

Should APSA's Most Prominent Award Continue to be Named after a Racist?

Jennifer Hochschild

doi:10.1017/S1537592716001304

As political scientists, we have no control over the possible renaming of the many institutions named for the twenty-eighth U.S. president—except for the Woodrow Wilson Foundation Award, given annually by the American Political Science Association for the best book on government, politics, or international affairs. The APSA's highest honor for book writing commemorates a man who not only held the nation's presidency but also earned a Ph.D. in political science, wrote books and articles including the still-read *Congressional Government* (1885), taught jurisprudence and political economy in half a dozen colleges and universities, presided over the APSA as well as Princeton University—and directly or indirectly promoted racial segregation in universities, the federal employment, and the armed forces. Should the association's most prominent award continue to be named after a racist?

Like many APSA members, I have pondered this question a lot. Colleagues make thoughtful arguments on both sides. On the one hand:

If I taught American politics, I would teach about George Wallace, but I wouldn't want to receive the "George Wallace award." I, like 16,000¹ other members of the Association, would have liked one day to win the "Wilson Prize." Today, I no longer would.²

On the other hand:

Most presidents and legislators have complex and often contradictory records that are difficult to judge. With Wilson, the question . . . is how to weigh his record of racism against the fact that he was one of the most progressive presidents at that point in history.³

Julian Zelizer's question is crucial: How does one weigh the great good that a political leader promotes against the great evil that he or she also promotes? In that stark form, without context or evaluative criteria, judgment seems impossible or irresponsible. So I have three

meta-questions to which I would want answers before deciding what I think the APSA should do about the Wilson Award.

The first is a question of depth: Where does Wilson fit on a continuum of racist public leaders, and where is the cut-off point of unacceptability along that continuum? As my email correspondent put it, George Wallace is arguably beyond the pale. So is Robert E. Lee (but what about Washington and Lee University?), George Custer, P.W. Botha, and probably John C. Calhoun. On the other end of the continuum are Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln—and what about Lyndon Johnson or Malcolm X? In the middle sit men (and a few women) with great power who did admirable things outside the realm of racial hierarchy and shameful things within it—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson. How do we parse them, or do we reject all, or accept all? I, for one, find Jefferson more abhorrent than Wilson on the grounds that enslavement is worse than segregation. But at some point this parsing itself makes one squirm.

My second meta-question is one of breadth: How far should our reconsideration and perhaps rejection of deeply flawed prominent leaders go? Franklin Roosevelt made no effort to save European Jews in slave camps or death camps during World War II; arguably, some of my relatives died as a result. James B. Duke led the explosive growth of the American cigarette industry; should Duke University change its name? I will not name names here, but many eminent political scientists were deeply sexist; should we change the names of other career, dissertation, book, or article awards? Until we have something like rough answers to the question of breadth as well as depth, I lack the context for evaluating the Woodrow Wilson Foundation Award.

Or perhaps not—and that leads to my third meta-question. A fellow political scientist asked an arresting question about my search for a broader principle from which to judge Wilson: Why? If the political contest over racism in American universities and elsewhere has settled on Wilson at Princeton, Calhoun at Yale, Lord Jeff of Amherst, and college "masters" at Harvard, why not engage with those politics where and how they present themselves? As Michael Walzer once pointed out, a would-be reformer may not get to choose exactly the platform on which to take a stand; you have to get on the train that happens to be leaving the station, to switch metaphors (as he would never do). So perhaps we

Jennifer Hochschild (hochschild@gov.harvard.edu) is the Henry LaBarre Jayne Professor of Government and Professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University.

should simply evaluate the costs and benefits of maintaining the Woodrow Wilson Foundation Award on its own terms.

My own preference right now is to keep the name but add another: Make it the Woodrow Wilson Foundation–W. E. B. DuBois Award, or something like that.⁴ That is my compromise for honoring a president, addressing his flaws, and retaining a little humility about what people two generations from now will find to condemn in our own actions.

Notes

1 Actual membership is about 12,000 at present.

2 Personal email to author, December 5, 2015.

3 Zelizer 2015.

4 My inspiration is the Leonard P. Zakim Bunker Hill Memorial Bridge in Boston, a beautiful construction with a ridiculous name, arrived at through arduous political compromise.

References

Zelizer, Julian. 2015. “Erasing Woodrow Wilson’s Name Is Not That Easy,” CNN, November 30. (<http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/30/opinions/zelizer-woodrow-wilson-princeton/>) Accessed July 9, 2016.