

## In His Day: Awareness of Wilson's Duplicity

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Disagreement over Woodrow Wilson's legacy is nothing new. On March 28, 1939, Paul A. Hill asked W. E. B. Du Bois to contribute a chapter to his retrospective on Wilson's career: "It is generally admitted that he was one of the greatest statesmen and world figures of his age. His historical stature will undoubtedly grow as the decades pass by, and his influence will be felt for many years to come" (Hill 1939). Du Bois said he was "glad to write an estimate of . . . Wilson but it might not agree entirely with" Hill's "picture" (Du Bois 1939a). Viewing Wilson from the moral perspective of his African American contemporaries, we see a cunning political scientist plying his craft in the service of personal power and racial domination.

It is easy to forget that Wilson was a groundbreaking political scientist. He founded the subfield of public administration and he revolutionized the study of American institutions. But his immense success as a politician suggests that he knew an awful lot about campaigns and elections. The unusual four-way contest of the 1912 presidential election provided Wilson with a unique opportunity to manipulate African Americans into supporting the Democrats. On October 16 of that year, Wilson wrote a promissory note to African Americans, which he delivered via Bishop Alexander Walters, an influential Civil Rights leader and a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League: "I want to assure them [African Americans] through you that should I become President of the United States, they may count upon me for absolute fair dealing and for everything by which I could assist in advancing the interests of their race in the United States" (Walters 1912). Wilson added that it was "his earnest wish to see justice done them in every matter, and not mere grudging justice, but justice executed with liberality and cordial good feeling. . . . Every guarantee of our law, every principle of our constitution, commands this," Wilson insisted (*ibid.*). Walters took Wilson at his word.

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He, and other African American elites, promoted Wilson's candidacy through the NAACP and other Civil Rights organizations and their extensive social networks.

Du Bois, who was a colleague of Walters at the NAACP, thought that the unusual election offered an extraordinary political opportunity: African Americans could influence the outcome and then appeal to their electoral effect when protesting for Civil Rights reform. According to Du Bois, Walters told him that he "believed Mr. Wilson was well disposed toward Negroes" (Du Bois 1939b, 1). "I was enthusiastic," Du Bois recalled; "I put the small but growing influence of the *Crisis* magazine back of the Wilson candidacy. I resigned my membership in the Socialist Party. . . . I made several campaign speeches and wrote a series of sharply worded leaflets which were distributed widely by the colored organization affiliated with Tammany Hall" (*ibid.*, p. 2). "Here, if anywhere," Du Bois said, "seemed to be a chance to woo the Democratic Party from its extreme anti-Negro pro-slavery platform" (*ibid.*, p. 1). said he added that "because of the explicit promises of Woodrow Wilson, a larger proportion of Negro voters cast their ballots for the Democratic ticket in 1912 than ever before" (*ibid.*, p. 3). But Wilson's guarantees were never that explicit.

Wilson privately assured African American elites of his commitment to equal citizenship so that they would promote his candidacy. Such furtive appeals provided him cover; he could plead for African American votes in the North without publicly opposing Jim Crow injustices in the South and thus avoid alienating white Southerners. African American elites understood the game being played. They knew, firsthand, that survival required you to express yourself differently to different constituencies. But they misjudged the Princeton political scientist and profoundly miscalculated the potential cost of electing a southern Democrat. Du Bois said that African Americans were quickly "disappointed" with Wilson's presidency, as they now faced legislation "designed to strengthen the caste restrictions on Negro civil rights," which included "marriage between the races, housing, education, jim-crow street cars in the District of Columbia and the Federal Civil service" (*ibid.*, p. 3). As one historian aptly puts it, Wilson swiftly enlisted racism in the nation's service (Yellin 2013).

In retrospect, Wilson did not need to win African American votes in 1912. He won the election in a landslide because William Howard Taft (the Republican incumbent) and Theodore Roosevelt (the Progressive Party candidate) split the Republican vote. By 1915, Wilson had

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extended the reach of white supremacy into almost every corner of the federal government, and so in his reelection campaign, he made fainthearted attempts to cajole African Americans and appealed almost exclusively to white voters, often exploiting their racial fears and resentments.

That same year, Du Bois's wife, Nina, warned him of Wilson's duplicity:

I see by the *Crisis* that Mr. Wilson is rather given to complimenting your Boston Branch of the Association [NAACP]. Don't let him fool you. [Thomas] Dixon's play [movie] over here has Wilson's name assigned to two or three sentences which are thrown on the screen. He must have given his consent for it to be used. He is just playing for votes now for a second term. He and Dixon are working together if the truth is known (Nina Du Bois 1915).

Du Bois's wife was referring to Thomas Dixon Jr., who bolstered his reputation as a white supremacist when he published *The Clansman* (1905), which inspired D. W. Griffith's 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, the film Nina Du Bois had just seen. Dixon and Wilson had been graduate students together at Johns Hopkins University. Much to Wilson's dismay, Dixon left political science for journalism and acting, eventually settling on fiction writing. But his old friend struck gold, becoming the foremost artist of white supremacy and taking racial terror to new heights as chief writer for the film. Few have been able to match Dixon's aptitude for inciting racial fear and resentment.

Wilson may have been the first but he was not the last Progressive southern Democrat to deceive and then betray African American voters. Yet today we seem far more uncertain of Wilson's legacy than were his African American contemporaries. In response to objections to his name on Princeton's School of Public and International Affairs, the university's trustees have decided it best to retain his name but to also place Wilson's legacy in a "much fuller context" (Princeton Trustees 2016). My

discussion of Du Bois's impression of Wilson is intended to remind us that African Americans of his day were well aware of his appalling politics with regard to race. Recalling their judgments is essential to a full account of Wilson's true legacy.

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