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Washington, D. C. 20016

November 21, 2015

President Christopher L. Eisgruber
One Nassau Hall
Princeton University
Princeton, New Jersey 08540

Dear President Eisgruber:

Reports of efforts to remove the images and name of Woodrow Wilson 1879 from institutions at our alma mater have concerned many people, myself included. As someone who has spent much of an academic career studying Wilson and his thought, words, and actions, may I share with you a few observations about the facts and context surrounding his alleged "racism."

The heart of the matter is that his record on matters of race should never be excused but neither should it be overblown or exaggerated. As president of both Princeton and the United States he did show signs of racial prejudice. He explicitly discouraged an accomplished African-American student from applying to Princeton, on the grounds that the student would not find a welcoming atmosphere---which was almost certainly true. Soon after he got to Washington he allowed members of his cabinet to mount efforts to segregate facilities in their departments and he condoned reductions in the categories of federal jobs open to African-Americans. Protests by the newly formed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) brought a halt to formal segregation in the federal workplace, although it informally prevailed in practice. The employment reductions continued unabated, and the return of the Republicans to power in the 1920s did not reverse this trend. Most famously, Wilson permitted D. W. Griffith's cinematically brilliant but scurrilously racist film *The Birth of a Nation* to be screened at the White House. These and a few other incidents undeniably redound to the discredit of his historical reputation.

But consider some other examples. 2016 will mark the centennial of the appointment of the first Jew to the Supreme Court of the United States, the great Louis D. Brandeis---by President Wilson. Earlier, as governor of New Jersey, he had appointed the first Jew to that state's supreme court, and at Princeton he had appointed the first Jew and the first Catholic to the faculty. He fought and lost his greatest battle at Princeton against the social exclusiveness of the eating clubs. Granted, those actions

involved religion, white ethnicity, and class, but even in black-white race relations there were some bright spots. In 1902, he scandalized his southern in-laws by inviting Booker T. Washington to participate in his inauguration as president of Princeton, and his daughter remembered him saying that Washington gave the best speech at the ceremonies (“Even better than yours, Father?” she recalled asking him). In 1918, he issued a statement condemning lynching as “this disgraceful evil” and a betrayal of America’s most cherished values. That same year he intervened in the Mississippi Democratic primary against the racist demagogue Senator James K. Vardaman. His main reason for opposing Vardaman was that the senator had opposed going into World War I, but Vardaman’s customary playing of the race card could not save him from defeat. As for *The Birth of a Nation* incident, Wilson’s alleged endorsement of the film as “history written by lightning” was invented by a Hollywood writer twenty years later. At the screening, the president seemed preoccupied and left mid-way through the showing. Later, he tried to discourage the film’s re-release.

The best way to judge Wilson on matters of race is not to keep score between good and bad deeds but to recognize him and judge him for what he really was. Many have made snap judgments based on his birth in Virginia on the eve of the Civil War and his upbringing in Georgia and South Carolina during the war and Reconstruction to write him off as a typical white man of those places and times. Such a characterization is wrong. As the son of a couple who had recently moved from Ohio, Wilson did not have deep roots in the South (or in America, either---he is the only president between Andrew Jackson and Barack Obama to have a foreign-born parent and the only one since Jackson to have no American-born grandparents). As a child in Presbyterian manses, he grew up somewhat sheltered from his southern surroundings, and his classmates at Princeton in the 1870s recalled that he had no southern accent. While studying law at the University of Virginia less than two decades after the Civil War, he published essays applauding the defeat of the Confederacy and welcoming the demise of slavery. When he entered national politics, he worried correctly about the weakness of his support for the Democratic presidential nomination in the South, and as his inauguration day approached he privately grumbled about talk of his administration being “Dixified.” Except for two brief, unhappy interludes studying law in Charlottesville and practicing law in Atlanta, Wilson spent his entire adult life outside the South, and he turned down a career academic’s dream job there, the presidency of the University of Virginia, six years before he unexpectedly became president of Princeton.

The correct way to assess Wilson’s racial attitudes is as a fairly typical white *Northerner* of his time. This means that he shared their near blindness toward racial injustice and impatience with efforts to arouse concern about what was happening along the color line. Such attitudes epitomized the views of the vast majority of whites outside the former Confederate and Border States. Those attitudes stood in stark contrast to the obsessive heed that their southern counterparts paid to race. This was true not only of such demagogues as Vardaman and Tom Watson of Georgia but also of more genteel sorts such as Wilson’s navy secretary Josephus Daniels and the refined other senator from Mississippi, John Sharp Williams. Southern whites of that time could feel a sense of security as they locked down Jim Crow and disfranchised nearly all African-

Americans. They had ended Reconstruction decades earlier and arrogated total political control to themselves. Successive Supreme Court decisions, most notably *Plessy v. Ferguson*, had removed any danger of constitutional challenge under the Fourteenth or Fifteenth Amendments. Likewise, the Republican party had increasingly shunned African-Americans in favor of courting southern whites, and in his 1912 break with the Republicans Theodore Roosevelt had organized his new Progressive Party as a whites-only body in the South. These policies impelled some prominent African-Americans, led by W. E. B. Du Bois, to support Wilson for president in 1912---much to their later sorrow. Through all of this, southern whites remained vigilant against any perceived threat to their racist regime. Wilson offered them no threat, except for that one-time condemnation of lynching, but he did not share their underlying obsession with race.

Wilson's record on race needs to be judged fairly for what it was and was not. Equally important, that record should not eclipse the many great things he did at Princeton and in the world. He began the long march toward the transformation of a small, snobbish men's college into this great, diverse university that can vigorously question his views and legacy. He created such legislative monuments as the Federal Reserve System and Federal Trade Commission, the graduated income tax, the inheritance tax, and aid to farmers and organized labor---precursors to the New Deal and Great Society. Unlike Princeton's other American president, James Madison 1771, Woodrow Wilson won his war, and with his Fourteen Points he measurably shortened that war. Through the Fourteen Points and his essential role in creating the League of Nations, he sought to build a new world order that might prevent major wars and would mark the beginning of the end of colonialism. Du Bois, for one, grasped the implications of Wilson's actions, and he supported his foreign policies despite bitter disappointment with the president's racial record at home. Woodrow Wilson poses the same question for judgment as does Thomas Jefferson: do his racial transgressions (which were far less than Jefferson's) outweigh the great things he did and the great legacies he left behind?

I know that you will weigh many considerations in dealing with questions involving the place of race in America and the role and legacies of Wilson. Excellent historical work over the last half century has illuminated the crucial significance of race in our nation's history, and anything that can be done to foster awareness and appreciation of this dimension of our national life is all to the good. A great place of scholarship and inquiry will pursue such efforts in the true spirit of the place, with deliberation, dispassion, and resolve. I applaud efforts in this direction.

Yours sincerely,

John Milton Cooper, Jr. '61 P'93