

The Controversy over Woodrow Wilson's Legacy: A Discussion

Woodrow Wilson is the only American political scientist to have served as President of the United States. In the time between his political science Ph.D. (from Johns Hopkins, in 1886) and his tenure as president (1913–21), he also served as president of Princeton University (1902–10) and president of the American Political Science Association (1909–10). Wilson is one of the most revered figures in American political thought and in American political science. The Woodrow Wilson Award is perhaps APSA's most distinguished award, given annually for the best book on government, politics, or international affairs published in the previous year, and sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation at Princeton University.

Wilson has also recently become the subject of controversy, on the campus of Princeton University, and in the political culture more generally, in connection with racist statements that he made and the segregationist practices of his administration. A group of Princeton students associated with the "Black Lives Matter" movement has demanded that Wilson's name be removed from two campus buildings, one of which is the famous Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs (see Martha A. Sandweiss, "Woodrow Wilson, Princeton, and the Complex Landscape of Race," <http://www.thenation.com/article/woodrow-wilson-princeton-and-the-complex-landscape-of-race/>). Many others have resisted this idea, noting that Wilson is indeed an important figure in the history of twentieth-century liberalism and Progressivism in the United States.

A number of colleagues have contacted me suggesting that *Perspectives* ought to organize a symposium on the Wilson controversy. Although we do not regularly organize symposia around current events, given the valence of the controversy and its connection to issues we have featured in our journal (see especially the September 2015 issue on "The American Politics of Policing and Incarceration"), and given Wilson's importance in the history of our discipline, we have decided to make an exception in this case. We have thus invited a wide range of colleagues whose views on this issue will interest our readers to comment on this controversy. —Jeffrey C. Isaac, Editor.

Which Wilson Do We (Dis)Honor?

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Woodrow Wilson led many lives. Choosing among them—whether to honor or to dishonor—is no easy task. Here are some of those lives.

From Professor to President of Princeton. Throughout the time of his presidency of Princeton University, it is hard to see anything radical in either his writings or his academic leadership. Wilson is a good Burkean and Anglophile reformer who, in the face of strong opposition to his attempts to reconfigure undergraduate life at Princeton, began to create

a "party" constituted by the appeal to more democratic principles. And through graduate education, Wilson sought to open Princeton to new forms of scholarship and more exacting academic standards in the arts and sciences (as Mark Pattison had done at Oxford a generation earlier). Wilson put Princeton—lacking professional schools in medicine, law, and business—on a trajectory that soon secured it a place among America's leading research universities.

Promoter of Effective Government. A constant theme in Wilson's writings is a concern with achieving effective governance in America. His ends for government were as banal as the Republican campaign slogan in the Eisenhower era: "Peace, Progress, and Prosperity." To this end, he was quite willing to assert American military power in Latin America, restructure the American banking and economic regulatory system, and expand consumer and labor rights. But at the heart of his political and constitutional thought, and the key to his political leadership, is the centrality and necessity of party. This is also Edmund Burke's answer to the crisis in British governance in his time, in *Thoughts*

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on our Present Discontents (1770). Without party and the means necessary for its coherence—patronage, log rolling, compromise, even small measures of corruption—Wilson was of the opinion that America's multiplicity of governing institutions could not respond effectively to the needs and wants of a democratic electorate.

Accomplishments of the Party Man. We often forget how successful Wilson was in his first term as president. His skill in creating both intra- and interparty coalitions around each of his major pieces of legislation left an institutional legacy that few presidents can match. In the words of one biographer, Wilson was “one of the greatest legislative presidents in the 20th century, perhaps in all of American history” (Cooper 2009, 213). And he buttressed each of these legislative achievements with alliances and justifications that laid the basis for the eventual emergence of the New Deal coalition and the later transparty liberal establishment (Plotke 1996) that effectively governed America for half a century and remains bureaucratically entrenched in most of our national institutions.

Failures of the Idealist. G. K. Chesterton, best known for characterizing America as “a nation with the soul of a church,” also remarked that “there is nothing the matter with Americans except for their ideals.” The same could be said of Wilson: His overweening idealism, combined with a self-righteous religious fervor, was often his political and personal undoing—at Princeton, as governor of New Jersey, and as president. When his partisan political skills were married to his rhetorical eloquence, he usually succeeded. When his righteous idealism drove his political practice, he left a legacy of failure, most notably his delusional populist crusade to force the Senate to ratify an unamended peace treaty following World War I and ensure Democratic Party success in the 1920 election.

The Legacy of His Success. The cost of Wilson's remarkable political success was inherent in his “wild-card” (Skowronek 1997) rise to the presidency. He both honored progressive sensitivities by repudiating his earlier partisan positions (e.g., on child labor and the income tax) and flouted those same sensitivities as a rank partisan. Wilson's first appointment to the Supreme Court was his attorney general, James McReynolds, the most racist and reactionary justice to sit in that body. His largely successful resegregation of government workers in the capital was no less egregious, but inevitable, given the influx of patronage appointments streaming into Washington from the South.

There are lessons to be learned from the “lives” of Woodrow Wilson. To politically transcend—or transform—one's time takes political power, and that power must have its origins in partisan elections. Achieving ideals of public good requires the partiality of partisanship, but the results are often ironic. Wilson's last appointment to the Supreme Court was Louis Brandeis; and the Democratic Party Wilson brought out of disgrace and contempt eventually became, through the legislative alliances he first created, the only national institution in which African Americans play a decisive part. Would that today's progressives in academia temper their symbolic and cultural politics and begin to engage in democratic politics.

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