



Trashing Leaders at Home Weakens America Abroad

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Many historians rank Woodrow Wilson "among the nation's greatest leaders," the trustees of Princeton University—where Wilson was president before becoming New Jersey's governor and America's president—wrote the other day, "and credit him with visionary ideas that shaped the world for the better."

Indeed, Wilson's "14 Points" for a post-World War I world set the stage for the rules-based global order that his successors created after World War II, his League of Nations laid the groundwork for a more effective (though hardly perfect) United Nations and his call to make the world "safe for democracy" was the precursor for America's post-World War II efforts to promote freedom abroad.

All of that, however, didn't stop Princeton's trustees from voting to remove Wilson's name from its School of Public and International Affairs and one of its residential colleges, due to the ugly racism that Wilson espoused and which shaped some of his domestic actions as America's president.

Princeton's decision is understandable, coming at a powerful moment of national reckoning over race, but it nevertheless should give us pause. Like the efforts to topple monuments of all kinds, it reflects a broad push to judge our past wholly through a racial lens and to disdain all the notables of our past who don't measure up to today's new standards—whatever the notables' other virtues and accomplishments.

The implications are significant, at home but, perhaps more profoundly, also abroad. That's because a society that bemoans its faults but ignores its considerable virtues—its values, liberties, sacrifices and accomplishments—will lack the confidence in itself and the standing with others necessary to lead the world.

To be clear, Wilson was deeply racist. He bemoaned the South's loss at Appomattox, empowered his Cabinet to re-segregate federal agencies, told Black professionals to view segregation as a "benefit" and, at the White House, screened the racist film *Birth of a Nation*, which disparaged the Reconstruction period of Black empowerment and praised the Ku Klux Klan.

His faults, moreover, extended beyond race. Imperial, dogmatic and self-defeating, he refused to let anyone question his global views. A Democrat, he invited no Senate Republicans to accompany him to Europe to negotiate peace after World War I and, when he wouldn't consider their ideas for modifying the Treaty of Versailles, they rejected the treaty and, with it, the League of Nations.

"As our nation wrestles with its history in this moment," Princeton's trustees wrote in explaining their decision, "it is important, especially at institutions committed to seeking the truth, that we recognize the complexity of historical figures and that we examine the entirety of their impact on the world."

True, but that's precisely what the trustees did not do. Like protesters who target not just monuments to Confederate leaders, but also to presidents and abolitionists, the trustees fixated on Wilson's racism and concluded that was reason enough to remove his name from Princeton's hallowed buildings.

As it turns out, Wilson was human, and he unfortunately exuded some of the ugly prejudices that reflected the America of his day. Nor was he the last president, each one also a human being, to do so.

The issue, though, is how we should view our history and those who did the most to shape it. Will we honor our collective progress while still recognizing our shortcomings? Will we see the "complexity of historical figures," as the trustees put it, and allow ourselves to honor their achievements?

Though President Harry S. Truman led the effort to create the post-World War II liberal order, should the University of Missouri remove his name from its School of Public Affairs because he sometimes disdained Jews, once terming them "very, very selfish?"

Though JFK steered the nation through the Cuban Missile Crisis and inked the nuclear test ban treaty, should Harvard remove his name from its School of Government because he was slow to embrace the civil rights movement?

We need not whitewash our past. We need only remember, as we reckon with our shortcomings, that Wilson and FDR led the Allies to victory in war, that our post-World War II presidents retained the steadfastness that brought victory in the Cold War, that America created the liberal order that has served the world well and that, through our ideals and our efforts, we have spread freedom and democracy across the globe.

With our frayed alliances and energized adversaries, the world is coming to see what happens when America fails to serve as what former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright once called the "indispensable nation."

Rather than continue retreating, we need to resume our leadership role, secure in who we are even as we address our imperfections. This is no time to lose our memories, our pride and, thus, our nerve.

Lawrence J. Haas, senior fellow for U.S. foreign policy at the American Foreign Policy Council and former Communications Director for Vice President Al Gore.. He received his M.A. from Princeton University in 1980.