

Righting Some of Wilson's Wrongs

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It might come as no surprise that although my surname is Wilson, I actually have no genealogical lineage to Woodrow Wilson (yes, I have checked); and, of course, I never met him in person (he died well before my parents were born). A southern Democrat who actively supported racial segregation, discrimination, and racist ideologies, Wilson is ostensibly “the enemy.” However, I can say with a great deal of certainty that I would not be a political scientist, much less the academic I am today, without his inspirational lineage served through the Woodrow Wilson Foundation. Thus, the controversy over Woodrow Wilson’s name brings a great deal of reflection and emotion, and it is perhaps true that, indeed, “enemies make strange bedfellows.” Today, that might be called “bipartisanship,” but I digress.

I have the distinction of having been a Woodrow Wilson Fellow (WWF '93) in Public Policy and International Affairs (PPIA), participating in a summer institute at the University of Michigan (UM). In terms of academics, the PPIA program was my first introduction to specialized graduate-level training in economics, math and statistics, and advanced policy analysis. WWFs in my cohort had the opportunity to learn from UM heavyweights like Carl Simon, Sheldon Danzinger, Mary Corcoran, Robin Barlow, and Alan Deardorff; and we were exposed to a more rigorous understanding of issues like unemployment, poverty, equal opportunity policy, and international trade. Yet the most consequential element of the program was that all of the Fellows in my class were from African American, Asian, Latino, Native American, and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander descent. Our 1993 UM cohort was completely comprised of nonwhite undergraduate students interested in graduate education. We were a tightly knit group and supported one another in ways that inspired excellence and achievement. Today, there are many PPIA WWFs among the political science faculty ranks, including Saladin Ambar, Pearl Ford-Dowe, and Alvin Tillery.

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The dissonance over my existing pride as a WWF and that pride being attached to a known racial segregationist prompts reflection not only on how we should think about Wilson but also about how amends are to be made that channel reparations and produce a semblance of social justice. For instance, the PIPA program produced more than 2,000 Fellows in Wilson’s name, complementing the Foundation’s roughly 250 Martin Luther King, Jr., Fellows (from 1968 to 1974) comprised of black veterans pursuing graduate and professional degrees; the Woodrow Wilson Teaching Internships (1963 to 1990), which produced a generation of Historically Black College and University leaders in higher education; and the ongoing Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellowships that recruit and prepare talented individuals for high school teaching careers in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) in low-income communities and high-need schools. Many lives and individuals were hurt permanently by Wilson’s regressive racial policies, but many other lives have been given opportunities. In many ways, this is a form of reparations bearing Wilson’s name. It is also a form of social justice in that the Foundation is taking on the mission of righting some of Wilson’s wrongs.

Currently, Wilson’s racial legacy pales in comparison to the work of the Foundation bearing his name; and it also makes sense to revisit both legacies as we continue to dialog about the pains of the past and the opportunities of the future. Wilson was a definitive product of his time, and questions abound about the extent to which we should revisit his value. My point is simply to proffer that the discussion does not produce easy unanimity among all African American scholars who have benefited in Wilson’s name. Such a position may leave scholars from one side or the other on the “outside looking in,” which is ironically the same policy spirit espoused by Wilson, and now criticized.

Academics are slightly challenged in that we rarely go into our jobs thinking about all of the potential ramifications, such as accepting named professorships, associating with named centers or institutions, or even working for universities and colleges with explicit histories, many of which are uglier than Wilson’s policies. In the end, we each make a personal decision, informed or not, to stay or go (accept or reject). Perhaps it is a necessary condition for the utopian postracial society that all symbols of racism and discrimination are eliminated, but perhaps it is also a necessary condition to maintain all symbols of racism in order to remind us of how far we have come.

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