promoter, Thomas Dixon Jr., made him out to be.

The famous quotation that Dixon attributed to Wilson after the president watched the film in the White House—that the film was like “writing history with lightning. . . . My only regret is that it is all so terribly true”—seems to have been as much Dixon’s creation as a faithful reporting of Wilson’s actual words. (Scholars do not even agree on what Dixon alleged the president to have said, with John Hope Franklin quoting the words cited above and Arthur Leming quoting a somewhat different variant: “My one regret is that it is all too true.”) When April 1915 protests against the film in Boston began to cause Wilson political trouble, his handlers put out the word that Wilson had never endorsed the film.

Nevertheless, Wilson did like the film and had written Griffith in March 1915 to congratulate him on “a splendid production.” *The Birth of a Nation*—based on Thomas Dixon Jr.’s book *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1905)—told a story of Reconstruction very similar to the one Wilson had written for *History of the American People*. Indeed, on several occasions the film quotes lines from Wilson’s *History*. Wilson did not, however, glorify the Klan as both Dixon and Griffith had done. On the politics of this film, see John Hope Franklin, “*The Birth of a Nation*: Propaganda as History,” in *Race and History: Selected Essays, 1938–1988*, ed. John Hope Franklin (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 16; Arthur Leming, “Myth and Fact: The Reception of *The Birth of a Nation*,” *Film History* 16 (2004): 122; Michael Rogin, “‘The Sword Became a Flashing Vision’: D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*,” *Representations* 9 (Winter 1985): 150–95; and Thomas R. Cripps, “The Reaction of the Negro to the Motion Picture *Birth of a Nation*,” *Historian* 25 (May 1963): 344–62.

70. Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 522–23.

71. George Creel, head of the Committee on Public Information, William B. Wilson, secretary of labor, and Herbert Hoover, director of the wartime Food Administration, also showed interest in improving circumstances of African Americans. Jane Lang Scheiber and Harry N. Scheiber, “The Wilson Administration and the Wartime Mobilization of Black Americans, 1917–1918,” *Labor History* 10 (Summer 1969): 433–59. On rioting in Houston and its aftermath, see also Robert V. Haynes, *A Night of Violence: The Houston Riot of 1917* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976); and *PWW*, vol. 44, 41–42, 62, 77–78; vol. 45, 546–47; vol. 48, 323; vol. 49, 324–28, 401–2.

72. Letter from Woodrow Wilson to Attorney General Thomas Gregory, in *PWW*, vol. 43, 116. On the St. Louis riot, see, Elliott M. Rudwick, *Race Riot at East St. Louis: July 2, 1917* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964).

73. Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 525–80. Also see Mark Ellis, “‘Closing Ranks’ and ‘Seeking Honors’: W. E. B. Du Bois in World War I,” *Journal of American History* 79 (June 1992): 96–124; William Jordan, “‘The Damnable Dilemma’: African-American Accommodation and Protest during World War I,” *Journal of American History* 81 (March 1995): 1562–83; and Jonathan Rosenberg, “For Democracy, Not Hypocrisy: World War and Race Relations in the United States, 1914–1919,” *International History Review* 21 (September 1999): 592–625.

74. Scheiber and Scheiber, "Wilson Administration," 456–57. For the text of Wilson's speech, see "A Statement to the American People," July 26, 1918, in *PWW*, vol. 49, 97–98. See also the July 25, 1918, letter from John R. Shillady, secretary of the NAACP, to Woodrow Wilson, urging him to denounce lynching in his address to the American people; *ibid.*, 88–89.

75. On the powers that Congress gave Wilson to prosecute, discipline, and punish those whose actions were deemed to threaten the war effort, see chapter 7 in the present volume by Geoffrey Stone; David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); and Gerstle, *American Crucible*, chap. 3.

76. Scheiber and Scheiber, "Wilson Administration," 457; Letter from William Harrison and Others, National Race Congress, to Woodrow Wilson, October 1, 1918, in *PWW*, vol. 51, 191–93; William M. Tuttle Jr., *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York: Atheneum, 1970); Adriane Lentz-Smith, *The Great War for Civil Rights: African American Politics, World War I, and the Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).

77. Wilson uttered these words in his meeting with Trotter in 1914. Quoted by Lunardini, "Standing Firm," 258.

78. On the turn to Garvey, see Judith Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986).

79. Scheiber and Scheiber, "Wilson Administration," 451.

80. Blumenthal, "Woodrow Wilson and the Race Question," 9; Rosenberg, "For Democracy, Not Hypocrisy: World War and Race Relations in the United States, 1914–1919," 592–93; Stephen R. Fox, *The Guardian of Boston: William Monroe Trotter* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 223–30.

81. Kenneth M. Glazier, "W. E. B. Du Bois's Impression of Woodrow Wilson," *Journal of Negro History* 58 (October 1973): 459.

82. The relevant language of the original Japanese proposal read as follows: that every state participating in the League be required to accord all "alien nationals . . . equal and just treatment in every respect, making no distinction, either in law or in fact, on account of race and nationality." When the explicit use of the words "race and nationality" proved to be too radical for those who were designing the Covenant, the Japanese altered their amendment to say, simply, that article 21 endorsed "the principle of equality of nations and just treatment of their nationals." The amendment, in both versions, was motivated in the first instance by Japan's desire to secure nondiscriminatory treatment of its people who had emigrated to the United States and Latin America, and to Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and other parts of the British Commonwealth. But beyond this self-interest, Japan was acting on the principle that the League of Nations ought to commit itself explicitly to the universal application of its "equality of nations" principle.

Wilson seems to have been receptive to this amendment until he encountered sustained opposition to it from Australians and New Zealanders and also from the leaders of anti-Asian organizations in the western United States. He then refused to accept it

under any circumstances, even when the League of Nations Commission, in April 1919, formally approved the watered-down version by a vote of 11 to 6. Paul Gordon Lauren, "Human Rights in History: Diplomacy and Racial Equality at the Paris Peace Conference," *Diplomatic History* 2 (summer 1978): 264, 269; Kristofer Allerfeldt, "Wilsonian Pragmatism? Woodrow Wilson, Japanese Immigration, and the Paris Peace Conference," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 15 (2004): 545–72; Naoko Shimazu, *Japan, Race and Equality: The Racial Equality Proposal of 1919* (London: Routledge, 1998). For more general analyses of the influence of racial considerations on the 1919 peace conference, see chapter 8 in this volume by Lloyd Ambrosius; Lloyd E. Ambrosius, *Wilsonianism: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy in American Foreign Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); and Erez Manela, "People of Many Races: The World Beyond Europe in the Wilsonian Imagination," paper presented to Fourth Biennial Woodrow Wilson National Symposium, Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library, Staunton, Va., September 2006.

83. David J. Hellwig, "The Afro-American Press and Woodrow Wilson's Mexican Policy, 1913–1917," *Phylon* 48 (Fourth Quarter, 1987): 261–70.

84. Gerstle, *American Crucible*. Also see Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975); and Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997).