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Members of the Woodrow Wilson Legacy Review Committee:

Thank you for soliciting my assessment of Woodrow Wilson and his ongoing historical meaning. Given your committee's charge to respond to student protests about the racism embedded in Wilson's commemoration, I focus on the racial legacies of the Wilson presidency, and, as you will see, discuss two aspects of President Wilson's import. First, I consider Wilson's role in and the experience of racial segregation in the civil service. Second, I explore Wilson's seldom noted opposition to lynching and its complicated meaning in the context of twentieth-century liberalism. I argue that we cannot simply excuse Wilson's racist politicking as a feature of him being "a man of his time." In the view of many members of his own administration, to wide swaths of the American people, and arguably, at times, to Wilson himself, his segregationist approach to governance was both preventable and highly questionable. At the very same time, Wilson's tenure in the White House bore positive consequences that must be taken into account when pondering his racial legacy. I contend, in fact, that Woodrow Wilson's commitment to federalism and a reformist vision of liberalism provided an important foundation to later versions of racial progressivism, though admittedly, in ways even Wilson could never have intended.

Upon arriving in Washington in 1912, the Wilson administration brought with it the segregation of the so-called races, a practice widely known by its colloquial name, Jim Crow. Racial segregation, as a series of state and local laws, did not exist in the federal bureaucracy prior to Wilson's arrival. It was common, in fact, to find African American supervisors issuing orders to white staffers in government offices across the District. Wilson and most of his appointees, however, were elite white Southerners, emotionally, intellectually, and culturally. Born in Virginia before the start of the U.S. Civil War, Woodrow Wilson remained sympathetic to the conquered Confederacy, and he held a deep antipathy for the experiment of Reconstruction, which he and many others deemed, on professed intellectual grounds, a resounding failure of black self-governance. Among his more intimate associates, the president was also known to have a talent for lightening the otherwise heavy mood at cabinet meetings by telling "darky" jokes – pejorative anti-black humor – and often doing so in "Negro" dialect. Such personal foibles and beliefs were not incidental to Wilson's approach to governance; they proved integral. Within six months of his winning the presidential election of 1912, Wilson and his political appointees began restructuring the federal bureaucracy in accordance with the perceived racial mores of the New South.

Ever the big thinker, Wilson left Jim Crow's gritty (and highly suspect) managerial details to his staffers. The way they went about it suggests that even the Wilson White House questioned the legality of federal Jim Crow. Department heads often chose not to write down segregation orders, preferring to issue directives by telephone or word of mouth. In the Department of the Treasury, a verbal order was issued first, then, a few days later, placards appeared outside bathrooms reading,

“For colored employees.” From the spring of 1913 through the summer and into the fall, federal segregation continued. With the changing seasons, black employees across Washington saw their workplaces radically and surreptitiously reorganized, bureau by bureau. During that first year of implementation, many federal workers would leave work on Fridays and return on Mondays to find furniture dramatically rearranged, partitions erected, and whole rooms relocated.

In one especially dramatic example, some 300 black women employees in the Bureau of Printing and Engraving returned from a weekend in mid-November to find half of the women’s dressing room converted into a “Colored Only” dining room. Integrated eating at the engraving bureau had apparently horrified First Lady Ellen Axson Wilson during her tour of the facility. Sources suggest that this implementation of Jim Crow came specifically at her behest. Regardless of the policy’s origin, black women who had used the bureau’s dining hall for years found their lunch table now opened out onto sinks and commodes. Hundreds of black women were forced to eat their afternoon meals to a chorus of flushing toilets, and in a “dining room” that could now only accommodate 40 people.

Several things about Jim Crow in the civil service help us assess Wilson’s legacy. For starters, Wilson’s understanding of racial segregation mirrored the logic articulated by the United States Supreme Court in its landmark decision, *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). The court ruled in *Plessy* that racial segregation was not tantamount to discrimination and, thus, it did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment. In the court’s majority decision, Justice Henry Billings Brown remarked that the court considered false “the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority.” Jim Crow laws made no such claim, the court maintained, and any notion that segregation meant inequality existed “solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it.”

President Wilson made precisely the same argument in 1913. As he told a group of black activists who had come to the White House to protest Jim Crow measures, “I do not think the spirit of discrimination has been shown in any essential manner.” Rather, segregation, again in Wilson’s words, helped prevent “friction, or rather the discontent and uneasiness, which had prevailed in many departments.” In Wilson’s estimation, localized and modest segregation measures had been “exaggerated.” He went so far as to avow, “There is no policy on the part of the administration looking to segregation.”

The historical record contradicts this position. What’s more, the actual process by which whites imposed segregation suggests that the Wilson Administration knew its actions were morally questionable, potentially illegal, and that they would elicit pushback from African Americans and their allies. The secretive and ad hoc measures taken by white administrators were one thing, but Wilson’s Jim Crow operatives also ramped up security. “The watch force of the building,” as one decree outlined, “has been directed to render every assistance in enforcing this order.” In most instances, white workers became segregation’s shock troops. Many whites literally bullied their black co-workers into “place.” Workplace altercations were often the result. As one account in the press described, the implementation of Jim Crow was “probably the most dangerous phase of the whole situation.” While many southern Progressives, Wilson included, argued that segregating the civil service would reduce the threat of racial violence in the federal workforce, it clearly had the opposite effect.

Wilson’s separate-but-equal understanding of “order” may have been in step with dominant notions of Jim Crow jurisprudence. It bears repeating, however, that he was not simply, as is so often remarked, “a man of his time.” Countless white Americans, to say nothing of millions of non-whites, opposed federal Jim Crow. Wilson’s segregating of the civil service inspired white Americans from twenty-six states to pepper the White House with letters of protest. The Wilson Administration received over 200 letters, in fact. Many complaints came from white members of the NAACP, but others belonged principally to patriotic social clubs, veterans’ organizations, and even white staffers from within the federal bureaucracy. Others still were simply everyday

Americans with no professional affiliations at all. As one impassioned attorney and self-described Progressive from Omaha, NE, intoned, “For the past five years I have devoted all my energy to fighting municipal corruption and the social evil. I know something of what it means to fight in the battle for reform.” Proclaiming *his* vision of progressivism as being opposed to segregation, the man then threatened, “I shall endeavor to enlist the sympathy and support of wealthy and powerful white persons in this cause.”

During the Wilson era, white Americans seemed to be fighting over the soul of modern Progressivism, and given the president’s influence, progressivism’s more racist strains carried the day. Most historians agree that, as the 28th President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson advanced important reforms, reigning in certain excesses of industrial capitalism, instituting critical regulations in the banking sector, and making long-term contributions to the fruitful expansion of diplomacy abroad and federal authority at home. But Wilson and many of his staffers also believed the federal government could better protect life, liberty, and property through legalized racial separation. Jim Crow, in other words, served as a crucial reformist instrument. It revealed, too, a deep ambivalence at the heart of modern white supremacy, one that Wilson tried mightily to reconcile.

If segregation, an official expression of white power, represented order, then lynching, its dark side, threatened disorder. As a kind of social insurance, Jim Crow’s racism included practices of paternalism. Black people, being politically enfeebled by forced demotions and disenfranchisement, required, demanded, and in many instances were offered the expanded patronage and protection of America’s white elite. Traditions of black self-defense attest that it was an offer blacks did not always accept. Nevertheless, white paternalism, as a cultural feature of Jim Crow, must be considered when weighing the gravity of Woodrow Wilson’s legacy.

Take, again, the problem of lynching. In June of 1918, Robert R. Moton, Booker T.’s successor at the Tuskegee Institution, wrote President Wilson asking him to issue a powerful public condemnation of extralegal white terrorism. A string of murders, including the hanging of a pregnant black woman in rural Georgia, prompted Moton to write, “I think a strong word definitely from you on this lynching proposition will have more effect just now than any other one thing.” In keeping with the conventions of Jim Crow patronage, Moton closed his letter professing his “loyalty absolutely to you,” and begging forgiveness “for writing frankly, or for adding another ounce to your already too heavy burden.” Less than two weeks later, Wilson made his speech, “Mob Action.” “Every American,” Wilson professed, “who takes part in the action of a mob or gives it any sort of countenance is no true son of this great Democracy.” In the context of World War I, the president then pleaded, “How shall we commend democracy to the acceptance of other peoples, if we disgrace our own...proving that it is...no protection to the weak?”

The phrasing here is critical, both for understanding Wilson and the long consequences of the kind of white supremacy he espoused. In casting African Americans as “the weak,” Wilson affirmed a particular strain of Southern liberalism that ultimately set the course of liberalism more broadly. Under Jim Crow progressivism, state actors needed to temper mob rule, or regulate the popular sovereignty for which lynching served as the ultimate, deadly expression. To be a liberal, in other words, meant protecting an apparently “weak” Negro – once known widely as “the Lady of the Races” – from an overreach of Anglo-Saxon strength. It meant, in short, protecting dark savages from white barbarians. What did this mean politically? In domestic terms, that was simple; Wilson was anti-lynching.

In geopolitical terms, it was slightly more complicated. In Wilson’s view, Germany represented the dangers of white barbarism on the world stage; Haiti and the non-white nations of the Americas, the dark savage. I contend, in fact, that both the U.S. occupation of Haiti (1915-1934), and Wilson’s efforts to drive the Germans out of the Americas and parts of Europe served as extensions of the president’s New South worldview. Wilson’s foreign policy represented another refraction of his commitment to Jim Crow order. With the U.S. military at his service, he ordered

the takeover of Haitian banks, parliament, and infrastructure, citing the country's political instability as proof of black state failure. (Prior to 1915, Haiti had seven presidents in seven years). And as Wilson himself said of the Germans, "Germany has outlawed herself among the nations, and has made lynchers of her armies. [American] lynchers emulate her disgraceful example." By the president's estimation, geopolitical peace, like administrative peace in Washington, would be brought about through the wise and judicious deployment of Anglo-Saxon might.

In assessing Wilson's commemoration, his liberalism must be considered in relation to its costs and consequences. Wilson's racism and paternalism – his liberalism – prompted him to undercut non-whites' claims for self-determination and, through armed occupation and segregation, helped bring violence to people of color across the U.S., the Caribbean, and Latin America. After Wilson's death, however, African Americans and white progressives forced the Democratic Party to come to terms with Wilson's legacy. In 1932, black voters withheld electoral support from Franklin Roosevelt, citing FDR's 1913 signing of segregation directives and his unilateral rewriting of the Haitian constitution a few years later, both on Wilson's orders. (That election year, Roosevelt earned only 25% of the black vote). During the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, civil rights activists took Wilson's own ideas about state responsibility and used them to secure important political and institutional gains across the country. Black progressives used Southern liberalism to get "Colored Only" courts, police forces, and other federal investments from segregationist Southerners itching to prove that white legislators could actually make separate equal. Much more notably, Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the advocates of non-violent direct action laid their bodies on the line, daring white state actors to make good on their paternalist promises. These men and women did not just shame American politicians in the eyes of the world, but they forced self-professed liberals into fresh and fruitful negotiations. Civil Rights activists, in effect, used a holdover of New South political culture to secure the very things from which so many whites had hoped to divest them – civil rights and voting rights.

These are breakthroughs for which Wilson should not receive credit, but that should be celebrated in any future honoring of Wilson's memory. The ability of marginalized, colonized, and wrongly demoted people to essentially turn Jim Crow liberalism into civil rights reform represents, in itself, an accomplishment worthy of commemoration.

In considering how best to honor Wilson's memory, we would do well to remember the ironies of American politics. Franklin Roosevelt presided over the most far-reaching segregationist program in American history – the New Deal – and yet also did more than any of his predecessors to advance the economic improvement of Afro-America. President Lyndon Johnson, known for his open use of vile racial epithets, proved to be one of the nation's most effective opponents of segregationist politicking. And Woodrow Wilson, a segregationist and U.S. expansionist, made government increasingly responsible for protecting life, liberty, and property, even if his own limitations prevented him from democratically applying his vision. We can and should protect and preserve a fuller understanding of the memory of Wilson, Roosevelt, and others by electing to honor and elevate those that they would not.

Respectfully submitted,

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