Woodrow Wilson and Black Lives Matter

The political consequences of the racial evaluation of history

By Eric London
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In recent weeks, a series of protests at American universities taking place under the banner of the "Black Lives Matter" network have attracted national media attention. Though limited in size, the demonstrations have forced the resignation of several leading university officials who they accuse of racism.

The first demonstration was held at the University of Missouri on September 24 when a student government president raised concerns of racist incidents on campus. The university chancellor called the racist incidents "totally unacceptable" and ordered diversity training for students and faculty. On November 6, the university president gave what protesters felt was an incorrect answer to the question "what is systematic oppression?" Three days later, the president issued his resignation.

At Claremont McKenna College in Los Angeles, demonstrators forced the resignation of the college dean on November 12 because she was insufficiently deferential to a student protester in an email exchange. In her email, the dean thanked the student for sending an article she wrote and asked the student if she would like to meet to discuss how to help students who did not "fit the CMC mold."

Later in November, a 33-year-old professor at the University of Kansas was placed on leave after a first-year graduate student said the professor used inappropriate language during an internal department discussion on the events at University of Missouri. Demonstrators have also called for the resignation of professors and school officials at Ithaca College, Yale University and Occidental College for questioning the demonstrators.

At Amherst College and Princeton University, protesters have demanded that the schools change the names of buildings named after figures who demonstrators say were racist. At Amherst, students are demanding that the school officially renounce its namesake, Baron Jeffery Amherst, an 18th century British Army Field Marshall. Princeton students are likewise demanding that the school drop the name of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs because of the 28th president's racism.

The working class is entitled to ask: Is this a movement that has a progressive character? Do the demonstrators deserve at least critical support? The answer to both questions is no.

These protests are not part of a movement for social equality or civil rights. Rather, they are of a typically middle class character and represent a very familiar and toxic element of bourgeois politics: the fight amongst different factions within the wealthiest ten percent for a more favorable distribution of wealth at the top. The extreme concentration of wealth among the top 1 percent generates resentment and grievances within broader sections of the affluent middle class, and the various factions seek to stake their claims to wealth, privilege and positions of influence by utilizing the politics of race, gender, sexual orientation and nationality.

This approach is central to the politics of the most affluent section of the African American middle class and their political representatives. Far from raising broader demands to improve the material conditions facing the broad mass of the working population, including African American workers, the protesters demands are insular and self-serving.

They demand: more paid academic positions for African American professors and graduate students, higher budgets for the identity-oriented university departments, mandatory racial sensitivity training for university students and faculty, and, at Princeton University, disciplinary action for any student or faculty who has voiced opposition to the demonstrations. None of their demands reflect an attempt to address any of the burning issues affecting billions of workers worldwide. Police violence, war, refugees and poverty are not mentioned in their communiqués.

Underlying this program is an attempt to portray a false version of history based on the use of race as the principal criteria of historical analysis. Such falsifications have consequences, and in this regard the fight over the naming of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs is of central importance.

The anti-social character of the racial view of history

The Woodrow Wilson School is a major training center for the politicians and diplomats of American imperialism. Its graduates include Paul Volcker, David Petraeus, Samuel Alito, George P. Shultz and many other pillars of government officialdom. The name of such a facility is not a major matter of concern to socialists.

Demands by protesters that the elite Princeton University change the name of its public policy school have been echoed by pseudo-left groups like the International Socialist Organization. In a December 3 article titled "What the fight is about at Princeton," the ISO writes that the protests "point the direction toward a university that is democratic and open to everyone." According to the ISO, the Princeton activist group Black Justice League "has done a valuable service" by "challenging the legacy of Woodrow Wilson, one of the founders of modern American liberalism" who was "a leading racist of his day."

The ISO's comment echoed in content and language a lead editorial published a week earlier, on November 24, by the *New York Times* editorial board, "The Case Against Woodrow Wilson at Princeton."

"Student protesters at Princeton performed a valuable public service last week when they demanded that the administration acknowledge the toxic legacy of Woodrow Wilson," the editorial reads. Its conclusion is that "the overwhelming weight of evidence argues for rescinding the honor that the university bestowed decades ago on an unrepentant racist."

As a preliminary matter, the *Times* editorial shows the extent to which bourgeois politics has sought to utilize racial and identity politics to sustain its rule. But more importantly, the racial prism of historical analysis adopted by the demonstrators and the *Times* editors is fundamentally false. It fails to explain anything about the development of American or world history, and its purpose is to distort the past and prevent the working class from drawing the necessary conclusions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* holds no brief for Woodrow Wilson, the twenty-eighth US president.

But the building of a class-conscious movement of the working class

requires a correct appraisal of the development of American history and of American imperialism. In this regard, Wilson was a significant and distinctive figure whose Democratic administration embodied a major turning point in US history.

Woodrow Wilson and American liberal imperialism

At a speech delivered at Philadelphia's Independence Hall on July 4, 1914, exactly one month before the start of World War I, President Wilson posed a question on behalf of an American capitalist class whose economic and military force had never been greater: "What are we going to do with the influence and power of this great nation?"

Wilson's response was shaped by the needs of the American bourgeoisie in response to the great events that followed—the stalemate of the war and the threat of a German continental powerhouse, the Mexican Revolution, the Russian Revolution, the consequent growth in popularity of socialism domestically and a powerful anti-communist reaction set in motion by the revolution and the war. Wilson led the US into the war, invaded Mexico and Soviet Russia, and oversaw the arrest of socialist revolutionary Eugene V. Debs and hundreds of radicals through the Palmer Raids of 1919-20.

But Wilson was also a reform candidate who had initially pledged to keep the US out of war and lay the foundation for a program of social liberalism. His presidency was torn asunder by the inherently contradictory character of a program aimed at combining social reform with securing the global supremacy of American capitalism.

Three years old when Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1860, the son of a Scots-Irish leader of the Confederate Presbyterian church quite literally grew up with American capitalism.

A supporter of the Democratic Party in the period of Reconstruction, Wilson made a career as a leading academic in the Dunning school of historiography, which portrayed post-Civil War reconstruction as a harmful and vindictive ploy by radical egalitarian Republicans like abolitionist Congressmen Thaddeus Stevens and Ben Wade. Moves to put an end to reconstruction were bound up with preparations for an offensive against the growth of working class struggle and a turn to imperialism abroad.

The imposition of Jim Crow in the South following the Supreme Court's "separate but equal" decision in the 1896 case *Plessy v. Ferguson* were part of an effort to divide the working class and poor along racial lines. Wilson's racism and the segregationist policies of his administration can thus only be understood on the basis of a class analysis, and not as the product of some abstract, innate racial impulse.

After winning election as New Jersey governor in 1910 on an anti-Tammany Hall program, Wilson emerged as a liberal statesman who embodied much of the program of the progressive movement. In 1912, he won a contested Democratic nomination on the 46th ballot with a late endorsement from Democratic agrarian populist William Jennings Bryan, whose program was losing its popular base under the weight of the development of industry and the rise of finance capital.

In a remarkable general election, Wilson was elected in a four-way race with only 42 percent of the vote, defeating Republican incumbent William Howard Taft, former president and Progressive Party candidate Theodore Roosevelt, and the revolutionary socialist Eugene Debs, who polled a significant 6 percent of the vote—the highest of any socialist in American history.

Wilson's election was the product of the Democratic Party's attempt to subsume the progressive reformism of the turn of the century non-partisan leagues. Faced with the rapid development of a militant industrial working class which was coming increasingly under the influence of the Socialist Party and Eugene Debs, leading sections of the ruling class were forced to adopt the urban reform planks of the progressives in order to maintain political legitimacy and stave off the development of a mass socialist movement.

The Democratic platform of 1912, for example, included attacks on high costs of living as well as a statement opposing "a policy of imperialism and colonial exploitation in the Philippines or elsewhere." In 1916, Wilson nominated social reformer Louis Brandeis as Supreme Court Justice and defended him in the face of widespread conservative and anti-Semitic opposition.

But Wilson—only the second Democratic president since the Civil War—was the president of a powerful American capitalism that was bursting into the 20th century set on wrapping the world economy in its grasp. The Democratic Party could not serve Wall Street without being prepared to take the United States to war.

In April 1917, Wilson repudiated the pacifism of the Baltimore platform by requesting a declaration of war on the Central Powers. In his message to congress, Wilson laid out a program for humanitarian imperialism that has since become an essential element of bourgeois politics up to the present period:

"The world must be made safe for democracy," Wilson told Congress. "Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them."

Each hypocritical and self-righteous lie reflects two very important interrelated elements that were then coming to fruition in American bourgeois politics. On the one hand, the American ruling class could no longer rely on an undeveloped western frontier for economic growth; it had to use military force to reorganize the world. On the other hand, working class opposition to war domestically must be suppressed—not only by force but also by misappropriating the bourgeois democratic traditions of the American Revolution and Civil War.

Aware of growing social tensions in the United States, Wilson could not wage war abroad without fanning the flames of reaction at home. In the words of historian William Leuchtenburg, "imperialism and militarism had replaced the old forms of liberal protest" during the Wilson years. Richard Hofstadter also writes that the war machinations "destroyed the popular impulse that had sustained progressive politics for the decade before 1914."

"War has always been the Nemesis of the liberal tradition in America," Hofstadter notes. "From our earliest history as a nation there has been a curiously persistent association between democratic politics and nationalism, jingoism, or war."

The Russian Revolution and the birth of "humanitarian" imperialism

The contradictions at the core of the Wilson administration burst asunder when the Russian working class brought down the 300-year Romanov dynasty over the course of five days in February 1917. Faced with the threat of social revolution, American imperialism's drive to carve-up the world was bound-up with the ruling class' existential fight to stave off social revolution.

Wilson let loose the dogs of war and intensified the crackdown on democratic rights domestically. He made his request for a declaration of war to Congress in the same month that Vladimir Lenin delivered his April Theses to the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in St. Petersburg. The passage of the anti-democratic Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 followed suit.

In his famous 1918 Fourteen Points proclamation, Wilson explains the necessity of his program of liberal humanitarianism on the grounds that "the Russian representatives [in Leon Trotsky's December 1917 anti-war proclamation "An Appeal to the Toiling, Oppressed and Exhausted Peoples of Europe"] presented not only a perfectly definite statement of

the principles upon which they would be willing to conclude peace but also an equally definite program of the concrete application of those principles."

Wilson was forced to act by the growing threat of social revolution. Cecil Spring Rice, British Ambassador to the US, recalls Wilson fearing that "if the appeal of the Bolsheviki was allowed to remain unanswered, if nothing were done to counteract it, the effect would be great and would increase."

Historian Arno Meyer adds: "The president had concluded that in the face of the appeals from Petrograd the Allies could no longer remain silent, because the Bolshevik appeals were addressed not only to the Germans but also to the peoples of the Allied Nations."

Wilson also hoped to implement his Fourteen Points on an international scale through the proposal for a League of Nations to peacefully litigate disputes between capitalist powers. In his efforts, Wilson came into conflict not only with isolationists in the political establishment, but with the utopian character of the project itself. No bourgeois peace plan could eliminate the contradictions between the world capitalist economy and the outdated nation-state system and was doomed to failure.

In his 1919 essay "Order out of Chaos," Trotsky exposed the character of Wilson's plans to reorganize the world—not for democracy, but for Wall Street:

"The American president Wilson who, like the fraud and hypocrite Tartuffe, roams across blood-drenched Europe as the highest representative of morality, the Messiah of the American dollar, chastises, pardons and settles the destinies of nations. Everyone asks him, invites him and pleads with him: The King of Italy, the perfidious ruling Georgian Mensheviks, the humiliated and favour-begging Scheidemann, the moulting tiger of the French middle class, Clemenceau, the fireproof safes of the City of London and even the midwives of Switzerland.

"Rolling up his trousers Wilson steps over the puddles of European blood and by the grace of the New York stock market which did well to place its last stake on the European lottery, unites the Yugoslavs with the Serbs, asks the price of the Hapsburg crown, between two sniffs of tobacco rounds out Belgium at the expense of looted Germany…"

Wilson's ignominious decline

In the wake of the wave of political reaction engendered by the war, Wilson was as broken politically as he was physically. Despite suffering a stroke that left him immobilized and secluded in 1919, Wilson made an embarrassing last-ditch effort to secure his party's nomination for president at the San Francisco convention in 1920 but received just two votes out of hundreds on only the 22nd ballot.

In the 1920 general elections, the Democrats were trounced by Warren Harding, who called the election a referendum on Wilson's presidency, pledged "a return to normalcy," and nearly doubled Democrat James Cox's vote total. Four years later, Wilson was dead at the age of 67.

It would not be until 1933 that another Democrat—Franklin D. Roosevelt—would assume the office of president. Roosevelt was himself a former Wilsonian, appointed as Assistant Secretary of the Navy in 1913 when he was a relatively little known state senator from New York. Roosevelt's presidency and the course of the latter half of the 20th century also bore the marks of American liberalism's inherent inability to advance social reform while waging imperialist war abroad.

The writer Stefan Zweig notes in his essay "Wilson's failure" that the president's last departure from Europe was marked by a complete absence of the crowds who had greeted him as the liberal peacemaker just a few years earlier. The literary critic Edmund Wilson (no relation) wrote that President Wilson was, like Casanova, a man whose "intelligence and imagination" were "followed soon by the detection of a fraud that discredits and eclipses the whole man."

The racial protesters know little, if anything, of this complex history, which they would dismiss as secondary to Wilson's racism.

The middle class protesters are not opposed to Wilson for his imperialism or for his anti-working class politics, and they make no criticism of the Democratic Party. In their view, the Wilson School may as well be named after the black imperialist Condoleezza Rice, while Yale Law School should be named after Clarence Thomas and West Point Military Academy after Colin Powell.

The building of a mass, internationalist socialist movement of the working class in the US requires a settling of accounts with the legacy of social reformism long since abandoned by the Democratic Party. No such advance can be made by viewing history through the prism of race and identity. Instead, the working class must deal with history objectively, disclose the class issues, and place political events and figures in their proper historical context.