

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

We have long cheered on, and sought to participate in, the now decades-long expansion of historians' conception of Progressivism. Although some scholars still, often compellingly, argue for a unitary vision of the Progressives and a coherent narrative to the Progressive Era, we are much more inclined toward a complex and multifaceted conception that includes—as our last issue attests—members of the Society of American Indians as much as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

Julie Greene's presidential address is an admirable expression of this pluralist vision. No longer is the Panama Canal simply a far-sighted instrument that sped up global commerce. Nor is the Canal simply an imperial imposition on a helpless and victimized populace and country. Rather, in Greene's thoughtful view, the Canal was just one node in a "movable empire" where workers from throughout the world came to seek a new life while negotiating power relations that were definitely not in their favor. At the same time, what happened in Panama didn't stay in Panama: the political ideology and technical knowledge that provided the foundation for empire in Central America had been learned in and was transportable back across the globe to places like the Philippines.

Greene provides us with eloquent testimony from migrant Barbadian workers as part of her contribution to our rethinking the politics and political economy of American empire. Yet by no means does she neglect the old-fashioned major players. William Howard Taft, along with his wife Helen, also perform active roles, in her telling, as constructors of and thinkers about the new empire.

Greene's address is an exemplar of how the profession has largely transcended the now-archaic binary of a history of ordinary people, or of elites. Thus it is fitting that we are able to match her provocative message with a forum on Theodore Roosevelt and Europe. Curated by Edward Kohn, and shepherded largely by former *JGAPE* editor Alan Lessoff, the forum in many ways does some of the same work as Greene, although from a very different angle. While recognizing TR's intense and often bellicose Americanism, the authors de-nationalize the Bull Moose and reveal some of the many ways that Roosevelt cared about Europe and how much, in turn, he influenced events in that continent.

The Progressive presidents are, however, not just ghosts in the pages of this hoary historical journal. They continue to be very much involved in current public affairs even a century after their presidencies. TR's old home, Sagamore Hill in Oyster Bay, New York, reopened in the summer of 2015 with much fanfare and a massive \$10-million restoration under the auspices of the National Park Service. And the Republican presidential debate in November 2015 was held in the same Milwaukee venue where, in 1912, TR unfolded his blood-flecked notes and delivered a nearly hour-long speech just after being shot in the chest by a would-be assassin.

More intense as we go to press is a national controversy over Woodrow Wilson at Princeton University. With the possible exception of Thomas Jefferson, no president is more connected to a university than his fellow Virginian Wilson, who served as both professor and president at what for decades had the most southern feeling of any of the Ivies.

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In mid-November, the Black Justice League at Princeton occupied the president's office for a day and a half. The League centrally advocated a general reckoning with the 28th president: "WE DEMAND the university administration publicly acknowledge the racist legacy of Woodrow Wilson and how he impacted campus policy and culture." The League also called on the administration to change the name of the university's renowned Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs and Wilson College as well as to remove Wilson's portrait from public display at a dining hall. Princeton's president, Christopher Eisgruber, ultimately agreed to "initiate conversations concerning the present legacy of Woodrow Wilson on this campus," including a possible removal of Wilson's name; to solicit campus opinions on the desirability of changing the Wilson School; and to seek removal of the portrait.¹

The Black Justice's League's demands have inspired a vigorous dialogue and debate about issues that the university has sanitized. And to be sure, the call for what might be deemed a de-Wilsonization of Princeton correctly asserts how foundational Progressive racism was to forging American white supremacy a century ago. Yet such calls for justice unfortunately seem to point toward a view of history as light and dark—might one say black and white?—rather than an intellectual and cultural resource that might help us wrestle with the complex legacies of a difficult past. However one might evaluate the Federal Reserve System, the creation of the Department of Labor, and the League of Nations—not to mention the segregation of the federal civil service—Wilson was fundamental in creating the world we live in. Pushing the delete button risks severing the connection between past and present, thus making a true and genuine reckoning of oppression all the more difficult.²

Perhaps rather eerily, what the Justice League seems to be calling for, in part, is quite congruent with the vindictive eliminationist stance toward Wilson of conservative pundit Glenn Beck, who has said that the anniversary of the death of the totalitarian liberal Wilson is each year the happiest day of his life. Indeed, Beck has come out commending the substance (although not the tactics) of the League's actions. Beck, fulminating against a professoriate supposedly in love with the founding Progressive, responded to the events at Princeton by noting that Wilson "was one of the worst, racist, awful president's [sic] we've ever had. I hate this guy."³

Princeton junior Zeena Mubarak has offered a different vision of how to confront an ugly past. Arguing against her fellow black Princetonians in the pages of the student newspaper, she asserts that:

We must not erase Woodrow Wilson, because to do so is to play into an almost dystopian mentality where the things we do not like are simply thrown down the memory hole. It is true that it is wrong to deify historical figures. Thus, acknowledging Wilson's racism is important. We cannot allow him to be portrayed as the infallible patron saint of Princeton when his words are hurtful to so many current Princetonians. However, wiping out his name and face would do nothing to spur on dialogue or to change racist institutions. It would only allow us to try to forget that we have inherited a legacy that was created by people whose personal views we do not agree with.⁴

The value of Mubarak's approach is that it recognizes the dangers of erasure and denial as well as of uncritical adulation. We need to talk—and, arguably *learn* to talk—about the past in an intellectually complex, democratic fashion that finds history to be troubling as well as inspiring, humbling as well as clarifying.

Regardless of one's stance on this challenging issue, the Princeton protest above all demonstrates that the Gilded Age and Progressive Era continue to matter. That alone should be heartening to the readers of this journal.

Finally: if you would like to continue the conversation, please write to us at johnsto1@uic.edu and bjohnson25@luc.edu. Our dialogue may well even continue in the pages of the journal.

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NOTES

¹Hannah Waman and Do-Hyeong Myeong, "Updated: Students 'Walkout and Speakout,' Occupy Nassau Hall Until Demands of Black Justice League Are Met," *Daily Princetonian*, Nov. 18, 2015; Princeton Black Justice League, #OccupyNassau Meet Black Student's Demands," *Change.org*, Nov. 2015, <https://www.change.org/p/princeton-university-administration-occupynassau-meet-black-student-s-demands>; Princeton Office of Communications, "University, Students Reach Agreement on Campus Climate Concerns," *Princeton News*, Nov. 19, 2015, <http://www.princeton.edu/main/news/archive/S44/79/75E24/index.xml?section=topstories>; Liam Stack and Gabriel Fisher, "Princeton Agrees to Consider Removing a President's Name," *New York Times*, Nov. 19, 2015; Andy Newman, "At Princeton, Woodrow Wilson, A Heralded Alum, Is Recast as an Intolerant One," *New York Times*, Nov. 22, 2015. Princeton is actively soliciting scholars, and all others, to contribute to the discussion of Wilson at <http://wilsonlegacy.princeton.edu/>.

²For a strong argument in favor of a general Wilsonian delete button that pre-dates the events at Princeton, see Randy Barnett, "Expunging Woodrow Wilson from Official Places of Honor," *Volokh Conspiracy* blog, *Washington Post*, June 25, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2015/06/25/expunging-woodrow-wilson-from-official-places-of-honor/>. For dueling perspectives on how to view Wilson's racism, see Dylan Matthews, "Woodrow Wilson was Extremely Racist—Even by the Standards of His Own Time," *Vox*, Nov. 20, 2015, <http://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2015/11/20/9766896/woodrow-wilson-racist>; and Andrew Burstein and Nancy Isenberg, "Woodrow Wilson is not the Confederate Flag: Scrubbing his Name from Princeton is a Bad Idea," *Salon*, Nov. 20, 2015. For vigorously opposing perspectives on how to best proceed with issues of Wilson, historical racism, and democratic debate, see, on one side, Corey Robin, "We Have the Woodrow Wilson/P.C. Debate All Backwards: Protesters Are Forcing a Debate Princeton Has Whitewashed for Decades," *Salon*, Nov. 20, 2015; and, on the other, Geoffrey R. Stone, "Woodrow Wilson, Princeton University, and the Battles We Choose to Fight," *Huffington Post*, Nov. 21, 2015 and James Livingston, "Don't Repress the Past," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Nov. 20, 2015. See also the statement by Princeton African American Studies Faculty Members, "Princeton Faculty Letter in Support of Student Protests," Nov. 20, 2015, AAS21, <http://aas21.com/2015/11/20/support-letter/> and the unambivalent statement of the *New York Times* editorial board supporting the renaming of the Wilson School in "The Case Against Woodrow Wilson at Princeton," *New York Times*, Nov. 24, 2015.

³Tré Goins-Phillips, "Black Lives Matter Activists Continue Sit-In Demanding Erasure of 'Racist' Woodrow Wilson—and Glenn Beck Says They Are Right," *The Blaze*, Nov. 19, 2015, <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2015/11/19/black-lives-matter-activists-continue-sit-in-demanding-erasure-of-racist-woodrow-wilson-and-glenn-beck-says-they-are-right/>. Johnston has written about Beck and the surprisingly complex views of his intellectual associates about Wilson and the Progressives in "Long Live Teddy/Death to Woodrow: The Polarized Politics of The Progressive Era in the 2012 Election," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 13 (July 2014): 411–43. For a libertarian attack on progressivism—past and present—that accepts the postulates of the Black Justice League, see Virginia Postrel, "Progressive and Racist: Woodrow Wilson Wasn't Alone," *BloombergView*, Dec. 8, 2015, <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-12-08/woodrow-wilson-wasnt-the-only-progressive-racist>. For an anti-Progressive scholar opposing both the Black Justice League and Princeton, see Richard A. Epstein, "Does Woodrow Wilson Belong at Princeton?," *Defining Ideas*, Nov. 30, 2015, <http://www.hoover.org/research/does-woodrow-wilson-belong-princeton>.

⁴Zeena Mubarak, "We Must Not Erase Woodrow Wilson," *Daily Princetonian*, Nov. 18, 2015.