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Racism IN THE Nation's Service

Government Workers and the Color Line in Woodrow Wilson's America

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Aside from the trails we are blazing for those who are to enter the Civil Service after us, we have our families to support, homes to purchase and properly equip and preparations to make for larger and higher service in the cause of the uplift of the race.
—W. Calvin Chase, *Washington Bee*, September 27, 1913

Introduction

In 1913, several hundred black men and women working as clerks in the nation's service were a rare reminder of the rights and citizenship African Americans had won nearly fifty years earlier. Between the 1880s and 1910s, thousands like them passed civil service exams, pulled political strings, and traveled to Washington, D.C., to take up work in the executive offices of the federal government. They produced reports in the Census Bureau, managed appropriations in the Treasury Department, and sorted in the Post Office Department. With decent paychecks, they built middle-class lives and sent their children to college. But that spring, the complex and tenuous political arrangements that had made their positions possible were undone by the racism of a new regime. "I have plans that are all ruined, utterly ruined," despaired Census clerk William Jennifer.[1] The opportunities and stability he and so many others had come to expect from government employment would all but vanish. This is a book about how that world of possibility, work, politics, and mobility was snuffed out. It is a story of how "good government" became the special preserve of white men.

The standard narrative about racism and the U.S. civil service in the early

twentieth century is that Woodrow Wilson, a southern Democrat, segregated black workers in federal offices in 1913.[2] The real story is not so simple. The fact of spatial segregation cannot capture the experiences, struggles, and national significance of workers like William Jennifer. What concerned African American employees most was the increasingly apparent relationship between segregation and stunted opportunity. Even if they could find autonomy in "Negro corners," the corners were necessarily on the margins, offering, in the words of historian Earl Lewis, "more space than power."[3] Economics, not space, lay at the heart of what we call segregation. The goal of Wilsonian discrimination was not just racial separation but the limitation of black people to a controlled and exploitable class of laborers. It meant channeling civil servants into a racially tiered system with less mobility and less money for black Washingtonians.

Segregating the civil service had economic consequences but also political and civic ramifications. Wilson's administration combined institutionalized racism with progressive reform in a way that devastated not only careers but also the very foundation of full citizenship for African Americans. Historians have not adequately connected this kind of racial segregation with the state's power to bureaucratize racism and shape class formation.[4] As Wilson and his managers cut down African American civil servants, they undermined an actual as well as a symbolic black middle class in the nation's capital and nationalized a white supremacist social order too often presumed to exist only in Wilson's native South.[5]

Racism in the Nation's Service reveals a key shift in national racial regimes during Wilson's presidency. By regime, I mean the ways in which white and black federal employees interacted and the ways in which bureaucrats conceptualized racial distinctions as they organized government employment. Wilson's government was no more racialized (that is, involved in maintaining racial categories and distinctions) than preceding administrations, but it was more dedicated to white supremacy. By denying appointments, promotions, and even dignity to African American workers, Wilsonians limited the ability of African Americans to obtain stable employment and build the kind of wealth, not just income, that is required to rise in American society. The attrition of African American clerks in federal offices was not simply a routine political purging of loyal Republicans at the hands of newly empowered Democrats. It was a deliberate subversion of a small but growing class of African American middle-class professionals. Under a segregationist regime, being black meant being economically vulnerable, just as it meant suffering social and political inequality.

In public memory, Woodrow Wilson stands alone at the center of this story. While Wilson strongly supported segregation, there is no evidence that he oversaw its implementation or ensured consistency through a clear directive.[6] Wilson was an aloof and shadowy chief executive when it came to personnel management, even in the area of racial discrimination. Instead, it was the men Wilson appointed to run his government who threaded white supremacy into the federal bureaucracy. A few, such as Assistant Secretary of the Treasury John Skelton Williams, were especially steadfast and exuberant discriminators. Yet the progressive aims of Wilsonians and the resistance of African Americans forced most bureaucrats to work haltingly and often in negotiation with each other, government workers, and even civil rights leaders. The result was a more complex regime with a larger cast of characters. Wilson's most remarkable role came after the dirty work was well underway, when he blessed the marriage of progressive politics and state-sponsored racism as necessary for good government.

Racism is too often walled off as an ugly and vestigial outlier to the efficient and equitable state that progressives sought to build. Fair elections, untainted food, and a stable currency stand as essential goods, while the racism of leaders like Wilson is usually lamented but ultimately set aside as personal prejudice unconnected to policy.[7] A few scholars have located the origins of an extensive American "racial bureaucracy" in the Wilson administration.[8] Yet the U.S. civil service was ordered by racial constructions from its inception. It was the practice and force of racism that changed with the progressive politics of the 1910s. In fact, bureaucratic rationalization provided white progressives with a way of explaining their actions against black civil servants that seemed to fit their progressive politics.[9] We cannot explain these changes without a longer view and a deeper understanding of the experiences of black federal employees, whose longstanding claims to citizenship and employment in the national state provoked Wilsonian Democrats.

The histories of black politics, progressive reform, and state-making are crucial to understanding racial discrimination under Wilson, and so my account stretches from Reconstruction to the late 1920s. Its chief actors are those black and white Americans who together forged national politics and urban life in Washington. I examine the capital's relatively egalitarian society at the turn of the twentieth century as well as the forces that led to its destruction. In particular, political patronage's incessant swapping of partisanship for jobs in the late nineteenth century was a central factor of African American federal employment, the establishment of Washington's black middle class, and white progressives' complaints about black politi-

cians.[10] The new political regime of the 1910s, supposedly free of patronage and inaugurated at a moment of expanding state power, did more than harm a few elite black men and women. It undermined the claims to citizenship and economic security of all African Americans.

FOR DECADES AFTER THE CIVIL WAR, federal employment was a powerful means of social mobility for African Americans. The decent salaries of government clerks paid for a full and dynamic life in a capital city with comparatively little racial discrimination. Washington was an island of possibility for ambitious black men and women at a time when racism cordoned them off from vast sectors of the economy and set ceilings on the jobs they could manage to get. Never free of hardship, the District of Columbia and its federal offices nonetheless offered a promising future for African Americans in a nation in which disfranchisement, peonage, violence, and terror were hallmarks of black life.

Government employment and Republican politics safeguarded Washington as a place of relative opportunity for black Americans. To be sure, racism circumscribed black life in Washington well before the Wilson administration. Historian Kate Masur has revealed how the revocation of the District's franchise in the 1870s was racially motivated and crucial to the story of Reconstruction's demise.[11] Losing the vote was a major blow to the citizenship and liberty that Radical Republicans had promised Washington's freed people. Even so, the social mobility, wealth, prominence, freedom, and power of Washington's black middle and elite classes in 1900 were remarkable. Black Washingtonians testified to a distinct contraction of possibility with the coming of the Wilsonians, suggesting that what occurred was not merely the topping off of the process Masur describes.

Black men and women who worked for the government in 1900 were functional members of the state apparatus doing the nation's business. Their numbers grew steadily well into the new century.[12] In 1912, every dollar printed by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing bore the signature of the black man who served as register of the Treasury. Black men also served as auditor for the Navy Department, U.S. consul in Cognac, France, and collector of the Port of New York. More than 400 African Americans, mostly men, worked as white-collar clerks in Washington, some in supervisory positions over white workers. The politically savvy, educated, and reasonably well-off black population in the capital represented the highest ideal of progress for African Americans. That they made their living in government offices placed them at the very center of the American republic.

Such vital citizenship required political power. Against mounting odds, African Americans maintained a voice in the Republican Party after Reconstruction. Even as disfranchisement began to bring a white supremacist order to the political chaos of the 1870s and 1880s in the South, northern Republicans did not yet imagine their party without black politicians. Through actual votes, mostly outside the South, and the patronage manipulation of Booker T. Washington and his "Tuskegee Machine," black Republicans exerted pressure on the national party even as southern states were blocking black voters.[13] The roots of the modern civil rights movement have been found recently in nineteenth-century black nationalism, the early NAACP and its forerunners, and working-class radicalism, but these discoveries should not diminish the political party activities of black Americans after Reconstruction. The self-uplift ethic of middle-class African Americans in this period required not just the stability of federal paychecks but the protection of interracial political connections.[14]

The significance of political patronage becomes apparent when it is seen in the context of the racist labor market of late-nineteenth-century America. Patronage is typically characterized as a malignant system of graft, corruption, and undemocratic politics. Thanks, in part, to the progressive ideology of leaders such as Woodrow Wilson, the patronage system that produced black federal employees has a bad reputation.[15] Most historians assume that African Americans played no role beyond being the mere tools of spoilsmen. The old view of Reconstruction as a political sewer still survives—if implicitly—in the literature, which can make it difficult to shed light on the ways in which black politicians operated shrewdly (and morally) according to the rules of their era, rules white politicians created for their own benefit.[16] Not that every black politician was a saint. Black spoilsmen were self-serving in just about the same proportion as white spoilsmen, but the preoccupation with patronage's undeniable problems obscures the ways in which African Americans used politics and the state productively to protect their well-being even after Reconstruction.

Indeed, patronage greatly facilitated African American citizens' claims to decent jobs, social mobility, and civic equality in circumstances that denied them other ways to express these claims.[17] Patronage did not float all boats and may have even forestalled a broader collective black politics by turning some leaders into conservative ward heelers.[18] Yet federal patronage did more than serve a few individualistic elites. Legal historian Risa Goluboff has noted that the demands African Americans made on the expanded New Deal state for their safety and security "prove false the historiography's di-

chotomy between patronage and rights consciousness."[19] I argue that this dichotomy was undercut from the moment African Americans engaged the state as full citizens in the 1860s. For a time, black civil servants in Washington were treated as equals and moved up in the bureaucracy to positions of decent pay and real responsibility. Their mobility allowed for investment in the city's institutions that benefited all black Washingtonians. The public schools in the capital, topped by the famed Dunbar High School, were one obvious example, but so too was the ability of black lawyers and Republican administrators to maintain a relatively unsegregated city into the 1910s.

THE PROMINENCE AND PROSPERITY of educated black Washingtonians attracted a racist backlash after the turn of the twentieth century. As legal disfranchisement shut down persistent pockets of black and Republican voting in the South, as racist thinking scaled the heights of modern science, as disputes between capital and labor grew more urgent, and as Reconstruction-era politicians—black and white—exited the stage, white Republicans began to shed their egalitarianism. White supremacy then arrived in Washington in full force with Woodrow Wilson and his Democrats in 1913.

When Wilsonian progressives pledged to clean up Washington, they meant its offices and its streets. They posed as "Redeemers" of a government and its capital gone astray under Republican rule. Bureaucratic reform in federal offices proceeded apace with racial discrimination under Wilson, and with similar arguments and language. Progressive reformers demanded racial segregation as part of their efforts to make the federal government more efficient and the capital a happier, more attractive city. Powerful black people in the national capital made the government vulnerable to corruption, "friction," and even racial conflagration. White supremacy was a necessary precondition if the United States was to be a model nation, if the federal government was to be a model employer, and if Washington was to be a model city.

The racism of white Americans in the early twentieth century should not surprise us, but the practice of racism still requires exploration and explanation by historians. Racism has been a profoundly protean phenomenon, one driven by human beings in specific contexts and with evolving ideologies.[20] Progressive ideas about friction and efficiency did not cause Wilsonian racial discrimination; racism led Wilson to exclude black people from his "New Freedom." But Wilsonians hit upon discriminatory and discursive practices that allowed them to claim simultaneously the mantles of

progressive politics and white supremacy. Politics is made up of methods of talk as well as policy ideas, and Wilsonians narrowed issues of citizens' rights to managerial concerns of "efficiency" versus "corruption." They racialized efficiency (made it white), just as they racialized Republican corruption (made it black). Progressive critiques of patronage thus maligned black Republicans as corrupt and associated racial integration with dirty politics. Patronage, especially black patronage, lost out to managerial bureaucracy, and African Americans, once skilled players, were left without access to the game.

The changes that Wilsonian management practices ushered in are indicated by the treatment of black workers when the Republicans returned to power in 1921. Whereas William Howard Taft never fully abandoned his connections to black patronage, the Harding and Coolidge administrations saw no reason to return to pre-1912 levels of black employment. They too adopted the Wilsonians' assumption that black and white workers could not and should not be expected to work as equals in the same offices. They did so not simply as racists but, following patterns set by the Wilsonian racial regime, as modern administrators interested in managerial questions of efficiency. These concerns about efficiency did not bring about segregation, but they did become powerful and important ways of talking about segregating—just as they became key ways of talking about administration in general.

African Americans were profoundly disturbed by discrimination in federal offices, and they never stopped protesting it. But most of the black civil servants working in Washington when Wilson took office in 1913 did not live to see the color line erased. That generation experienced both the opportunities of the Republican era and the betrayal of those opportunities as the racial regime shifted. No longer did their abilities, education, and political loyalty to the GOP serve as productive elements in a government career. Black civil servants could not repel the racial exclusion that the more powerful Wilsonians were intent on enacting. They resisted but did not overcome.

THIS BOOK TRACES THE RISE AND FALL of African American civil servants in three sections. The first section establishes the world of black politics and federal employment in Washington, D.C., before Woodrow Wilson's election in November 1912. Chapter 1 takes us on a walk through Washington and its federal offices around the turn of the twentieth century, and chapters 2 and 3 follow national politics and its connection to federal

employment from Abraham Lincoln's administration to William Howard Taft's. The next section charts the rise of the Wilsonian regime between 1913 and 1917. Chapter 4 explores the ideologies and discourse swirling around the Wilson administration, in particular the relationship between progressive politics and white supremacy. Chapter 5 lays out the ways in which Wilson's administrators went about discriminating against African American federal employees in Washington, from separating and isolating employees to limiting career prospects. Chapter 6 examines the methods of resistance and protest deployed by black employees and civil rights activists, as well as Woodrow Wilson's response to the protests. Finally, the last section, chapter 7, follows the story into the late 1920s, when the generation of federal employees who experienced Wilsonian discrimination began to die out. This chapter returns us to ordinary life in federal offices and in Washington's streets, to see the ways in which the changes under Wilson's administration became institutionalized after Republicans returned to national power.

The achievements of African American civil servants at the turn of the twentieth century show how federal employment and political patronage provided avenues to social and economic mobility, especially for those discriminated against elsewhere. In turn, tracking the deliberate destruction of this system reveals how racial discrimination was experienced by black Americans, justified by white Americans, and both rationalized and nationalized by the federal government. Because they had been so privileged, because the government kept so much paperwork about them, and because some Wilsonians worked so deliberately, the stories of African American civil servants in Washington offer an unusually complete and eloquent record of the process and pain of drawing the color line in the United States.

The bureaucratic segregation and discrimination that metastasized in Washington's offices in the 1910s involved a new racial system, one that just a few years later would seem timeless. Federal discrimination was not simply the establishment of segregation in federal offices by one Democratic president. Rather, it constituted a dramatic change in national politics, one that encompassed bureaucratic rationalization, progressive politics, and African American disfranchisement. This history illustrates how the American state has been complicit in racism and black poverty. If Radical Reconstruction offered a chance for the United States to fulfill its founding promises, Wilsonian discrimination revealed the extent to which the state continued to be implicated in the nation's failures.