

# How We Remember (and Forget) in Our Public History

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The controversy surrounding whether to continue the ceremonious naming of institutions and honors in homage to the life of Woodrow Wilson cannot occur without a review of *who* Wilson was, of *what* his contributions were, and about *what* he represented. Such a review would be warranted if we were considering naming an award or edifice for any person. Three very general criteria (exclusive of a financial contribution to support funding an honor) come to mind when considering whether to bestow an edifice or honor in someone's name:

1. The outstanding contributions of the nominee;
2. The nominee's exemplification of a positive image and/or notable integrity; and
3. Whether there is a conflict of interest concerning the nominee.

We are generally aware of Wilson's numerous achievements, as noted in the first criterion. However, criterions 2 and 3 are the most contentious for his legacy, and thus deserve further review.

## Wilson's Image, Integrity, and Conflicts of Interest

Wilson, a native-born Southerner, was no stranger to the lifestyle of Jim Crow, and as a Democrat, this was his point of political vulnerability (Blumenthal 1963). Much of white southern politics in the early twentieth century rested upon one's devotion to the New South and its redemption of white supremacy. Yet Wilson ran for the presidency on the "New Freedom" platform, which espoused government reform against patronage and an antidiscriminatory meritocracy that was part and parcel of Progressivism, whether it was a part of the Republican or Democratic Party. Wilson's Progressivism stopped short of applying equally to black

Americans (Logan 1965), and this is a point of departure from his "positive image" and "integrity," despite his campaign promises to blacks. His commitment to white southern values of his day conflicted with the interest of broader democracy and inclusion of blacks.

As U.S. President, Wilson appointed devout, white, racist Southerners to federal positions (replacing black appointees), and they segregated the federal bureaucracy (Williamson 1984). Previously, the Civil Service (Pendleton) Act of 1883 required passage of civil service examinations for all civil servants in order to lessen the effects of oft-exclusionary patronage. This had expanded opportunities for blacks (King 1995; Patler 2004). To Wilson, segregation was a form of détente between the races—it was for blacks' own good.

Wilson entertained a special White House viewing of D. W. Griffith and Thomas Dixon's controversial 1915 film "Birth of a Nation," which depicted Reconstruction as damnation against southern whites, until the Ku Klux Klan prevailed in restoring white supremacy over blacks, bringing order back to the South. Wilson never denounced the film, despite blacks' national protests and an insurgence of racial riots and lynchings in the wake of its release (Cooper 2009). Although he delivered an address on the lawlessness of lynching, he generally refused to address blacks' concerns publicly, no matter what the issue.

## Contemporary Context: Race Matters

Was Wilson a noteworthy president, scholar, and public administrator? Indeed he was, but with notable contradictions. However, the *full* story of Wilson's "contributions" to society should exist in descriptions of his contradictory record on race and public administration. Today's standard of more open discussions on race also allows us to peruse a fuller perspective of Wilson's views, actions, and administration of race-related issues.

To engage this debate further, we should consider the following: What does naming a building or honor represent? How does naming "edify" and "institutionalize" our commemoration of the person so honored? Who determines naming rights? How diverse are (and have been) these grantors? Are we willing to tell people "no," that a name will not be used, and to what avail?

If Wilson's name is not removed from edifices and honors, then we should ask ourselves *why*, and we should be willing to explain *why not*. In short order, this is a moment of reflection about how we remember (and *forget*) in our public history. But it also leads us to perennial discussions about whom and about what we have a history of

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a willingness to forget—the claims and facts of black people’s inequitable experiences in American democracy.

Perhaps we need a Day of Remembrance, wherein we actually do commemorate the undemocratic and sometimes heinous actions of avowedly great leaders that were in stark contrast with those that they professed. By symbolically removing their names from buildings and honors, we can remind ourselves that the struggle for democracy was just that, a struggle, and a struggle among many people, not just a struggle of a single person. Most importantly, the removals would be drastic, widespread, and astonishing.

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