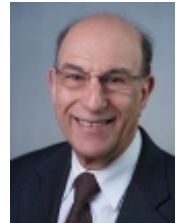


Woodrow Wilson's legacy of racial segregation can be condemned even by the standards of his own time.

*After months of debate and protests, the trustees of Princeton University this month rejected demands to remove Woodrow Wilson's name from the university's facilities but agreed that the university should do more to present Wilson's contributions to segregating US society. **Richard Rothstein** writes, however, that the trustees blundered by accepting the claim that Wilson's actions were reprehensible by the values of "our times." We do not have to judge Wilson's actions by the standards of today, Rothstein says; the standards of many of Wilson's early 20th century contemporaries are more than enough to condemn his views and actions on segregation.*



Earlier this month, the Princeton University trustees announced they were rejecting student protester demands that "Woodrow Wilson" be removed from the names of the university's School of Public and International Affairs and a residential undergraduate college.

The protesters objected to honoring Wilson because he participated in and, as president of the United States, helped lead a national wave of reaction against the progress towards equality that African Americans had made in the decades after emancipation. In particular, Wilson segregated, for the first time, the federal civil service.

The trustees agreed that Wilson's racial policies, both as president of the university (where he refused to admit African American students) and as president of the United States were a serious blemish on his record. They recommended greater efforts to recruit African American students, programs to better incorporate those students into university life, and "a much more multi-faceted understanding and representation of Wilson on our campus, especially at the school and the college where his name is commemorated." They made no specific proposals in this regard, but it would seem reasonable to install a prominent plaque at the entrances of these buildings that describe Wilson's contributions to segregating American society, and distribute a pamphlet to each student at the school and college that describes the origins of segregation and Woodrow Wilson's contribution to it.

Such an approach would be preferable to removing his name. Preserving the identity of the school and college should be a provocation for ongoing discussion of this history. Sanitizing the names, in contrast, could ensure that future generations of Princeton students will be as little challenged by that history as previous generations have been.



Robertson Hall, home of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University Credit: [mob mob](#) (Flickr, [CC-BY-NC-SA-2.0](#))

There was, however, a discordant note in the trustees' report. It said that the continued use of Wilson's name "implies no endorsement of views and actions that conflict with the values and aspirations of our times." In this fashion, the trustees subtly associated themselves with a theme propounded by opponents of the student protests, the idea that, as one *New York Times* letter-writer put it, "judging and vilifying 19th and early 20th century behavior by 21st century standards is neither realistic nor prudent." A sociology professor [wrote](#) that we should not target "incidents and opinions that were normative during [Wilson's] time in office." A [distinguished law professor said](#) that Wilson "was a man of his own time, and he should be judged accordingly... not only by the moral standards of today, but by ...his values in the setting of his own time." And so on.

Philosophers and historians have long pondered whether we can judge the past by today's standards. But in the case of government sponsorship of segregation, we can avoid the tough questions and be satisfied with judging yesterday's leaders by standards that were readily available to them in their own time.

Prior to Woodrow Wilson's inauguration in 1913, African Americans had been making slow but steady progress in federal employment, and were about 5 percent of all federal civil servants nationwide, working side-by-side with whites. They occupied managerial positions as well, sometimes directing an integrated workforce. Wilson's cabinet officers demoted African Americans and denied them any further promotions, to prevent them from ever being in supervisory positions over whites. Federal departments installed curtains to separate black and white clerical workers, segregated cafeteria sections by race for the first time, and created separate bathrooms that black workers had to use in the basements of government buildings. In 1914, the federal civil service [instituted](#) a policy of requiring photographs on all job applications, to ensure that further black workers would not be hired. In a [New York Times op-ed on the Princeton students' protest](#), Gordon J. Davis, a prominent African American lawyer, described how his grandfather was peremptorily demoted from a well-paying position as a supervisor in the Government Printing Office to a messenger in the War Department, at half his previous salary. He lost a home and died "a broken man."

Secretary of the Treasury William McAdoo justified such treatment with a claim that the Wilson administration's segregation policy was necessary "to remove the causes of complaint and irritation where white women have been forced unnecessarily to sit at desks with colored men." President Wilson [stated](#), "I do approve of the segregation that

is being attempted in several of the departments” and wrote to a friend, “We are trying—and by degrees succeeding—a plan of concentration which will put them all together and will not in any one bureau mix the two races.”

Because the civil service has always been a stepping-stone for upwardly mobile lower-class groups, cases like that of Mr. Davis’s grandfather were no small matter. Although not all Davis descendants were permanently set back, many other families were not so fortunate. Wilson’s policies decimated the growing African American middle class of Washington, D.C. Given what we know about the limits of intergenerational income mobility in the United States, then as well as now, Wilson’s policy had an impact lasting many generations and contributes to the impoverishment of the African American ghetto, particularly in the nation’s capital.

Segregation may have been a popular policy for Wilson to follow, but there were contrary voices offering a different standard. Wilson had choices, and if we claim that his decision only followed norms for his time, we inappropriately excuse how he chose. If we make “standards of the time” synonymous with the most conventional, majority opinion of an era, we forfeit our ability to learn from errors of the past, and undermine our will to correct them.

Certainly, throughout the twentieth century, outspoken African Americans protested their treatment as a lower caste, denied the full rights of citizenship guaranteed to them by our Constitution. Their voices were always in the public realm, widely available to offer a standard by which public officials’ actions should have been judged. In 1913, an African American delegation met with the president to protest his segregation policies, but Wilson deemed their spokesman impudent and vowed never to meet with him again.

If you dismiss the relevance of African American protests on the ground that whites’ “standards of the time” meant not paying attention to black opinion, consider that many white religious leaders also protested Wilson’s policy of segregation. The National Council of Congregational Churches of the United States, a mainstream Protestant group, adopted a resolution condemning Wilson’s policy at its 1914 convention. The editor of *The Congregationalist and the Christian World* wrote to Wilson that his segregation policy violated Christian principles and told his readers that protesting Wilson’s policy was the “Christian white man’s duty.” Senator Robert La Follette’s magazine (now known as *The Progressive*) published a series of articles protesting Wilson’s policy and concluding that African Americans “should not be discriminated against.”

Wilson’s Republican predecessors—Presidents William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, and William Howard Taft—also had different ideas of what was appropriate. None was an integrationist—indeed, each supported “social” segregation, and forcefully so. They made no efforts to challenge Democrats’ imposition of a new order of racial subjugation and terror in the South, but the Republicans did open an integrated federal civil service to African Americans and sanctioned their promotion within the ranks.

As Theodore Roosevelt’s term came to a close in 1909, 2,785 African Americans worked in federal offices in Washington, D.C., representing 11 percent of the capital city’s federal civil service. Of these, 415 were executives, professionals, technicians, scientists, or other white collar workers. William Howard Taft appointed an African American lawyer, William Lewis, as an assistant attorney general and fought for (and won) his Senate confirmation. At the time, this was the highest federal position ever held by an African American.

As governor of New York, Theodore Roosevelt had hosted African American leaders at the governor’s mansion on a number of occasions, sometimes as overnight guests. In one of his first acts as president in 1901, he made a public gesture that symbolized his contempt for the growing national support for segregation, inviting the African American educator Booker T. Washington to dinner at the White House. It was not a popular thing to do; Democratic Senator Benjamin Tillman (who had run for office boasting of his role in the massacre of African Americans at the end of Reconstruction) said, “The action of President Roosevelt in entertaining that nigger will necessitate our killing a thousand niggers in the South before they will learn their place.” The leaders of Roosevelt’s own Republican Party were also critical.

Roosevelt, not easily intimidated, made no effort to pacify Tillman; after Tillman slugged a fellow Democratic

Senator who had been cooperating with Roosevelt's legislative program, the president [banned](#) Tillman from White House dinners for the rest of his presidency. Yet while Roosevelt advocated full civil rights for African Americans, he also [courted](#) Southern white votes with racial appeals that included declarations about white racial superiority. Neither of Roosevelt's stances can be deemed *the* "standards of the time." Nor, for that matter, were Tillman's views "normative" for the time. In the national conversation regarding rights of African Americans, Roosevelt had one of many standards, Woodrow Wilson another. We can fairly acknowledge Roosevelt's and condemn Wilson's. We don't have to hold Wilson to contemporary standards; the standards of a considerable number of his contemporaries are enough to condemn him.

Wilson's successor as president, Warren G. Harding, was also no integrationist, but like McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, and Taft, he sometimes stood up to the worst advocates of African American suppression. In 1923, the federal government built a hospital in [Tuskegee](#), Alabama for African American veterans of World War I. Alabama administrators adopted a policy that although the hospital served black veterans, no African Americans would be hired, and proceeded to staff the hospital only with white doctors, nurses and other staff. President Harding personally intervened, freezing all hiring at the hospital until African Americans in professional as well as service positions could be recruited.

It is one thing to excuse historic figures for failing to recognize moral standards that were held by nobody, or barely anybody. But if we excuse them for failing to recognize moral standards that were held by some, and of which they were aware but chose to reject, we undermine our constitutional system. The purpose of the Bill of Rights and the Civil War amendments is to protect minorities and individuals from majority opinion, not from unanimous opinion. Whether because of private prejudice or political expediency, government officials who segregated the nation ignored their constitutional obligations, unpopular though those obligations may have been to most white voters.

By embracing the idea that "our times" are different, the Princeton University trustees ducked the most important issue that the student protesters raised. What does it say about us that it took until 2016 to address the racial legacy of the university's most prominent leader? It is not as though the students brought up issues with which we, and the trustees, were unfamiliar. Wilson's role in segregating the civil service has been described in many historical accounts. His promotion of and praise for the film, *Birth of a Nation*, glorifying the Ku Klux Klan's violent suppression of African Americans at the end of Reconstruction, is known even by many who don't read history texts. If the university erects a plaque at the entrance of the Woodrow Wilson School, describing Wilson's role in segregating the nation, the text should also reflect upon the failure of the university, including its present leaders, to acknowledge this legacy for the next hundred years—until student protests forced them to do so.

Also this month, Harvard University President Drew Faust installed a plaque to honor African American slaves that the university had used in its 18th century construction. [She observed](#):

It should not be because we feel superior to our predecessors that we interrogate and challenge their actions. We should approach the past with humility because we too are humans with capacities for self-delusion, for moral failure and blindness, for inhumanity. If we can better understand how oppression and exploitation could seem commonplace to so many of those who built Harvard, we may better equip ourselves to combat our own shortcomings and to advance justice and equality in our own time.

The Princeton trustees should be commended for their acknowledgement of the past and their new commitment to diversity and inclusion. But rather than a smug boast that "the values and aspirations of our times" are different from those of Wilson's time, the trustees would have been well served by a bit of Drew Faust's humility.

This article originally appeared at [The Economic Policy Institute](#).

Featured image, President Woodrow Wilson. Credit: By Unknown photographer (Library of Congress[1]) [Public domain or Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

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