

Extraordinary Isolation? Woodrow Wilson and the Civil Rights Movement

Nicholas F. Jacobs, *University of Virginia*
Sidney M. Milkis, *University of Virginia*

*This article explores the contentious and dynamic relationship between Woodrow Wilson and a nascent, diverse civil rights movement from 1912 to 1919. The pivotal relationship between Wilson and the early civil rights movement emerged out of two concurrent and related political developments: the increasing centrality of presidential administration in the constitutional order and the growing national aspirations of political strategies and goals among reform activists. Not only do we illustrate an early form of social movement politics that was largely antithetical to the administration's objectives, but we also trace how the strategies adopted by civil rights leaders were contingent on an early, still-to-be institutionalized administrative presidency. We highlight Wilson's involvement in the racial unrest that emerged from the debut of the film *The Birth of a Nation* and in the race riots that accompanied the Great Migration and World War I in his second term. These early twentieth-century episodes legitimized a form of collective action and helped to recast the modern presidency as an institution that both collaborated and competed with social movement organizations to control the timing and conditions of change.*

Prevailing historical accounts of Woodrow Wilson's presidency give us the impression that his political thought and actions made a major contribution to the development of the modern executive. Wilson, the only political scientist to reach the presidency, would argue that the president uniquely captured and commanded the full force of American politics because of the institution's "extraordinary isolation" from the demands of party politics and congressional deliberation. Especially with the rise of the United States as an industrial and world power, he argued, the president should strive to "be as big a man as he can," for in *modern* America, "there is but one national voice in the country and that is the voice of the President."¹ During his two terms, Wilson did inaugurate practices that strengthened the president as a popular and legislation leader; however, his political science

failed to take adequate account of what was going on in civil society, a deficiency that has haunted presidential scholarship ever since. As we demonstrate, the prospect for transcendent presidential leadership was rendered impractical right from the start of the Wilson administration by the emergence of a fraught relationship between an invigorated executive branch and social movement activists who routinely focused their direct action on the White House. Although this bottom-up, top-down dynamic would not be fully realized until later in the twentieth century, its historical roots can be traced to the contentious alliance between Woodrow Wilson and the civil rights movement.

The dawning of the civil rights movement coincided with, and in some ways helped to advance, a more powerful and purposeful executive office. Consequently, modern presidents became more prominent and regular targets of insurgents who, in turn, gave the White House fresh incentives to stay on top of potent social movements, to try to control them, and sometimes to partner with them. Constrained by constitutional norms, the separation and division of powers, and a decentralized party system, the disruptive potential of executive power was, outside political crises and war, limited until the twentieth century. The wartime collaborations and reform breakthroughs of Abraham Lincoln and the abolitionists anticipated the potential of the uneasy

Email: nfjacobs@virginia.edu

1. Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); James W. Ceaser, *Presidential Selection: Theory and Development* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Random House, 1989; first published by Knopf, 1949;); Forrest McDonald, *The American Presidency: An Intellectual History* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1994); John Milton Cooper Jr., *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011); Peri Arnold, *Remaking the Presidency: Roosevelt, Taft and Wilson, 1901–1916* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

partnerships between presidents and social movements that were forged during the Progressive Era; however, both antebellum clashes and postbellum retrenchment underscore the larger, prototypical constraints of nineteenth-century U.S. politics.² As the failure of Reconstruction made clear, the decentralized “state of courts and parties” of this era made impractical the expansion of national administration that might ensure the enforcement of the rights embodied by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments.³

The innovations of presidency-led reform began to emerge during Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency. A storm of protest ensued over his social courtesy of inviting the highly respected leader of the Tuskegee Institute, Booker T. Washington, to dine with the First Family in the White House—the first time that an African American had “broken bread” in the executive mansion. Such tumult dramatically demonstrated the unremitting attention and symbolic importance attached to the modern presidency. Roosevelt’s collaborations with Washington revolved principally around patronage appointments and other partisan maneuvers that sought to resist the push to establish Lily-White Republican organizations below the Mason-Dixon Line. But Roosevelt’s controversial action in the Brownsville affair and the absence of a national network of social movement organizations that could forcefully challenge his mistreatment of black soldiers testified to how little the partnership forged between the White House and moderate African American leaders like Washington could accomplish.⁴

Yet with the founding of the NAACP in 1909 and Wilson’s efforts to make more routine Roosevelt’s innovations in amplifying the rhetorical and administrative powers of the executive office, uneasy but potentially fruitful alliances between presidents and social movements became a regular feature of American politics. Wilson’s relationship with the early twentieth-century civil rights movement thus underscores how the modern executive office became a focal point for social activists. Our central concern is when and how this sustained pressure translated into concrete political outcomes: What deliberate tactics did advocates deploy in pushing their causes? How did these tactics affect official administration political and policy positions?

While formal institutional developments in the modern presidency during Wilson’s tenure opened up a critical space for this negotiated relationship,

we also trace how an important set of informal associations brought about significant political change in American race relations. As John Wilson argues in his classic definition of social movements, what makes activists unique is their ability to “bring about or resist large-scale change in the social order by *noninstitutionalized* means.”⁵ With its enhanced administrative capacity, the growing expectation for rhetorical leadership, and the increased demands placed on the president for party leadership, civil rights reformers sought to take advantage of these new governing commitments in forcing President Wilson to act when he might not have otherwise.

For Progressives like Wilson, the modern presidency—the “steward of the public welfare,” to use Theodore Roosevelt’s alluring phrase—was predicated on the idea of effective administration.⁶ The support that the NAACP and the National Independent Political League gave Wilson during the 1912 campaign made the leaders of the budding civil rights movement hopeful that their efforts to secure the new administration’s support would be reciprocated in impartial administration. After the inauguration, however, civil rights leaders quickly became disillusioned with the new president; from 1913 to 1915, they collided with Wilson’s partisan allies, who were seeking to segregate the federal service in the name of “efficiency.” The federal workplace thus became a venue for a national struggle for the services of the modern executive. This struggle, which extended to conflicts over the White House screening of *The Birth of a Nation*, race riots in East St. Louis, and the mistreatment of African American soldiers during World War I, would continue throughout Wilson’s two terms. Seeking to take advantage of the presidency’s growing prestige and influence, activists used even the most couched statements of presidential support in the service of their cause to motivate supporters and denounce vitriolic racial hatred. For Progressives, the modern presidency was to be imbued with ambition to break through old legal formulations and transcend state borders to become a leader of a newly constructed nation.⁷ When racial violence threatened this aspiration, activists targeted Wilson with repeated pleas for enhanced presidential authority. Moreover, with America’s growing participation in world affairs, the modern presidency was expected to facilitate the spread of democracy overseas. When those ideals were desiccated inside the military—the ostensible instrument to expand self-government abroad—activists pressured the

2. Sidney M. Milkis and Daniel Tichenor, *Rivalry and Reform: Presidents, Social Movements and the Transformation of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

3. Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

4. Milkis and Tichenor, *Rivalry and Reform*.

5. John Wilson, *Introduction to Social Movements* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 8 (emphasis added).

6. Woodrow Wilson, “The Study of Administration,” *Political Science Quarterly* 2 (1887): 197–222.

7. Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York: Dutton, 1963; first published 1909).

president to exert his constitutional prerogative in the name of racial justice.

Although the demands on the presidency to become the leading instrument of democracy often outpaced either the willingness to respond or the institutional ability to do so, Wilson sometimes found common cause with the goals of civil rights activists. Their extended, negotiated relationship, moreover, sometimes bore fruits of racial justice and social progress during what many scholars consider to be the nadir of race relations in modern America.⁸ While none of these developments were landmark civil rights victories and few triggered massive reconfigurations of the executive office, this formative relationship foreshadowed the emergence of a new form of presidential politics that would become implicated in the reform ambitions of civil rights organizations later in the century—from Franklin D. Roosevelt's (FDR's) reluctant association with civil rights activists (many of whom first cut their teeth during Wilson's presidency) to Lyndon B. Johnson's (LBJ's) fervent commitment to racial justice during his administration. Wilson was slow to realize that he needed to contend with civil rights reformers in the pursuit of remaking the executive office, but he was to learn that it was impossible to stand apart from the severe racial tensions that roiled the nation at the dawn of the twentieth century. With the advent of the modern presidency—its rhetorical, administrative, and partisan goals only partially ritualized—reformers found a malleable institution on which to focus their demands and a prestigious office that might be used to their advantage. Wilson never fully capitulated to these pressures; nevertheless, the negotiated outcomes that did emerge were very much the product of these new institutional constraints and opportunities.

We focus on Wilson's contentious collaboration with a nascent civil rights movement to gain some analytical clarity on the dynamics of what we call presidency-aligned social reform—the uneasy alliance between the modern presidency and organized activists pursuing reform. In focusing on this alignment between an emerging modern executive and a budding civil rights movement, we do not mean to suggest that Wilson was always a cooperative ally to the cause of civil rights; rather, we stress that civil rights activists were marginally successful because their objectives dovetailed with the institutional logic of building a stronger, more nationalized, and more public presidency. Just as Wilson was often

hesitant to give into the demands of African Americans' push for greater social and political equality in the early twentieth century, scholars have noted that the modern presidency, more generally, is just as likely to be hostile, as receptive, to the demands of social activists.⁹ And yet, most ambitious presidents and social movements share a deep desire to recreate the political order. Social movements are “engaged in a political or cultural conflict” that challenges, through a “variable ensemble of performances” the existing political and cultural commitments of the established regime.¹⁰ The development of the modern presidency in the beginning of the twentieth century channeled reform aspirations through an empowered and increasingly public executive branch. As such, the presidency became the preeminent institution to which “persons successfully claiming to speak on behalf of a constituency lacking formal representation” made “publicly visible demands for changes in the distribution or exercise of power.”¹¹ Wilson's relationship with the civil rights movement illustrates that successful social movements *can be* effective in redirecting energies and resources toward, as Stephen Skowronek has famously argued, “dislodging established elites, destroying the institutional arrangements that support them, and clearing the way for something entirely new.”¹² But far from being just a “blunt disruptive force,” the modern presidency—saddled with constitutional restraints and received commitments—possesses an ambivalent form of power that can stifle, redirect, or empower social advocates, even while remaining malleable to their demands.

As a theorist of presidential government, Wilson understood the capacities of executive power to be virtually unbounded; it is therefore all the more revealing to study the gains made by civil rights reformers in leveraging the capacities he did manage to expand in the White House. To be sure, Wilson engaged with and responded to the demands of civil rights activists before many of the institutional resources that would become available to presidents after the consolidation of the modern executive office under FDR existed: an extensive

9. Russell Riley, *The Presidency and the Politics of Racial Equality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Elizabeth Sanders, “Presidents and Social Movements: A Logic and Preliminary Results,” in *Formative Acts: American Politics in the Making*, ed. Stephen Skowronek and Matthew Glassman, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

10. Mario Diani, “The Concept of Social Movement,” *The Sociological Review* 40, no. 1 (1992): 13; Charles Tilly, *Social Movements, 1768–2004* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 4.

11. Charles Tilly, “Social Movements and National Politics,” in *State-Making and Social Movements: Essays in History and Theory*, ed. Charles Bright and Susan Harding (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 306.

12. Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1997), 27–28.

8. Alton Hornsby Jr., ed., *A Companion to African American History* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008); David Brown and Clive Webb, *Race in the American South: From Slavery to Civil Rights* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); Rayford Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877–1901* (New York: Dial Press, 1954).

staff, a formidable communications team, and a more presidency-centered party.¹³ Yet, while many of the developments that resulted from these interactions remained in an embryonic state, they would establish a pattern that would persist through the seminal presidency of FDR and continue until the dramatic encounters between John Kennedy and civil rights activists in the wake of the Birmingham bombings led to a more ritualized relationship between the White House and social activists.¹⁴

The relationship between Wilson's presidency and civil rights reformers therefore sits at the juncture of two concurrent and related political developments: the increasing centrality of executive administration in the constitutional order and the growing national aspirations of political strategies and goals among social activists.¹⁵ Together, these two currents of political change forged an unexpected and often times contentious relationship that would force the Wilson administration to respond to social protest, even if it preferred to remain silent. And yet, the outcomes, while leaving both the White House and reform advocates disappointed, often advanced the goals of both. The emerging prominence of a modern executive was abetted by the rise of a new mass media. Before the 1890s, public debate was dominated by the decentralized party press; but the challenge to party organizations—embodied by such reforms as the Australian ballot, the direct primary, and expansion of the civil service—and the development of inexpensive and rapid forms of manufacture had made possible a “mass market beyond the confines of one faction, party, or following.”¹⁶ As such, the presidency gained a stronger claim to rhetorical leadership, challenged the partisan demands placed on White House administration, and extended its authority over parts of the growing national administrative apparatus. In turn, activists for racial justice strategically used their contentious collaboration with the White House to help recruit new members and amplify their causes.

13. Arnold, *Remaking the Presidency*. Arnold writes that FDR's second term, particularly the creation of the Brownlow Committee and the enactment of the 1939 Executive Reorganization Act, marked the point that “the progressive presidency's asymmetry between large responsibilities and few resources was ending and the modern presidency was beginning” (p. 207). We agree, as noted in the conclusion, that FDR's institutional reforms consolidated modern executive power, but many critical features of the reconstituted presidency, including a contentious but critical relationship with social movement organizations, began during the Progressive Era.

14. Sidney M. Milkis, Daniel J. Tichenor, and Laura Blessing, “Rallying Force: The Modern Presidency, Social Movements, and the Transformation of American Politics,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 43 (2013): 641–70.

15. Theodore Lowi, *The Personal President: Power Invested, Promise Unfulfilled* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 41.

16. Elmer B. Cornwell, *Presidential Leadership and Public Opinion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), 10.

The development of social activism over Wilson's entire presidency (1913–1921) therefore foreshadows many of the same dynamics witnessed throughout the twentieth century—what historians have called “the long civil rights movement.”¹⁷ As Bruce Miroff has observed, with the development of the modern presidency, occupants of the White House became more attuned to the national reform ambitions of social activists. Indeed, many twentieth-century presidents became more likely to profess support for the same high ideals (environmental protection, equal rights for women and minorities, and the rights of labor) that social movements championed.¹⁸ This does not necessarily mean presidents became more personally sympathetic to advocates' demands. Rather, the institutional incentives of presidential governance formed a unique, symbiotic relationship with social movement politics. By focusing on just one area of social reform—civil rights—we do not mean to suggest that other activists were unable to develop similar relationships or exert political pressure using the same tactics. On the contrary, even a cursory review of the women's suffrage movement and early civil liberties advocates shows that a similar dynamic was at play.¹⁹ However, in tracing the especially contentious relationship between Wilson and civil rights leaders, we reveal how such uneasy alliances changed and responded to new political contexts, how leaders in the White House and on the “streets” adapted to one another, and how the small gains made through the contentious volleys altered the racial politics of this era.

With this article, we join several scholars who have recently reevaluated Wilson's racial policies in light of an increased appreciation for the early twentieth-century civil rights movement. Megan Ming Francis has documented, for example, how the newly formed NAACP was instrumental in persuading Wilson to denounce lynching in a highly lauded address in 1917.²⁰ And, in a broad review of Wilson's personal relationship with civil rights leaders, David Levering Lewis concludes that the president's legacy on civil rights reform was born out of a “miscalculation” between social activists and their

17. Eric Arnesen, “Reconsidering the ‘Long Civil Rights Movement,’” *Historically Speaking* 10, no. 2 (2009): 265–88.

18. Bruce Miroff, “Presidential Leverage over Social Movements: The Johnson White House and Civil Rights,” *Journal of Politics* 43, no. 1 (February 1981): 1–23.

19. Christine A. Lunardini, *From Equal Suffrage to Equal Rights: Alice Paul and the National Woman's Party, 1910–1928* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Daniel Tichenor, “The Presidency, Social Movements, and Contentious Change,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (1999): 14–25; Geoffrey Stone, “Mr. Wilson's First Amendment,” in *Reconsidering Woodrow Wilson*, ed. John Milton Cooper Jr. (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008).

20. Megan Ming Francis, *Civil Rights and the Making of the Modern American State* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

hope for a truly progressive administration.²¹ By drawing on primary accounts in the African American press and archival evidence, much of which has been overlooked because it did not make it into Arthur S. Link's widely published volumes, we differ from other revisionists in two important respects. First, while we acknowledge that Wilson's antilynching address was a high point in legitimizing the collective-action strategies of the NAACP, this rhetorical action is just one part—and probably not the most consequential part—of how civil rights groups sought to use the public persona of the presidency to advance their objectives. Nowhere is this contentious dynamic more visible than in the massive, coordinated campaign to prohibit the release of America's then most popular film, *The Birth of a Nation*. Over the course of three years, civil rights leaders invoked Wilson's name and his couched statements to denounce the film's debut, despite Wilson's efforts to transcend the debate.²² Second, we argue that the racial policies and administrative decisions that did emerge were not the result of a "miscalculation" on behalf of civil rights leaders who came from an ideologically diverse and organizationally disparate movement. Rather, Wilson's search for federal authority in the wake of race riots and his revisions to courts-martial policy during World War I were the result of strategic, well-planned efforts on behalf of civil rights leaders to reform policy in those areas where the executive, by early twentieth-century standards, enjoyed considerable discretion. Finally, we stand apart from dominant institutional perspectives on political development in arguing that that many of these reforms took place in the absence of *immediate* electoral incentives. African Americans remained firmly entrenched inside the Republican Party until 1936; but the civil rights leaders' discontent with the Taft administration gave Wilson an opportunity to embellish his credentials as a progressive leader by working with reform advocates as they pursued their objectives, including their early attempts to build a

black contingent of the Democratic Party and to end racial segregation inside the federal civil service.

This combination of bottom-up and top-down politics was not the consequence of mere circumstances, sociological forces, or economic opportunism. Rather, they were the direct result of political strategies and brokered relationships that intentionally sought to use the tools and public persona of the modern executive office in the pursuit of social reform. Social movements at times seek to secure the rights of the dispossessed and to advance moral causes not merely by opposing the existing order of things but through a principled commitment to reconstituting it with the help of powerful allies in government. At the beginning of the twentieth century, civil rights leaders, despite the president's wayward support, were often willing to frame their message as one that comported with the goals of the Wilson administration. The gains, while often limited, helped to legitimize a strategy of collective action that would continue to focus its energy on forcing the president's hand in critical reform issues. Whereas Wilson had extolled the virtues of the president's isolation prior to entering the White House, he would have to make an important qualification to that description eight stormy years later. Well-organized and politically savvy social advocates had disabused him of the hope that a modern executive could alone represent the nation—and set the terms and conditions of change.

RACE AND ORDER IN WOODROW WILSON'S AMERICA

Wilson was surprised and often perturbed by how African American leaders viewed his racial policies. His own answer to the "Negro Question" had not changed all that much over the course of his academic and political career.²³ However, as soon as Wilson entered office in 1913, he was immediately confronted with demands of Democratic Party activists and social movement leaders who had grown tired of the more gradualist, "politics as usual" stance that had pervaded Progressive Era racial politics.²⁴ The growing Lily-White movement inside the

21. David Levering Lewis, "Civil Rights [Mis]Calculations: Woodrow Wilson and the African American Leadership" (paper presented at the Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library Symposium "1912: An Election to Remember," Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, VA, September 14, 2012).

22. To write about Wilson's record on race is to recognize that much of what is currently "known" about Wilson is often apocryphal. For example, both Francis and Lewis embellish their arguments about the tension between the White House and civil rights leaders by referencing Wilson's infamous endorsement of the film: "It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." However, historians have long noted this common error and continue to trace the development of this quotation and its use in popular and academic accounts. See especially, Mark E. Benbow, "Birth of a Quotation: Woodrow Wilson and 'Like Writing History with Lightning,'" *Journal of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era* 9, no. 4 (2010): 509–33; Arthur Lennig, "Myth and Fact: The Reception of 'The Birth of a Nation,'" *Film History* 16, no. 2 (2004): 117–41.

23. See especially, Gary Gerstle, "Race and Nation in the Thought and Politics of Woodrow Wilson," in *Reconsidering Woodrow Wilson*, ed. John Milton Cooper Jr. (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008), 93–124; Stephen Skowronek, "The Reassociation of Ideas and Purposes: Racism, Liberalism, and the American Political Tradition," *American Political Science Review* 100 (2006): 385–401.

24. Martin Kilson, *Transformation of the African American Intelligentsia, 1880–2012* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Derrick P. Alridge, *The Educational Thought of W.E.B. Du Bois: An Intellectual History* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008); Wilson J. Moses, *Conflict in African American Thought: Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Republican Party, and Theodore Roosevelt's treatment of African American soldiers in the aftermath of the Brownsville race riots precipitated a new moment in the politics of civil rights.²⁵ Leaders such as Bishop Alexander Walters became willing to experiment with bringing African Americans into the Democratic Party; others, such as Oswald Garrison Villard, sought to use national political issues—notably the increasing segregation of federal civil service workers—to mobilize supporters to their cause. In pursuing these goals, social advocates shared a desire to win an important ally inside the White House. While the executive office was considered a “fulcrum” of power long before Wilson's tenure, his first two years in the White House demonstrate the tension between the demands of this new presidency-aligned social reform and traditional party politics.²⁶ Wilson often demurred and hesitated in responding to these initial appeals, but the minor victories that social activists secured helped solidify and reenergize a White House-centered strategy that would remain in place throughout Wilson's term.²⁷ Although the efforts to push Wilson in matters related to the civil service and patronage were bitterly disappointed, civil rights leaders proved that they could get the president's attention; moreover, the contentious relationship with the White House brought national awareness to racial injustices and helped to mobilize additional recruits for the even greater struggles that lay ahead.

Promises and Patronage

Tapping into the same stream of social activism and political energy that animated the Progressive Era, the early twentieth-century civil rights movement gave rise to a number of organized advocacy groups including the National Independent Political League, the National Equal Rights League, the National Citizenship Defense Committee, and the National Association of Colored Women. Among these newly empowered organizations, none became as prominent as the NAACP. Founded in 1909, the NAACP helped to capture the voice of the nascent

25. Richard B. Sherman, *The Republican Party and Black America from McKinley to Hoover, 1896–1933* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1973); Charles W. Calhoun, *Conceiving a New Republic: The Republican Party and the Southern Question, 1869–1900* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006).

26. Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government in the United States* (New York: Columbia University, 1908), 93.

27. As Bruce Miroff so aptly described in his history of LBJ and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, from “the standpoint of presidential politics, what is distinctive—and troublesome about social movements is their preference for mass mobilization over elite negotiations, their propensity to confront issues directly rather than exerting pressure through Washington lobbying, and their desire for public attention and controversy rather than quiet coalition-building.” Miroff, “Presidential Leverage over Social Movements,” 5.

civil rights movement; this influence was due, in no small part, to W. E. B. Du Bois's own rhetorical gifts, which were displayed in the organization's monthly magazine, *The Crisis*. Du Bois, in the first edition of *The Crisis*, sought to exalt the collective-action strategy of this new reformist politics:

Some good friends of the cause say we represent fear agitation. They say: “Do not agitate—do not make a noise: work.” They add, “Agitation is destructive or at best negative—what is wanted is positive constructive work”. . . . The function of this Association is to tell this nation the crying evil of race prejudice. It is a hard duty but a necessary one—a divine one. It is Pain; Pain is no good but Pain is necessary. Pain does not aggravate disease—Disease causes Pain. Agitation does not mean Aggravation—Aggravation calls for Agitation in order that Remedy may be found.²⁸

Wilson, therefore, not only entered the presidency on the heels of one of the most extraordinary elections in U.S. history—a contest that represented the cresting of the Progressive movement—but also while a strategy of direct action supplanted the more gradualist, “Atlanta-school” approach to civil rights reform.²⁹ A Southern man who had established a national reputation as president of Princeton and reform governor of New Jersey, Wilson had made no strong commitments to the cause of racial equality. As an academic, Wilson's stance on civil rights fit neatly within his larger philosophy of political development. For Wilson, the bonds of social cohesion and the prospects of material advancement emerged from a system of laws both “impersonal and impartial,” a code of laws that “must say that every man who does such and such things must suffer the penalty.” Under such a system of just and equitable laws, diverse communities under a “constitution of liberty” could “search after the best adjustment.” Clearly, America had not yet fulfilled this promise of freedom; indeed, Wilson saw the potential for disorder and social regress. As he noted in his address to the African American college Hampton Institute in Virginia in 1897,

There must be a right adjustment of individuals to one another, of classes to one another, and of government to all. But this adjustment is infinitely difficult to make, and must be made anew from age to age. No man ought to be

28. “Editorial,” *The Crisis*, November 1910, 11.

29. Lewis L. Gould, *Four Hats in the Ring: The 1912 Election and the Birth of Modern American Politics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008); Sidney M. Milkis, *Theodore Roosevelt, the Progressive Party, and the Transformation of American Democracy* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2009); Eldon Eisenach, *Review, Theodore Roosevelt, the Progressive Party, and the Transformation of American Democracy, Perspectives on Politics* 8 (2010): 368–69.

impatient to see it speedily effected. It must come from day to day. Any man who expects to bring the millennium by a sudden and violent effort at reform is fit for the lunatic asylum.³⁰

Wilson endowed the institutional presidency with great promise and rhetorical flourish, but he also had a well-considered appreciation for the limits of politics as well as incremental reformist politics, especially on the racial question. As Gary Gerstle notes, “the sentiments animating Wilson’s 1897 Hampton speech mirrored those undergirding the famous Atlanta Exposition address that Booker T. Washington had given two years earlier.”³¹ Yet by the time Wilson had decided to run for the presidency, Du Bois and others had become the new vanguards of racial progress.

Those leaders’ support of Wilson in the election of 1912 was one of desperation, stirred by the deafening silence of the Republican and insurgent Progressive platforms on racial injustice;³² however, it was not one that was uncoordinated and haphazard. The incongruity between the goals of social activists and Wilson’s racial thought was well understood. As Du Bois later recounted, there was a specific and coordinated three-pronged approach to persuade Wilson by appealing to his desire to build a less Southern-dominated Democratic Party; by exploiting personal relationships he had built during his career; and finally, in the event that all else failed, by appealing over his head and directly to the people.³³

The beginning of Wilson’s presidency demonstrates how well formed this complicated and divisive form of politics was during the Progressive Era. Today, presidential leadership is fueled through the merging of partisan goals and the demands of various social advocacy groups.³⁴ But Wilson’s administration witnessed the emergence of that distinctly new form of presidency-aligned politics that placed the executive in a political space between party and social advocacy. The importance of Wilson’s support to a cause outside of the party platform led civil rights leaders to pursue some type of statement prior to the 1912 election. As Villard would later recount in his

memoirs, “Knowing that Governor Wilson was in a politically fluid state so far as his opinions were concerned, much pressure was brought to bear upon him by liberals to induce him to go still further than he had.”³⁵ They were ultimately successful and even though it was a private, intentionally broad promise whose leak angered Wilson, reform leaders publicized the statement widely in the 1912 campaign: “My sympathy with [the colored people of the United States] is of long standing,” Wilson wrote to Villard and Walters, “they may count upon me for absolute fair dealing and for everything by which I could assist in advancing the interests of their race in the United States.”³⁶

For Bishop Walters, the words “absolute fair dealing” meant one thing in particular—jobs. Patronage was, of course, critical to maintaining the loyalties of both Democrats and Republicans, but while the number of jobs, and the actual dollar amounts of the positions never amounted to much, for African Americans struggling to find a secure position in either party at the beginning of the twentieth century, the quantity and quality of federal civil service appointments was a critical measure of racial equality. And so, upon Wilson’s election, Walters immediately set to work on securing the dispensation of jobs to new black Democrats.³⁷ There were far fewer loyal African Americans in the Democratic rank and file and such a strategy had risks, as the replacement of appointees, even if they were “colored positions,” subjected them to rejection by a Senate run by Southern Democrats. Still, the number of positions that would go to black Democrats was the subject of highly speculative talk. Democrats had not held the power to appoint since Grover Cleveland, and never had such a high percentage of African Americans volunteered their support to the Democratic Party. Contemporaneous estimates suggest that thirteen applicants applied for each of the more than 10,000 positions Wilson was able to appoint. And with Wilson’s electoral victory resting on only 42 percent of the nation’s vote, most Washington insiders ventured that the administration would not waste such prime jobs on building a black Democracy.³⁸ Anxiety started to grow as, months into his presidency, Wilson had yet to make any effort to remove black

30. Woodrow Wilson, “Liberty: An Address at Hampton Institute,” January 31, 1897, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 10, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 127–34.

31. In seeking to advance the cause of racial equality through economic progress and by building parallel and segregated institutions in the black community, Washington believed that the route of gradual persuasion offered better hope of racial progress than strategies of confrontation; see Gerstle, “Race and Nation,” 106.

32. Milkis, *Theodore Roosevelt*.

33. W. E. B. Du Bois to Oswald Garrison Villard, October 18, 1946, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, Series 1: Correspondence, Box 112, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

34. Milkis et al., “Rallying Force.”

35. Oswald Garrison Villard, *Fighting Years: Memoirs of a Liberal Editor* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939), 223.

36. Woodrow Wilson to Alexander Walters, October 16, 1912, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, Series 1: Correspondence, Box 112, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

37. For Walters’s work in helping to expand the Democratic Party, Wilson would later offer Walters the post of minister to Liberia in September, 1915—a position Walters would decline in order to continue his work in the church. See Alexander Walters, *My Life and Work* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1917), p. 196.

38. “Few to Get Offices,” *Washington Post*, March 26, 1913; “Merit Guides Wilson in Filling Offices,” *New York Times*, March 11, 1913.

Republicans from office, an issue symbolically rich in importance for how the new administration would treat his new partisan allies.³⁹

By early July, the White House settled on Adam E. Patterson for registrar of the Treasury, one of the most prestigious “colored positions” in all of the federal government. Once the Oklahoma Democrat was selected, his Senator Thomas Gore, Secretary of the Treasury William McAdoo, and Wilson worked for more than a month to secure endorsements and to find a propitious time to submit the nomination to the Senate.⁴⁰ When finally announced on July 25, however, it soon became clear that no amount of preparation could overcome the fierce opposition that was waiting. Senators of Wilson’s own party met the announcement with a mix of bafflement, anger, and opportunism. Leading the fight were two well-known “fire-eating” Southerners—James K. Vardaman of Mississippi and Coleman L. Blease of South Carolina. Despite, and perhaps as a result of, granting major concessions to the progressive wing of the party earlier in the congressional session, the Southern delegation was adamant in their opposition. Immediately after the nomination became official, Vardaman denounced Wilson’s proposal, arguing that it was “beyond their political comprehension” why the Democratic Party would need to dispense patronage to the “colored brother.”⁴¹ The policy of appointing African Americans to positions of such stature would, Vardaman claimed, “create in every negro in the country a hope that he may someday stand on social and political equality with the white man.”⁴² In the face of such fierce opposition, Gore dropped his support of Patterson within a week—an unexpected embarrassment to the administration.⁴³ Soon after, Wilson followed suit.

Despite the very dim prospects for Patterson’s confirmation, the nomination was viewed as a test of principle for Wilson. His silence and quick capitulation to the Southern element disappointed those who thought that the strong support of civil rights

activists in the 1912 elections would spur the administration to openly “fight any movement of race discrimination started by the Bourbon element of their party.”⁴⁴ Robert Wood, who was working with Walters to secure black nominations, wrote to Wilson, expressing exasperation and dismay. The president and his aides seemed all too willing to retreat in the face of resistance from the “untraveled, provincial, self-seeking politician from the South.”⁴⁵ To the editorial board of the *Afro-American*, the failure to get the Patterson nomination through the Senate simply confirmed the naiveté of black Democrats:

The President deliberately “set him up” in order that he might be “knocked down.” ... We do not blame Mr. Patterson. We do not blame or censure Negro Democrats. They were thoroughly honest in their endeavors. They simply lacked experience. That they now have “in the fall of Adam.”⁴⁶

Battling Segregation in the Federal Workforce

Wilson’s hesitancy to replace Republican African American appointees with loyal Democratic men angered Villard, Walters, and Du Bois. It was one thing if Wilson lacked the skill and will to stand up to Southern politicians, but such ready acquiescence to Southern race-baiters made it seem as if the White House sympathized with their commitment to white supremacy. The sacrifice of Patterson also further implicated the president in the Democratic Party’s larger plans to reverse African American progress by instating legally mandated segregation in the federal workforce. Indeed, as Jim Crow laws spread in the aftermath of the notorious “Compromise of 1877,” the push for codified racial segregation became not just a Southern, but a national issue; during the early days of the Wilson administration, this segregationist movement spilled over into the federal civil service.

Awaiting Wilson when he arrived in Washington, DC, was the newly established and inaptly named National Democratic Fair Play Association. Just as African American Democrats had eagerly awaited patronage positions in the new Wilson administration, so too did white Democrats show up to receive the spoils of a victorious presidential election. And, just as black civil service workers and the newly organized NAACP were fighting to desegregate parts of the civil service, an active and mobilized force was

39. “Democrats Are Uneasy,” *Afro-American*, April 26, 1913.

40. See Woodrow Wilson to William Gibbs McAdoo, June 27, 1913, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 28, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 10–11; William Gibbs McAdoo to Woodrow Wilson, July 1, 1913, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 28, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 20; William Gibbs McAdoo to Woodrow Wilson, July 18, 1913, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 28, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 40–41; “Patterson’s Case Discussed by Senator Gore with President Wilson,” *Washington Post*, July 29, 1913, p. 3; “Drops Negro as Candidate,” *New York Times*, August 3, 1913.

41. “Wilson Names a Colored Man,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 26, 1913; see also, “Fight Negro for Register,” *New York Times*, July 27, 1913.

42. “War on ‘Favorites,’” *Washington Post*, July 26, 1913; “Revolt on Patterson,” *Washington Post*, July 27, 1913.

43. “Senate May Not Confirm Patterson,” *Afro-American*, August 2, 1913, p. 1.

44. “Patterson Shows White Feather,” *Afro-American*, August 9, 1913, p. 1.

45. Robert N. Wood to Woodrow Wilson, August 5, 1913, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 27, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 115.

46. “What Caused the Fall of Adam?” *Afro-American*, August 16, 1913, p. 4.

pushing for further segregation of the federal workforce. At major rallies held throughout the capital, rapturous applause greeted prominent members of Congress who capitalized on speaking to Fair Play rallies—none more infamous than Mississippi Senator Vardaman. A favorite talking point demanded that white men fulfill their responsibilities of protecting white women, who might work under the supervision of African American appointees, and segregate all federal offices and facilities.⁴⁷ At one rally just over four months after Wilson's inauguration, Vardaman confessed to a crowd of civil service employees that he favored lynchings for crimes against white women over regular courts of justice, and that if he could not segregate African Americans in the civil service, he would quarantine whites.⁴⁸

Efforts to extend Jim Crow to the federal civil service preceded the Wilson administration; but deliberate efforts to draw a hard and fast line between white and black federal workers intensified with the election of a Southern-born Democratic president. Moreover, Wilson's own conservative views of racial progress, coupled with his insistence on administrative efficiency, made him sympathetic to the claims that racial unrest in federal departments hampered the government's responsibilities.

Wilson could not readily escape his seeming hypocrisy. He had once lauded the president's unique ability to distill the disparate voices of a nation; now he had to contend with the fact that no "unified chorus" of public opinion existed—instead, warring factions increasingly engaged in the tactics of public demonstration.⁴⁹ As soon as press reports indicated that Wilson was not living up to his promise of "absolute fair dealing," Villard reached out to Wilson and for more than three months, the two engaged in direct correspondence on the issue of civil service segregation. The NAACP's leadership, speaking through Villard, had hoped to pressure Wilson into publicly involving himself in the conflict occurring in his administration before escalating their public relations campaign.⁵⁰ Fellow NAACP board member, Moorfield Storey wrote to Villard approving of his back-channel campaign, writing "the President's [response] is much more hopeful than his previous communications and indicates that he feels the pressure." Nevertheless, "we ought not to lay down our arms and wait on a very indefinite assurance ...

47. Eric S. Yellin, *Racism in the Nation's Service: Government Workers and the Color Line in Woodrow Wilson's America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 102–103.

48. "Calls Lynching Best," *Washington Post*, August 7, 1913, p. 2.

49. Wilson uses the analogy of a conductor and a choir in a speech titled, "Abraham Lincoln: A Man of the People," February 12, 1909, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 10, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 127–34.

50. Oswald Garrison Villard to Woodrow Wilson, September 18, 1913, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 28, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 289–90.

in the meanwhile the work of segregation goes on without change and I am not inclined to let our enemies do all the fighting."⁵¹ Villard heeded this advice and continued to pressure Wilson informally, conceding that even if the NAACP were to stop its publicity campaign, only the president's voice could "assuage this feeling of bitterness and humiliation, or induce them as a race to remain in cool and just equipoise." As Villard pointedly reminded Wilson, "Vardaman, Tillman, Hoke Smith, and the other demagogues of this type will never for a moment remain cool and just on this issue" and that "nothing but a vigorous confronting of such men as these, and a ceaseless battling for the colored people's rights will prevent further discrimination of vast proportion and undreamed of bitterness."⁵²

On the same day Villard's missive was sent, Wilson received a large petition from African American civil service workers themselves, pleading for the president's personal involvement to stop segregation orders.⁵³ Shortly thereafter, Wilson had an interview with one of Villard's reporters, currently working on a story about segregation in the civil service. The reporter, John Palmer Gavit walked away from his interview with appreciation for the delicate political situation that Wilson faced. As he would write Villard,

[Wilson] has to deal with a Congress which in both Houses [are] dominated by men to whom this view [the negro is of a different and inferior race] is fundamental. ... If he should now declare himself in opposition to this view, it would certainly precipitate a conflict which would put a complete stop to any legislative program. It is beyond question that the Senate *will not confirm* any nomination of a negro for any position in the federal service in which he is to be in command of white people—especially white women.⁵⁴

Gavit, confessing that he was "not entirely clear in my own mind as to what the President ought to do" on the "tragic situation culminating the crimes and hypocrisies of three centuries," suggested that Wilson meet personally with Villard. Recognizing his

51. Moorfield Storey to Oswald Garrison Villard, September 25, 1913, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress.

52. Oswald Garrison Villard to Woodrow Wilson, September 29, 1913, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 28, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 342–44.

53. Wesley Lisey Jones, a Republican senator from Washington State sent Wilson the petition on September 29.

54. John Palmer Gavit to Oswald Garrison Villard, October 1, 1913, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 28, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 348–50. Gavit would continue to suggest that, "When the Republicans were in power, it was necessary for them to pretend, at least, that they held to the first view of the negro's position; they needed his vote in a number of the big doubtful states. ... In point of fact, the extent to which "segregation" has been actually attempted has been much exaggerated. Even Miss Nerney's report, the accuracy of which I assume, confirms me in this."

own faults, or unsure as to what he could personally do, Wilson requested that Villard travel down to Washington to discuss the matter.⁵⁵

At that meeting, Wilson confessed to Villard the same sentiments he had relayed earlier—that he “honestly thought segregation to be in the interest of the colored people” and that a “number of colored men with whom we have consulted have agreed with us in this judgment.”⁵⁶ Villard, crediting such tacit approval to the more gradualist reformer Bishop Walters, was determined to convince Wilson that both the denial of African Americans of their fair share of appointments and segregation in the civil service were defended on white supremacist grounds. The NAACP’s internal investigation of segregation in the federal government suggested as much: Conducted by May Childs Nerney, secretary of the NAACP, the report concluded that while “segregation is no new thing in Washington, and the present administration cannot be said to have inaugurated it. . . . The past few months of democratic [sic] party control have, however, given segregation a tremendous impetus, and have marked its systematic enforcement.”⁵⁷ As Nerney pointed out, the lack of any official policy only served the cause of the bureau chiefs who wanted to segregate: “when no official orders have been issued in regard to this . . . should [colored people] make such complaint they would be merely asked to cite a discriminating order, and failing that would probably be told that the changes that had been made had been necessitated by exigencies in work, color having had nothing to do with it.” Wilson seemed intrigued and requested a copy of the report.⁵⁸ Upon receipt several days later, he thanked Villard and promised to “make use of it as I told you I would.”⁵⁹

Whatever Wilson’s assurances were, Villard pressed his advantage. Fearing that Wilson might renege on his promise to make use of the investigation of the civil service, the NAACP went public with the report. At the same time, hoping that he could spur Wilson into action, he sent the White House a copy of a speech he planned to give at the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church before the Washington, DC, branch of the NAACP on the night of October 27. With

55. Woodrow Wilson to Oswald Garrison Villard, October 3, 1913, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 28, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 352–53.

56. Woodrow Wilson to Oswald Garrison Villard, August 29, 1913, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 28, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 245.

57. May Childs Nerney to Oswald Garrison Villard, September 30, 1913, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 28, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 402.

58. Oswald Garrison Villard to Woodrow Wilson, October 14, 1913, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 28, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 401.

59. Woodrow Wilson to Oswald Garrison Villard, October 17, 1913, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 28, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 413–14.

Wilson out of town, McAdoo took the lead in defending the administration’s record on race. In a letter that Villard would read before the crowd, McAdoo tried to point to the various attempts the White House had made to be “just and generous to the negroes,” including the attempt to appoint Patterson.⁶⁰ Villard and his audience showed contempt for the treasury secretary’s guarantees that the administration was not complicit in the segregation of the civil service; to the wild applause of an estimated 7,000 members, Villard argued that, “What Mr. McAdoo does not appreciate, is that the slightest yielding on the part of a high Federal official will find a dozen imitators, who think by outdoing their masters to curry favor with those in power.”⁶¹ Indeed, Villard told the crowd that Wilson “may go down in history as the man who put in motion terrible forces for evil without adequate conception or prevision of the dangers he was inviting.”⁶²

Villard’s widely publicized denouncement of Wilson and McAdoo precipitated a mammoth, multi-organization petition campaign, which less than two weeks later delivered close to 20,000 signatures to Wilson in opposition to racial segregation. William Monroe Trotter, now head of the National Equal Rights League, led the delegation that delivered the petition to Wilson, which called for a complete investigation into segregation of the civil service. Wilson, who had known about the issue for months, tried to appease Trotter at their meeting, and suggested that the matter was still understudied: “I am slowly making myself familiar with the matter with the hope that I shall see my way clear to do the right thing all along the line.” Even though the public relations campaign pushed by these civil rights groups made it impossible for the president to plead ignorance, Wilson still deflected responsibility, reminding Trotter that reports of segregation in the civil service were intricately related to the general mood of racial hostility in Washington: “You know what my endeavors have been on certain occasions; and in one instance, for example, I could not get a nomination confirmed in the Senate.” Echoing his Hampton Institute speech, he added that “There are these difficulties of which we must be patient and tolerant. Things do not happen rapidly in the world, and prejudices are slow to be uprooted.”⁶³

To a foremost leader of a rising movement, Wilson’s plea for patience and tolerance was intolerable—such

60. William Gibbs McAdoo to Oswald Garrison Villard, October 27, 1913, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 28, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 453–55.

61. “Denied by M’Adoo,” *Washington Post*, October 28, 1913, p. 1.

62. “Reviving the Abolition Spirit,” *Afro-American*, October 25, 1913, p. 1.

63. Wilson’s Reply and a Dialogue, November 6, 1913, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 28, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 496–500.

forbearance had only encouraged the discriminatory actions of bureau chiefs and allowed organizations like the Fair Play Association to gain popularity. When Wilson tried to suggest that newspaper reports of segregation had been “exaggerated,” Trotter confronted him with a copy of a memorandum issued by an auditor in the Interior Department that explicitly ordered segregated lavatories.⁶⁴ Confronted with hard evidence, Wilson assured the delegation that he would investigate that matter.⁶⁵ According to Trotter’s newspaper, the *Boston Guardian*, “The President was impressed by the protest and commented on its strength,” stating that, “it was deserving of, and should receive his careful attention.”⁶⁶

How much attention Wilson personally gave the matter is conjecture, but the lack of a public response to the issue torpedoed the remaining trust between his administration and the social movement that had pressured him for months. Racial segregation continued to plague the civil service, although reports on its continued existence varied considerably. By January, the NAACP sent a telegram to Wilson welcoming “the report that segregation of colored employees in the Federal departments at Washington has been checked.”⁶⁷ And over the next two months the organization’s magazine, *The Crisis*, would summarize the news dispatches and investigations into the status of African American workers, suggesting that bureau chiefs would be held accountable for instances of racial discrimination in their offices. Yet, even if discrimination and racial animosities in the federal workplace diminished, Wilson’s silence on the issue undermined any notion that he was moved by social activists’ persistent targeting of the White House.⁶⁸ Perhaps hoping to vindicate these efforts, Villard told audiences of civil service workers that “President Wilson had stopped the segregation of the government employees.” But, for those employees still suffering under lower-level bureau chiefs who continued to overlook them for promotions and raises, Wilson’s leadership was a huge disappointment—a betrayal of his campaign promise to deal fairly with African Americans.⁶⁹

64. “Independent Political League Makes Protest,” *Afro-American*, November 22, 1913.

65. “President’s Intention to Investigate Alleged Wrongdoing Commended,” *Afro-American*, November 29, 1913.

66. “Independent Political League Makes Protest,” *Boston Guardian*, November 15, 1913. Cited in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 28, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 498.

67. From Moorefield Storey and Others, January 6, 1914, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 29, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 105.

68. See the February 1914 edition of *The Crisis* for a summary report of various news organizations.

69. “Has the President Been Deceived?” *Afro-American*, January 24, 1914. See also “Segregation is Checked,” *Afro-American*, March 21, 1914.

The growing militancy of the civil rights movement forced Wilson to grapple with a contentious issue that he and his administration had actively sought to avoid. Try as civil rights leaders might, however, Wilson continued to view the issue of civil service segregation as one that would maintain the relative order and “harmony” of a multiracial workforce, a sentiment that he most forcefully expressed when Trotter returned to the White House a year later in November 1914.⁷⁰ Inside the Oval Office, Trotter explained that the forces in favor of segregation remained in full force despite the president’s stated commitments, and that Wilson’s equivocation on the subject made the problem worse: African Americans “realize that if they can be segregated and thus humiliated by the national government at the national capital the beginning is made for the spread of that persecution and prosecution which makes property and life itself insecure.”⁷¹ But Wilson stubbornly refused to acknowledge the connection between segregation and humiliation. Once again, Wilson promised that he would look into specific injustices that the committee brought before him; but he clung to his previously stated notions that segregation was a secondary concern in dealing with the race question. “We are all practical men,” Wilson acknowledged. “We know that there is a point at which there is apt to be friction, and that is in the intercourse between the two races . . . nobody can be cocksure about what should be done. I am not cocksure about what should be done. I am certain that I have been dependent upon the advice of the men who were in immediate contact with the problem in several departments.”⁷²

An angry Trotter would have none of this, telling Wilson, “We are sorely disappointed that you take the position that the separation itself is not wrong, is not injurious, is not rightly offensive to you . . . but that is not in accord with the facts, Mr. President.”⁷³ Wilson had heard enough and pointed to the door, telling Trotter that “the other members of the delegation have shown a spirit in the matter that I have appreciated, but your tone, sir, offends me.”⁷⁴ Failing to make his case on principle, Trotter reminded Wilson about the support that civil rights leaders gave him in the 1912 election. Yet Wilson insisted that his decision to condone ad hoc segregation was not a matter of partisanship or pandering to Southern Democracy. Insisting his position was a matter of principle, the president lectured, “Politics must be left out . . . that is a form of blackmail. You

70. See the exchange between Wilson and Trotter in “An Address to the President by William Monroe Trotter,” November 12, 1914, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 31, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 298–309.

71. *Ibid.*, 300.

72. *Ibid.*, 305.

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Ibid.*

can vote as you please, provided I am perfectly sure that I am doing the right thing at the right time.”

In supporting Wilson in 1912, many African Americans hoped they had elected a politician who would embrace the opportunities and resources of a powerful social movement; but Wilson envisioned an executive office that could elevate itself above this direct form of political action. And yet, as his disastrous meeting with Trotter made clear, this determined elusiveness during Wilson’s first two years in office only agitated and aroused civil rights leaders who blamed the president for the limited success they had in staving off the ambitions of Southern Democrats and the Fair Play Association. Although the promise of a fully cooperative relationship all but died by the spring of 1915, these same advocates still believed the power of the modern presidency was an essential ingredient of social reform. When Trotter stormed out of the Oval Office, he would take an unprecedented step to convince the president that his conception of the “right thing” was disastrously misguided. Speaking directly to reporters who lingered in the office of Wilson’s personal secretary, Trotter relayed his account of the incident. This signaled civil rights activists’ determination, as Frederick Douglass had once urged his abolitionist allies in their contentious relationship with Lincoln, to “keep pounding the rock”—to persist, indeed double down on their efforts to leverage the modern president’s public prestige to advance their cause.⁷⁵

A WHITE HOUSE EMBROILED: THE BIRTH OF A NATION

The political pageantry that accompanied *The Birth of a Nation*’s premier was almost as grand as the film itself. For more than three years, the film crisscrossed the country, opening to rapturous audiences who had waited with anticipation for weeks, if not months, for the film’s release. Historians and political scientists have written much about what this film’s release reveals about American society in the mid-1910s—the revisionism of Reconstruction, the debilitating racial situation in the aftermath of industrialization, and the powerful technologies of mass media. Wilson is often placed in the limelight of these accounts as an ardent supporter of the film’s release. We are not the first to “revise” or correct the historical record on Wilson’s own equivocal role in this history and agree with scholars who have argued that Wilson had a critical place as president in the politics surrounding *The Birth of a Nation*. But more than other accounts of this episode, we document the tense and significant interaction between

75. Sidney M. Milkis and Daniel J. Tichenor, “Reform’s Mating Dance: Presidents, Social Movements and Racial Realignments,” *Journal of Policy History* 23 (2011): 451–90.

the White House and social movement organizations throughout the film’s controversial run. Try as he might, Wilson was unable to escape the tug of forces clamoring for a voice as large and important as the president’s. None other than Trotter, who, “tossed” out of the White House just months earlier, now sought to use President Wilson’s prestige to condemn the heinously racist film. This campaign was born of the hard lessons learned in the jousts with Wilson during the preceding two years and Wilson’s involvement in the controversy demonstrates that he was not immovable, that he adapted to the mounting pressure of the civil rights movement and began to see that engagement with its leaders was unavoidable for a “modern” executive.

The White House Launches a Blockbuster

Wilson’s involvement with the film’s debut and its aftermath is part personal, part political. Thomas Dixon Jr. authored both the book, *The Clansman*, and the script on which *The Birth of a Nation* was based. Dixon was an old classmate of Wilson’s at Johns Hopkins and remained a personal friend; indeed, Wilson nominated Dixon in 1913 to serve as ambassador to Italy.⁷⁶ A tireless, self-seeking promoter of the film, whose short-lived notoriety belies the enduring cultural and political impact of his work, Dixon tried for months to secure a special screening of the film for the Wilson family in a public movie theater in Washington. The film’s special screening at the White House came after weeks of lobbying by Dixon, an effort that only succeeded, as Wilson would recall, because it was “a courtesy extended to an old acquaintance.”⁷⁷

A mark of the rising importance of the presidency, Wilson’s opinion on the film, his rumored endorsement, and the significance of the film’s screening in the White House, were central to the debates throughout the nation as to whether the film should be allowed to play. Nowhere were these debates more prominent than in Boston, home of Trotter, where the film was to debut on the fiftieth anniversary of General Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox. Energized by the protests in Boston, and coordinated, in part, by the NAACP, demonstrations and censorship hearings followed the film’s cross-country tour. Mayors, governors, and the press would routinely call on the White House for guidance or support in managing the film’s disruptive premier. In this contest for Wilson’s endorsement, Trotter would

76. Thomas Dixon, Jr. to Woodrow Wilson, July 2, 1913, Woodrow Wilson Papers, Series 4, Reel 332, Case File 2247, Library of Congress. See also White House Memorandum, Woodrow Wilson Papers, Series 4, Reel 332, Case File 2247, Library of Congress.

77. Woodrow Wilson to Thomas Thacher, April 30, 1915, Woodrow Wilson Papers, Series 4, Reel 332, Case File 2247, Library of Congress.

ultimately prevail, when he and other civil rights activists finally persuaded the president to officially denounce the film, a success they publicized in protest materials sent around the country. But this condemnation was preceded by a long silence, which the producers of *The Birth of a Nation* exploited in fighting against the national protest movement the film aroused.

Dixon's attempts to use the presidency as a source of credibility and promotion began in preproduction. Wilson's historical works never appear in Dixon's *The Clansman*, but the film does invoke his *History of the American People* on three separate occasions to bolster its popular and historical credibility. Predictably, the quotations are spliced to maintain a narrative of redemption and fearmongering. Wilson certainly viewed the motives of Reconstruction, especially the widespread disenfranchisement of ex-Confederate soldiers immediately following the war, with great skepticism and regret, but the passions inflamed on both sides of the political question offended his Burkean commitment to social order and gradual social evolution. Conveniently overlooked by D. W. Griffith and Dixon was Wilson's treatment of the Ku Klux Klan in the *History*. Wilson did not denounce the Klan with any degree of moral fervor, indeed, his characterization of Reconstruction governments as corrupt and lawless seemed to justify the Klan's formation. Unlike the producers of *The Birth of a Nation*, however, he did not glorify its violent "redemption" politics. "The Ku Klux and those who masqueraded in their guise struck at first only at those who made palpable mischief between the races or set just law aside to make themselves masters," he wrote; "but their work grew under their hands, and their zest for it. Brutal crimes were committed; the innocent suffered with the guilty; a reign of terror was brought on, and society was infinitely more disturbed than defended. Law seems oftentimes given over." The Klan was "a very tempting and dangerous instrument of power for days of disorder and social upheaval," Wilson conceded; but they were also "reckless fellows," who "had plied their means of intimidation without scruple or principle or public object."⁷⁸

Whatever Wilson's view of the Klan, however, he was lured into the screening of a film in the White House that romanticized vigilantes as the savior of the nation's honor. With East Coast premiers scheduled for March 1915, Dixon worked tirelessly to arrange a public cinematic debut of the film for Wilson and his family.⁷⁹ But when Dixon traveled from

New York City on February 3, he treaded carefully around the film's controversial subject, requesting Wilson's help "as a friend and as a scholar." As he would later write Wilson's aide Joseph Patrick Tumulty about the meeting,

I didn't dare allow the President to know the real big purpose back of my film—which was to revolutionize Northern sentiments by a presentation of history that would transform every man in my audience into a good Democrat! And make no mistake about it—we are doing just the thing. Hence the wild hysteria of no good Republicans afraid in Massachusetts . . . What I told the President was that I would show him the birth of a new art—the launching of the mightiest engine for molding public opinion in the history of the world.⁸⁰

Dixon and Griffith were both present at the White House screening on February 18, followed up by a special screening at the National Press Club for various members of Congress and other cabinet officials.⁸¹ Only one brief, six-sentence announcement of the screening made it into the next day's papers, the leak going to the *Washington Evening Star*. Part of the press's inattention to the White House debut was a response to Wilson's deliberate request for Dixon not to use the occasion for the film's publicity. But even if Dixon had wanted to use Wilson's endorsement, there was nothing for him to quote. As Marjorie Brown King, the only survivor among the persons at the White House screening, later told Arthur S. Link, "Wilson seemed lost in thought during the showing, and . . . walked out of the room without saying a word when the movie was over."⁸² Wilson's silence and preoccupation are understandable. As the papers went to press the morning of the February 19, all news was on Germany's renewal of unrestricted submarine warfare in the English Channel. Indeed, White House correspondence for the entire week was overwhelmed with dispatches to and from Europe in an attempt to resolve this international crisis.

Nevertheless, the purpose of the White House screening on the part of Dixon and Griffith was made all the more apparent in the weeks that followed. Both men would write Wilson personally, thanking him for the honor. Griffith would specifically ask for the president's help to review a "proposed

78. Woodrow Wilson, *A History of the American People: Reunion and Nationalization*, vol. 5. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1902), 64–75.

79. As Dixon would recount in his memoirs, *Southern Horizons*, he was disappointed that the film could not be shown in a movie theater in Washington, DC, as part of the silent film's cinematic spectacle came from a massive orchestra accompanying the film;

no doubt, a public outing from a president still in official mourning over the death of his wife to attend a movie premier would have added to the film's publicity.

80. Thomas Dixon to Joseph Patrick Tumulty, May 1, 1915, Woodrow Wilson Papers, Series 4, Reel 332, Case File 2247, Library of Congress (emphasis in original).

81. "News and Gossip of the Stage," *Washington Post*, February 21, 1915, SM2.

82. Arthur S. Link, *Wilson and the New Freedom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1956).

series of motion pictures dealing with matters historical and political.⁸³ Wilson was polite but evasive in his response, reminding Dixon that “there is always a violent possibility that I shall be absolutely absorbed and my attention preempted.”⁸⁴ Dixon would persist, however, in his unremitting efforts to capture the president’s attention, flooding the White House with newspaper clippings on the show’s spectacular reception for weeks.

Dixon did not need to embellish or mislead Wilson on the film’s reception—it was extraordinary. The scathing indictment of the film in Villard’s own newspaper, *The New York Evening Post*, proved to be the exception rather than the rule. Upon debut, *The [New York] Globe* reported, “here is beyond question the most extraordinary picture that has been made or seen in America so far”; *The New York American* wrote that, “Mr. Griffith comes pretty near working a miracle”; *The Evening World* commented that, “the most dramatic events in our United States history have been reproduced with striking realism.”⁸⁵ Perhaps no review better captured the filmmakers’ intent than that of the widely read and syndicated columnist Dorothy Dix who embraced the narrative, writing lavishly that

Out of this desperate situation [end of the Civil War] rose the need for a desperate remedy, and the South found it in the organization of the Ku Klux Klan . . . Robed in long white gowns, and with their horses covered with the same flowing white drapery, they came silently by night upon offending negroes, and visited a swift justice upon them. . . . *The Birth of a Nation* is history vitalized and made living . . . go and see it because it will make a better American of you, for out of the baptism of blood of the Civil War was born the new nation, one and indivisible.⁸⁶

The widespread acclaim of the film is a testament to the persistent racial animosity that still marked American life during Wilson’s presidency. African Americans would find cause and distress in battling segregation and patronage politics under Wilson, but the fight to prevent *The Birth of a Nation* was larger than institutional wrangling. The film stained the heart and mind of every community in which it debuted. Its popularity and reception was not just a

83. D. W. Griffith to Woodrow Wilson, March 2, 1915. Woodrow Wilson Papers, Series 4, Reel 332, Case File 2247, Library of Congress.

84. Woodrow Wilson to D. W. Griffith, March 5, 1915. Woodrow Wilson Papers, Series 4, Reel 332, Case File 2247, Library of Congress.

85. All of these newspaper accounts come from clippings Dixon sent Wilson on March 5, 1915—two days after the New York premier.

86. “‘The Birth of a Nation’ Master Work Says Dorothy Dix,” *Dix Review*, March 5, 1915.

mark on the racialized politics of the country, but a barrier for future racial progress in all walks of life.

Civil Rights Activists Fight Back

The NAACP had started its legal battle against the film as soon as its Los Angeles debut was announced. They had been unsuccessful in their attempts to delay or prevent the film’s premier, as the city council and Los Angeles Police Department refused to intervene, citing that the National Board of Censorship had approved the film. However, even after intensive lobbying efforts, the film debuted in New York City, on time, and to sold-out audiences for weeks. The film would move from New York to Boston within the first two weeks of April, where civil rights groups began to focus their efforts on what they hoped to be a more hospitable environment. At the behest of Trotter and other Boston-based leaders, Mayor James M. Curley agreed to hold a hearing to debate the film’s merits against its potential disruption on April 7—two days before the film’s scheduled premier.

The arguments presented to Curley’s review committee had all been heard before, with the exception of one: Wilson’s personal screening and approbation of the film. In front of the committee, John Cusick, representing Griffith and the production company, told the mayor, “This play has been produced in the East Room before the President and his Cabinet. I am in doubt whether I have permission to state it or not, but I can say this of my own knowledge from what I have heard, without quoting anything, that there was absolutely no criticism made by them in regard to that play.” Butler R. Wilson, law partner of Archibald Grimke and future president of the Boston branch of the NAACP was taken aback. The mayor asked Wilson if what had been said was true, and the attorney, unaware, could only respond that, “I don’t know what Woodrow Wilson has done. . . . I don’t know what that Cabinet is capable of doing. I hadn’t heard that this had gone before them.” Cusick interjected a final endorsement—“They enjoyed it, and they thought it was one of the greatest things ever produced.”⁸⁷

The transcript suggests that Curley was intrigued by the president’s endorsement and at the end of all the testimony, he voted along with the rest of the committee to allow the film’s premier, albeit only if the producers would remove certain scenes from the film. Days later, the film was released to sold-out audiences at the Tremont Theater, just down the street from a memorial to Crispus Attucks. The following morning *The Boston Globe* would report, “As a work of art it is so wonderful and so beautiful, and so full

87. Original letters, excerpts, and attachments, Woodrow Wilson Papers, Series 4, Reel 332, Case File 2247, Library of Congress.

of life that it robs one of the power of criticism.”⁸⁸ Still not satisfied, Griffith’s production company saturated the Boston dailies with advertisements including a full-page ad touting the endorsement of U.S. senators, former governors, military officials, and reverends—even some New York schools, “who after hearing both sides concerning this picture viewed it critically themselves and made a request to have it exhibited to their children.”⁸⁹

Legal methods having failed, Trotter moved to stage a massive demonstration in front of, and inside the theater the following weekend. Having received advance notice of the plan, the Boston police department stationed more than 200 plain clothes and uniformed officers in the surrounding area.⁹⁰ When the box office refused to sell some of the remaining tickets to a group of African American men, police began to clear the lobby. Of those standing at the ticket counter, Trotter was the first to be arrested and was escorted away by four police officers. “Several hundred” men followed them down the street. Police officers drew their clubs and pushed the crowd through the adjacent Boston Commons, arresting ten other persons—nine of them black.⁹¹ Upon his release, Trotter would give a prescient warning; his demonstration was not the “violence” the nation needed to worry about: “It is a rebel play, an incentive to great racial hatred . . . it will make white women afraid of negroes and will have white men all stirred up on their account. If there is any lynching here in Boston, Mayor Curley will be responsible.”⁹²

The White House record shows that Wilson saw clippings of news reports on the protests the following day. His personal secretary, Tumulty, pressed Wilson to publicly denounce the film. Yet still feeling both regret and anger from his encounter with Trotter just months before, Wilson told Tumulty that, “I would like to do this if there were some way in which I could do it without seeming to be trying to meet the agitation which . . . was stirred up by that unspeakable fellow [Trotter].”⁹³ America’s social order was in peril, but a statement denouncing the film, while morally superior to silence, could legitimize, the president feared, not only a political

gadfly but also the type of agitating protest he thought dangerous to the country.

Yet when reports of Wilson’s rumored endorsement arrived on Tumulty’s desk, fearful of his boss’s reputation, he broached the subject again with Wilson.⁹⁴ Wilson personally drafted the response—“It is true that ‘The Birth of a Nation’ was produced before the President and his family at the White House, but the President was entirely unaware of the character of the play before it was presented and has at no time expressed his approbation of it.”⁹⁵ Those words would remain the official response for all other inquiries coming to the White House over the following weeks.⁹⁶

Over the next year and a half, communities of both white and black Americans—from Philadelphia to Juno, Alaska—greeted the film’s arrival with legal petitions, massive rallies, and pleas to elected officials and censor boards to ban the film.⁹⁷ Among the many resources available to these citizens groups was a highly heralded pamphlet published by the Boston branch of the NAACP—*Fighting a Vicious Film*. The 47-page publication features essays from Storey, Villard, Washington, and others along with public resolutions and censor bills serving as exemplars from other communities. Tucked between an essay by the historian John Morse and another by the famous philanthropist George Foster Peabody, detailing his own

94. Edward Douglass White, the chief justice of the Supreme Court, was the first to bring these rumors to the White House’s attention on April 5. White’s name had been used as a word-of-mouth endorsement of the film, and he suggested to an acquaintance that, “if the owners were wise they would stop the rumors,” lest he denounce the film publicly. Other reports of this rumor came from members of the White House Correspondents Association, forwarding letters from their respective readers as to the president’s true feelings. See White House Correspondents’ Association to Joseph Tumulty, April 20, 1915, Woodrow Wilson Papers, Series 4, Reel 332, Case File 2247, Library of Congress.

95. See the internal, White House Correspondence between Tumulty and Wilson. Woodrow Wilson Papers, Series 4, Reel 332, Case File 2247, Library of Congress.

96. See reprinted responses to W. H. Lewis and Alexander Walters in *The Crisis*, June 1915. For Walter’s original letter to Wilson, see Alexander Walters (National Democratic Colored League) to Woodrow Wilson, April 30, 1915, Woodrow Wilson Papers, Series 4, Reel 332, Case File 2247, Library of Congress.

97. One of the major African American dailies, the *Chicago Defender* provided exhaustive coverage of these protests across the United States and into Canada. In no less than thirty-three major American cities did the *Defender* report instances of citizen protest—from May 1915 in Detroit to June 1916 in Pensacola, Florida. Many were unsuccessful, although some citizen groups managed to cut some of the most vitriolic scenes from the film. However, the film was banned—albeit temporarily—from production in Chicago (the next stop after the Boston premiers). The *Defender* also reports instances of “extralegal” protest: Reels of the film were destroyed in Mason City, Iowa, in December 1915, and large demonstrations turned into episodic violence when the film premiered in Philadelphia that September of the same year. The *Defender*’s own view of its role in perpetuating the fight is most clearly evoked in an editorial in the September 11, 1915, edition, p. 8.

88. “Applause for Mr. Griffith,” *Boston Globe*, April 10, 1915 (morning edition), 2.

89. “Why ‘The Birth of a Nation’ Is Shown,” *Boston Globe*, April 9, 1915 (morning edition), 15.

90. “Race Riot at Theater,” *Washington Post*, April 18, 1915, p. 2; “Birth of Nation Causes Near-Riot,” *Boston Sunday Globe*, April 18, 1915, p. 1; “Boston Race Leaders Fight Birth of a Nation,” *Chicago Defender*, April 24, 1915, p. 4.

91. “Birth of Nation Causes Near-Riot,” p. 1.

92. *Ibid.*, 3.

93. Woodrow Wilson to Tumulty, April 24, 1915, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 33, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978). The dictated message originally reads “Tucker,” which is almost certainly an error on the typist’s part.

misattributed endorsement, lies a reprinted copy of Wilson's response under the bold heading—"Not Endorsed by the President."⁹⁸

Following his fateful White House meeting on Jim Crow personnel practices and witnessing Wilson's timidity on racial appointments, Trotter publicly condemned the president. Yet, he and members of the NAACP continued to recognize the value and potential of the president's "bully pulpit," even if the president was hesitant to stand behind the podium. The fight over *The Birth of a Nation* was a watershed moment in the history of African American civil rights. African American leaders' campaign against the film kept up a barrage of protest against its racist narrative, but despite their best efforts to play up Wilson's refusal to endorse *The Birth of a Nation*, they never received the full-fledged denouncement of the film from prominent national officials. Nevertheless, the spirited demonstrations of the NAACP, the National Equal Rights League, and myriad churches and local civic organizations vindicated a strategy of direct confrontation. The battles against extending Jim Crow to the federal service and *The Birth of a Nation* had unified and strengthened the civil rights movement, which ended its brief flirtation with the Democratic Party. As his reelection campaign began, Wilson lost what little support from the civil rights community he had managed to gain in the 1912 election. Even those who fought adamantly for African Americans to avoid "capture" by the Republican Party, and urged their brethren to take advantage of the two-party system to advance their interests, were largely demobilized and languid.⁹⁹ Writing a month before the 1916 election, Du Bois summarized the collective feeling of political agnosticism that had fallen over the civil rights movement:

The Negro voter enters the present campaign with no enthusiasm. Four years ago the intelligent Negro voter tried a great and important experiment. He knew that the rank and file of the Bourbon democracy was without sense or reason, based on provincial ignorance and essentially uncivilized, but he saw called to its leadership a man of high type and one who promised specifically to American Negroes, justice—"Not mere grudging justice, but justice executed with liberality and cordial good feeling." They have lived to learn that this statement was a lie, a peculiarly miserable campaign deception. They are forced, therefore, to vote for the Republican candidate, Mr. Hughes, and they find there little that is attractive. . . . Under ordinary circumstances the Negro must expect

from him, as chief executive, the neglect, indifference and misunderstanding that he has had from recent Republican presidents. Nevertheless, he is practically the only candidate for whom Negroes can vote.¹⁰⁰

Opposed by a reunified Republican Party in 1916, Wilson won reelection by a much narrower margin. Charles Evans Hughes was able to resecure most of New England as well as some of the midwestern states (Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa) that Wilson was able to take with Roosevelt running as the Progressive standard bearer. None of the major publications at the time credited a dramatic shift in the African American vote as the cause of Wilson's loss of support. But surely, the narrative about the role of African Americans in politics had dramatically changed. In 1912, African Americans leaders were ready to be bold and experiment with a progressive candidate, even if he was a Democrat with Southern roots. In 1916, these same activists lamented that Wilson won because African Americans were so disenfranchised in the South that the entire Electoral College bore the taint of caste and prejudice.¹⁰¹ Yet with America's entry into World War I, the bitter harvest of civil rights leaders' support for Wilson in 1912 was less important than the challenges presented by events in Europe. Politics as usual was interrupted by the convulsive social and economic disruptions of total war.

IN THE PRESIDENT'S OWN WORDS—"CHAMPIONS OF DEMOCRACY"

Wilson's first term in office is a vivid example of the opportunities and difficulties of presidency-aligned social reform. The combative, but productive attempts to influence national politics were unprecedented, if not always fruitful, efforts, but to build on their initial successes, civil rights leaders knew that they would have to enlist the Wilson administration in advancing their causes. In their effort to form an alliance with the recalcitrant Wilson during his second term, social activists faced the promise and perils of world war. War animated the country's deep racial animosities in profoundly violent ways, exposing the fragility of America's social fabric that Wilson so longed to protect. However, these new responsibilities did not push the presidency, as some scholars have suggested, in "a conservative direction" to protect preexisting commitments.¹⁰² Rather, as Mary Dudziak has persuasively argued in reference to the Cold War, international perceptions of

98. *Fighting a Vicious Film: Protest against "The Birth of a Nation"* (Boston, MA: Boston Branch of the NAACP, Library of Congress Collection of Books by Colored Authors, Rare Book Collection, 1915), 29.

99. "Fifty-Fifty in Presidential Race," *Afro-American*, September 2, 1916, p. 1.

100. *The Crisis*, October 1916. See also, "A Negro Party," *Afro-American*, October 7, 1916, p. 4.

101. "The Great Question," *Afro-American*, November 18, 1916, p. 4.

102. Sanders, "Presidents and Social Movements," 224.

American democracy are often catalysts for major social reform at home—including civil rights.¹⁰³ Likewise, the country's involvement in World War I created a constitutional crisis that Wilson believed he had the responsibility and power to address. As commander in chief, Wilson deployed the arsenal of presidential prerogative to maintain his steadfast commitment to political and social order. In large measure, that order was threatened by racially motivated assaults on black soldiers and citizens; however, it was not inevitable that Wilson would connect his presidential ambitions with those of civil rights leaders. It took persistent lobbying and relentless pressure to persuade the president civil rights leaders could be strange, if not entirely new, bedfellows.

The Battle to Make America Safe for Democracy

Wilson would ask Congress for a declaration of war on April 6, 1917, just months after winning reelection on a campaign that highlighted his success in keeping America out of an embroiled Europe. The rivalry between the White House and civil rights leaders during the first term now found a common cause with Wilson's international idealism and the necessity of maintaining a unified front at home. His early equivocation on race gave tacit endorsement to the seeds of race hate and violence that only grew with the social disruption aroused about America's entry into the war. Yet, facing the persistent pressure of the same group of social advocates from whom he kept his distance during his first term, Wilson finally recognized that his public image had become tarnished on the race question—a stain that would impede his domestic and international ambitions. The newly formed civil rights groups found a reluctant voice in fighting *The Birth of a Nation*; but Wilson now saw advantage in joining their cause of racial justice with his promise to make the “world safe for democracy.”

The swell of patriotism that came with the start of war quickly waned with the social upheaval that the Great War wrought. An estimated 300,000 African American soldiers eventually served in the military to assist the war effort.¹⁰⁴ But most significantly, with expanding industry in the North and in the face of sustained racial prejudice in the South, over half a million African Americans migrated to the urban centers of northern America during Wilson's

second term to take advantage of economic opportunities brought about by the necessities of waging “total war.”¹⁰⁵ These dramatic transformations added stress to an already weakened social fabric. In East St. Louis, that fabric would finally tear.

The region of St. Louis had become the center of racial tension and prejudice that had permeated through all parts of American life. Responding to sporadic mob violence in June, Du Bois would comment that, “It is this attitude of many labor unions and Northern working men who make the mobs of East St. Louis, that keeps many Negroes living among Memphis lynchers. But it cannot keep them all. The stream of migration is large. It is going to be larger.”¹⁰⁶ One day before the outbreak of the largest riot that would hit East St. Louis, the region's defense board warned of escalating tension and impending violence in the region as a result of migration and strained economic pressures.¹⁰⁷

Unlike the urban riots that would engulf cities in the 1960s, aroused by the boiling over of blacks' frustration with invidious social and economic conditions and police brutality, the race riots of early twentieth-century America were precipitated by white mobs terrorizing African American neighborhoods. Ongoing labor disputes and strikes in several industries had inflamed tensions between white laborers and black migrants, widely believed to have been imported to the region to expressly break organized labor. As municipal police routinely overlooked crime and violence perpetrated against African American communities, city blocks learned to self-arm and self-organize in response to rumored and reported mob violence. When church bells rang in an African American neighborhood of East St. Louis early in the morning of July 2, groups of heavily armed men gathered and accidentally fired on a police van. As reports of gunshots spread throughout the entire region, mobs of white men and women—many employed in rapidly diversifying industries—marched into African American neighborhoods and began to set city blocks ablaze. Reporters in the streets relayed accounts of lynchings from telegraph poles, houses set ablaze, and local “militias” firing on fleeing residents, now trying to seek shelter in government buildings. Newspaper accounts describe a war-torn battlefield, far away from the trenches of Europe,

105. The term *total war* applied in part to the Civil War. But with the development of the modern state, war became an instrument of national policy that mobilized the society's entire population and resources for prolonged conflict. See Edward Corwin, *Total War and the Constitution* (New York: Knopf, 1947).

106. “Memphis or East St. Louis?” *The Crisis*, July 1917, p. 114.

107. “Defense Board Warned against Negro Influx,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 1, 1917, p. 13; See also “Labor Rivalry behind Trouble Leading to Riot,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 3, 1917, p. 2. Both these reports are in response to sporadic outbreaks of violence that had hit the city in the previous month.

103. Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

104. Gerald Astor, *The Right to Fight: A History of African-Americans in the Military* (Darby, PA: Diane, 1998); Arthur E. Barbeau and Florette Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers: African-American Troops in WWI* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1996).

with opposing armies clearly distinguished by the color of their skin.¹⁰⁸

Such dramatic violence did not escape the attention of the White House, yet Wilson, naturally cautious and uncertain of his authority, was hesitant to make a public statement on the matter. With a stream of letters pouring into his office, Wilson reached out to his attorney general, Thomas Gregory, asking if he “could exercise any jurisdiction in this tragical [sic] matter.” The president was determined to find this legal authority, for, as stated in his letter to Gregory, he was “very anxious to have any instrumentality of the Government employed to check these disgraceful outrages.”¹⁰⁹ Arthur Capper, governor of the bordering state of Kansas, expressed sentiments in a letter to the president that Wilson “entirely” shared: “It is certainly a most humiliating circumstance that in the center of our own nation, in one of the great centers of population, a hundred or more helpless negroes, men and women, were butchered by white men while officers of the law were present.”¹¹⁰

By the next weekend, delegations of African Americans, joined by senators and congressmen, began to call on the White House for meetings and official statements. Wilson’s official response was to say nothing as he waited for a report from his attorney general.¹¹¹ Yet, he remained in continual contact with the Republican congressman from St. Louis, Leonidas Dyer. Dyer shared Wilson’s deep concern for the rule of law and eagerly pressed on the president and his congressional colleagues a way to authorize the federal government’s involvement. Believing that the president lacked statutory authority to investigate lynchings and other acts of mob violence, Dyer introduced legislation that would specifically consider “whether the Constitution and laws of the United States were violated; and what legislation, if any, [was] needed to prevent like outrages.”¹¹² Under existing constitutional interpretation, the Fourteenth

Amendment confined the Department of Justice to areas of “public authority;” as lynchings were private actions, albeit often with the cooperation of local law enforcement, the federal government lacked grounds to investigate and prosecute the crimes.

As Dyer worked to secure meetings with Wilson to convey the concerns of various civil rights organizations, thousands of African Americans took to the streets of New York City to protest the violence in East St. Louis. In an act that seemed to directly foreshadow the philosophy and strategies of direct action of the 1950s and 1960s civil rights movement, an estimated 10,000 men, women, and children silently marched down Fifth Avenue carrying banners that would resonate with a country at war abroad and with itself: “Make America Safe for Democracy;” “The First Blood for American Independence was Shed by a Negro;” “We Were First in France, Ask Pershing.”¹¹³

The reference to Wilson’s defense of World War I—“The world must be made safe for democracy”—revealed the civil rights activists’ hope to ally their cause with the president’s international idealism, rather than to simply denounce its hypocrisy. A delegation of about twenty civil rights leaders from the Silent Protest Parade arrived at the White House days later to deliver a petition signed by 12,000 citizens, beseeching the president to deploy the prestige and powers of his office against mob violence.¹¹⁴ Wilson did not meet personally with the delegation—a slight that would bring the president more ridicule in the African American press—but as he wrote Tumulty on the same day the parade delegation visited, he wished for his secretary to think about a public address to denounce mob violence and an appropriate occasion where his rhetoric would ameliorate rather than add to the tension—“I want to make [a speech] if it can be made naturally and with the likelihood that it will be effective.”¹¹⁵ Just as with *The Birth of a Nation*, Wilson believed that public remarks on the race question could be as deleterious and inflaming as beneficial to the cause. In this instance, however, his commitment to the law and the causes of the civil rights movement were more aligned.

Still, as his tentativeness to meet with the parade delegation suggested, Wilson remained cautious in flexing the rhetorical muscle of the modern presidency. Yet Alfred B. Cosey, who had worked alongside Walters in the stillborn efforts to build a black wing of

108. “Race Rioters Fire East St. Louis and Shoot or Hang Many Negroes,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1917. See also “Labor Rivalry Behind Trouble Leading to Riot,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 3, 1917; “Mob Shoots and Burns Negroes by Scores in East St. Louis Riots,” *Washington Post*, July 3, 1917; “The Riot in East St. Louis,” *The Crisis*, August 1917.

109. Woodrow Wilson to Thomas Watt Gregory, July 7, 1917, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 43, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 297–98.

110. Arthur Capper to Woodrow Wilson, July 6, 1917, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 43, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 112. For Wilson’s response, see Woodrow Wilson to Arthur Capper, July 8, 1917, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 43, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 123.

111. See Joseph Patrick Tumulty to Woodrow Wilson, July 10, 1917, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 43, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 139.

112. Leonidas Carstarphen Dyer to Woodrow Wilson, July 20, 1917, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 43, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 112.

113. “Negroes in ‘Silent’ Race Riot Protest,” *Washington Post*, July 29, 1917, p. 10.

114. “Joseph Patrick Tumulty to Governor Frank Orren, with Enclosures (August 1, 1917, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 43, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 342.”

115. Joseph Patrick Tumulty to Woodrow Wilson, August 1, 1917, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 43, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 342–43.

the Democratic Party, understood that, on this issue, there was a critical space for Wilson and social activists to collaborate. A member of the Silent Protest Parade delegation that had visited the White House, Cosey wrote to Wilson urging him to, “use his great powers to [grant] us some redress for the grievances set forth in our petition . . . praying that the President may find it in his heart to speak some public word that will give hope and courage to our people, thus using his great personal moral influence in our behalf.” Two days earlier, Cosey had gone on the record denying press reports that Wilson had refused to initially see the delegation because they were black and that the delegation remained willing to meet with Wilson whenever convenient.¹¹⁶ Their patience finally paid off when Wilson saw the delegation on August 16, where in a widely publicized statement he “expressed himself as shocked because of the riots and assured the delegation of his sympathy in their efforts to prevent recurrences.”¹¹⁷

While Wilson conveyed to civil rights leaders and the press his outrage over the East St. Louis riots, he maintained pressure on his attorney general to investigate violations of federal law. As Dyer was seeking to expand the legislative authority of the federal government to prosecute lynching, Wilson requested that his attorney general deliver a full report of the federal government’s existing responsibility to intervene and prosecute those who engaged in mob violence. Alas, from what the Department of Justice could conclude, no federal law was applicable to the facts as discovered by numerous local, state, and federal authorities. Yet, Wilson insisted that Department of Justice attorneys would remain in the city to aid state authorities, in the event that “a condition which would justify [federal action] may develop later on.”¹¹⁸ Perhaps Wilson’s reluctance to stretch federal law was just cover for his unwillingness to meddle in racial conflict. But, while the rubble in East St. Louis still smoldered, a more exacting test of his forbearance arose: Racial violence would implode in one area where the authority of the commander in chief was unambiguous—the U.S. Army.

Another race-riot broke out on August 23, this time near Camp Logan just outside of Houston, Texas. Just months into the war, the Wilson administration was no stranger to the race question inside the U.S. military. As mobilization ramped up and as the army moved all-black regiments into military camps heavily concentrated in the Deep South, the race-

mongering element of the Democratic Party saw an issue they could exploit. Precisely such a calculation was made abundantly clear in South Carolina Congressman Asbury Lever’s response to rumors that African American and Puerto Rican soldiers would be stationed outside Columbia, South Carolina. Pleading for support, Lever wrote, “the enemies of the administration and me personally would want no bigger club; it would be almost fatal. The blame would be put upon me. I protest earnestly against it.” Wilson, likewise, grew concerned about the potential recriminations of his congressional foes, particularly Senator Blease, “and the passions he would rejoice to raise,” in exploiting the policy of stationing black soldiers into the South.¹¹⁹

Lever, and indeed the entire Department of War, had correctly predicted the racial animosity that would greet African American units arriving in the South. When the 654 black soldiers of the Third Battalion of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment arrived in Houston, relations quickly soured between the local community and enlisted men. Rumors broke out that a young corporal had been shot by local police, prompting roughly a hundred of the soldiers to march toward the nearby town of San Felipe, prompting white residents to break into hardware stores to arm themselves. Because of the presence of multiple National Guard regiments, the death toll in Houston did not match what had happened in East St. Louis; still, nine residents, four police officers, and two soldiers lay dead by morning. Anticipating the possibility of additional violence, battalion commanders acted swiftly to remove the entire contingent of black soldiers, sending them back to Columbus, New Mexico.¹²⁰

Arrests were made and courts-martial scheduled for the sixty-three indicted soldiers, as secretary of war, Newton Diehl Baker directed a full investigation into the incident. The verdicts were announced on November 27: Fifty-four black soldiers were found guilty of all charges and specifications; thirteen were found responsible for masterminding the mutiny and orchestrating the march. They were “to be hanged by the neck until dead.”¹²¹ Reactions to the sentences reflected the deep division in the country on the race question. The day following the execution of the convicted soldiers, the *Los Angeles Times* editorialized in its headline that the “Noose Avenges Riot Murders.”¹²² In stark contrast, the editorial page of the *Afro-American* questioned how different the

116. *New York Globe*, August 7, 1917. This clipping is attached to the letter Cosey sent Wilson on August 9, 1917, Woodrow Wilson Papers, Reel 230, Library of Congress.

117. “Wilson Pledge to Negroes,” *Washington Post*, August 17, 1917, p. 2.

118. Thomas Watt Gregory to Woodrow Wilson, July 27, 1917, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 43, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 298.

119. Woodrow Wilson to Newton Diehl Baker, August 21, 1917, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 44, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 10.

120. Robert V. Haynes, *A Night of Violence: The Houston Riot of 1917* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976).

121. *Ibid.*, 271.

122. “Noose Avenges Riot Murderers,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 12, 1917, p. 15.

actions of the soldiers really were from those of crimes perpetrated against black civilians throughout the country:

Guilty as these soldiers of the 24th, and as worthy of punishment as they are known to be, the country stands aghast at these severe and summary sentences meted out to them. If they ran wild and murdered and terrorized a community, everybody knows that they simply did what lynching parties practice almost daily on a smaller scale ... these men of the 24th were punished as much because they were colored as because they were guilty.¹²³

The thirteen soldiers accused of plotting the insurrection were summarily executed without public notice. Days after, sixty more African American troops were summoned to be court-martialed. By the end of the year, five more soldiers were ordered to hang for their role in the Houston riot. In many ways, the swift action taken by the War Department mirrored the process taken after violence erupted outside of Brownsville, Texas, in 1906 between black soldiers and local white residents. As was the case in Houston, residents of the town were agitated by the African American soldiers' arrival. They not only accused, but also planted evidence against the all-black Twenty-Fifth Infantry Regiment. Months later, President Roosevelt, animating protest that led to the founding of the NAACP, summarily signed the dishonorable discharges of all 167 black soldiers stationed at Fort Brown.¹²⁴

But the remaining soldiers of the Houston riots received a surprising reprieve from the White House that stands in contrast to Roosevelt's decisions in the Brownsville case. In large part a response to the divisive reactions over the first round of executions, Wilson issued an order through the War Department that dramatically altered the procedural due process rights of accused soldiers. The *Chicago Defender* first broke the news that all further and scheduled executions of American soldiers, except for those serving overseas, would be reviewed in Washington before the sentences were carried out. Reporters who wrote for the African American press made the connection to the Houston riot clear—"there is no doubt but that the men executed were technically guilty and thus amenable to the law, but it is also true that the provocation was great and only possible of endurance under extraordinary circumstances ... had the President's order been in force before the hanging of

these men, the Race would not have had to suffer the pangs caused by their execution."¹²⁵

With the new order, the Wilson White House began a prompt review of the Houston riot courts-martial. For civil rights activists, this was more than a legal maneuver. The hundreds of letters and petitions that arrived at the White House are a testament to their public relations campaign that tied the fate of the soldiers to Wilson's personal involvement. As with the delegations from the Silent Protest Parade, Wilson hesitated to give the public remarks that these messages requested. Nevertheless, the soldiers' fate galvanized the president's attention over the next several weeks. When James Johnson, soon to be executive secretary of the NAACP, personally delivered an independent report and collected petitions to the White House in February, 1918, Wilson wrote to Baker that, "this document ... accompanied by a gigantic petition, that is, gigantic in the bulk of its signatures, has I must say moved me very much. I hope you will have time to read at any rate the portion which concerns the soldiers in the 24th Infantry. I believe I have already said to you that I would like very much to participate in the reconsideration of the cases."¹²⁶

With uncharacteristic, but necessary speed, Wilson granted an indefinite reprieve to the soldiers who had already been convicted of their role in the Houston violence and were awaiting the gallows.¹²⁷ Over the next six months, attorneys at the Justice and War Departments reviewed their cases. In a lengthy memorandum Baker sent Wilson on August 22, 1918, he reported that, "I am obliged to concur with the unanimous judgment expressed by all who have examined these records, that they are without serious flaw as to matters of law, that the Court in each instance was properly constituted and composed of men of the highest character, [and] that all rights of the accused were safeguarded." Yet, Baker recognized, "months have elapsed since the beginning of these trials ... the time has passed and the execution now of these death penalties, it is said, would come as a shock and reopen an old race wound."¹²⁸

Taking Baker's advice wholesale, Wilson commuted many, but not all, of the death sentences and commuted several of the life sentences. In delivering remarks on his decision, it was clear that the massive petition drive and the hundreds of letters in

125. "President's Order Is Well-Received," *Chicago Defender*, January 5, 1918, p. 5.

126. Woodrow Wilson to Newton Diehl Baker, February 19, 1918, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 46, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 385.

127. "President Wilson Issues Reprieve for Convicted Men of 24th Infantry," *Afro-American*, March 1, 1918.

128. Two Letters from Newton Diehl Baker to Woodrow Wilson, August 22, 1918, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 29, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 324-28.

123. "Houston Incident Closed—Not Forgotten," *Afro-American*, December 15, 1917, p. 4.

124. Ann J. Lane, *The Brownsville Affair: National Crisis and Black Reaction* (Port Washington, NY: National University Publications, 1971).

support of clemency had their effect. As Wilson told reporters, “The offense of which these soldiers were guilty is one of the greatest difficulty . . . [yet] I desire the clemency here ordered to be a recognition of the splendid loyalty of the race to which these soldiers belong and an inspiration to the people of that race to further zeal and service to the country of which they are citizens and for the liberties of which so many of them are now bravely bearing arms at the very front of great fields of battle.”¹²⁹

Speaking Out against Lynching

Wilson’s decision to investigate the East St. Louis and Houston riots were consistent with his previous commitments to maintaining social order. World War I, however, had changed the context in which Wilson would strive to negotiate the demands of an increasingly energetic social movement, even amid the realities of a racially divided polity and a system of separated governing institutions. The fight in Europe for “democracy” opened up the rhetorical space for Wilson to speak for democracy at home. Nevertheless, absent the intense and sustained pressure of social advocacy groups, it is unlikely that Wilson would have found it necessary or beneficial to speak out against lynching. Yet facing a relentless campaign to enlist his support, he denounced mob violence in a widely lauded address on July 26, 1918.¹³⁰

The antilynching cause was of the first priority for the NAACP, one that was also intricately connected to the organization’s ongoing efforts to prevent the further release of *The Birth of a Nation*. It stemmed, in part, from the federal government’s limited authority

129. Woodrow Wilson, “Statement on the Houston Riots,” August 31, 1918, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 49, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 400–402.

130. Despite claims to the contrary, Wilson was not the first president to publicly denounce lynching. After Booker T. Washington personally called on Theodore Roosevelt to make a speech against mob violence in a letter on February 6, 1902, the president responded to his request a few months later in a Memorial Day address at Arlington National Cemetery. In a speech principally concerned with American occupation of the Philippines, Roosevelt inserted an entire paragraph to distinguish the actions of the U.S. military from the acts of deplorable injustice taking place in the South: “Is it only in the army in the Philippines that Americans sometimes commit deeds that cause all other Americans to regret? No! From time to time there occur in our country, to the deep and lasting shame of our people, lynchings carried on under circumstances of inhuman cruelty and barbarity, cruelty infinitely worse than any that has ever been committed by our troops in the Philippines; worse to the victims, and far more brutalizing to those guilty of it. The men who fail to condemn these lynchings, and yet clamor about what has been done in the Philippines, are indeed guilty of neglecting the beam in their own eye while taunting their brother about the mote in his.” For the full remarks, see Theodore Roosevelt, Memorial Day Address (May 30, 1902), Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, Virginia, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

to prosecute lynchings in the states, and the belief that a presidential address could help advance such legislative authority in Congress. The NAACP’s Johnson discussed as much with Wilson on the same day that he delivered the petitions in support of Twenty-Fourth Infantry soldiers. Referencing a recent lynching at Estill Springs, Tennessee, Wilson, as he did in response to East St. Louis, sought federal authority.¹³¹ But, the attorney general was adamant, writing back to Johnson several days later that, “under the decisions of the Supreme Court of the United States, the Federal Government has absolutely no jurisdiction over matters of this kind; nor are they connected with the war in any such way as to justify the action of the Federal Government under the war power.” The lack of federal authority motivated, in large part, the desire to see Wilson denounce lynching in a formal address. As the NAACP’s John Shillady wrote to Tumulty, “the President’s inspiring moral leadership as a man, no less than his position as President, gives him the opportunity, and may we suggest respectfully, the responsibility of speaking out.”¹³²

Shillady knew that Wilson deplored mob violence. The president’s consistent and public reactions to racial violence in the summer of 1917 confirmed this; indeed, a year earlier, he joined the National Association of Colored Women in denouncing lynching. Dictating his response to Tumulty, Wilson’s told his secretary to “say he [the president] deplores most earnestly and deeply the violence you alluded to and believes with you that it is a serious menace to the whole structure and spirit of civilization.”¹³³ But Wilson’s August 1916 “denouncement” did not have the persuasive force that other civil rights leaders hoped a more public statement would have.

To help push the issue on the White House’s agenda, Du Bois dedicated dozens of pages in *The Crisis* to the antilynching cause, from illustrating with gruesome horror instances of specific violence, to detailing with quantitative accuracy the number of occurrences and their frequency by state. Dozens of other organizations and those who had pressured Wilson for years now also enlisted in the effort. In March, Trotter and other members of the National Equal Rights League joined the growing chorus of voices calling on Wilson to exercise his rhetorical role as the voice of the people. Framing the crisis of public mood and growing racial animosity that jeopardized America’s fight for democracy, these leaders escalated the call for Wilson to publicly denounce

131. James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way* (New York: Viking, 1933), 324–25.

132. John R. Shillady to Joseph Patrick Tumulty, February 18, 1918, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 46, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 380–81.

133. Woodrow Wilson to Joseph Patrick Tumulty, August 11, 1916, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 38, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 24.

lynching and to remove *The Birth of a Nation* from theaters, which was still drawing large audiences three years after its initial screening.¹³⁴ Wilson refused to respond immediately, but Tumulty continued to press the subject. Eventually, in a private, but leaked, letter to his secretary Wilson would confess that, “I have always felt that [*The Birth of a Nation*] was a very unfortunate production and I wish most sincerely that its production might be avoided, particularly in communities where there are so many colored people.” Tumulty pressed the president to elaborate, suggesting to him that “you may perhaps care to say more than this.” But Wilson, perhaps not wanting to further fracture his relationship with the NAACP, or perhaps fearful that his intrusion might escalate the tension, responded to Tumulty in a handwritten note: “No. This will do.”¹³⁵ The historical record does not demonstrate whether this brief but firm denouncement was effective in quelling racial tensions or in stopping the further production of *The Birth of a Nation*. However, it reveals that Wilson, in the context of war, was pushed to publicly condemn the film, a testament to an incipient joining of executive authority and social activism.

Indeed, when civil rights leaders framed the lynching issue as deleterious to the war effort and social order, Wilson began to consider a more public commentary on racial injustice. Later, in May, the Equal Rights League would press the issue further, and in no uncertain language:

At the very time that the Red Cross is asking every American worker to give one day's wages for its humanity work, five colored Americans are fiendishly murdered by a white American mob, one of the lynched being a woman. Simultaneously General Pershing announces two colored soldiers [as] heroes [and] victors in bloody combat over 20 Germans. France gave them the Croix de Guerre. Will you their President recognize their heroism by publicly exerting your personal and official influence against lynching their women?¹³⁶

The National Citizenship Defense Committee, a pro-war organization led by prominent African American politicians and businessmen from Chicago, explicitly requested presidential action as a “war measure.” In an open telegram they declared, “we hold that the government which exacts allegiance is under obligations to give protection in return . . . as a war measure, we respectfully request and urge the

134. Emery T. Morris and Others to Woodrow Wilson, March 5, 1918, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 46, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 550–51.

135. This set of correspondence is contained in the Woodrow Wilson Papers, Series 4, Reel 332, Case File 2247, documents 199629–199639, Library of Congress.

136. “League Protests Lynch Law to President Wilson,” *Afro-American*, May 31, 1918, p. 1.

President and the Congress to take some immediate and effective steps to abolish lynching and mob violence and thus secure the hearty and solidified support and cooperation of all the patriotic peoples of the United States to win the war for civilization and to make the world safer for democracy.”¹³⁷ This message was echoed by R. R. Moton, who as principal of Tuskegee Institute had developed a congenial relationship with White House. As he wrote the president, “The one concrete suggestion that I wish respectfully to make is that, I think a strong word, definitely from you on this lynching proposition will have more effect just now than any other one thing, and I think you could say that word in such a way as not to offend the South or the North or the Negro.”¹³⁸

Moton’s appeal came after Wilson had already made up his mind to make some sort of public declaration, but the White House was still debating the timing of the pronouncement. What is clear, and significant, is that Wilson had decided against a mediated platform—he wanted to make a strong statement directly to the people.¹³⁹ Wilson’s experience in dealing with the fallout of *The Birth of a Nation* forced the president to learn two important lessons. First, although the power of modern media created a new political environment especially ripe for fear-mongering, the same technological developments facilitated massive, organized resistance to these campaigns. Second, the president’s image was inescapably connected to these disputes, even if they took place largely outside of formal politics. Wilson’s comprehension of these lessons figured prominently in his decision to finally denounce lynching after months of waiting for an opportune moment. Wilson had hinted several times over the spring and early summer of 1918 that he had remarks ready should an occasion arise that merited a presidential address.¹⁴⁰ That moment arrived when the German government began running propaganda following the lynching of a German American, Robert P. Prager.¹⁴¹

137. “Telegram Sent Wilson, Senators, Congressmen,” *Chicago Defender*, December 8, 1917, p. 10.

138. Robert Russa Moton to Woodrow Wilson, June 15, 1918, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 48, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 323.

139. Woodrow Wilson to Joseph Patrick Tumulty, June 13, 1918, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 48, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 302.

140. See, for example, Lester Alger Walton to Joseph Patrick Tumulty, June 13, 1918, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 48, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 302; Woodrow Wilson to R. R. Moton, June 18, 1918, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 48, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 346; Leonidas Dyer to Woodrow Wilson, July 23, 1918, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 49, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 61–62.

141. Leonidas Dyer to Woodrow Wilson, July 23, 1918,” 61–62.

In a statement reprinted in almost every major newspaper, Wilson joined the demands of civil rights advocates with his commitment to protect and advance abroad America's idea of self-government. He began by counseling his readers that he would speak "very plainly" about an issue that "so vitally affects the honor of the Nation and the very character and integrity of our [American] institutions." Referencing the "disgraceful example" of the German army, Wilson reminded Americans that, "we proudly claim to be the champions of democracy. If we really are, in deed and in truth, let us see to it that we do not discredit our own." Wilson's peroration clearly tied his condemnation of a mob's murder of Prager to the larger cause of racial violence:

I therefore very earnestly and solemnly beg that the governors of all the States, the law officers of every community, and, above all, the men and women of every community in the United States, all who revere America and wish to keep her name without stain or reproach, will cooperate—not passively merely, but actively and watchfully—to make an end of this disgraceful evil. It cannot live where the community does not countenance it.¹⁴²

The address was first-page, above-the-fold, headline news, reprinted in its entirety in many newspapers. Its long passages of flowering rhetoric made Wilson's "Statement to the American People" suitable material for editorials, which continued for weeks.¹⁴³ The *Chicago Defender* took the opportunity to note that "Embodied in the President's appeal to the country can be found the principles enunciated by this paper for the past twelve months in its fight for a clarity of Race conscience."¹⁴⁴ The editorial continued its praise onto the back pages: "The coming of this message from President Wilson, a Democrat, was like a bolt out of a clear sky, a bolt intended to strike our enemies a stinging blow; a bolt intended to bring these wreckers of order and law to a realization of the fact that they are deserving of the same consideration from true American citizens as that shown for the Huns, who are endeavoring to kill democracy."¹⁴⁵

The success of various civil rights leaders in persuading Wilson to publicly denounce lynching is most certainly a surprising and significant moment

142. Woodrow Wilson, "A Statement to the American People" July 26, 1918, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 49, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 97–98.

143. "President Wilson's Proclamation Denouncing Lynching," *Afro-American*, August 2, 1918, p. 1.

144. "President Wilson against Mob Rule," *Chicago Defender*, August 3, 1918, p. 1.

145. "Our President Has Spoken," *Chicago Defender*, August 3, 1918, p. 16.

in the history of social advocacy. It helped to legitimize a strategy of direct confrontation with the White House necessary to promote the goals of racial equality in an era of mass politics. Because his actions were bounded by the early twentieth-century restraints on the executive's administrative discretion in matters of social policy, Wilson's most consequential impact on the lives of African Americans was less pronounced. Nevertheless, Wilson's reluctant but ultimate condemnation of a scurrilous film and mob violence against African Americans followed from a deliberate strategy by civil rights leaders to push the president. Civil rights activists forced Wilson to become involved in matters of racial injustice so that the White House, already engaged in a major war, was compelled to broker a balance between social reform and maintaining the status quo. Indeed, Wilson's stance foreshadows the delicate situation of his successors. As Miroff has argued, for most of the twentieth century, presidents increasingly sought to find a "symbolic balance point" where they could champion the goals of social movements to a limited extent all the while maintaining a "special commitment to law, order, and the general good."¹⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

Just two years prior to becoming the Democratic nominee for president, Wilson argued forcefully in favor of a strengthened national executive. As soon as the president assumed office, he must realize that, "the nation as a whole has chosen him, and is conscious that it has no other political spokesman. He is the only national voice in affairs."¹⁴⁷ Wilson styled himself to be this great interpreter, yet once he entered the White House, the president soon learned that modern presidential governance is often less about interpretation, and more about navigating the fractious demands on the executive office.

Even in areas where the presidency has significant discretion—administrative leadership, rhetorical persuasion, and military command—Wilson's experience demonstrates that the modern White House was hardly to be one of "extraordinary isolation"; rather, it was implicated in the struggles of activist movements—conflicts that played out on the public stage. The success of civil rights activists in forcing the hand of Wilson to adopt goals antithetical to his conservative beliefs about racial relations adds much needed texture to our traditional view of top-down and bottom-up politics, that is, social movements seek to disrupt, while presidents seek to conserve the prevailing social order.¹⁴⁸ Woodrow Wilson

146. Miroff, "Presidential Leverage Over Social Movements," 14.

147. Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government*, 68.

148. Riley, *The Presidency*; Sanders, "Presidents and Social Movements."

sought to harness presidential power and distill the national voice, only to find himself in an agonizing search for rhetorical and administrative power to manage a discordant chorus of competing and mutually incompatible claims. And yet, the success of a nascent civil rights movement helped to legitimize a strategy of collective action that targeted the White House—as a recalcitrant but important ally of the “long civil rights movement.”¹⁴⁹

The emergence of president-aligned reform was not limited to the nascent civil rights movement. Other important social movements sought to pressure and cooperate with the Wilson administration. As Alice Paul exclaimed when Wilson finally threw his support behind the woman’s suffrage amendment during World War I, “For four years we have striven to secure his support . . . for we knew that it and perhaps it alone would insure our success. It means to us only one thing—victory.”¹⁵⁰ And, just as the suffrage movement set their sights on the White House, Geoffrey Stone has argued that the contentious experience of various intellectuals and social leaders with the White House during the Great War led to the formation of another formidable advocacy group, the American Civil Liberties Union.¹⁵¹

Moreover, Wilson’s struggles to adapt to an increasingly energized environment of social movements, national media, and a presidency-centered political culture, sheds light on the ongoing mating dance between presidents and social movements throughout the twentieth century. The NAACP and other civil rights organizations continued their campaign against mob violence during the conservative Republican administrations of the 1930s. Indeed, even with the “return to normalcy,” activists not only persuaded Warren Harding to denounce lynching but also a conservative Republican House of Representatives to pass an antilynching bill. Although this bill was killed in the Senate, the NAACP redirected its political efforts to the courts, where it won a major legal victory against mob violence in the case of *Moore v. Dempsey*. With this 1923 decision, the Supreme Court “positioned itself as a major player in the politics of race in Jim Crow America.”¹⁵² This legal victory, confirming the civil rights organizations’ development as an influential national movement, prepared the ground for a new chapter of presidency-aligned reform. The 1932 election, amid the worst economic crisis in American history, brought to the White House another progressive Democratic president who did not believe that America was ready for a

civil rights revolution; like Wilson, however, FDR was not able to ignore the entreaties of civil rights activists who fought to establish a foothold in the New Deal political order.

FDR, in fact, explicitly drew on Wilson’s experience in dealing with civil rights groups—particularly the adversarial style his predecessor encountered in Trotter—and sought clarification on Wilson’s handling of civil service segregation from Josephus Daniels who served in both administrations.¹⁵³ FDR’s “game of checkers,” as the poet Langston Hughes described it, with the civil rights leader A. Phillip Randolph suggests how the uneasy alliance between Wilson and the civil rights movement was an important signpost of things to come.¹⁵⁴ Drawing on the same successful strategy of the 1917 Silent Protest Parade, Randolph spearheaded the mass mobilization strategy of a March on Washington Movement. FDR’s reluctant but ultimately significant response to its demands in 1941—the issuance of an executive order against discrimination in the defense industry and the creation of the Fair Employment Practices Committee to enforce this initiative—further solidified the tense, but formative relationship between civil rights activists and a White House simultaneously dedicated to energetic executive governance and social stability.

The New Deal brought about a major partisan transformation—one that shifted the center of gravity in the Democratic Party from the South to the Northeast and Midwest and made a full-scale “racial realignment” possible.¹⁵⁵ Yet the relationship between prominent black activists and the Wilson administration suggest that the groundwork for this political development already was in the works during the Progressive Era. The experiment to build a black contingent of the Democratic Party in 1913 was, by all accounts, an abject failure. Almost fifteen

153. Daniels was secretary of the navy during Wilson’s two terms as president. FDR, famously following in his cousin’s footsteps, served as assistant secretary of the navy under Daniels. Daniels’s private diary informs us of the earliest conversations that took place inside the White House over the segregation of the civil service. In a letter to FDR, Daniels expresses Wilson’s dismay for how he handled Trotter’s second invitation to the White House, admitting to have “lost my temper and played the fool.” Josephus Daniels to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, June 10, 1933, F. D. Roosevelt Papers, Official File 237, Papers as President: The President’s Official File, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library & Museum.

154. Langston Hughes, “Poem for a Man: To A. Phillip Randolph on Achieving His Seventieth Year,” April 15, 1959, in *The Papers of A. Phillip Randolph*, ed. John H. Bracey and August Meier (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC). As Hughes exalted in this poem honoring Randolph on his seventieth birthday: “[He] played the checkered game of King jump King. And jump[ed] a president.”

155. On the development of a racial realignment during the New Deal era, see Eric Schickler, *Racial Realignment: The Transformation of American Liberalism, 1932–1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

149. Arnesen, “Reconsidering the ‘Long Civil Rights Movement,’” 265–88.

150. “Wilson Backs Amendment for Woman Suffrage,” *New York Times*, January 10, 1918, p. 1.

151. Stone, “Mr. Wilson’s First Amendment,” 213.

152. Francis, *Civil Rights and the Making of the Modern American State*, 171.

years later, however, that realignment would gain renewed traction, as many African American voters were once again willing to experiment with the Democratic Party.

The success of this political experiment was closely associated with structural changes in the working arrangements of American politics. During his second term, FDR advanced institutional changes, born of the Progressive Era, that made the modern presidency—as well as the uneasy partnership between presidents and social activists—an enduring fixture of the American political system. The enactment of the 1939 Executive Reorganization Act led to the creation of the Executive Office of the President and the strengthening of national administrative power that allowed a reform-minded president to forge a partnership with social activists—one that challenged the tight boundaries of the decentralized, patronage-based party system.¹⁵⁶ FDR's creation of Fair Employment Practices Committee revealed how he could pursue policies that defied the white supremacists who dominated the Southern wing of his party and serve a new progressive coalition with direct ties to the White House. The predictable conflicts and uneasy collaborations between modern presidents and a determined civil rights movement were poised to yield dramatic political results.

The dynamic we traced above was still vividly on display when activists confronted LBJ—arguably the greatest White House advocate of civil rights reform in the modern era. The product of this relationship was more fruitful than what could be achieved during the presidencies of FDR and Wilson; however, as the highly contentious battle over the seating of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic Convention dramatically illustrates, LBJ and activists still collided in public and in

private over the goals, tactics, and speed of racial progress. The transformative potential of a White House rife with reform ambition was most fully realized under LBJ, but he and mid-twentieth-century civil rights leaders were not working in uncharted territory.¹⁵⁷ They were operating in a political landscape rife with reformist possibilities, but possibilities that had been carved out, against large odds, decades earlier.

In a nod to Wilson's own political science, contemporary scholars are quick to point to the numerous ways in which presidents have recast the trajectories of institutional development over decades of political history. As numerous books and articles on presidential power attest, faced with the institutional paradox of maintaining constitutional order and carrying out personal, or partisan, policy goals, presidents often act as a critical agent of American political development. Even Richard Neustadt's formulation that presidents operate within a largely fixed set of institutional constraints emphasizes the role of presidential strategy and skill in successful dealings with the Congress.¹⁵⁸ Yet these parsimonious accounts of presidential decision making, as valuable as they are, seldom account for how presidents adapt to ill-defined and unforeseeable social, economic, and political pressures.

Wilson the political scientist argued that “the framers of the Constitution made in our President a more powerful, because a more isolated, king than the one they were imitating,” and he envisioned on the eve of his election such an extraordinarily autonomous office. Yet President Wilson quickly learned that the modern executive—the steward of the public welfare—could not stand apart from the flurry of demands that now roared down Pennsylvania Avenue.¹⁵⁹

156. Sidney M. Milkis, *The President and the Parties: The Transformation of the American Party System Since the New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

157. Milkis et al., “Rallying Force.”

158. Indeed, Neustadt's analysis of modern presidential power is the intellectual heir, and analytical extension of Wilson's political science. As Neustadt writes, “A President may retain the liberty, in Woodrow Wilson's phrase, ‘to be as big a man as he can.’ But nowadays he cannot be as small as he might like.” Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan* (New York: The Free Press, 1990/1960), 6.

159. Wilson, *Congressional Government*, 74.

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