

President Woodrow Wilson: A Darwinian Racist Eugenist

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Abstract

The life of American President Woodrow Wilson was reviewed, focusing on the influence of Darwinism and Wilson's acceptance of a racist-eugenics worldview. This worldview resulted in Wilson's aggressive attempt to resegregate the federal bureaucracy based on race. Likewise, when president of Princeton University, Wilson did everything in his power to block Blacks from attending Princeton. Wilson's policies were based on his belief in the evolutionary inferiority of Blacks. This belief was a factor in causing the violent race riots that resulted in the loss of thousands of lives and causing many millions of dollars in damage.

Keywords: Darwin, Social Darwinism, Eugenics, President Woodrow Wilson, racism, civil rights movement, Herbert Spencer, Princeton University, World War I, Progressive Movement, Democratic Party, Carry Buck

Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) was the twenty-eighth president of the United States (fig. 1). His two terms as President were from 1913 to 1921. Wilson had planned to seek a third term, but suffered a severe stroke in 1919 that left him incapacitated. Wilson is usually deemed by historians to be a “good” president. One relatively recent ranking has him listed as number six (Ridings and McIver 1997). Under his leadership, Congress enacted the most cohesive, complete, and elaborate program of federal oversight of the nation's economy in history. Other historians, those referred to as “loose constructionists,” concluded that Wilson has trampled on the Constitution (Folsom 2007). Wilson logically redirected his domestic progressive impulse on everything from domestic matters to foreign policy. He also transformed the basic focus of American foreign policy from isolationism to internationalism. Before he became President, Wilson served as president of Princeton University and governor of New Jersey.

A Progressive Darwinist

From where did some of the more unsavory aspects of Wilson stem? What would possess the man to write, in his 1890 essay “Leaders of Men,” that the “true leader uses the masses like tools”? Wilson was a progressive social Darwinist; a belief described by Yuval Levin as the

applications of scientific thinking...to questions of population and race in ways that make a case for public policy grounded in a preference for the strong over the weak—be it the physically strong or the socially strong... This kind of social Darwinism draws more on Malthus (who preceded Darwin) and Galton than on Darwin himself, and it surely informed the

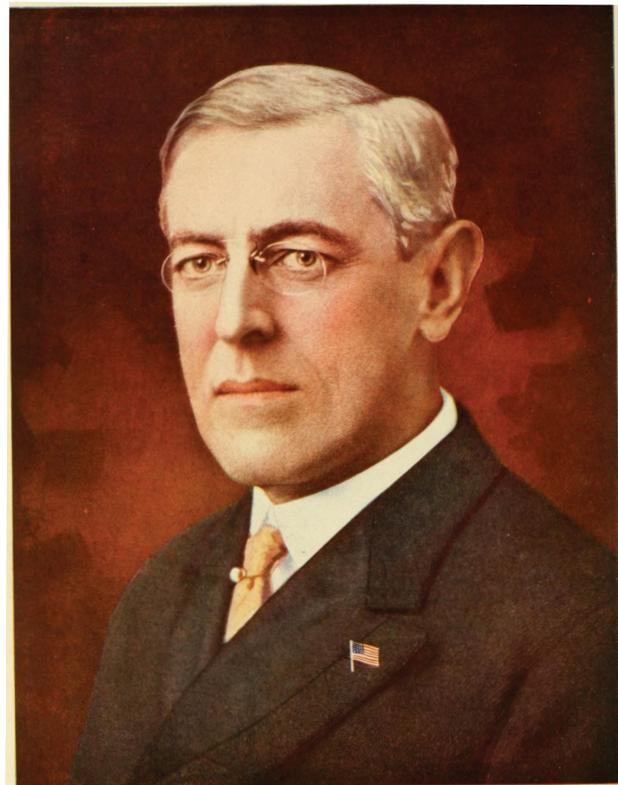


Fig. 1. President Woodrow Wilson at Middle Age. From Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Woodrow_Wilson,_President_of_the_United_States.jpg.

early eugenicists, and many people who argued (on various sides of the politics of those days) about the strength of the species rather than the well-being of the individual. (Levin 2007)

As will be documented, this definition of social Darwinism describes President Wilson's progressive worldview extremely well. He embraced Darwinian

racist ideas from his John Hopkins graduate studies when the progressive mode of thinking was sweeping through American higher education. Specifically, “the arguments of Darwin and [social Darwinist Herbert] Spencer and the evolutionary school came to Wilson primarily through [essayist Walter] Bagehot, whose work much of Wilson’s early scholarship imitates.” (Pestritto 2005, 12).

Furthermore, “Wilson’s ideas about an evolutionary interpretation of government were greatly stimulated by his study of the works of Walter Bagehot. Bagehot’s *English Constitution*, which was very important for Wilson...[and] Bagehot’s *Physics and Politics* gives prominence to evolutionary ideas.” (Cohen 1995, 276). Bagehot taught, “Whatever may be said against the principle of ‘natural selection’ in other departments, there is no doubt of its predominance in early human history. The strongest killed out the weakest, as they could” (Bagehot 1872, 24).

Spencer’s Social Darwinism asserted that the principles of evolution, including natural selection, apply not only to biological species developing over long geologic times, but also to human societies and social classes. Furthermore, the evolution Spencer advocated involved “a contest for survival among the races or peoples rather than among single individuals” (Cohen 1995, 277). Wilson was not the only famous person engaged in such reasoning. Margaret Sanger is infamous for her racist solutions to “overpopulation.” By 1923, the American Eugenics Society was formed by people who thought that they should have the authority to determine who should live, die, and be sterilized. Also involved were scientists and leading minds in academia and society, as well as people who had largely rejected scripture as authoritative. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, penning the majority opinion, in *Bell v. Buck* (1927) agreed that a woman named Carry Buck should be forcibly sterilized, writing in part, “three generations of imbeciles are enough” referring to Carry’s mother, Carry, and Carry’s child. Now we know that Carry’s poverty background was the main reason why she was labeled feeble-minded (Cohen 2016).

In harmony with his “progressive” views, President Wilson “was intensely involved in legalizing the eugenics that called for the segregation, sterilization, and eradication of entire swaths of the population.” (Samaan 2020b, 293). As described by British historian Paul Johnson, one of his flaws that may have influenced Wilson to push for the “eradication of entire swaths of the population”, was Wilson’s “streak of selfish egotism...a self-regarding arrogance and smugness, masquerading as righteousness, which was always there and which grew with the exercise of power. Wilson, the good and great, was corrupted

by power, and the more he had of it the deeper the corruption bit, like acid in his soul” (Johnson 1997, 641).

The term Social Darwinism was brought into wide use in America by Richard Hofstadter in his book *Social Darwinism in American Thought* to describe an attitude that deified competition (Hofstadter 1944). Wilson was also significantly influenced by Rev. Walter Rauschenbusch, one of the most influential social gospel proponents of the age (Rosen 2004, 16–17). He also supported the work of Harvard lecturer, Dr. Edwin Katzen-Ellenbogen. Katzen-Ellenbogen was a founding member of the Carnegie Institution as well as the chief eugenicist and scientific director of the State Village for Epileptics at Skillman, New Jersey (Samaan 2020a, 45). Katzen-Ellenbogen was also involved with several eugenic advocacy groups including the New Jersey Sterilization League and the Eugenics Research Association.

These organizations campaigned around the world to achieve their goal of creating a master race of blond, blue-eyed Nordic people which they believed were alone fit to inherit the earth. In the process of achieving this goal, the movement’s long-term focus was to eliminate Negroes, Indians, Hispanics, East Europeans, Jews, dark-haired hill folk, poor people, the infirm, and anyone outside the gentrified genetic lines drawn up by the leading American eugenicists.

As a eugenicist, Katzen-Ellenbogen viewed humanity through a eugenic prism. He exhibited great compassion toward those persons he saw as superior, and great cruelty toward those he considered genetically inferior. In harmony with his worldview, Katzen-Ellenbogen later actively collaborated “in the murders and tortures in the Buchenwald” concentration camp and was later found guilty of war crimes along with the other “butchers of Buchenwald.” (Black 2022, 1796; Samaan 2020b, 86, 121; Weindling 2004, 229).

Wilson’s Profession and Personal Life

Wilson grew up in Augusta, Georgia during the Civil War and Reconstruction era. Wilson’s family identified with the South and were staunch supporters of both the Confederacy and slavery. (O’Reilly 1977, 117). He soundly defeated incumbent Republican William Howard Taft and former President Theodore Roosevelt to win the 1912 United States presidency. He was the first Southerner to do so since 1848. As a Southerner, Wilson was an apologist for slavery, the southern redemption movement, and a supporter of the “lost cause mythology.”

This worldview became part of the philosophical foundation for the racial violence and terrorism employed to reverse Reconstruction and “reimposition of white supremacy in the Jim Crow

era. Its acceptance in the North as well as in the South facilitated national reunion following the war but at the cost of the civil rights of African Americans” (Blight 2021). Wilson viewed slavery as a positive institution for Blacks because it was part of their civilizing process: “Reconstruction was nothing more than a host of dusky children untimely put out of school.” (O’Reilly 1977, 117).

Professor Pestritto cautioned that overly stressing his southern roots as the major factor of Wilson’s racism is problematic, writing that the

standard assumption is that because Wilson was a southerner, his racism must have had its roots in his southern upbringing...Wilson did not, in fact, subscribe to the “southern” position on most political questions; his views on race, while certainly consistent with those held by most southerners of the time, are mostly attributable to the historicist nature of his political philosophy. (Pestritto 2005, 43)

His political philosophy was that superior races have a modern spirit...Inferior races are mired further back in the process of history, and so the spirit of an inferior race may be a perfect match for an autocracy. In other words, some races by virtue of their historical superiority, deserve a more advanced form of government. Compared to his own race, Wilson contended, “Other races have developed so much more slowly, and accomplished so much less.” (Pestritto 2005, 43)

Wilson’s support of Social Darwinism was thus open and unapologetic, allowing him to rationalize supporting a “white supremacist social order too often presumed to exist only in Wilson’s native South” (Yellin 2016, 2). Although Wilson believed that Blacks were evolutionarily inferior, the

views of the congressional leaders [under Wilson] were much worse, and they would block any appointment to a post in which a black person “is to be in command of white people—especially of white women.” In this newly charged atmosphere [created by Wilson], white bureaucrats could give free reign to their prejudices. (Cooper 2011, 205–206)

Evolution was so central to Wilson’s view of Blacks that one documentary concluded that his belief was Blacks were “less evolved” than whites (Drain 2002).

Wilson’s Knowledge of Biology

Wilson did not have a background in science but accepted evolution because it was part of his culture. His worldview “largely stems from the massive influence of Charles Darwin and his publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859” (Harris and Bailey 2014, 41). Some of his writings that supported both human evolution and racism include a paper titled *The State* (Wilson 1889). In this writing he detailed how evolution was related to humans, and his

decisions, actions, and writings were consistently based on this assumption. He assumed evolution was true, especially as related to humans. For example, he was a “champion of eugenics” and the Darwinian worldview dominated his policies toward those that he felt were less evolved than the “higher” races, namely the Nordic Whites (Rahe 2016).

The following is one example: With the dictates of Social Darwinism and the eugenics movement in mind, in 1907, he campaigned in Indiana for the compulsory sterilization of criminals and the mentally retarded; and in 1911, while governor of New Jersey, he proudly signed into law just such a bill (Rahe 2016).

Wilson wrote that the American Constitution was founded on the [firm] law of gravitation. The government was to exist and move by virtue of the efficacy of “checks and balances.”

The trouble with the theory is that government is not a machine, but a living thing. It falls, not under the theory of the universe, but under the theory of organic life. It is accountable to Darwin, not to Newton. It is modified by its environment, necessitated by its tasks, shaped to its functions by the sheer pressure of life. No living thing can have its organs offset against each other, as checks, and live...Living political constitutions must be Darwinian in structure and in practice. Society is a living organism and must obey the laws of life, not of mechanics; it must develop. (Wilson 1913, chapter 2)

Wilson’s open support for evolution was surprising for “a man of his strict religious upbringing” and given the fact that his father was a Presbyterian minister (Pestritto 2005, 42). Even though he “had to operate under the eyes of religiously minded university trustees, Wilson was bold in embracing both Hegelian themes and those of evolutionary thinkers.” (Pestritto 2005, 42).

Dr. James Woodrow—Darwin Supporter

Wilson’s uncle, Darwinist Dr. James Woodrow, was brought in 1884 “before the highest church court for his pro-Darwin views” (Heckscher 1991, 155). In the end, James Woodrow “was tried and convicted for heresy on the basis of his evolutionary views. Woodrow was subsequently ousted from the Presbyterian Church and fired from his seminary position. Wilson, a great admirer of his uncle, was appalled at his church’s treatment of him.” (Pestritto 2005, 42). References to his uncle’s “situation are scattered through Wilson’s correspondence” (Cohen 1995, 275). In a letter to his future wife, Ellen Axson, Woodrow Wilson wrote that, as a strong supporter of Darwin, he objected to the

attack on uncle James Woodward which I predicted...If uncle J. is to be read out of the

Seminary, Dr. McCosh [president of Princeton since 1868 and known in particular as a supporter of Darwinism] ought to be driven out of the church, and all private members like myself ought to withdraw without waiting for the expulsion which should follow belief in evolution. (Wilson 1967, 216–217)

Wilson thus rejected the teaching of both the Genesis creation account and the biblical teaching of the equality of the races or, more accurately, the equality of different people groups (Acts 10:34–35).

Wilson as a Racist

Wilson was “extremely racist—even by the standards of his time” (Matthews 2015). As president of Princeton University, he worked tirelessly to keep African-American students out of Princeton, even though other Ivy League schools were then accepting some black students. (O’Reilly 1997, 117–121). In O’Reilly’s words:

After inviting Booker T. Washington to his 1902 inauguration as president of Princeton University, Wilson spent the next eight years working to keep every other Negro off the Princeton campus and out of the student body altogether, not wishing to make uncomfortable the southern whites who happened to enroll for classes (O’Reilly 1997, 117).

The first Black student graduated from Princeton only 46 years later, specifically in 1948. Wilson brought this support of discrimination with him to the federal bureaucracy when he became President. Before Wilson’s election as President, Black Americans were widely represented in the federal government. During Wilson’s first year as U.S. President, he authorized widespread imposition of racial segregation in the federal bureaucracy. Soon Black Republicans were swept from office and replaced by White Democrats (Heckscher 1991, 290). To facilitate anti-Black discrimination, which readers will recognize as actual systemic racism, in 1914 the federal government required photographs of all applicants on job applications. In short, before the election of President Woodrow Wilson, Black Americans worked at all levels of the federal government. But when Wilson assumed office in 1913, he mandated that the federal workforce be segregated by race—leading to the reduction of Black civil service workers’ income, increasing the significant income gap between Black and white workers, and eroding some of the gains Black people had made following Reconstruction. (Foy 2020)

Wilson also worked to, not only segregate both the university and government, but the outside community as well:

Nothing could be more debilitating to Wilson’s own...vision for the nation and the world than the sight of workers tacking up “White Only” or

“Colored” signs over District of Columbia toilets. Yet this is what Wilson and his people set out to do from the administration’s first days. (O’Reilly 1997, 117–118)

Wilson saw this as a rational policy that resulted from the science of social Darwinism to deal with “Inferior beings of a lower order” (O’Reilly 1997, 118). He viewed “black people as inferior and loved his ‘darky’ jokes... [but] did not fill his speeches with racist diatribes.” (Yellin 2016, 105). The reason was because Wilson realized that in Washington, when he took office, “black civil servants were treated as equals and moved up in the bureaucracy to positions of decent pay and real responsibility” (Yellin 2016, 6).

He worked hard to change this reality, but, as a seasoned politician, he usually was circumspect about acting on his personal opinions which could create problems. His management style was to delegate to others and, furthermore, he “viewed the hysterical blackphobia of white southern politicians as unseemly” and counterproductive as well. (Yellin 2016, 105). President Wilson applied evolution not only to people, but also to government. Wilson’s belief that the American

government was not grounded on certain unchanging truths about human nature but would instead evolve to fit ever-changing historical circumstances—can be seen from his earliest days of thinking about politics. During his legal education and then as a professor of jurisprudence, Wilson applied his evolutionary view to the question of how the law should be taught, adopting the approach of what is now called legal realism. Law, under this approach, is not so much a study of forms as it is a study of how the law evolves in response to changing historical realities. (Pestritto 2012)

To achieve his racist goals, Wilson’s cabinet and many of his important administrative posts were filled with like-minded men. For example, his First Assistant Secretary of the Treasury was the leading southern financier John Skelton Williams, an open opposer of African-American federal employees during Wilson’s first term. He, like many social Darwinists,

updated his racism with pseudoscientific concerns about the decline of the white race and sexual intermingling. Segregation had never been more necessary, he maintained. “There are many good mulatto citizens, but it is true indisputably that any mixture of the races makes a mongrel, and ultimately an inferior blend.” The District of Columbia with its light-skinned black elite and its nonsegregated public spaces, had been mongrelized. (Yellin 2016, 98)

Actually, Wilson’s belief was firmly based on Darwinian principles, and could not exist if not for the

concept which is at the core of Darwinism: that the races are evolutionarily unequal, and evolutionary mechanisms could only function because of this perceived inequality.

Showing the Most Racist Film Ever Produced?

One of Wilson's worst racist actions as President was showing one of the most racist films ever produced in America, the infamous production titled *The Birth of a Nation*, the D.W. Griffith Reconstruction epic inspired by Thomas Dixon's novel (*The Clansman*), and [he] encouraged Cabinet members and their families to attend.... This divisive film... Wilson considered an "all so true" depiction of Reconstruction evils and Klan heroism." (O'Reilly 1997, 119)

The three-hour film, which Brook (2015) called "the most racist film ever made," included 18,000 people and 3,000 horses (Scott 2015). It was also the first film ever to be screened at the White House. The film resulted in a very real contribution to racism and the harm it caused (Yellin 2016,104).

The Fruits of Wilson's Darwin-Inspired Racism

Lynchings, race riots, and racially motivated murders greatly increased in America in the 1920s and this abuse of the rule of law has been widely acknowledged as the long term result of Wilson's policies (Messer 2008). The worst race riot in American history was the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. It was caused by mobs of white residents who burned and destroyed 191 businesses, 1,256 houses, schools, municipal buildings, several churches, and the only hospital in the district. The over 40 square blocks destroyed were part of one of the wealthiest black communities in the United States. More than 800 people were admitted to hospitals, and 6,000 black residents of Tulsa were interned (Wilson, 2022). The most careful study found between 150–300 black and 50 white people died as a result of the riot (Snow 2001, 124).

The total confirmed lynchings of Blacks from 1882 to 1942 was 3,431. (Lynchings 1968). The violent race riots and lynchings which cost the lives of many hundreds caused Wilson to realize, in contrast to his earlier view, that segregation, "might not be a progressive, scientific solution to racial problems after all" (O'Reilly 1997, 121). Yet Wilson continued until he died to advocate for segregation as the solution to the American race problem. He believed just keep the races apart and everything will be fine. Wilson's civil service segregation policy was public policy for over 35 years. It was "only after Adolf Hitler gave eugenics and 'scientific racism' a bad name that segregation" was finally actively opposed by the American South. (Rahe 2016).

Summary

Wilson's Darwinian eugenic goals were not hidden, but clearly expressed in his writing and correspondence. Even when running for the American presidency, Wilson openly sought "permission—in an era in which 'development,[and] 'evolution,' is the scientific word—to interpret the Constitution according to Darwinian principle" (Clinton 2013). The public and elites largely agreed with his Darwinian racist worldview, or at least did not openly disagree with it, or oppose it.

Fortunately, modern "progressives eschew Social Darwinism and the pseudo-scientific racism espoused by their intellectual forebears." Although, they "oppose racial segregation and the sterilization of criminals and the mentally retarded" they still advocate some of the same views that Wilson did, such as the approval of chemical castration of youth in their early teens who suffer from gender dysphoria. This position appears to be a regression to years ago (Rahe 2016). Unfortunately, Wilson's white supremacist policies were part of American culture for decades, causing widespread institutional racism and segregation. His policies were only finally overturned by the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Fortunately, there were some living in the era who remained faithful to Scripture and its application, such as Gresham Machen (fig. 2).



[W]e ought to be plain about this—that unless we preserve the principles of liberty in this department [education] there is no use in trying to preserve them anywhere else. If you give the bureaucrats the children, you might as well give them everything else as well.

—Presbyterian theologian
J. Gresham Machen, author
of *Christianity and Liberalism*.

Fig. 2. J. Gresham Machen and a relevant quote from his speech to the US Congress. <https://www.lawrencereed.com/memes-quotes/2018/9/17/machen-on-education>.

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