

Nick Patler's speech at Princeton in April 2006

Woodrow Wilson was a newcomer in American national politics when he appeared as a Democratic presidential contender in 1912. Armed with a liberating doctrine called the New Freedom, Wilson brought hope and anticipation to many people who had been forced to the margins of American life-or out of American life altogether, particularly African Americans, immigrant communities, and women as well as those who felt overwhelmed by the power of huge corporations such as white middle class and lower income Americans.

Indeed, the New Freedom became synonymous with Wilson the candidate as he repeated its principles in one form or another to audiences and groups all over the country, and in numerous interviews. Described as "beautiful and worthy sentiments" by NAACP Chairman, Oswald Garrison Villard, Wilson's words thrilled listeners when he expressed with conviction that America should be a land lifting to the "admiration of the world its ideas of absolute free opportunity, where no man is supposed to be under any limitation except the limitations of his character and his mind; where there is supposed to be no distinction of class, no distinction of blood, no distinction of social status but where men win or lose on their merits."

Wilson had also structured his first presidential campaign in a way that appealed to the hopes and aspirations of minorities. Shunning powerful corporations and special interest groups, he made it clear that his campaign would only accept contributions from the masses. This inspired many Democratic newspaper headlines across the country to dub its strategy as the "Poor Men's Money for Wilson Fight"-an eye-catcher for African Americans and struggling immigrants who were some of the poorest of the poor because of the crushing effects of systematic racism and ethnic bias.

Another reason why many people, particularly African Americans, were attracted to Wilson early on was due to the candidate's overt integration of Christian doctrine and ethics with democratic values. Wilson's personal religious beliefs permeated his public speeches, as he often used moral imagery to describe political issues. Perhaps not until Jimmy Carter would a candidate and president bring his personal religious convictions into the public arena as did Woodrow Wilson. In one of his most popular and reprinted speeches, Wilson proclaimed that "the man whose faith is rooted in the Bible knows that reform cannot be stayed, that the finger of God that moves upon the face of nations is against every man that plots the nation's downfall or the people's deceit."

To a beleaguered and isolated people excluded from participation in the white man's world and whose political and social roots were deeply embedded in the freedom and equality of their segregated churches, Wilson's message of God, liberty and justice, so familiar to black Americans, offered hope that perhaps the time was at hand for them to finally become part of the American nation. Many black leaders such as WEB DuBois and William Monroe Trotter enthusiastically set themselves to the task of actively supporting Wilson, believing that he was their only chance for "fair treatment" in Jim Crow America, and some even went as far as to proclaim him the second Abraham Lincoln.

So what happened once Wilson became president? Did African Americans find a new freedom? Were immigrants given opportunity and respect regardless of their blood and social status? Did Wilson's noble sentiments of freedom and justice sweep away the reactionary forces standing in the way of female suffrage?

The answer to these questions for many America citizens during the Wilson years was, sadly, no. Despite President Wilson's lofty rhetoric in his first administration that naturalized Americans were some of the most loyal and hard working citizens in the country, not to mention his courageous veto of a popular bill in 1915 that would have required a literacy test for immigrants, his second administration spelled danger for many foreign born immigrants as well as German-Americans, Italian-Americans, dissenters, and others who became targets of government sponsored intrusion, slandering, discrimination and violence.

These activities were set in motion by President Wilson when he established the Committee on Public Information in 1917, or the Creel Committee as it was often referred to after its director, George Creel, a zealous Wilson supporter and newspaperman from Colorado. Created ostensibly to rally American support for the first world war, the committee was a propaganda machine that promoted hyper-nationalism, and essentially it fueled an intense suspicion of actions of any person, ethnic, political, or civic groups that appeared to even superficially challenge this rigid and exclusive definition of patriotism. Wilson no doubt handpicked the right man for the job. George Creel, by his own admittance, wrote that "an open mind is no part of my inheritance. I took in prejudices with mother's milk and was weaned on partisanship."

Wilson had tried for several years to balance American economic interests

with neutrality as the first large scale war machine rolled across Europe, but once he was set on the U.S. entering the war, he pursued it with irresistible fervor and used any means possible to generate consensus. The Creel Committee was the first massive public relations effort to promote the virtues of America, create fear of the other and demonize its enemies. While at best the commission distributed flags, ribbons, photographs of Wilson, and other everyday patriotic material, at worst it was the manufacturing of good and evil, us and them, and black and white that would be repeatedly used not only by regimes such as Nazi Germany, but also by the American government. The commission effectively recruited creative talent and used newspapers, speakers, academics, artists, filmmakers, and every available communication channel to successfully manipulate and change American inhibitions towards a bloody world war.

As a result, Americans were daily saturated with pamphlets, articles, posters, movies and other marketing tools depicting and distorting Germans as "depraved," "brutal," and "bestial," and without a trace of human decency. Germans were also depicted over and over in films and on posters as lurking and malevolent subhuman creatures, shadowy and dark skinned. In some cases, they were portrayed as ravishing sexual predators. Conversely, America and its allies were depicted as heroic and the essence of valor. Movies and posters often manufactured an iconic Anglo Saxon image--colorful, radiant, strong, brave, and white.

Although the massive scale and far reaching impact of the Creel Committee up until that time was unique in American history, there had been recent precedents which helped pave the way for its WWI propaganda efforts. Interestingly, the way German humanity was being marketed and distorted was similar to the way African Americans had been degraded for years. Since the latter part of the nineteenth century, some of the most respected journalists, academics, scientists, historians and others had effectively used their professional credentials to promulgate black inferiority. Here they maintained that African Americans were a naturally inferior race who were regressing to barbarity and sexual predation. This codification of black inferiority which impacted the collective consciousness was reinforced by the onslaught of the sophisticated marketing of products that depicted African Americans in distorted caricatures on advertisements, labels and magazine covers.

Thus, the Creel Committee had very recent precedents which had demonstrated the effectiveness of talent, resources, and marketing to impact and indeed create public opinion. And perhaps nowhere was there such a striking recent example as the high tech marvel, Birth of a Nation, made in 1915. This film,

based on Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* and directed by D.W. Griffith, was dazzling and innovative and used what was then state-of-the-art cinematography to utterly distort black humanity as well as history. Millions of people nationwide were mesmerized by the film and accepted its historical spin at face value. In some cases, *Birth of a Nation* contributed to violence against African Americans, including lynching and beatings, and even inspired a popular resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. So popular was the film, that President Wilson invited friends and colleagues to a private viewing in the East Room at the White House, after which he called the film "history written with lightning" and remarked that "it was all so terribly true."

The film's innovative methods; its content; but most of all its ability to successfully manipulate human perception created a precedent for the war propaganda films that would be made under the direction of the Creel Committee with such titles as *The Beast of Berlin*, *Wolves of Kulter*, and *To Hell With the Kaiser*. Shortly after meeting with Wilson at the White House, D.W. Griffith put his movie studios in the service of the U.S. government, which set up a film division to pump out more war propaganda films. Griffith not only influenced the exploitation of cinema in the war era with *Birth of a Nation* but directed one of the most successful propaganda films in 1918, which portrayed the main German character as a ruthless, cold blooded, and hateful officer and referred to him as a "beastly Hun." In addition, the defeat of what was often described as German barbarity became a moral and religious obligation-a holy undertaking as it was often referred to-not unlike the divinity of whiteness that made the utter degradation and exploitation of African Americans and the domination of peoples in Cuba and the Philippines as morally acceptable and a Christian obligation on the part of whites.

The Wilson administration's pervasive propaganda tactics during the war years created fear and paranoia and instigated many to question the loyalty of American immigrants, both native and foreign born. Moreover, Wilson publicly threatened the "firm hand of stern repression" against any "disloyalty," and his administration urged "loyal" Americans to report persons who spoke out against the war, thus fanning the flames of prejudice and suspicion of immigrants and dissenters. Congress quickly followed suit by passing the Espionage and Sedition Acts-both of which gave the federal government arbitrary power to subvert civil liberties. As a result, not only were German immigrants under intense scrutiny, but many hyphenated Americans, pacifists, socialists, and others were susceptible to and were the victims of discrimination and violence. People were attacked, beaten, jailed, harassed, fired from their jobs, and murdered. Fourteen states made it illegal to even speak German language in public schools, and German

courses were dropped from college curriculums. Socialists such as Eugene Debs—a respected leader and presidential candidate who received almost one million votes in 1912—was arrested and sentenced to ten years in prison for speaking out against the war. Others who were seen as a challenge to the government were deported, including Emma Goldman for her opposition to military conscription. In addition, Wilson's Postmaster General, Albert Burleson, used his expanded powers during the war to have private mail rigorously searched and seized, newspapers and magazines closed down, and citizens and groups fingered for surveillance and arrest. Dissent in any form was not only discouraged but was crushed—and many people, including the Commissioner of Immigration at Ellis Island, Frederick Howe, who had such high hopes in Wilson, indeed Wilson had inspired him to enter the federal service in the first place, was utterly discouraged by the negative forces the president unleashed on immigrants and other American citizens during the war years. Howe would later write, "Thousands of Germans, Austrians, and Hungarians were taken without trial from their homes and brought to Ellis Island." He further described heartrending scenes of women and relatives searching frantically for their loved ones who had been arrested. "The Department of Justice, the Department of Labor, and Congress not only failed to protest against hysteria," wrote Howe, "they encouraged these excesses; the state not only abandoned the liberty which it should have protected, it lent itself to the stamping out of individualism and freedom."

The Wilson administration also miserably failed African Americans. But during the campaign of 1912, as mentioned, many black Americans, mostly those from the north who could vote, switched from the Republican Party and instead supported the Democrat Wilson for president. Besides feeling inspired by his New Freedom doctrine, and encouraged by his commitment to the underdog both symbolically and rhetorically, African Americans felt reassured by Wilson, who in private meetings and correspondence had promised them "even handed justice and equal rights regardless of race, color, or nationality." Even when warning signs began to appear during the campaign, the Democratic Party made special appeals to black groups by officially recognizing them as working on behalf of Wilson in several states, including in New York where the party allocated over fifty thousand dollars to obtain the black vote.

With the election of Woodrow Wilson, however, the South was essentially swept back into power for the first time in fifty years. A southern born president was in the White House; some of the most vociferous members of his cabinet and their underlings were from the South; Democrats now controlled both the House and the Senate with southern Democrats just shy of the majority; and most of the Congressional committees would soon be chaired by southerners. Incredibly, the number of votes cast for Wilson in every

southern state in 1912 surpassed the combined totals in each of those states for Teddy Roosevelt and William Howard Taft.

What this new southern mindset in Washington quickly discovered was a relatively integrated federal workforce that included thousands of African Americans working in practically all departments, bureaus, and divisions of the government, including supervisory and managerial positions. Most had earned their positions by outscoring the competition on civil service exams, which had largely erased the color line so prevalent in the private sector, providing African Americans with the best opportunities for upward economic mobility in Jim Crow America. As a result the civil service had attracted some of the most educated African Americans in the country.

Yet it wasn't long after the new administration came to power in 1913 that it began a campaign of discrimination against its black federal employees. In what was essentially a restructuring of the civil service based on race, the Wilson government brazenly segregated, reclassified, harassed, and terminated African Americans with civil service status in Washington and throughout the South. While federal Jim Crow had appeared by as early as Teddy Roosevelt's second term, it was sporadic and lacked the expansion, intensity, support, and opposition that marked the early Wilson years. By the end of 1914, the government had also required each civil service applicant to submit a photograph with their application, providing the government with an easy way to identify and purge black applicants.

Jim Crow manifested several ways throughout the federal departments in Washington and the South. African Americans were grouped together on jobs where they had previously worked as integrated teams. They were partitioned off from whites-sometimes behind makeshift partitions and in other cases they were grouped together in separate rooms and offices. African Americans were assigned the least desirable jobs, inferior workspaces, and were forced to use separate toilets, which for the first time were designated as "colored" and "white." They were also required to eat at separate tables in the dining rooms and designated eating areas. In some cases they were forced out of the employee dining rooms altogether into makeshift and unsanitary dining rooms, which were usually in their dressing and locker rooms.

Federal Jim Crow during the early Wilson years went much further than the segregation of black employees however. African Americans were routinely the victims of reclassification, which meant that they were downgraded from their positions with less pay and fewer opportunities for advancement. They were also the objects of intense suspicion and harassment, particularly

black males who had status and supervised white women (this was used incidentally by many, including Treasury Secretary McAdoo, as the rationale for federal segregation). In some cases, African Americans were terminated from their positions all together or were prevented by the photograph policy and other schemes from obtaining federal jobs. And of the thirty-something African American appointees who on the eve of Wilson's election in 1912 were serving in such positions as Assistant Attorney General and Recorder of Deeds in Washington, and in diplomatic posts around the world such as Minister to Haiti, only ten remained by the end of Wilson's first term, and by the end of his second term only three African Americans were counted in the entire appointive and diplomatic corp. Within eight years, most of the progress African Americans had made in the federal government, earning their positions by competition and political contacts, was all but wiped out. Jim Crow, which had dominated at the local and state levels for years, had made its sweep complete and universal during the Wilson era as it became the norm in the federal bureaucracy.

Although this policy of federal racial discrimination was set in motion and carried out by Albert Burleson and Treasury Secretary William Gibbs McAdoo, and their appointed underlings, President Wilson both publicly and privately sanctioned and vigorously defended the Jim Crow policy. Even when confronted with detailed evidence by protestors such as William Monroe Trotter and Oswald Garrison Villard, and despite a year and a half long intensive nationwide campaign protesting federal discrimination, which for a moment shook the edifice of Jim Crow, Wilson not only refused to help some of the nation's most vulnerable but also he allowed forces to crush their progress and aspirations. In a heated meeting at the White House, Trotter put things in perspective when he asked President Wilson on behalf of his people, "Have you a 'new freedom' for white Americans and a new slavery for your Afro-American fellow citizens? God forbid!"

Much to his credit, Wilson did nominate Robert Terrell, an African American and husband of leader Mary Church Terrell, as municipal judge of the District of Columbia. Here he doggedly withstood heated opposition from southern lawmakers, who barked loudly with threats, until Terrell was finally confirmed. President Wilson also called for more federal support of Native Americans, and although he commended them for their progress, he shockingly claimed in a speech before the Congress of Native Americans that the U.S. government's past motives and policies had been "wise, just, and benevolent."

Also, after much resistance, President Wilson reluctantly supported a constitutional amendment for women's suffrage. Prior to this, women suffrage

leaders like Alice Paul, after struggling seventy years for the right to vote, and disappointed by the way Wilson had sidestepped the issue since his campaign, brought things to a climax by protesting and picketing in front of the Wilson White House, where they were harassed, assaulted, arrested, and jailed. Like Trotter and African Americans, women had a question for the New Freedom president as well, which they repeatedly presented to him on banners, signs, and in chants: "Mr. President," they asked, "how long must women wait for liberty?" Once incarcerated, some of the women went on much publicized hunger strikes and routinely received rough treatment. After much bad publicity, both in the American press and abroad, and realizing the potential harm it could do to American credibility during and after the war, President Wilson, on June 9, 1918, finally announced his support for women's suffrage.

To conclude, how do we reconcile Wilson's noble sentiments of justice, liberty, and equality, which became the hallmarks of his League of Nations and Fourteen Points, with the negative forces his administration unleashed on some of the most vulnerable people and groups in America, indeed the ones who needed these things the most? And what precedents did these actions set for future policies and minority relations in the U.S.? With his support of federal Jim Crow, President Wilson, for the first time, used the power of the presidency to officially promote racial discrimination against U.S. citizens, thus sanctioning years of local and state Jim Crow and encouraging discrimination against African Americans in general from the highest office in the land. And the negative precedent he set in federal employment, reversing decades of remarkable progress, lasted at least until WWII, and really much longer as African Americans were reduced to some of the lowest paid positions. A few years after WWII, the Fair Employment Practice Committee discovered that 90 percent of black federal employees were working in custodial occupations compared to an overall 10 percent for all government employees.

Also, the Creel Committee and Wilson's own publicly harsh remarks questioning the loyalty of immigrants and others, along with his support of anti-black discrimination in the federal government, created precedents, both dangerous and subversive, that would manifest throughout the twentieth century and beyond. Some of these could be seen almost immediately after WWI with the frenzy of intolerance and paranoia created during the Red Scare, the massive rise of the Ku Klux Klan, and the growing number of deadly race riots instigated by whites. Moreover, the powerful strain of racism that had for years saturated American and European life, would also taint the Paris Peace Conference, and contribute to its failure to accommodate the aspirations of non-white minorities, thereby laying the basis for the twentieth century struggles of oppressed and colonized peoples in countries

such as Vietnam and South Africa.

The successful propaganda efforts of the Creel Committee to negatively influence human perception at the expense of other human beings, and promote militarism, was effectively used once again during WWII against Japanese Americans who became the intense targets of discrimination, and forced into internment camps during the war. Other groups such as German and Italian Americans, and conscientious objectors, were under scrutiny and sometimes assaulted, arrested and jailed. During this time, as well, the Office of War Information and its Bureau of Motion Picture Affairs rolled out nationalistic propaganda on a scale even far greater than the Creel Committee. This extreme paranoia and hyper patriotism, and the manufacturing of us and them, became high-pitched during the red baiting of the McCarthy period as ordinary American citizens suddenly found themselves as potential enemies of the state. And the use of propaganda and other efforts, such as U.S. foreign aid, to influence, subvert and control societies was perhaps crystallized during the Cold War Era where us and them became doctrine, and the U.S. and the Soviet Union used whatever means at their disposal-media, money, coercion, etc.-to win loyalty in the world, particularly from impoverished neutral nations in Africa and other places, in an effort to maintain power and strategic advantage rather than a genuine concern for the welfare of the people living in these countries.

But we only have to open our eyes to what is happening today to see in action the legacy of the Creel Commission. Since the beginning of the war on terror and the second war in Iraq, the current administration has effectively employed, with amazing success, euphemisms and apocalyptic language such as good vs. evil, axis of evil, threat to freedom and democracy, imminent attack, etc. to create fear and consent. The enemy is depicted unequivocally as evil, irrational, and utterly dangerous and the government must be given arbitrary power-the citizen's patriotic duty-to crush them via the military and Patriot Act. This has for the most part prevented any serious public dialogue-essential to the lifeblood of a democratic state-on how we got into this situation in the first place and what responsibility the U.S. bears in creating this crisis, historically and today.

Moreover, the U.S. government, including the Pentagon, has employed a massive PR campaign to market these wars, beginning with efforts early on to manipulate and distort information, or at best utilizing tenuous and questionable data, and disseminating it as proof positive to the public to create a sense of imminent danger to justify the invasion and bombing of Iraq. The government has also enlisted advertising agencies such as the

Lincoln Group and others with over \$300 million dollars in contracts to help create and maintain consent in America for the war, and to influence Muslim peoples, including subverting Middle Eastern and Muslim societies by manipulating their press with pro-American messages and stories. USA Today, in reporting on this PR effort, aptly described it as a "Pentagon psychological warfare operation." Most disturbingly, according to a recent four month investigation by U.S. News and World Report, Washington has launched a strategic blitz PR campaign, not seen since the height of the Cold War Era, to change the very face of Islam. One of the main players here, providing a dangerous example of the legacy of the Creel Committee, is the CIA, which, according to one of its own spokesman, is receiving an "exponential increase" in resources to covertly influence Muslim societies.

I don't want to end my remarks here having only discussed some of the negative aspects of the Wilson administration and the unfortunate consequences of its policies and actions. To wrap up, I want to emphasize that I deeply admire the Woodrow Wilson who was so troubled by the mass killing and bloodshed of WWI-and the Armenian genocide which occurred during the war years-that he made it his mission or obsession to create an international mechanism to reduce war and human carnage. Although the proposed League of Nations was not without serious problems and paradoxes from the beginning-including Wilson and the other delegate's refusal to consider a racial equality clause from Baron Mikino of Japan or pleas for self-determination and an end to colonial domination from a young Ho Chi Minh of Vietnam, and not to mention Wilson's disregard of petitions at Versailles from WEB DuBois and William Monroe Trotter seeking an end to racial injustice for people of African decent in America and all over the world-Wilson's vision did, in my opinion, initiate the beginning of a paradigm shift in the international-political context that would challenge state sponsored war, aggression, and domination. The Leagues' legacy to protect, uplift, and prosper humanity can not only be seen in the United Nations-as precarious and problematic as its history has been-and the international tribunals, but, I believe, the League's spirit has manifested in such monumental efforts as Raphael Lemkin's crusade for the Genocide Convention; the amazing nonviolent movements and revolutions of the twentieth century, ignored by history books, which included billions of people worldwide who not only challenged the status quo, but redefined age old conceptions of power based force, weaponry, and aggression; and the growing collective voices and efforts that are now challenging policies and actions that perpetuate war, violence, and the distortion of humanity and information.

With all considered here, the legacy of Woodrow Wilson seems to present, in retrospect, a complex man, torn between his personal convictions and

prejudices, the political, economic, and social challenges of his times, and the self-interests of nations and aspirations of humanity. Thank you.