

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

15 January 2016

Dear Mr. Henry:

I write in response to your letter dated 7 December 2015, requesting my views on Woodrow Wilson's legacy at Princeton and in the nation more broadly.

Some disclosure: I am the parent of a Princeton alumnus (class of 1999), and have frequently visited the Princeton campus for research as well as participation in various scholarly and professional undertakings. I have also written a good deal about Wilson, notably in Over Here: The First World War and American Society (Oxford University Press, 1980, rev. ed., 2004).

I will not directly address the specific issues that I see have been raised on campus, concerning Wilson's name on the School of Public Policy and International Affairs and Wilson College, and his mural in Wilcox dining hall. I will, rather, offer some more general thoughts on historical memory and cultural memorialization, with particular reference to Wilson.

The distinction between memory and memorialization is of cardinal importance. So is the relation between them.

The first refers to the historian's master task of comprehending the past as capaciously and as objectively as possible. No responsible historian could conceivably countenance the erasure of any part of the historical record, whether comforting or disconcerting, or, in the case of an individual, worthy of praise or censure. Such is the unfortunately all-too-common practice in many authoritarian regimes, as famously burlesqued by the "memory hole" in George Orwell's *1984*. I vividly recall my own encounter with that practice, as a student in the 1960s in Moscow sub-way stations, where murals and mosaics of scenes in Soviet history showed several figures, once hailed, now discredited, with their faces rubbed out.

But free societies are committed to open inquiry and untrammelled expression. They insist on full disclosure and invite constant, iterative conversation between the past and the present. That conversation often -- indeed almost always -- generates shifting appraisals of the inhabitants of that "other country" that is the past, not only as new evidence comes to light, but as the interests, values, moral standards, and analytical perspectives of successive "presents" evolve and

themselves pass into the historical record, eventually to be judged against future interests, values, standards, and perspectives yet to be imagined. Conspicuous examples in my professional lifetime include women's history, African-American history, and environmental history, all of which have moved from the margins to the foreground of our historical consciousness. Who among us dares to predict how our descendants will judge us, or what regnant orthodoxies of belief and practice we now deem incontestably legitimate will look foolish or even contemptible in their eyes?

Like markets, historical conversations work best when all parties have equal access to the maximum amount of reliable information. Ensuring the completeness and trustworthiness of that information, encouraging self-awareness about the inevitably historically conditioned analytical apparatus we bring to bear in making sense of it, and sustaining the analytical rigor of the exchange between past and present is what the serious study of history is all about.

Many scholars – notable among them Princeton's own Arthur Link -- have long been engaged in dialogue with Woodrow Wilson and the so-called Progressive Era in which he lived. The facts of his life and his time are well documented, including his seminal scholarly work on the nature of Congress (*Congressional Government*, 1885), his transformative role as president of Princeton, the innovative practices he brought to the presidency of the United States (including personal appearances before Congress and systematic mobilization of public opinion), the raft of progressive legislation that he successfully championed in the fiscal, commercial, and social domains (tariff reform, creation of the Federal Reserve System and the Federal Trade Commission, the Workingmen's Compensation Act, and the Child Labor Act, not to mention his appointment of the first Jew -- Louis Brandeis -- to the Supreme Court, and his advocacy for women's suffrage, which led to passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1920).

In addition, for better or worse, he led the country into what we now call World War I; conceived the basic architecture of the greatest transformation in the structure of the international order since, arguably, the Peace of Westphalia; and, again for better or worse, articulated what Henry Kissinger has succinctly described as "the principles [that] have remained the bed-rock of American foreign-policy thinking" ever since.

Those "for better or worse" qualifiers are important reminders that history is not a static subject, nor memory a simply mechanical function, as each generation brings

its own experience to bear when it comes to appraising the wisdom and legacies of its forebears.

That consideration warrants a further word about the racial assumptions that constitute some of the most controversial aspects of Wilson's career. It has long been a matter of record that he wrote disparagingly about the role of emancipated blacks in the Reconstruction Era, that his writings were expropriated by D.W. Griffiths in his 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, and that as president of the United States he embraced Postmaster General Albert Burleson's proposals to implement segregation in the federal employ and rudely dismissed William Monroe Trotter when he came to the White House to protest that policy.

His views on Reconstruction uncritically reflected what was then – in an age that saw intensified efforts at sectional reconciliation and the rise of Jim Crow -- the virtually unimpeachable high-scholarly consensus customarily associated with the Columbia University historian William Archibald Dunning and his students. The “Dunning School” held that Reconstruction amounted to a vindictive punishment cruelly inflicted on the defeated South. It unleashed flagrant corruption, so the argument ran, and cynically exploited bewildered and ignorant freedmen to immiserate and humiliate the conquered Confederates. That interpretation informed virtually all scholarship and teaching about the era until well into the twentieth century. It was not seriously challenged until W.E.B DuBois published *Black Reconstruction in America* in 1935. It was at last thoroughly discredited by a generation of scholars in the Civil Rights era, conspicuously including Kenneth Stampp, in *The Era of Reconstruction (1967)* and culminating in Eric Foner's magisterial synthesis, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution (1988)*. That evolving cycle of scholarship about Reconstruction – from Dunning to Dubois to Stampp to Foner -- is now routinely taught as a classic case study in historiography, the study of how history is written and how and why interpretive schema change.

To rehearse that notorious chapter of historiography is not to excuse Wilson, but it is to be taught a lesson in humility. It's a lesson about how, even for the keenest minds among us, the most cherished assumptions about our own time and circumstances, assumptions that ineluctably inform our view of the past, can themselves be not merely abandoned, but even execrated and anathematized by later generations.

That Wilson had views about race and Reconstruction that we now find utterly repugnant is a fact. (It might be noted here that he also wrote that “because I love

the South, I rejoice in the failure of the Confederacy.” [“John Bright,” *The Virginia University Magazine* (March 1880), 367.] We can wish that he had possessed qualities of imagination and empathy that would have liberated him from those views, but he did not. Those matters are inexpugnable parts of our historical memory. So are his enthusiasm for *Birth of a Nation*, his acceptance of Jim Crow in the federal service, and his condescending treatment of William Monroe Trotter.

That is how Wilson *must* be remembered. But how *should* he be memorialized? Here we pass from the realm of necessity to the realm of choice, from the realm of what is empirically irrefutable to the realm of how and whom we choose to honor. And here is where memory and memorialization intersect. Because such choices about whom we honor must be informed by mustering the fullest appreciation of the circumstances and – in my view most importantly -- the *totality* of the life in question. Here it may also be appropriate (humility again) to recollect the Biblical invocation that “he that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone.” (*John 8:7*).

Princeton surely does not honor Wilson *because* of his racial views. Nor has it sought to obfuscate, much less defend, those views. But it has recognized that in the fullness of his passage through this vale of tears and disappointment, while he may well fall short of sainthood, on balance his was a life of extraordinary accomplishment -- as a scholar, educator, and statesman.

Others may calculate that balance differently, but it’s my conclusion that in this fallen world of ours, his was an exemplary life, “warts and all,” and deserves to be acknowledged – and yes, celebrated -- as such. To conclude otherwise would sadly affirm Mark Antony’s cynical pronouncement that “the evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.” (*Julius Caesar, Act III, Scene 2*). In a world where there is no shortage of evil, it surely seems perverse to highlight the imperfections, rather than the positive accomplishments, of those who tried to do their best. In a world of none but fallen people, the good that some of them manage to do deserves all the recognition that it can get. In my judgment Woodrow Wilson merits that kind of recognition.

Sincerely,

David M. Kennedy
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