

“A New Slavery of Caste”: An Evaluation of President Woodrow Wilson with Regard to Race

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Abstract

The presidency of Woodrow Wilson has been traditionally considered successful due to his administration’s progressive legislation and leadership during World War I. Recently, his positive reputation has been challenged on the grounds of his racist views. This paper argues that these challenges are legitimate by first establishing criteria for evaluating presidents based on constitutional rights and values, and then by examining the Wilson administration’s relationships to two race-based crises: the segregation of the civil service and mob violence. Wilson’s bigotry led him to consistently make decisions that negatively impacted the lives and livelihoods of millions of African Americans. His unwillingness to uphold the individual rights and equal protections promised to all Americans, regardless of race, represents a fundamental failure of his presidential duty. Failures like these should weigh heavily in any meaningful evaluation of presidential success.

Dismantling Racism: An Introduction

On November 18, 2015, over 50 student protesters staged a 32-hour sit-in outside of the university president’s office to protest Princeton University’s enduring commitment to the legacy of the 28th U.S. president, Woodrow Wilson (Cavaliere et al. 2015). Wilson, who served as president of Princeton prior to serving as president of the United States from 1913 to 1921, has been memorialized on the campus through murals, buildings, and the prestigious Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. Princeton’s commemoration of Wilson is echoed across the country in the schools, cities, and street signs that bear his name. Wilson’s claim to

success, which has traditionally rested on the shoulders of the progressive legislation passed during his two terms as president and his handling of World War I, is solidified in these physical landmarks. More abstractly, Wilson's legacy is maintained through his reputation as an idealist and dreamer (Berg 2013), a democratic leader who helped shape the modern presidency (Tulis 2003), and a visionary internationalist (Link 1954). It is these qualities that have led to his consistently high placement in presidential rankings among scholars and others, and it is these qualities that made the November protests so controversial.

Pressure placed upon the Princeton administration led to promises to engage in a conversation with the protestors, but the activity ignited a larger debate across the country about Wilson's claim to presidential success. The protesting students, affiliated with Princeton's Black Justice League, contested their university's veneration of Wilson—and his generally positive public image—because of his views of race. It is no secret that Woodrow Wilson, Virginia-born and raised in the midst of the Civil War and Reconstruction, harbored views on race that conflict with twenty-first century sensibilities. Despite the efforts of some scholars to take Wilson to task for his racial failings, his name remains revered. The Black Justice League's demand that “the university administration publicly acknowledge the racist legacy of Woodrow Wilson” was not unprecedented, but was met with backlash (2015). A counter group, “Concerned Princetonians,” condemned the Black Justice League for “historical revisionism” and creating “a dangerous precedent and slippery slope that will be cited by future students who seek to purge the past of those who fail to live up to modern standards of morality” (2015). Their discomfort at the fracturing of Wilson's legacy rests on fears of censorship and anachronistic judgments.

In this paper, I argue that Wilson's racial policies do undermine his claim to presidential success. Although the concept is notoriously difficult to define, presidential success must include adequately fulfilling basic constitutional presidential duties, especially promoting the general welfare of the American people. Essentially, a successful president will have made choices that do not negatively impact the lives of constituent groups, particularly those defined by race. This paper begins with a review of what scholars have previously written about Wilson and race. It then establishes criteria for an evaluation of Wilson's presidency with roots in basic, constitutional expectations of what a president should and should not do. I will illustrate that Wilson's bigotry caused him to fail at his fundamental presidential duties by investigating his administration's relationships to two race-based crises, the segregation of the civil service and the mob violence of the late 1910s. Finally, this paper will assert that Wilson's failures were far from harmless and should weigh heavily in any full assessment of his presidency.

“Shocking the Social System”: Scholarly Opinion of Wilson on Race

Scholarly opinion has been divided in regards to the legacy of Wilson's racial policies. Although few scholars overtly praise or deny the Wilson administration's racial record, the importance they lend it in their evaluation of Wilson differs. Some scholars take an apologetic stance on Wilson's actions. They, like the group of Concerned Princetonians, are concerned with unfair criticism of Wilson for having views that they argue were actually moderate and mainstream at the time. Other

scholars concede that Wilson's racial policies were disastrous but argue that the good wrought by his other initiatives—bank reform, anti-child labor laws, women's suffrage—outweigh the negative realities of segregation and rising racial tensions. Finally, an increasingly popular school of thought maintains that Wilson's racial policies are too harmful to overlook. Scholars who adhere to this school show solidarity with the Black Justice League and skewer Wilson for his racism, but they have offered few comments on how this should affect our view of Wilson's presidency.

For defenders of Wilson, a concern for historical revisionism takes precedent. Biographers such as Kendrick A. Clements and A. Scott Berg attempt to reframe discussions about Wilson's racism by placing his views within the context of his time. For example, Clements maintains that Wilson was a bigot but admits that he had prejudices "like everyone else" and that, in relation to contemporaries, Wilson was actually a racial moderate (1992, 45). This concern for historical context is valuable, but it has the unfortunate implication of downplaying the negative impacts of Wilson's racial policies and, in some instances, the reality of Wilson's racism itself. Clements absolves Wilson of any responsibility for the segregation of the federal government, and Berg defends the reasoning behind Wilson's choice—he argues that Wilson sought "to promote racial progress—equal opportunities and peaceful coexistence—by shocking the social system as little as possible" (Berg 2013, 206). The claims made by Wilson apologists obscure his very real racist views.

Defenders of presidential success are less likely to diminish Wilson's racism but fail to offer a comprehensive analysis of the human impact of Wilsonian racial policies. Although these scholars concede that Wilson was a racist whose record was, in the words of biographer Arthur S. Link, "tragic and unfortunate" (1954, 66), they rarely offer a meaningful account of his racial policies in their final evaluations of his presidency. They condemn Wilson's racism and acknowledge that he was less tolerant than his presidential predecessors. But they maintain that his other achievements outweigh this negative aspect and make him worthy of praise. Link devoted his scholarly career to Wilson, a feat agreeable to him because of his belief that Wilson was the most "admirable character" he had ever encountered in history (Kauffman 1998). Modern evaluators such as historian Alvin S. Felzenberg, despite harboring a few misgivings, have commended Wilson's pushes for progressive legislation and congressional leadership as "extraordinarily competent" (Felzenberg 2008, 173). Defenders of Wilson's success may have a more even-handed view than defenders of Wilson, but they suffer from their failure to do anything more than pay lip service to condemning his racism.

Critics of Wilson are united by their efforts to castigate him for his bigotry. This school of thought was developed by midcentury African American scholars such as Kathleen Wolgemuth and Rayford Logan who initially sought to record the administration's offenses (1959; 1965). Although their views were once unpopular, their ideas are becoming increasingly accepted in academic circles. Contemporary scholars such as Eric S. Yellin, Michael Dennis, and Sheldon M. Stern deny a defense of Wilson based on historical context by arguing that he, as president, should have been more cognizant of the negative impacts of his personal prejudices. Some, like Stern, have called for an explicit reevaluation of Wilson's legacy but do not offer a framework for doing so (2015). Others, like Yellin and Dennis, explore the negative impacts of

his racism but do not comment on what this means for an assessment of his presidency (Yellin 2013; Dennis 2002). This critical school of thought is the most aware of the historiography concerning Wilson and the most likely to include black agency in their discussion of the events but suffers from its failure to convincingly argue that Wilson's views on race undermine his claim to presidential success.

Defenders of Wilson, for all of their efforts to understand the president within the context of his own time, disregard the fact that in practice he was more discriminatory than his presidential predecessors. When articulating their arguments they overlook the importance of Wilson's role as protector of the Constitution and its guaranteed rights. Thus, when synthesizing their evaluations of his presidency they do not endow the administration's racial policies with the gravity they are due. Critics of Wilson are the most likely to understand the basic failure of presidential duty presented by Wilson's conscious decisions to debase the lives of a significant population of American citizens. However, they do not explore what this means in terms of presidential success. This paper not only affirms their conclusions by presenting new evidence about the Wilson administration's racial policies, it uses the example of Wilson to comment more broadly on what presidential success means.

“Preserve, Protect and Defend”: Evaluating Presidential Success

There is no universally agreed upon criteria for what makes a “good president,” and there likely never will be. Presidential success is easily definable or redefinable depending on the preferences of the person doing the defining—so much so that some have even questioned the legitimacy of attempting to rate presidents at all (Rudalevige 2015; Felzenberg 2008). Despite this, evaluating the success of presidents is tempting. Newspapers and institutes regularly poll scholars and publish the results just as regular Americans compare the merits of their favorite presidents among friends. Those who score well are usually the same presidents who are historically held in high esteem. The concept of presidential success, despite being imperfect, still exerts a significant enough effect on national memory and self-conceptualization.

Historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr. is widely considered to have inaugurated this means of looking at presidents with a 1948 poll of 55 eminent historians and political scientists for *Life* magazine. The poll was informal and simplistic. Schlesinger's sample was comprised of his professional colleagues—all white men employed at elite colleges and universities. Without any instruction about criteria for judgment they rated the presidents in six categories from “Great” to “Failure.” Wilson was considered “Great,” a ranking he maintained in the 1962 follow-up poll for the *New York Times*. The second poll increased the sample size to 75 experts but kept the criteria-less system of evaluation. Although this open-ended system of evaluation allowed for nuance in judgment, it added nothing substantive to discussions of what “presidential success” truly is. This weakness was compounded by the startling lack of diversity among those surveyed. Even in the third and final 1996 Schlesinger poll, conducted by Schlesinger's son, also a Harvard historian, only two of the 32 scholars surveyed were anything other than white and male. Although there is nothing wrong with polling white men, the results of a poll comprised entirely or mostly of white men are not likely to be reflective of issues or concerns faced by women or people of color. The Schlesinger polls, despite setting the original standard for academic evaluations of presidential success, were deeply flawed.

The flaws in the Schlesinger polls acted as a framework for later ranking systems to “fix.” Scholars began to refine the original categorization. Many chose to sacrifice Schlesinger’s original value judgments in favor of complicating the system by devising specific criteria on which to rate the presidents. Survey respondents have been asked to comment on attributes like “crisis management” or “character and integrity” (Ridings and McIver 2000). Sample sizes were intentionally increased and manipulated to include women, minorities, and experts from both sides of the political spectrum in an effort to get the most balanced results possible (Ridings and McIver 2000; *Wall Street Journal* 2005). Presidential ranking has become so ubiquitous that scholars such as Alvin S. Felzenberg have used it as a springboard to develop their own systems of evaluation while others, such as Marc Landy and Sidney Milkis, have investigated the shared attributes of those presidents who are consistently considered “Great” (2008; 2000). Evaluating presidents and presidential success is a veritable cottage industry.

Of all of the recent ranking systems, the Siena Research Institute US Presidents Study is the most notable. The Siena poll expands on the original 1948 poll in almost every way. The sample size is larger and more inclusive, and respondents are asked to judge presidents on a five-point scale across 20 different categories (Sienna Research Institute 2010). The most recent 2010 poll surveyed 238 historians, political scientists, and presidency scholars on their informed opinions of individual presidents’ personal attributes, abilities, and accomplishments. Although the Siena poll is more substantive than other ranking efforts, it is still flawed. Each of the categories is assigned equal weight when calculated—this means that especially desirable attributes like “leadership ability” and “integrity” are considered to be equally important as “luck” when making a final judgment call on a president’s success. Contrary to what the Siena poll’s methodology implies, some things are more important than others when trying to calculate a president’s success. The Siena Institute’s efforts can be seen as the culmination of scholarly attempts to judge presidents due to the study’s comprehensive nature, but the results are still limited.

The biggest weakness of prominent systems of presidential evaluation, both scholarly and popular alike, is their tendency to be complicated. Even simplistic systems of evaluation lose sight of what is—or should be—at the heart of presidential success. A fundamental role of the president is to promote the interests of the American people. This measure of success is the most basic and meaningful one, rooted in the nation’s most important documents and values. The presidential oath of office confirms that the president is to “preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States” (U.S. Const. art. II, § 1, cl. 8). Any failures to do so, including failures to uphold the Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth Amendment, which offers citizens “equal protection of the laws,” as well as failures to “promote the general welfare” of all Americans are violations of this oath and failures of duty (U.S. Const. amend. XIV; U.S. Const. preamble). Presidents have many responsibilities, but to be considered successful they must, at the bare minimum, uphold this role. This constitutional measure is the sole criterion upon which meaningful presidential success should be judged due to its essential and definitive nature. Any other criteria simply distracts from what is important when evaluating the performance of a president.

Unfortunately, a measure of presidential success rooted in constitutional rights and values has been largely overlooked or ignored. The result of this is that presidents

who have failed to do their duty and broken their oath of office have been frequently considered successful. This should not be possible. All presidents should be judged on whether or not they have worked to uphold the individual rights and equal protections promised to all Americans. In this case, did Woodrow Wilson work to advance and protect these rights? In an effort to determine whether or not Wilson's personal prejudices interfered with his ability to sufficiently fulfill his constitutionally mandated role this paper will investigate the realities of two Wilson Administration racial policies, the segregation of the civil service and the response to race-based mob violence.

“Justice Done in Every Matter”: Wilson’s Views on Race

Woodrow Wilson was the first president from the South since prior to the Civil War, and he carried with him all of the baggage that that implied. Born in Staunton, Virginia, in 1856, Wilson's youth was spent in Georgia and both Carolinas. Wilson's earliest memories were of the Civil War, and he came of age during the Reconstruction. White supremacy is not a uniquely Southern ideology, but Wilson's youth was informed by it, and he identified deeply with his Southern background. It was not uncommon for him to take the side of the South in debates and, as he matured, he began to use his platform to act as a voice for the American South in the American North (Wilson, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson* hereafter cited as *PWW*, 2:19–25). A part of this voice was an unexamined proclivity for white supremacy.

Wilson was both a conduit and a source for the articulation of postbellum Southern racial ideas. He had been shaped by them, and he sought to shape the world in their image. His historical writings popularized a view of Reconstruction in which the honorable South was plagued by “the intolerable burden of governments sustained by the votes of ignorant negroes and conducted in the interest of adventurers” (Wilson 1902, 5:58). Wilson's best-selling series, *A History of the American People*, portrayed black suffrage as a social ill and the development of Jim Crow laws as “imperatively necessary” for the protection of the South (5:20). As the head of Princeton, Wilson discouraged African Americans from applying, arguing in 1904 that “the whole temper and tradition of the place are such that no negro has ever applied for admission” (quoted in Princeton University Board of Trustees 2016). When directly challenged by the request for admissions information by an African American in 1909, Wilson recommended that it was “altogether inadvisable for a colored man to enter Princeton” (quoted in Princeton University Board of Trustees 2016). Throughout his career, Wilson worked to keep African Americans out of places of power and privilege both socially and institutionally.

This did not keep him from soliciting the black vote during the 1912 presidential election. African American support for Wilson's candidacy was spurred by distaste for the other candidates and exploited by the Wilson campaign (DuBois 1973). In private meetings with civil rights leaders, Wilson promised to be “president of all the people” and vowed to refrain from discriminatory hiring practices (*PWW*, 25:25). In a letter to Bishop Alexander Walters, an ex-slave and leading black minister, Wilson wrote of his “earnest wish to see justice done in every matter” and his promise that “[African Americans] may count upon me for absolute fair dealing” (ibid. 449). Excerpts of the letter were published and black leaders, despite misgivings, extended their support to

Wilson (NAACP 1912, 216–17). The culmination of their efforts was an unprecedented turnout among black voters for a Democratic candidate (DuBois 1973; Villard 1913). African Americans, drawn in by explicit promises, placed their faith in Woodrow Wilson.

“A New Humiliation”: The Segregation of the Federal Government

Of all Wilson’s racial policies as president, the most problematic was the segregation of the federal government. Although never mandated by an executive order, Wilson helped found a political regime that allowed for the further subordination of African American federal workers. His appointments of Southern Democrats in key cabinet positions created a culture in which, more than any previous administration since the end of Reconstruction, white supremacy was a pursued policy. The slights toward the black community came first in the form of the appointments of white men to offices traditionally held by African Americans, such as the American ambassador to Haiti, before disseminating throughout the executive branch in the form of firings, demotions, discriminatory hiring practices, and blatant segregation (Villard 1913). This push for segregation represented a symbolic and economic blow to the black community that would not be remedied for another generation.

Segregation was a legitimate threat for the African American community, especially in Washington, DC. The nation’s capital was a relatively integrated city with a booming black middle class whose prosperity was anchored in government jobs (*Washington Bee* 1901a; *Washington Bee* 1901b; *Washington Bee* 1910). Racism was pervasive, but a government job represented prestige and a stable salary. The city was looked at by African Americans across the country as a beacon of hope (Watkins 1897). Encroaching segregation in other parts of the United States had sapped African Americans of their social mobility, maintaining oppressive racial hierarchies that disenfranchised voters and kept them in a cycle of abject poverty. The prospect of segregation reaching Washington threatened to destroy the black middle class that had thrived there for over half a century, undermining the very basis of African American success and ambition at the turn of the twentieth century.

The prospect of segregation in Washington was first brought to Wilson’s attention on April 11, 1913, from a very different perspective. Texas-born Postmaster General Albert Burleson broached the subject in a Cabinet meeting roughly a month after Wilson’s inauguration. His concern was for white railway mail clerks who had the “unpleasant” experience of having to work in cars alongside black railway mail clerks (Daniels quoted *PWW*, 27:290). Burleson’s concern was not unique; his sentiments were echoed by both other Cabinet members and the platform of the newly established National Democratic Fair Play Association, an organization of white office-seekers who exploited fears about the virtue of white women working under black supervisors in the federal government to push for segregation (Annin 1913; *New York Times* 1913). Wilson expressed his wish to have “the matter adjusted in a way to make the least friction” (*PWW*, 27:291). By July 1913, reports of segregation confirmed Wilson’s acquiescence to the pro-segregation wishes of his cabinet members (*PWW*, 28:60). In response to questions about the veracity of the reports, Wilson asserted that it was not only true but a positive development, writing, “My own feeling is, by putting certain

bureaus and sections of the service in the charge of negroes we are rendering them more safe in their possession of office and less likely to be discriminated against" (65). He echoed that sentiment publicly (278). It is arguable that Wilson, a Southern progressive, genuinely believed he was acting in the interests of both races. Scholars such as Michael McGerr (2003) have illustrated that segregation was not at odds with contemporary progressive notions of race relations. Even so, these notions were still built atop fears of African American advancement and were not left unchallenged.

Wilson's position was heavily criticized by civil rights leaders around the country. Robert N. Wood, writing for the United Colored Democracy in an August 5, 1913, letter, protested segregation on the grounds that "[African Americans] see in the separation of the races in the matter of soup and soap the beginning of a movement to deprive colored man entirely of soup and soap, to eliminate him wholly from the Civil Service of the United States" (*PWW*, 28:117). The black community was already sensing a threat to their livelihoods. The NAACP echoed Wood's sentiments in a widely published August 15 letter, adding that "wherever there are men who rob the Negroes of their votes, who exploit and degrade and insult and lynch those they call inferiors, there this mistaken action of the Federal Government will be cited as the warrant for new racial outrages" (165). Wilson refused to reconsider his position and continued to tacitly support the actions carried out by his department heads. He made the decision to uphold segregation in the civil service.

Wilson's actions had a demoralizing effect on the black community. Segregation wound its way through the structure of the executive branch, leaving alienation and shame in its wake. In the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, three female African American employees were forced to use a bathroom for their lunchroom. When one of the women objected, she was fired (Nerney quoted in *PWW*, 28:404). In the Post Office Department, African Americans did not get a lunchroom at all. The Treasury Department saw African American women segregated out to work in rooms with poor light and ventilation. An NAACP report revealed they had "been moved several times but originally had been in rooms with white clerks where they had good light and air" (406). Ambitious black civil servants were demoted across departments, taking considerable cuts in pay and prestige (*Washington Bee* 1914). It is no wonder that, in an August 18, 1913, letter Booker T. Washington commented, "I have never seen the colored people so discouraged and bitter as they are at the present time" (*PWW*, 28:127).

In light of these developments, civil rights leaders and the NAACP attempted to arouse public sentiment against the administration through the use of mass meetings and publications. This development inspired the Wilson administration to not only retract their initial assertion that segregation was beneficial but to deny its existence altogether. Treasury Secretary William Gibbs McAdoo wrote a letter, most likely approved by the president, in which he claimed, "There is no 'segregation issue' in the Treasury Department. It has always been a mischievous exaggeration" (*PWW*, 28:453). This was a blatant falsehood—there was clearly a segregation issue in the Treasury Department and the federal government as a whole—and a direct contradiction to what the Wilson administration had previously stated publicly regarding the existence of segregation in the civil service.

The culminating moment for both the opposition and administration came on November 6, 1913. In response to a petition with more than 20,000 signatures from individuals in 36 states protesting the segregation of the federal government, Wilson granted an audience with black civil rights leader William Monroe Trotter (*PWW*, 28:491). Trotter used the meeting to condemn Wilson's willingness to "inaugurate a new humiliation, a new handicap, a new caste of slavery" on the black community (493). Wilson responded by explicitly saying "there is no policy on the part of the administration looking to segregation" (496). Wilson may have genuinely believed that segregation was beneficial, but he was not willing to even offer a defense of his administration's actions. Perhaps this is because he knew that segregating the civil service represented a failure of his duty to all American citizens. Ultimately, Wilson's acquiescence to his Cabinet secretaries indicated a prioritization of white supremacy over black achievement—a trend that began in Wilson's academic career that he took with him to the White House.

The fallout of Wilson's meeting with Trotter played out in multiple ways. The white press castigated Trotter and the black press heralded him as a hero (*New York Times* 1913; *Broad Ax* 1914). The public focus on segregation in the federal government briefly limited the policy's continued adoption, but by early 1914 it became clear that segregation was here to stay (*PWW*, 29:105). Organized protests from the black community never stopped, but by the early 1920s the segregation in the federal government had seeped out into the city. DC had lost its reputation as a haven for African Americans and was now just as segregated as other Southern cities (*Washington Bee* 1921; *Cleveland Gazette* 1925). Segregation within the federal government reigned supreme, despite some half-hearted attempts to reverse it, until the 1960s. The Wilson administration's policy of segregation, supported by Wilson himself, ruined the economic and social well-being of thousands of families. His response to segregation was one that explicitly reneged on a campaign promise and failed to achieve one of his most basic presidential duties—the promotion and extension of welfare and liberty.

"Disgrace to Democracy": The Wilson Administration and Mob Violence

The legitimization of white supremacy in the federal government had the unintended consequence of further destabilizing race relations. For all of Wilson's insistence on using segregation to solve racial problems in a way that would result in the least amount of friction possible, his consent in segregating the federal workforce had a trickle-down effect that helped to exacerbate racial tensions across the country and eventually culminated in lynchings and race riots. Wilson's initial actions were compounded by other factors that put strain on the American people, like the advent of World War I, shifting demographics and the rise of new industry. Violence against African Americans was nothing new—lynching had been endemic in the United States since the end of the Civil War and race riots were not an original development—but it became more frequent, more pronounced, and more destructive during Wilson's presidency. Highly publicized lynchings and an outbreak of race riots in Wilson's second term were abetted by his reluctance to take any sort of definitive action, and the African American community was left facing these new challenges while saddled with a government that, more than any other in the past 50 years, was deaf to their concerns.

Racial violence presented a clear and present danger to the African American community. Lynching and mob violence had long been a tactic used to threaten African Americans into subordination. The practice had evolved into its contemporary form during Reconstruction as a response to legislation that brought legitimate political and economic power into the hands of African Americans. As Woodrow Wilson himself put it “[white men] took the law into their own hands, and began to attempt by intimidation what they were not allowed to attempt by the ballot or any ordered course of public action” (1902, 5:59). Their attempts were successful. Lynching and other forms of mob violence threatened African American lives, well-being, families, and communities. It undermined their ability to protect their social and economic interests, and it brought tragedy and horror wherever it appeared.

Although lynchings had been in decline since their peak in the 1890s, they were still considered enough of a threat in the 1910s to warrant the NAACP to press Wilson to offer his support in condemning mob activity (NAACP 1919; *PWW*, 25:25). Wilson promised to do just that although he did express reservations about the ability of the federal government to be of much use in the matter (*PWW*, 25:26). Instead of upholding his promise, Wilson was at best silent on the issue and at worse antagonistic. In an oft-repeated anecdote about the administration, Wilson held a private showing of D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film, *Birth of a Nation*, at the White House. The film, which portrayed the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan as a group of dashing heroes who protected the virtue of white women from devious freed blacks in the Reconstruction-era South, enflamed racial tensions and directly led to the reinvigoration of the KKK. Although the Wilson administration did attempt to distance itself from the film following huge amounts of backlash from the black community, it is true that the film accurately reflected Wilson’s own understanding of Reconstruction (*Broad Ax* 1915). The dynamics of the Reconstruction-era South shown in the film are the same ones that Wilson himself helped to develop in his own historical writing—he is even quoted in the film. Despite the administration’s efforts to retract their previous support of the film, Wilson again put strain on race relations and unintentionally promoted violence against African Americans.

Despite previous failures, Wilson still could have easily made a positive impact against lynching and mob violence. In 1916, a brutal, well-publicized lynching in Waco, Texas, aptly referred to as the “Waco Horror” by the NAACP, spotlighted the issue internationally (1916). Wilson had an opportunity to comment publicly on the tragedy and condemn lynching. Instead, he was silent. Wilson’s previous hesitation about the ability of the federal government to intervene with state criminal law could have been a reason for his reluctance but, if so, it is notable that he did condemn mob violence after the 1918 lynching of a German-American during World War I. In this instance, he compared lynchers to “disgraceful” Germans and reminded Americans that “every mob contributes to German lies about the United States” (Wilson Speech July 26, 1918). It is logical that Wilson would seek to limit internal strife during war time, but it is also a clear indicator of his priorities that a public denunciation of lynching came only at a moment when it was possible to do so in a way that did not cross the color line.

Lynching was not the only form of mob violence faced by African Americans. Wilson’s second term saw two waves of urban race riots that cost hundreds of lives and

millions of dollars' worth in property damage (Greuning and DuBois 1917; McWhirter 2011). The massacres that swept through East St. Louis in 1917 and the string of riots that ignited in cities such as Chicago and Washington, DC, in 1919 shared marked similarities. Both had roots in the racial tensions spurred by continued lynchings and the national example set by the segregation of the federal government. Both were exacerbated by the northern migration of black workers, the uneven relationship between labor and capital, and the stresses of war (U.S. Congress 1918; *New York Times* 1919). Although there were multiple instances of riots and massacres in the late 1910s, I will be focusing on the riots of 1917 and 1919 since they best exemplify the overall trend.

The massacre in East St. Louis exploded out of tensions between black and white workers in the summer of 1917. Tensions had existed since May, but conditions worsened in July with a drive-by shooting in a black area of the city by two white men (U.S. Congress 1918). Retribution sought by African Americans triggered violent retaliation by whites that lasted for days. Precise death tolls are unknown due to underreporting, but anywhere from 40 to 200 African Americans and 8 white people were killed (U.S. Congress 1918; Greuning and Dubois 1917). Most of the deaths and the worst of the damage came from the fires set by white rioters in the black areas of the city. The Wilson administration remained silent on this incident.

Calls for federal intervention on behalf of the African American community were immediate. They were united by the sentiment expressed by an NAACP report that asked "And what of the federal government?" (Greuning and DuBois 1917, 238) and found a well-articulated vocalization in eminent African American professor Kelly Miller's widely printed "Disgrace of Democracy: An Open Letter to Woodrow Wilson" (Miller 1917). Miller used the ongoing war to frame his argument, writing "the Negro, Mr. President, in this emergency, will stand by you and the nation. Will you and the nation stand by the Negro?" (13). African Americans also created public outlets for their protests, turning to the streets in an unprecedented Silent Protest Parade (*PWW*, 42:342). The protestors echoed the sentiments expressed in Miller's letter, calling for "lynching and mob violence [to] be made a national crime" (343). The African American community was not about to go down without a fight.

For all of his silence, Wilson was aware of the events as they played out. Unable to ignore the horror of the riot, Wilson privately expressed his anxiety, referring to events as "tragical and outrageous" (*PWW*, 43:300; 43:123). In formulating a response, Wilson turned to his Attorney General, where the two conferred that "no facts have been presented to [the government] which would justify federal action" (300). Wilson did not feel as though he had the jurisdiction to intervene, but he was still free to make a public comment regarding the violence. In situations like this, a president's ability to appeal directly to the people can be a great asset (Neustadt 1991). Instead, he said nothing. The administration's lack of response was seen as suspicious in light of established racial policies (*New York Evening Post* reprinted in NAACP 1917, 304). Matters were made worse when a delegation of young black activists seeking an audience with the president in order to press for a public condemnation of the riot was turned away (*PWW*, 43:413). Sensing growing discontent, Wilson did agree to a meeting a few days later where he "promised that everything possible would be done by the federal government to punish persons guilty of violence against blacks and to

prevent similar offenses in the future” (ibid.). The response was published, but it is noteworthy that it took the concentrated pressure of the black community before the administration displayed any kind of leadership.

When similar offenses did occur in the future, the Wilson administration made no move to prevent them. The year 1919 saw the outbreak of over 30 race riots (*New York Times* 1919). Tensions that contributed to the 1917 riot were compounded by the demographic changes caused by returning soldiers and anxieties about Bolshevism in America. These tensions spilled out into the streets in the form of racially charged violence. African Americans in cities across the nation were beaten, assaulted, and brutally murdered; their houses were set ablaze and their property destroyed (McWhirter 2011; NAACP 1919). Conditions deteriorated badly, but Wilson’s attentions were turned elsewhere. He was primarily focused on a futile crusade to convince America to ratify the League of Nations, a sort of proto-United Nations designed to prevent another world war. He made no effort to understand the worsening racial tensions within the country or make any decisions about it. He was aware of the situation, given the extensive press coverage the riots received, but his was not an active interest.

Wilson’s failures in the area of tackling mob violence were twofold. The first comes from his fundamental failure to promote the general welfare of *all* Americans. Wilson’s failures to condemn mob violence in a timely and meaningful way, in addition to his implicit assertion of white supremacy at the federal level, created an environment that was amenable to racial violence. It would not have taken the refutation of principles concerning government intervention to issue a more timely statement on the evils of mob violence, and Wilson’s reluctance to do so is particularly suspicious given his established views on the inferiority of the black race. Wilson’s second failure concerns his general competency. In each of the crises discussed in this section, Wilson failed to take sufficient action. His reactions were either delayed or nonexistent in situations where a single phrase could have impacted the national understanding of an event. In the face of chaos, especially in 1919, any sort of proactive leadership could have potentially helped to quell the riots. Wilson could have easily used his station as president to lead the nation rhetorically, and he could have also used the riots as an opportunity to do something substantive about the plight of African Americans. Instead, he prioritized international affairs over the harsh realities of life on the American domestic front. In this case, Wilson’s failures were compounded by failures in a way that undermines presidential success on multiple fronts.

Reevaluating Legacies: A Conclusion

There is no concrete measure of presidential success, but some things are clearly indicative. In their efforts to be as substantive as possible, popular academic frameworks for presidential assessment have relied on a myriad of attributes to parse success from failure. These traits simply complicate meaningful evaluations of a presidency, obscuring what is truly important about the role of a chief executive. The true determiner is fundamental: to be successful, a president must work to uphold the individual rights and promote the welfare of all Americans. A commitment to civil and human rights is not only a necessary quality to have; indeed, it is critical. It is rooted in the documents this country was founded on, and it is the most reflective of our guiding

values. There is no reason that it should not be imperative in any assessment of a president.

Past systems of evaluation have been kind to presidents who fail to fulfill this basic expectation. Their kindness is unwarranted and harmful. In the case of Woodrow Wilson, his views on race, amplified by his role as chief executive, had disastrous consequences for many people. At best, it cost them their social and economic mobility; at worst, it cost some their lives. Wilson may have reacted more appropriately in other situations, and he may have left other, more positive legacies, but it should not be possible to be considered a successful president if your choices intentionally make the lives of a large group of citizens considerably worse. Rewarding those who have failed to pass this basic test is not only irresponsible, it is damaging—the praise of leaders like President Wilson sets a bad example for future aspirants to office and continues to harm groups that have been wronged in the past. It is not anachronistic to hold presidents accountable to a constitutional standard of individual rights and protections, and it should not be considered idealistic to expect such behavior from an elected official holding the country’s highest station. The positive reputation awarded to Wilson has been an inaccurate reflection of his presidential performance and a miscarriage of justice. It is not out of bounds to ask for a public reevaluation.

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