

Naming Rites for Naming Wrongs: What We Talk about When We Talk about Woodrow Wilson

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"[M]en seldom eulogize the wisdom and virtues of their fathers, but to excuse some folly or wickedness of their own."

— Frederic Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?"

From calls to remove Andrew Jackson from the \$20 bill to demands that the University of Cape Town remove a statue of Cecil Rhodes and that Woodrow Wilson's and John C. Calhoun's names be removed from institutions at Princeton and Yale, a wave of activism is forcing us to revisit dominant historical narratives, to confront the elisions embedded in the "consensus memories" of the figures associated with them, and to recognize and reckon with their continued implications for inequality and marginalization in the present.¹ "In the dialectic between remembering and forgetting that is a central component of memory," Leigh Raiford and Renee Romano write, narratives about the past "beg us to ask what is at stake" in dominant representations of historical events and figures.²

To try to understand one small portion of this dialectic, we turned to editorials and op-eds that took a position on whether to rename things named after Woodrow Wilson or John C. Calhoun. We limited the sample to pieces published during the period from September 1, 2015, through April 11, 2016, a period that begins with the reinvigorated debates at Yale and Princeton and ends with Princeton's announcement that the names of both the School of Public and International and Affairs and the Woodrow Wilson residential college would remain un-

changed). As evident in Table 1, we identified 40 such pieces in 16 national newspapers and 21 pieces in 12 college newspapers.³ Although we coded each one to discern the reasons given by their writers for their support for, or objection to, the proposed renaming, we focus in what follows on the arguments against removing the names.⁴

With a few exceptions, we found that opponents' arguments cohere around three main clusters of concerns: 1) worries that a lack clear criteria for deciding such renamings will set us careening down "slippery slopes" of endless and unacceptable demands; 2) arguments that nobody is perfect, that Wilson's (though rarely Calhoun's) record is mixed, and that his "good" outweighs his "bad"; and 3) concerns about historical accuracy and that such renamings entail ahistorical and anachronistic judgments that unfairly subject historical figures to "today's standards" and constitute attempts to "rewrite history."

We bring this (admittedly partial) analysis into conversation with evidence from select documents and discussions addressing proposals for name changes, using these as points of departure from which to assess and address opponents' apprehensions. Although the opponents of the name changes present themselves as defenders and honours of history, we argue that rather than occluding historical context and silencing debate, the conversations prompted by these "naming rites" work to question, denaturalize, and shake loose half-truths and accepted orthodoxies about American history. In so doing, these "rites" provide important focal points for unsilencing and "naming wrongs" both past and present.

No Clear Criteria and Slippery Slopes Among the most common objections to removing Wilson's and Calhoun's names is that without clear criteria for making such decisions, doing so will set universities and other institutions careening down slippery slopes of endless demands for further renamings. If we remove Wilson and Calhoun, this objection goes, what is to stop others from making ever more demands? In light of racism's "entrenchment into the American narrative," columnist Byron Williams writes in the *Contra Costa Times*, "I fear the nation's pantheon might become some what stark. Could we not find cogent arguments to remove Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln or Dwight Eisenhower from the hallowed walls of greatness for various infractions that run counter to our moral sensibilities?" This, he continues, "is the slippery slope fortified by arrogance."⁵ Although not opposed to all name changes, legal scholar Stephen Carter voices a similar concern, writing in a widely syndicated op-ed that he is worried that "[h]aving started

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Table 1
Editorials And Op-Eds Taking a Position on Whether to Rename Things Named after Woodrow Wilson or John C. Calhoun, September 1, 2015 - April 11, 2016

| | National Newspapers | | College Newspaper | | All Newspapers | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|---------|-------------------|---------|----------------|---------|
| | N | Percent | N | Percent | N | Percent |
| <u>Arguments Against Name Change</u> | | | | | | |
| Slippery Slope | 8 | 20 | 1 | 4.76 | 9 | 30 |
| Nobody Is Perfect, Good Outweighs Bad | 5 | 12.5 | 3 | 14.29 | 8 | 27 |
| Ahistorical/Rewriting History | 8 | 20 | 5 | 23.81 | 13 | 43 |
| N Pieces Opposing Change | 21 | | 9 | | 30 | |
| % of Total | | 52.5 | | 42.3 | | 49 |
| <u>No Clear Position</u> | | | | | | |
| | 4 | 10 | 3 | 14.3 | 7 | 11.5 |
| % of Total | | 10 | | 14.3 | | 11 |
| <u>Arguments For Name Change</u> | | | | | | |
| <u>Remembering History</u> | | | | | | |
| Things Change | 8 | 20 | 3 | 14.29 | 11 | |
| Against Praise | 2 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 2 | |
| Student Comfort | 5 | 12.5 | 2 | 9.52 | 7 | |
| N Pieces Supporting Change | 0 | 0 | 3 | 14.29 | 3 | |
| % of Total | 15 | | 8 | | 23 | |
| | | 37.5 | | 38 | | 37.7 |
| Total | 40 | | 21 | | 61 | |

Sources: Data were collected from Lexis-Nexis Academic “University Newspapers” and “U.S. Newspapers” databases using the search terms “Woodrow Wilson” OR “Calhoun” and restricting the search to “Editorials & Opinions” published between 1 September 2015 and 11 April, 2016. The original search turned up 175 pieces in national newspapers and 61 in college and university papers. After removing duplicates and those that were out of scope, the final universe contained 40 and 21; 37.7% of these supported removing the names, 49% opposed doing so, and 11.5% took no clear position. Individual articles that are quoted in the text are cited in the Notes and references.

down this road, we can’t seem to find the brakes. Public schools named for Robert E. Lee,” he reports, “are considering whether to make a switch. . . . Two members of Congress have even argued that Donald Trump should not be allowed to name his new Washington hotel after himself, lest we ‘send a message of exclusion and intolerance to millions of Latinos.’” Once we “admit that the impulse is legitimate,” he worries, “it’s hard to see where to stop.”⁶

Williams and Carter assume that the examples they offer make clear that we must, in Carter’s words, “find the brakes” lest we license the excision of any number of American “heroes” from places of honor (and, given Carter’s example of Trump, prevent contemporary figures from buying their way onto new ones). But rather than worrying that we should not begin questioning these legacies lest we find ourselves hemorrhaging heroes, we might instead acknowledge that in a country created through conquest and heteropatriarchal, slaveholding, and genocidal settler colonialism, many foundational figures have, in fact, held and acted upon loathsome and lethal beliefs and commitments. We may not be able to arrive at normative criteria by which we should decide who we honour and for what reasons, but we can nonetheless welcome and even invite curiosity about these and other histories of oppression, discrimination, and exclusion that underlie many American institutions and the figures associated with them so that we might better understand and address their ongoing implications. The questions

highlighted by such debates ought to “push us towards even broader conversations” in which we ask what Mari Matsuda describes as “the other questions.”⁷ For example, when we see something that “looks racist,” she says, we should also ask, “Where is the patriarchy in this?” When we see something sexist, we need also to look for the heterosexism in it. When we see something homophobic, we must also understand the class interests embedded in it.

Nobody’s Perfect (and Wilson Did Good Things, Too) The foregoing worry about “slippery slopes” dovetails with arguments that we should not remove the names of figures like Wilson because nobody is perfect, they made positive contributions, and it is for these positive contributions that we honor them. Even those who are troubled by, for example, Wilson’s resistance to admitting Black students to Princeton, by his curtailing of civil liberties during World War I, or by his central role in expanding and formalizing the segregation of the federal workforce often argue that these “bads” must be weighed against what they contend are his significant positive contributions. “To expunge Wilson from Princeton is to suggest that his racist views cancel any contributions he may have made to the nation,” Williams writes. “Should we ignore that he went before Congress and spoke in favor of women’s suffrage, which contributed to ratification of the 19th Amendment?”⁸ Other contributions frequently cited as evidence of Wilson’s net goodness are that as president of Princeton, he “transformed an intellectually lethargic

campus into a renowned institution of higher learning” and that as president of the United States he was a Progressive who instituted the modern income tax, enacted federal laws that established the eight-hour workday and restricted child labor, and proposed the League of Nations.⁹

As historian Paula Giddings writes in her commissioned letter to the Wilson Legacy Committee of the Princeton Board of Trustees, however, Wilson himself understood that far from confirming that he was, in his heart, a “progressive,” these latter contributions were instead codependent on and constitutive of his racist commitments. In fact, his own writings make clear that he subscribed to the “New South” creed that “insisted that needed reforms and regional progress would be achieved by national reconciliation, industrial growth, agricultural diversification—and racial control.”¹⁰ Wilson’s embrace and enforcement of racial segregation also licensed what historian Eric Yellin describes as “an attack on Black ambition,” as Black workers who eligible for promotions and attractive positions were targeted for demotion and dismissal.¹¹ As Yellin told a New York Times reporter, “Historians usually say, ‘Here was this amazing liberal progressive who was a racist, which is too bad, now let’s go back to talking about the good things.’ “But,” he continued, “it’s important to see that Wilson had a whites-only progressive view.”¹² Put simply, as Giddings writes, Wilson’s racism “was the corollary, not the antithesis” of his Progressivism. As such, these two facets “cannot be viewed separately but must be weighed as a single and ultimately ruinous heritage.”¹³

Even many of the ambitions and accomplishments offered as evidence that Wilson’s net contributions warrant continued honor and recognition are less progressive and less significant than we might believe. Since Wilson taught at Bryn Mawr and came eventually to support women’s suffrage, for example, it is often assumed (as is evident in Williams’s foregoing statement) that he was a proto-feminist who supported and even championed the educational and political equality of (white) women. But as journalist Jamie Stiehm notes, “Wilson was a cultural Southerner” who expected not only African Americans both male and female but also white women “to stay in their place,” and his career included “fierce opposition to women as equal citizens.”¹⁴ “Though a progressive Democrat, the Virginia-born president was no friend of suffrage,” journalist Mary Walton reminds us. “Publicly,” she notes, “he maintained that states should decide their own course.” “Privately,” however, Wilson told a male correspondent that “my personal judgment is strongly against it.”¹⁵ “I believe,” he wrote, “that the social changes it would involve would not justify the gains that would be accomplished by it.”¹⁶ Wilson was also complicit in the force-feeding and other abuses of imprisoned suffrage picketers, and some scholars suggest that Wilson’s pro-suffrage conversion was itself at least in part a function of his

racism, enfranchising white women in the hope of counterbalancing Black male voters.¹⁷

Scholars continue to debate the “true” nature of Wilson’s views about women’s political participation, as well as the motivations for and significance of his eventual support for the Nineteenth Amendment.¹⁸ His feelings about women’s education make clear, however, that he did not regard them as equal to men, that he was “not at all in sympathy with co-education,” and that he certainly did not think they belonged at Princeton.¹⁹ The question of higher education for women might be “settled in the affirmative,” he wrote, but this would happen “whether my sympathy be enlisted or not.”²⁰ In fact, historian Lucy Salmon, who had been his graduate student at Bryn Mawr and went on to establish the History Department at Vassar College, stated that she was “quite sure that he never whole-heartedly believed in college education for women” at all. He told her that he believed that “a woman who had married an intellectual, educated man was often better educated than a woman who had college training.”²¹ As Stiehm summarizes it, “female students” (and, we might add, women more generally) should recognize that “he was no friend to us, either.”²²

Concerns about History: “Rewriting” History and Imposing “Presentist” Standards The final constellation of apprehensions clusters around the two most explicit (separate but overlapping) concerns about “history.” The first is that calls for renaming constitute attempts to “erase,” “rewrite,” or “sanitize” history. In a message announcing that the “name of Calhoun College will remain,” for example, Yale president Peter Salovey wrote that “[o]urs is a nation that continues to refuse to face its own history of slavery and racism.” Yale, he continued, “is part of this history,” and “[e]rasing Calhoun’s name from a much-beloved residential college risks masking this past, downplaying the lasting effects of slavery, and substituting a false and misleading narrative, albeit one that might allow us to feel complacent or, even, self-congratulatory.”²³ Retaining the name, in contrast, “forces us to learn anew and confront one of the most disturbing aspects of Yale’s and our nation’s past.” “[A]t a certain point,” Stephen Carter avers, “we are no longer removing the worst traces of atrocities past. We are sanitizing the record entire.”²⁴ “Denounce and contextualize away,” Alexandra Petri writes in a *Washington Post* blog, “but don’t erase. History is full of things we would rather forget. But removing them is not the way to go.”²⁵

The second concern about history is a close cousin of the admonition that Wilson did good things, and contends that the condemnations that fuel calls for renaming are based on ahistorical (and often allegedly “politically correct”) judgments that unfairly hold historical figures to “today’s standards” regarding issues of race, gender, and the like. Petri, for example, argues that people “whose morals and actions lived up to modern standards are remarkable and rare.”²⁶ The writer of a letter to the editor published

in the *New York Times* argues that a “leader should be measured in the context of the times that he (*sic*) lived in, not by how he (*sic*) should have lived based on today’s standards.”²⁷

Considerations about how to represent, evaluate, and address histories of injustice and the figures associated with them are complex and multifaceted, as are questions about how to reconcile these histories with modern understandings and values. These issues have been the subject of a great deal of nuanced and thoughtful research, writing, and discussion—engagements too varied to do justice to here.²⁸ However, two points bear mention.

First, scholars have demonstrated in detail that Wilson’s views about policy positions regarding African Americans were extremely racist—and, regarding women, quite misogynist—even in the context of “his time.” This body of work is also too vast to summarize, but particularly relevant is that Wilson did not fail to *de* segregate the federal civil service but, instead, authorized and oversaw the *re* segregation of multiple federal agencies, many of which had been relatively integrated as a result of, and in the decades following, Reconstruction.²⁹ That is, he was not simply maintaining the racist status quo but was rather an agent of regress and of the deepening of oppressive regimes. (Indeed, if there is anything self-congratulatory in the debates around Wilson, it is the whiggish “darkness into light” progress narratives that assume that each generation is naturally and inevitably more enlightened than its political forebears when it comes to issues of race and gender).

Under Wilson, Yellin writes, “Federal employees working in Washington witnessed the color line being drawn across their working lives.”³⁰ This resegregation was manifested not only in Black employees being fired, demoted, and shut out of positions in which they had previously been employed, though all of those things are true and condemnable then as now. Wilson also allowed the Postmaster General to prohibit Black and white workers from sharing glasses, towels, lunchrooms, and bathrooms and allowed him to transfer Black employees to positions in which they did not interact with the public. The few African Americans “who remained at the main post offices were put to work behind screens, out of customers’ sight.”³¹ As Yellin puts it, a “process that had taken decades in the South took less than five years in Washington.”³² Journalist Dylan Matthews notes that Wilson’s two immediate predecessors—Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft—though far from perfect, “had been much better about appointing Black statesmen (*sic*) to public office,” and many of his contemporaries “both Black and white . . . attacked Wilson’s moves toward segregation.”³³

Wilson’s positions on gender equality and women’s suffrage were similarly regressive compared to those of many of his peers, lagging “well behind an emerging national consensus” and at a time when the “social changes”

that Wilson so feared were “already happening.”³⁴ During the 1912 presidential campaign, for example, when Theodore Roosevelt’s Progressive Party endorsed the Nineteenth Amendment, Wilson instead took a “states’ rights” position and claimed that he could not endorse it because it had not been endorsed in his party’s platform.³⁵

Second, the names and likenesses of figures such as Wilson and Calhoun have adorned buildings and institutions for decades and even centuries without promoting “confrontations” or “learning anew.” Any confrontations and learning that have been provoked by them have arguably been the result of requests that they be changed, underscoring the fact that we normally do *not* talk about the troubling aspects of their legacies but, rather, engage in collective *dis* remeberings that sanitize their records and often border on hagiography.³⁶ As Corey Robin writes, “if there’s any erasing going on here, it’s in the daily practices of Princeton. In those campus tours, those campus addresses, the general celebration of the man.” “When I was an undergraduate there in the late 1980s,” Robin recalls, “the only bad thing anyone had to say about him was that he once tried to get rid of the university’s stuffy eating clubs.”³⁷

Conclusion: Naming Wrongs

Princeton and Yale have decided to retain Wilson’s and Calhoun’s names, and the University of Cape Town has decided that it will not remove the statue of Rhodes. But the debates prompted by the demands for their removal have highlighted key silences and erasures in accepted orthodoxies about them. More generally, these conversations have asked us to reckon with the half-truths and fraught legacies of these and other “household names” rather than invoke them as unthinkingly as we do those of brands like Kleenex, Coke, and Band-Aids. By questioning who is honored and remembered and for what reasons, these naming rites also denaturalize the stories we tell about the past so that we might defuse them of their power to re-legitimize “contemporary violence, dispossession, and appropriation.”³⁸

Reasonable people can and do disagree about many aspects of these and other proposed name changes and about whether the energy devoted to such efforts might be more productively channeled toward other issues. It requires an Orwellian misreading of such proposals, however, to characterize them as attempts to silence debate or to “forget,” “erase,” “downplay,” or “sanitize” history rather than understanding them as interventions that demand fuller and more complicated accounts about the past as one part of the broader project of unsilencing and addressing the inequalities, oppression, and marginalization that mark and structure the present.

Notes

- 1 Barrett 2013.
- 2 Raiford and Romano 2006, xv.

- 3 We did so using Lexis-Nexis, using the search terms “Woodrow Wilson” OR “Calhoun.” The original search turned up 175 pieces in national newspapers and 61 in college and university papers. After removing duplicates and those that were out of scope, the final universe contained 40 and 21. As Table 1 makes clear, 37.7% of these supported removing the names, 49% opposed doing so, and 11.5% took no clear position.
- 4 There were interesting patterns among those who supported the calls for renaming as well, but space restrictions prohibit detailing those here.
- 5 Williams 2015.
- 6 Carter 2015.
- 7 Sandweiss 2015; Matsuda 1991, 1189
- 8 Williams 2015.
- 9 Princeton Trustees 2016, 4.
- 10 Giddings 2016, 3.
- 11 Yellin 2007, 123.
- 12 Schuessler 2015.
- 13 Giddings 2016, 3.
- 14 Stiehm 2015.
- 15 Walton 2010, 46; see also Stern 2015.
- 16 Brown 2008, 132.
- 17 Brown 2008, 126; 153.
- 18 See, for example, Brown 2008; Graham 1983–84; Lunardini and Knock 1980–81.
- 19 Axtell 2006 10.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Axtell 2006, 10.
- 22 Stiehm 2015.
- 23 Salovey 2016.
- 24 Carter, 2015.
- 25 Petri 2015.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Pomerantz 2015. (It is hard not to wonder whether this writer’s commitment to the use of masculine pronouns to describe “leaders” suggests that he wishes to be held to the standards of the times in Wilson lived as well).
- 28 See, among many others, Blight 2001, 2002; Bruyneel 2015; Day 2008; Nora 1989; Raiford and Romano 2006.
- 29 Matthews 2015; Stern 2015; Weiss 1969; Yellin 2007.
- 30 Yellin 2007, 131.
- 31 Boyd and Chen n.d. W. E. B. Du Bois even reported an instance in which a black clerk “who could not actually be segregated on account of the nature of his work has consequently had a cage built around him to separate him from his white companions of many years” (Lewis 1995, 446).
- 32 Yellin 2007, 131; see also Stern 2015 and Weiss 1969.
- 33 Matthews 2015.
- 34 Stern 2015; Brown 2008, 132.
- 35 Stern 2015.
- 36 Morrison 1987; see also Glaude 2016. As Yellin noted at a 2016 panel at Princeton, if we are concerned about Wilson-related erasures, we might start by addressing those effected by his own presidency, which erased 30 years of African Americans working in the federal government, Black people from the Progressive vision, and the political agency of Black men who voted for and endorsed him (including W. E. B. DuBois; see Stern 2015 and Weiss 1969).
- 37 Robin 2015; See, for example, <https://www.princeton.edu/~oktour/virtualltour/french/Hist02-Wilson.htm> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJVQP3aucXM>. The Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars provides an interesting example for institutions that wish to retain the names of complicated figures but also confront their fraught legacies. Their “About Woodrow Wilson” page begins with the following statement: “Thomas Woodrow Wilson, nicknamed the ‘schoolmaster in politics,’ is chiefly remembered for his high-minded idealism. . . . Wilson’s accomplishments have been re-evaluated with the passage of time and with changes in the United States. His visionary internationalism and domestic legislative record are juxtaposed with his views and actions on racial issues and Women’s Suffrage.” It then goes on to list a range of items, including “Was awarded Nobel Peace Prize–1919” but also “Racially segregated the U.S. federal government and oversaw the expansion of Jim Crow segregation measures in the District of Columbia” and “At first delayed a nationwide constitutional amendment granting Women’s Suffrage, although later, in 1919, he appealed directly to the U.S. House of Representatives to pass the amendment.” For more, see <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/about-woodrow-wilson>, accessed 12 April, 2016.
- 38 Bruyneel 2015, 3–5.

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