

Why Try to Change Woodrow Wilson Now?

Time and again I've longed for diversity, something to make my brain beat the faster. Searching for true diversity in U.S. colleges is quite an adventure.

Some students at U.S. privileged colleges, especially Princeton University and Amherst College, avowing that they have feelings of alienation and invisibility, seem not to understand that exposure to genuine diverse opinions is an intellectual adventure. In their mood of righteous indignation, they implicitly reject the essence of academic institutions as places for expression of free ideas that necessarily will conflict. Moreover, by calling for the erasing of history and the outlawing of individuals who have flaws and whom they find objectionable, they forget that people, including academic and political leaders are not made all of one piece.

In 2015, the admission rate at Princeton was 7.1 per cent of the 27, 290 who applied. Of these, Asian Americans were 22 per cent, Latinos were 11 per cent, and African Americans were 7 per cent. In Amherst College less than half of the student body is white.

It therefore comes as something of a surprise that a semester at the privileged Princeton is regarded by protesting students as a period of indentured servitude, since they have been transported to an unpleasant world, a site of U.S. imperialism at its most pernicious with its objective of degrading humanity. Present-day colonial Princeton, in which less than half the students are white, is viewed as hostile to minority groups and foreigners who are "marginalized."

In all fairness, however, the Princeton anti-colonists,

“delicate snowflakes” in the words of George Will, do not draw a parallel or equate the present champions of white supremacy at PU with the murderers of innocent 130 people, massacred by the “marginalized” Muslims who according to their Narrative of Victimhood also see themselves as oppressed by their colonial rulers. Yet the Princeton anti-colonialists, and likeminded students at Amherst, are less concerned with massacres of others, than with obtaining apologies by university administrators for “institutional legacy of white supremacy.”

The oppressed Princeton students demanded more cultural sensitivity, and courses on racial sensitivity. However, their insistence on racial “sensitivity,” is a distortion of the assertion of the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity of November 2, 2001 that cultural diversity is the common heritage of humanity and is necessary for humankind.

Certainly diversity is desirable for bringing different points of view into social discussion. On the basis of the UNESCO Declaration, minority voices and diversity should include people from different ethnicities, nationalities, cultures, social backgrounds, sexual preferences, and political points of view.

The demands of the Black Justice League at PU and Amherst students do not appear to be concerned with sensitivity towards Latinos, Native Americans, and Asians, as well as African-Americans. On this issue, the stated demand of the Black Justice League is limited to courses in the Department for African American Studies to be added to the list of distribution requirements.

At PU, the specific demand was the head of Woodrow Wilson, Virginian born, professor of Politics at PU, 13th President of PU, 34th Governor of New Jersey, and 28th President of the United States. He was the first southerner to become President since 1856. Wilson’s name is enshrined in a PU residential college, a campus café, and above all in the prestigious

School of Public Policy and International Affairs, named after him in 1948.

Woodrow Wilson is renowned for his greatly influential books on American politics, and for some of his contributions as U.S. president. As president of Princeton he appointed the first Catholic and the first Jew to the faculty. As president of the U.S. he was the supporter of the progressive movement. During his administration, women, by the 19th Amendment passed in 1919 and ratified in 1920, gained the right to vote. He planned a bill to end child labor, a bill blocked by the U.S. Supreme Court. He established in September 1914 the Federal Trade Commission to protect consumers, and approved the Clayton Antitrust Act. He was instrumental in promoting the creation of the League of Nations, and optimistically hoping to make the world "safe for democracy."

Wilson has been less well known for his distasteful words and actions about African Americans. The PU students of Black Justice League want Wilson's name removed from places on campus. It is their argument that "we owe nothing to people who are deeply flawed" that is troubling. It was the Princetonian F. Scott Fitzgerald who wrote that "the test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing views in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." Caution should be exercised in categorizing people in a simple way.

The Black Justice League forgot that all people are flawed, and complex. Even Mother Teresa has been accused of pandering to the rich. Indeed, the Nobel Prize for Peace is named for a man, a complicated person, poet, playwright, but also the man who manufactured nitroglycerine and dynamite. It is saddening to recall that Martin Luther King Jr. (real name Michael King) had plagiarized part, in fact about half, of his doctoral dissertation at Boston University. Should the Nobel Prize for Peace awarded him in 1964 be revoked?

Two issues arise: should honors or awards be given to flawed individuals; and should such recognition and awards be rescinded?

The first issue has always been controversial. Take just two cases. One concerns the problem of differentiating between the individual as a whole and the character of the person's work. There is the well-known example of Ezra Pound, who was awarded the Bollingen-Library of Congress Award in 1948 though he was an acknowledged fascist and virulent anti-Semite. Dag Hammarskjold held that Pound had fallen victim to anti-Semitism... such a "subhuman" reaction ought to exclude the possibility of a (Nobel) prize."

A second controversial case concerns President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He had received more of 80 per cent of the Jewish vote, and a number of his advisers were Jewish. Nevertheless, he refused to act on demands he try to save Jews from death by the Nazi regime, including bombing of Auschwitz, during the war.

The second issue relates to the demand for removal of an honor, and the limit to which such demand should go. It is one thing to make known the deficiencies of Wilson and to consider them in the context of his whole life and career. It is another to eliminate his memory and talk about his "racist legacy and how he impacted campus policy and culture." Moreover, however strongly one feels about the racist views of Wilson, they bear no relationship to present conditions of students in Ivy League colleges.

Will the situation of blacks be improved by the elimination of the presence of any reference to Wilson? It is ironic in this context that the PU campus is physically located on Washington Street in Princeton. Presumably, the street name in Princeton should be changed, not to mention the similarly named streets in every city in the U.S. and all the monuments honoring George Washington.

Where should this blacklist stop? Do not buy Ford cars because of Henry Ford's views that Jews had started World War I, and his admiration of Adolf Hitler. Should we renounce Lyndon Johnson because he often used the "N" word, and in the Senate blocked civil rights legislation? President Andrew Jackson was brutal towards Native Americans. Should we abandon the Declaration of Independence because Thomas Jefferson owned slaves?

Allegations of racism have spread throughout the academic world and university administrators are right to evaluate them and to correct abuses. It is true that Woodrow Wilson expressed racist views and behavior but he was also a reformer, nationally and internationally, and made important contributions to American life. College administrators, as well as the citizenry in general, would do well to weigh that racism in the context of those contributions.

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