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# Lost Cause in the Oval Office: Woodrow Wilson's Racist Policies and White-Washed Memory of the Civil War

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# Lost Cause in the Oval Office: Woodrow Wilson's Racist Policies and White-Washed Memory of the Civil War

## **Abstract**

For the past several weeks, students all across the nation have opened up discussions on race relations on university campuses and in American culture at large. The latest battlefield in the fight for greater inclusion is Princeton University, where protestors from the Black Justice League staged a 32 hour sit-in at the president's office. Princeton University, traditionally viewed as a bastion of progressivism and liberal ideology, is coming under fire for its reverence for perhaps their most famous graduate, President Woodrow Wilson. Wilson graduated from Princeton University Class of 1879 and served as president of the school from 1902 until 1910, after which he was elected Governor of New Jersey and subsequently the 28th President of the United States [*excerpt*].

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Woodrow Wilson, rascism, white-washed history, Black Justice League

## **Disciplines**

History | Political History | Public History | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Social History | United States History

## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### Lost Cause in the Oval Office: Woodrow Wilson's Racist Policies and White-Washed Memory of the Civil War

December 2, 2015

By Jeff Lauck '18

For the past several weeks, students all across the nation have opened up discussions on race relations on university campuses and in American culture at large. The latest battlefield in the fight for greater inclusion is Princeton University, where **protestors from the Black Justice League staged a 32 hour sit-in at the president's office**. Princeton University, traditionally viewed as a bastion of progressivism and liberal ideology, is coming under fire for its reverence for perhaps their most famous graduate, President Woodrow Wilson. Wilson graduated from Princeton University Class of 1879 and served as president of the school from 1902 until 1910, after which he was elected Governor of New Jersey and subsequently the 28<sup>th</sup> President of the United States.



*President Woodrow Wilson addresses the crowd at the 50th Anniversary Blue & Gray Reunion at Gettysburg in 1913. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

At a superficial level, Princeton seems entirely justified in venerating their well-accomplished graduate. However, as the Black Justice League has pointed out, President Wilson has also left a legacy of racism in his wake. In July 1912, Wilson enlisted the help of African American civil-rights leader William Monroe Trotter to increase his prospects among the black community during his campaign for the presidency. In exchange, Wilson promised to promote fairness for all Americans. During the first year of Wilson's presidency, Trotter again visited Wilson to follow up on his promise. Trotter brought with him prominent civil-rights leader Ida B. Wells as well as documented proof of a policy of segregation in federal offices. Trotter and Wells were dismissed with "vague assurances" from the president. In a third meeting in the Oval Office in 1914, Trotter escalated his rhetoric, charging that the president himself was promoting Jim Crow policies in the federal government. Wilson responded by arguing that segregation was put in place to benefit blacks and should not be seen as a "humiliation" for the African American community. The conversation quickly took a turn for the worse and Trotter and his delegation were escorted out of the White House, tempers flaring.

Wilson's segregationist drive is well documented in Eric S. Yellin's 2013 book *Racism in the Nation's Service: Government Workers and the Color Line in Woodrow Wilson's America*. Stephen Skowronek goes a step further in arguing that Wilson's policies regarding race have transcended the ages in America's progressive movement at home and abroad. Even more interesting (at least to the author and probably the readership of this blog) is Wilson's attitudes toward the Civil War and Reconstruction. In a 1901 article entitled "The Reconstruction of the Southern States," Wilson declared that "it was not strange" that southern legislatures took "extraordinary steps" to address the "dangers" of newly freed blacks. Wilson fed into a white supremacist narrative that freedmen were uncivilized, lazy, and unintelligent, writing that they were "unschooled in self-control . . . insolent and aggressive . . . sick of work [and] covetous of pleasure." He even likened them to "dusky children untimely put out of school." In these words lie the inkling of paternalism that would lead Wilson to believe that his segregationist policies would do the "inferior blacks" a great service by "protecting" them from competition with their pale-skinned superiors.

The capstone of Woodrow Wilson's white supremacist view of the Civil War era lies in [his speech at Gettysburg](#) on July 4, 1913 at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary Blue & Gray reunion. The overall goal of this reunion was to forge the spirit of reconciliation rather than debate the merits and causes of the war. Wilson played right into this goal. According to Wilson, the years since the Civil War brought "peace and union and vigor" and a peace that was both "wholesome" and "healing." In the words of a true reconciliator, everything about the war had been forgotten, save the "splendid valor" and "manly devotion" of the soldiers who fought there. Wilson would have his audience believe that after 1865, an era of great peace and prosperity was brought upon the nation. Yet this narrative completely ignores the plight and terror of freedmen who were shaken by the Klan and who were subjected to decades of Black Codes and Jim Crow Laws, which would not be eradicated for another half century. Nowhere in Wilson's speech does he mention the emancipationist aims of the Union war effort, nor the hundreds of thousands of African Americans who fought to bring about emancipation. In many ways, Wilson's speech represents the white-washed history of the American Civil War that has only recently been deconstructed.

Woodrow Wilson, in his discriminatory actions as President and his white-washed view of the Civil War certainly deserves to be labeled as a racist. Whether this means that Princeton University should opt to strike his name from buildings and honors at their school ultimately remains a decision for their administration. As for Gettysburg College, I can say only that I am proud that one of our buildings has for it uncompromising abolitionist and egalitarian Thaddeus Stevens, and not a controversial white supremacist.

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