



ADRIANE LENTZ-SMITH
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
BOX 90719
DURHAM NC 27708-0719

320 CARR BUILDING
TEL (919) 684-2837
FAX (919) 681-7670
<http://history.duke.edu>

Mr. Brent Henry
Chair, Wilson Legacy Review Committee
& Vice Chair, Princeton University Board of Trustees
Princeton University
Princeton, New Jersey 08544

January 15, 2016

Dear Mr. Henry and Members of the Wilson Legacy Review Committee:

Thank you for inviting me to join this conversation. I write as an historian of the twentieth-century United States, World War I, and the black freedom struggle and as author of a book, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I*, in which the politics and vision of Woodrow Wilson are crucial. In my research, as in your discussion, exploring the legacy of President Wilson involves examining Wilson's beliefs and actions, what everyday Americans made of his beliefs and actions, and how those two things together shaped American politics and society during his presidency and after.

Woodrow Wilson was a white supremacist. To say this of a southern-born Democrat from the early twentieth century is no more remarkable than observing that Georgia clay is red or that hound dogs bay. Most white folks in Virginia, where Wilson was born, or Georgia, where he passed his youth, would have considered the racial order that kept the majority of African Americans in economic subjugation and physical peril as natural as the color of dirt or the bark of a dog. After all, white supremacy—a slogan trumpeted by southern Democrats as they attempted to wrest political power away from black voters—was both a system of political economy and an ideology; it was designed to concentrate power and resources in the hands of a few and to naturalize that concentration through biological argument. Wilson, who told darky jokes in Cabinet meetings and who described former enslaved people in the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly* as “a host of dusky children untimely put out of school,” believed the biological argument, just as he approved of the laws that disfranchised folks he considered “unschooled in self control” and “excited by a freedom they did not understand.” As a professor—which he was when he wrote those words in the *Atlantic*, as president of Princeton—where he turned away African American applicants while cautioning them that they would not be comfortable on campus, and as president, he could little conceive of the fullness of black humanity, aspiration, or accomplishment.

What makes Wilson remarkable is not his adherence to white supremacy but how his adherence shaped his presidency. Wilson resembled Progressive-Era Democrats from the southern states who saw “the Negro Problem” as one of many problems—immigration, food safety, public

health—that required their attention. Jim Crow, to them, was a modern solution to the vexing conundrum of black citizenship. As president, Wilson appointed these southern Democrats, men like Josephus Daniels, William McAdoo, and Albert Sydney Burleson who successfully had waged the white supremacy campaigns as precursors to reform in their home states, and they brought their vision to Washington.

Wilson’s cabinet rationalized white supremacy and rooted it as a national, rather than a regional order. In the hurly-burly 1890s, they had waged their campaigns through blunt terror, both state-sanctioned and extra-legal; by the 1910s they had honed their instruments so that a bureaucrat could wield them. Wilson’s administration did not murder black officeholders, as Josephus Daniels’ North Carolina Democrats might have back in the 1890s; they simply moved them aside. By September 1913 the Administration had reduced the number of positions available to African Americans and segregated most federal departments, not simply placing African Americans in separate rooms but leaving them with harsher working conditions, cramped quarters, inadequate bathroom facilities, and little room for advancement. Endorsing the move to segregate federal jobs, Wilson argued—as he had with Princeton admissions—that he thought change would prove more comfortable for black people and white people alike. By contrast, intellectual and activist W.E.B. Du Bois decried the segregation of civil service jobs as “one of the gravest” systemic attacks on African Americans “since Emancipation.”

Under Wilson, white supremacy became encoded into the DNA of the federal bureaucracy. The Wilson administration by no means invented racism in the federal government; Presidents Roosevelt and Taft had been dialing back Republican support of African American political participation for a decade before Wilson came to office. Yet Wilson’s appointees were innovators. If the Taft administration brought segregation to Washington, the Wilson administration expanded, systemized, and entrenched it. As University of Richmond professor and Princeton history alum Eric Yellin writes in his book, *Racism in the Nation’s Service*, the administration “combined institutionalized racism with progressive reform in a way that devastated not only careers but also the very foundation of full citizenship for African Americans.” Advocates for racial justice across the U.S. argued that segregating Washington strengthened white supremacy nationwide—emboldening lynchers, further marginalizing black laborers, and narrowing the spaces for black social life.

Yet Wilson, like so many before him, voiced a vision of American possibility much more expansive than the crushing meanness he helped put into practice. When the president urged Congress to join the Great War as fight for “rights and liberties” and to construct “a universal dominion of right,” that would “make the world itself at last free,” African Americans heard something that resonated with their freedom dreams. Although the president never intended his calls for self-determination and a War for Democracy to apply to communities of color at home or abroad, Wilsonian rhetoric traveled places Wilson himself never would have dreamt of taking it. Thus, when African Americans in the black belt called themselves “soldiers of democracy,” they envisioned bringing down the very structures that the men in Wilson’s cabinet had helped to erect. And when African Americans worked to get to the Paris peace talks to decry American white supremacy in front of world audience, they felt empowered to do so because Wilson’s own Fourteen Points peace plan opened the door for “every denial of justice, humanity, and democracy” anywhere—to use the language of the black advocacy group the National Equal

Rights League from 1919—to become “a matter for correction and abrogation on a world basis by a world court.” Anticolonial nationalists who appropriated Wilson’s language for their struggles against European empire felt much the same way.

To many, Wilsonianism offered more than did Wilson himself. Yet, during the peace talks and after, some people wondered whether white supremacy did not doom the Wilsonian project. Observing that the President’s “conception of democracy” did not “extend beyond a scheme of government,” and that he was “pitifully clannishly [sic] ethnologically,” one Missouri activist wondered in a letter to W.E.B. DuBois whether any “actual contribution to democracy can come to this nation from Versailles.” DuBois himself placed hope in the League of Nations that emerged out of Wilson’s Fourteen Points but argued that its success depended on democracies thriving across the world. “‘Self-determination,’ a ‘world safe for democracy,’ a ‘new freedom for all men’—black, brown, yellow, and white—these slogans survive the downfall of the man who mouthed them,” DuBois wrote in *Crisis* magazine in 1921, “and are as eternally true and pressing as though he had never lived.”

Pressing, perhaps, but not triumphant. Domestically, anti-black collective violence swept through twenty-five American cities—including Chicago, Omaha, Charleston, and Washington—during the Red Summer of 1919 and functioned as white rioters’ war against, rather than for, democracy. African American casualties numbered in the hundreds, including some soldiers lynched in uniform. Internationally, the intractability of European empires and the ongoing U.S. occupation of Haiti (initiated in Wilson’s first term) and the Philippines demonstrated the limits of self-determination abroad. Wilsonian rhetoric had captured the sentiments already extant in the hearts of subject people across the globe, but the structures of white supremacy that Wilson found both natural and necessary continued to endure, enforced by a wave of terror that he did little to stanch. It would take another World War for civil rights and anti-colonial struggles to gain headway. Franklin Roosevelt came out of the Wilson Administration, but he did not share its domestic investments—and he operated in a world where Nazi appropriation had finally made horrid the sound of “white supremacy.” Building on his predecessor’s internationalist vision, Roosevelt restored the hope to Wilsonianism.

Historians often write Wilson’s story as tragedy. Undone by his own rigidity and unwillingness to compromise with Senate Republicans, the story goes, he never achieved his “peace without victory.” And the world bore the consequences. There is another tragedy in Wilson’s story. Hampered by his inability to see African Americans as citizens and unable to imagine the United States as anything but a white man’s democracy, he sought peace without justice. And not only African Americans but the nation as a whole had to bear the consequences. Underlying this story is a lament: Wilson should have been better, but he was not. This lament resonates with a narrative of twentieth-century history that sees the United States as always reaching for its democratic promise but too often falling short, and in this lament, Wilson stands in for a nation unable or unwilling to confront its history.

To question his legacy is to ask what we do with the histories that have brought us all to this present moment. This conversation matters because it pushes us to articulate how white supremacy helped to constitute Princeton, the American academy, and the United States. American history is rarely as pleasant as our civic myths would like it to be, and college

campuses are covered with monuments to people who believed, wrote, and did atrocious things. Sometimes, the correct response is to change those monuments. Other times the appropriate response is to contextualize them. Always, the correct response is to confront the history, and never is the correct response to sanitize it. I hope this discussion helps bring about an even stronger, more capacious institution, and I am pleased to have added my voice.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Adriane Lentz-Smith'. The signature is stylized and somewhat cursive, with a vertical line separating the first and last names.

Adriane Lentz-Smith
Associate Professor of History, African & African-American Studies, and Women's Studies