

Transforming Silence into an Active, Present Awareness: What to do about Wilson's Legacy

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Probably William Faulkner's most frequently cited quote is, "The past is not dead. In fact, it's not even past." This is especially true when the unexamined pain of history is not transformed but is instead transferred to a present era. Such is the problem and the prospective pain we confront if we leave the racial legacy of President Woodrow Wilson unexamined. Among many things, Wilson was a pioneering political scientist, a progressive reformer, a wartime president, and a moralist in international affairs. But he also was a tacit white supremacist in an era when record numbers of African Americans were being lynched, disenfranchised, and economically oppressed in parallel to the racialization of many other Anglo-American groups.¹

Few people know that Wilson spent part of his teenage years in Columbia—South Carolina's state capitol. It is also a city in which I have lived, taught, and observed for more than a decade. It is not an historical coincidence that Wilson and his family, who were steeped in the racial beliefs and mores of the "Old" white south, spent a formative moment of his adolescence in this city that helped birth the Confederacy. Its state's legislature was the first to ratify an "Ordinance of Secession" from the Union based in part on the right of white South Carolina aristocrats to own African Americans as enslaved property. Of course its sister city of Charleston sparked the Civil War. Columbia was also a ground-zero for the rise and fall of Reconstruction; especially when arch-segregationist Gov. "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman and his allies, among other ills, enforced the legal disenfranchisement of blacks through intimidation and murder if deemed necessary.² In 1915 then-President Wilson was so awestruck by D.W. Griffith's white supremacist epic—*The Birth of*

Nation—and its tortured history of Reconstruction, that he infamously asserted, "It was like writing history with lighting, and my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." It played to sold out white movie houses in Columbia as throughout the south. The actual, terrible truth is that the racist lies that Griffith and Wilson endorsed had horrible implications even one hundred years later.³

The same Confederate flag that Ku Klux Klan vigilantes flew in Griffith's film in 1915 as they "redeemed" the south by lynching supposedly rapacious black men (white actors in black face) inspired a young, white supremacist to commit a horrific crime in 2015. Dylan Roof was convicted of murdering black state senator and African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Rev. Clementa Pinckney and eight of his fellow parishioners by gunning them down in Charleston's "Mother" Emanuel AME Church during a prayer meeting. The same types of racist symbols and mores that Wilson praised in 1915 ran through the biography of his family. His father Joseph, a Presbyterian minister, owned enslaved blacks and led a split in the national Presbytery over the slavery issue. The same father proudly saluted the Confederate flag as a Confederate army chaplain. And of course it was this mindset that justified President Wilson enacting a policy of legally segregating the federal bureaucracy among the other racialized policies of his administration.⁴

The 2015 Charleston murders so shocked South Carolina's leadership that Columbia became the scene for the long overdue retirement of the Confederate battle flag from statehouse grounds. Supporters had long argued it was an innocuous emblem of "Dixie pride" but its true origins where in slavery and a Jim Crow, white southern resistance to the Civil Rights Movement. Debate still continues as to what else must be done to retire or contextualize other white supremacist symbols on the statehouse grounds—especially the statues of Ben Tillman and Senator Strom Thurmond.⁵

It is time to transform any silence about Woodrow Wilson's racial legacy into an active, present awareness. We can retire Wilson's name from various foundations, institutions, and monuments and/or maintain the presence of his name in limited respects but counter his racial legacy with historical markers and contrasting namesakes—e.g. W.E.B DuBois, Ralph Bunche, Jewel Limar Prestage. Whatever is done must demonstrate a commitment to the full truth and racial justice. Like the Confederate flag's removal in Columbia, we must

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transform painful lies into the plain truth. For if we do not, a racist past will only bolster a racialized present whether through the white supremacy of a Dylan Roof or the white nationalism of a Donald Trump.

Notes

- 1 Cooper, John Milton, Jr. 2013. *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography*. New York, NY: Random House, Hine, Darlene Clark, William C. Hine and Stanley Harrold. 2009. *African Americans: A Concise History*. Upper Saddle, New Jersey: Pearson, Smith, Rogers M. 1997. *Civic Ideals : Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History*. New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, Trotter, Joe William, Jr. 2000. "From a Raw Deal to a New Deal? 1929–1945." in *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans*, edited by R. D. G. Kelley and E. Lewis. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- 2 Edgar, Walter. 1998. *South Carolina: A History*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, Lau, Peter F. 2006. *Democracy Rising: South Carolina and the Fight for Black Equality since 1865*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press.
- 3 Edgar, Walter. 1998. *South Carolina: A History*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, Weiner, Mark S. 2004. *Black Trials: Citizenship from the Beginnings of Slavery to the End of Caste*. New York, NY: Albert Knopf Press.
- 4 Cooper, John Milton, Jr. 2013. *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography*. New York, NY: Random House, Robles, Frances, Jason Horowitz and Shaila Dewan. 2015. "Dylan Roof, Suspect in Charleston Shooting, Felw the Flags of White Power." in *The New York Times*. New York, NY: The New York Times.
- 5 2015, "Confederate Flag Lowered at the Sc State House for Last Time," Columbia, SC: The State. Retrieved June 7, 2016, (<http://www.thestate.com/news/politics-government/politics-columns-blogs/the-buzz/article26947045.html>), Larimer, Sarah. 2015. "Why a Vitriolic Jim Crow Advocate Is Still Memorialized on S.C. Statehouse Grounds." in *The Washington Post*. Washington, DC: The Washington Post.