

What can we take from this?

Wilson's racial prejudices extended far beyond allowing *The Birth of a Nation* to be shown at the White House. Even if the film had never been connected to him, or had never existed, the verified opinions that he held, and the legislative decisions he made during his years in office, are enough to illuminate his dismal views on race.

Wilson was unable to see the violence that opinions like his could, and did, lead to. His personal condemnation of certain acts of racist violence, such as the riots that broke out across America after the release of *The Birth of a Nation*, did not extend to a repudiation of the ideas that influenced those mobs. He critiqued how some Whites treated Black people, both before and after the Reconstruction period, but never advocated for abolition or for an overhaul of the system that placed Black people at the bottom.

For all of Wilson's sincere beliefs in progress and equality, these were not graces that he extended to Black Americans. His paradoxical views put forth a bold and inclusive view of America, one that still managed to ignore the struggles of Black Americans.

Sources

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3. Ibid, 515.
4. Ibid, 514.
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Images

1. Theatrical release poster for *The Birth of a Nation*, distributed by Epoch Film Co, Unknown Author. 1915. *Chronicle of the Cinema*. 1st ed. (London: Dorling Kindersley), p. 111.
2. Newspaper ad highlighting the massive scale of the film. "'The Birth of a Nation' at the Dominion Theatre [advertisement]," *Silent Film Music in Canada*, accessed March 22, 2023, <http://biblio.uottawa.ca/omeka1/silentfilmmusiccanada/items/show/10>.
3. Actors costumed in the full regalia of the Ku Klux Klan ride on horses at night in a still from *The Birth of a Nation*. (Hulton Archive/Getty Images).
4. Members of the NAACP picket under the marquee of the Republic Movie Theatre in Flushing, New York, against race discrimination featured in the movie, 'The Birth of a Nation,' being played at the theater in 1947. (Library of Congress/Corbis/Getty Images).
5. Quotes from Wilson's own writing which Griffith inserted into Birth. D. W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*, (1915) screen capture by author.

The Birth of a Nation and Woodrow Wilson

By
Elizabeth Hashimoto
WWH Scholar Winter/Spring
2023

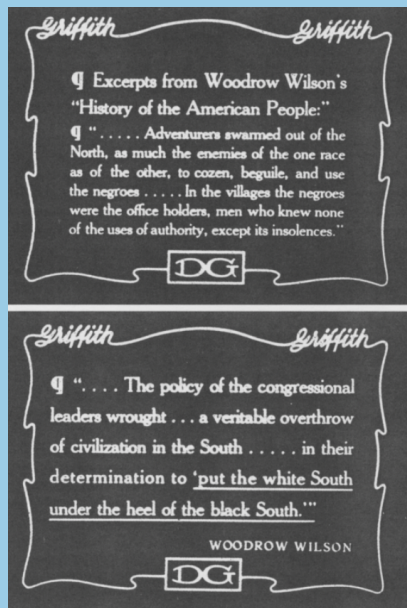


Fig. 5. A title card in the film quoting Wilson.

Fig.1. Poster advertising *The Birth of a Nation*.

On February 18, 1915, the new film *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by David Wark Griffith, was shown to President Woodrow Wilson in the East Room of the White House. It was the first film ever to be shown inside the White House and was watched by President Wilson, his family, and cabinet members.

The film went on to achieve massive commercial success as well as to generate immense controversy for its sympathies toward the South's side in the Civil War, its portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan as the defenders of White Americans, and its racist depictions of Black Americans. Civil rights groups protested the film across the country, and violence broke out after its screenings, resulting in Black people being attacked and lynched. The film's proximity to the president, and his perceived endorsement through the White House screening, gave the work added legitimacy as a valuable work of art. Though Wilson's personal opinions about the film are, unfortunately, difficult to pin down, his verifiable opinions on race, as well as his introduction of segregation into the federal government, are in line with the racist ideas advanced in the film. 1

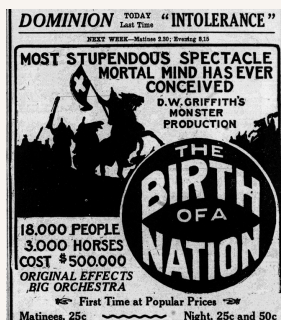


Fig. 2. Newspaper ad for the film.

Why did the White House showing of *The Birth of a Nation* take place?

Filmmaker and author Thomas Dixon Jr. was no stranger to the power of fictional media to influence public opinion. His novel *The Clansman* portrayed the Ku Klux Klan as the defender of Whites in the South after the end of the Civil War. Director David Wark Griffith developed this story into the film *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915. As a way to circumvent potential censorship, Dixon sought an appointment with President Wilson, with whom he had previously corresponded. Dixon described the film as a technological marvel, but did not tell the president its subject matter. Dixon must have expected some level of positive response to the film. Otherwise, he would not have brought it to the White House, since a condemnation from the president would have severely damaged the film's reputation.



Fig. 3. Still from the film, s showing the Klu Klux Klan.

Since Wilson was still in mourning for his first wife, he declined to go to the theater. Instead he let Dixon screen the film in the White House. While it was not his intention, Wilson's hosting of this private event in his home rather than his going to the theater added another degree of connection between the president and the film.

How did the Wilson respond to the film?

One quotation attributed to Wilson is famously repeated: "It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." 2

While this statement certainly seems to definitively showcase the president's feelings toward the film, it is unverified. After the showing, Griffith reported to a newspaper: "I was gratified when a man we all revere... said it teaches history by lightning." 3 He did not name Wilson, used "teaches" instead of "writing," and left out the second part of the quotation regarding the film's being "terribly true." The final form of the quotation was not attributed to Wilson until years later.

A woman who attended the screening recalled that the president watched the film in silence, and wordlessly exited when it finished. However, her account was given in 1977, with the length of time elapsed since the event making her testimony ambiguous at best. 4

Wilson's writings about race were used on the title cards in the film itself. At several points in the film, Griffith inserted quotations from Wilson's book, *History of the American People*, using them to bolster his points about the problems during the Reconstruction period.

Black contemporaries understood the film as a danger to their communities, petitioning to have it censored. The NAACP stated that it "put in graphic and highly dramatic terms certain issues that by now had passed into history and that for racial harmony were best forgotten." In the aftermath of *The Birth of a Nation's* release, Klan recruitment numbers grew, and anti-Black violence broke out after some of the screenings. 6

How does this relate to Wilson's larger legacy on race?

Wilson described the enslaved as children, who were generally taken care of by white plantation owners. In *The Birth of a Nation*, Black people are easily manipulated by Whites, who do not have their best interests at heart. In the film's depiction of Reconstruction, the newly emancipated, all played by White actors in blackface, engage in dancing, drinking, and running barefoot around the halls of government, where they have now been made senators. This portrayal echoes Wilson's words, when he wrote that enslavers acted with "moderation...[and] firm, but not unkind discipline," even when the enslaved acted "like a huge family of shiftless children." While Wilson also condemned the carpetbaggers (opportunistic Whites who arrived in the South to financially and socially profit from the conditions of the Reconstruction period) for their greed and manipulation, it was the end of slavery, and the "weak and incompetent" newly freed, he alleged, that allowed these new masters to replace the previous ones, who had acted with "affection and indulgence." 7

A similar desire to maintain "order" is on display with Wilson's expansion of segregation in the federal government. Under the guise of protecting White women from the feared sexual advances of Black men, a theme also found in the film, where freed Black men menace White women, Wilson's administration mandated separate facilities for Black and White federal workers. It also introduced a policy requiring that photographs accompany job applications, allowing for Black workers' applications to be discarded at the application level. Black workers already in the administration were removed from higher-level positions, thus decreasing their salaries, which already tended to be lower than those of their White counterparts. 8

Wilson's program of federal segregation was couched in the language of protection, a "benefit" to employees of both races. What Wilson put into motion resulted in the reversal of gains made after the Reconstruction period and the exclusion of Black people from higher-paying positions, which had both material and social ramifications. Wilson wanted to keep Black people in their "place" in society, and feared that mixing between the races would lead to discord. For progressive Wilson, liberty meant individuals' adjustment to their proper place in society under "right laws"- including racial ones. 9



Fig. 4. NAACP members protest the film.