

I am not Woodrow Wilson, and thank goodness for that because if I was the internet would hate me. I'm Mr. Beat, and why DOES the internet seem to hate Woodrow Wilson?

(clips)

That said, some have come rushing to his defense. (clip)

And actual historians, you know...not just people who make history videos like myself... have been MUCH kinder to Wilson. For example, Wilson was still ranked the 13th best president overall according to the most recent C-SPAN Presidential Historians Survey. And every biography I've come across about Wilson seems to think his accomplishments outweigh the negative stuff about him. The 28th American president had a huge impact on the country. In many ways, we are still living in Woodrow's World. No, not Wayne's World. WOODROW'S World. That's better. He reshaped the presidency and had the most influential foreign policy of arguably any other president in the 20th century. He got major progressive legislation passed that yeah...helped ordinary Americans.

Regardless, Wilson is no doubt one of the most polarizing presidents in American history. It's why I sing (put up hand) 🎵 hated by some/loved by others 🎵 in the chorus of the song I wrote about him. Why is he hated? Well, he was ridiculously racist. He expanded and further normalized racial segregation. He attacked many civil liberties, and was arguably the most anti-freedom of speech president we've ever had. He was an elitist. A sexist. I mean, the guy freaking believed in eugenics.

And long-time viewers of my channel might remember that I have made multiple videos explaining how I think he was one of the worst presidents in American history. Regardless, let's try to do something that scientists thought was just not possible. Make a balanced video about Woodrow Wilson. Wish me luck. (sigh)

(Title card)

-The Making of a Southerner-

Thomas Woodrow Wilson was born in Staunton, Virginia on December 28, 1856. Here, yes, absolutely here. It has 12 rooms and 12 fireplaces, by golly. Born here, in the "birth room." No, they really call it that. Not sure if every house has a birth room but I digress. He was the third of four children. His dad, Joseph, was a fairly well-known Presbyterian minister and theologian who rented slaves.¹ His mom, Jessie, was an immigrant from England and had a huge impact on Tommy's worldview.² Yeah, he was known as Tommy as a kid. Tommy Boy!

But Tommy only lived in this house for a little over a year. When he was a toddler, Joseph got transferred to lead a congregation down in Augusta, Georgia. Despite barely living here, Woodrow Wilson would visit Staunton several times throughout his life. And today, the whole complex surrounding Wilson's birthplace makes up the Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library. Staunton is ALL ABOUT claiming Woodrow Wilson as his hometown despite him, ya know, not

1

<https://www.wtvr.com/news/local-news/students-uncover-history-at-woodrow-wilson-home-june-24-2023#:~:text=Phillips%20said%20it%20was%20known.at%20the%20time%2C%20Phillips%20said.>

² https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/8596201/janet_e-wilson

having any memories living here. His earliest memory actually happened down in Georgia. (devil went down to Georgia) That was hearing some angry person passing his house announcing that Abraham Lincoln had been elected president and that now there was going to be a war. Indeed, the American Civil War began just a few months later. Tommy's parents strongly supported the Confederacy during the war, even caring for wounded Confederate soldiers at their church. Joseph was a chaplain for the Confederate Army.³ Woodrow Wilson, by the way, was one of only two American presidents to be a citizen of the Confederate States of America. That's kinda crazy.

Growing up, Tommy struggled to learn to read, and wasn't fully able to read until he was 12 years old. Many historians now say he had dyslexia, and he'd be a slow reader his entire life.⁴ Despite this, Tommy had ambitions to go to college. He loved history, philosophy, and politics. By the time he was a teenager, the family now lived in Columbia, South Carolina.

He'd end up attending four different colleges: Davidson, Princeton (which at the time was called the College of New Jersey), the University of Virginia, and Johns Hopkins. At Princeton, he excelled, joining as many leadership positions as he could. Poor health often held back his progress, though. This was why he left the University of Virginia's law school, for example. Regardless, he moved back in with his parents in North Carolina and continued to study law on his own. But after he became a lawyer in 1882, he hated it. That's when he decided to go to Johns Hopkins. Johns Hopkins is such a challenge for me to say out loud. I always want to just say, "John." Uh anyway...

In the summer of 1883, Wilson met Ellen Louise Axson down in Rome...Georgia, while visiting relatives. Ellen was also the daughter of a Presbyterian minister, and the two quickly fell in love. In fact, they got engaged just weeks after meeting.

But the wedding would be delayed. Say, don't you remember? Wilson was going to Johns Hopkins up in Baltimore. Hello? The two exchanged hundreds of letters while Wilson studied political science and history. They married in 1885 and he'd earn a Phd the next year. Even though it doesn't hold up very well today, his dissertation, Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics, made the case that the president was too weak and Congress too dysfunctional. It ended up being widely read and respected in academia at the time.

To this day, Wilson is the only American president to earn a PhD.

Around the time he finished his schooling, he now went by "Woodrow" instead of "Tommy." No more Tommy Boy. Woodrow was actually his mom's maiden name.

-Scholar on the Rise-

³ <https://www.city-journal.org/article/the-presbyterian-ministers-son>

⁴ <https://dyslexiahelp.umich.edu/success-story/woodrow-wilson/>

Over the next few years, Ellen and Woodrow started a family. They'd have three daughters together: Margaret, Jessie, and Eleanor, or Nellie. All three would grow up to be incredibly intelligent and active in politics.

Also over the next few years? Wilson would both TEACH history and WRITE history. Yep, he was an actual historian...like, legit bro. That said, by modern standards, he was kind of a crappy historian. His research was kind of "meh." He relied way too heavily on secondary sources. He was all-in on the Lost Cause mythology, or the narrative that the Confederacy fought the Civil War not to defend slavery but for more honorable purposes like states' rights. And his writing was extremely biased. Look, EVERYBODY is biased just like how EVERYBODY loves Raymond, but as a historian you at least have to TRY not to be. His writings reflect white supremacist views. In a popular textbook called History of the American People, which was used in school CLASSROOMS I should add, he wrote, "The white men were roused by a mere instinct of self-preservation ... until at last there had sprung into existence a great Ku Klux Klan ... to protect the southern country." Yeah, he freaking praised the KKK in a school textbook. His writings often framed history as the result of great men (usually WHITE men) and he generally just wrote about everything in a judgy way. Still, his peers and colleagues respected him tremendously. He'd end up writing several books and dozens of essays throughout his career.

But he was also a really good SPEAKER. Wilson spent three years teaching at Bryn Mawr, a women's college near Philadelphia. Apparently he didn't like it, feeling uncomfortable teaching women and not viewing them as intellectually serious. Ugh. And so he transferred to Wesleyan in Middletown, Connecticut, where he coached the debate team, but in 1890, he couldn't pass up an opportunity to return to his alma mater, Princeton.

-Princeton's Prince-

At Princeton, Wilson taught subjects like American government, political science, and constitutional law. Well shoot, I can relate to that. He gave really captivating lectures...really held his students attention...although some students thought he was too serious and strict. Wilson had developed such a great reputation as a teacher and scholar that other schools tried to snatch him up, but instead he became the president...of Princeton University. That was in 1902, when he was 46. Although he loved teaching and writing, he gladly accepted the position. You see, Wilson secretly had bigger ambitions. He didn't tell many folks this at the time, but he had wanted to become a politician probably since he was a kid. And you might be thinking- wait a college president is a POLITICIAN?!? Dang right it is, bucko. I mean...basically.

Wilson was the first non-minister to serve as president of Princeton, and he almost immediately shook things up. He introduced the preceptorial system, a term he came up with by the way, which emphasizes small group discussions, one-on-one meetings with faculty, and independent study, as opposed to students just going to classes in big lecture halls. He pushed for a more merit-based admissions process. In other words, it no longer was just about WHO you knew in order to get in, it was about HOW GOOD OF STUDENT you were. He pushed for higher standards for the faculty, thus causing many of the professors to leave. Due to all this, Wilson

made a lot of the old guard at Princeton angry. But he also gained some fame across the country as a progressive thinker who fought back against the elites.

In 1906, Wilson woke up one day to find himself blind in one eye. We now know he likely had a stroke, and possibly had strokes before this, actually, but it's not well documented. Still, Wilson mostly recovered and soon was dropping hints to influential Democratic Party dudes about his desire to run for public office.

Flash forward to 1910, and many New Jersey Democratic leaders united to nominate a wild card to be the state's governor. Sure, they liked Wilson's politics and loved the fact that he was a great speaker, but they liked more that they could easily influence him due to his perceived political inexperience. Boy were they wrong. Wilson did win the election, and promptly turned on the party bosses, asserting his independence while getting some love as a progressive reformer. I should note that, at the time, New Jersey was widely known as a politically corrupt state.

As governor, Wilson signed a bill removing political patronage from state hiring practices. In other words, he brought a meritocracy to the state. He signed another bill that curbed bribery and vote-buying in elections. He signed yet another bill that protected workers if they got injured on the job. He got direct primaries in the state for political party nominations, which weakened party bosses and gave ordinary voters more power. That said, all this was much in line with what other major progressive leaders around the country were doing. Also, uh...there was that eugenics law. Yep, he also signed a law authorizing the sterilization of people deemed "unfit to procreate." The law thankfully was repealed two years later, but this support for eugenics really makes Wilson look bad. Speaking of which, more than 1200 forced sterilizations took place in Staunton, Wilson's hometown, making it a sort of eugenics hub for a hot minute. Oof.

Regardless, by 1912 Wilson was one of the most beloved governors in the country. (turning) (turning) Meanwhile, he had been thinking about running for president for basically the entire time he was governor.

-Dark Horse-

Wilson had only seen one Democrat president his entire life, so normally the Democratic Party's expectations would be low. But, lucky for them, Theodore Roosevelt had splintered the Republican Party by running for president with the Bull Moose Party. This was a HUGE break for the Democrats...quite the luck they had. And after a tough primary race against the party favorite, Speaker of the House Champ Clark, Wilson surprised many by overcoming Clark to get the nomination at the Democratic National Convention that summer. And you can thank William Jennings Bryan for that...he swayed many votes Wilson's way.

Wilson campaigned on a platform that came to be known as The New Freedom. Not to be confused with the OLD Freedom. That freedom smells like dirty socks. The New Freedom called for stuff like stronger antitrust enforcement...aka being stricter against monopolies..., labor reform, farming reform, the direct election of senators, currency reform, and an income tax

Clone: well I don't like income taxes

Mr. Beat: Well don't worry, only on super rich people

Clone: Oh ok

Mr. Beat: Plus, Wilson wanted to lower tariffs

Clone: Yes!

(both attempt to high five but it doesn't go so well)

Anyway, in one of the craziest presidential elections in American history, Wilson won, becoming the 28th president in American history, despite getting less than 42% of the popular vote. Wilson was the first Southerner elected President since before the Civil War.

-Prez-

As president, Wilson ran a tight ship. He was a very hands-on type of fella. He also gave a bunch of speeches compared to previous presidents. In his first year in office, he became the first American president to deliver the State of the Union Address directly to Congress as a speech, instead of...ya know...a written message...since John Adams in 1800. And pretty much every president has given it as an in-person speech ever since. Wilson would go on to address Congress at least 24 more times in person, by far more than previous presidents.

Ok, so let's first talk about the racism.

Wilson's Cabinet was probably the most racist Cabinet since before the Civil War. Ok, so his Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan was just KINDA racist, but the rest of them? Holy crap. Wilson's Attorney General, James Clark McReynolds, was not only deeply racist but also antisemitic. He later became a reactionary Supreme Court justice. You may remember that I ranked him the 2nd worst Supreme Court Justice in American history. It's just my opinion. Hey, at least Wilson appointed the first Jewish member of the Supreme Court, Louis Brandeis. Well, McReynolds later was antisemitic to him when they were both in the Court together. That freaking guy. Anyway, Wilson's Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, implemented racial segregation at the federal level, as did his Postmaster General, Albert Burleson, as did his Secretary of the Treasury, William Gibbs McAdoo. By the way, McAdoo married Wilson's daughter, Nellie, and so, Wilson's son-in-law was his advisor. Wilson is the only president to have two kids get married at the White House. Nellie and William got married there and so did Jessie the previous year. Oh! And Wilson's niece, Alice, would also get married there later on.

Tragically, after Nellie and William's wedding, Ellen's health had steeply declined due to Bright's disease. She died in the White House on August 6, 1914. She's the most recent First Lady to die while in office.

Woodrow was devastated after Ellen's death, and he became very lonely. However, less than a year later, Wilson's cousin, Helen, introduced him to another widow, Edith Galt. Woodrow and Edith quickly fell in love and got married at Galt's home on December 18, 1915.

But enough about his personal life. What is this? The Hallmark Channel. Come on. So yeah, despite resegregating the federal government and thus bringing JIM CROW LAWS TO THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT UGHH, Wilson signed a bunch of influential Progressive Era legislation. Like the Revenue Act of 1913, which dramatically reduced tariffs, tariffs which had previously protected big corporations at the expense of consumers. To make up for this lost revenue, the law put into place the first peace time federal income tax in American history...thanks to the recently approved 16th Amendment. That same year, Wilson signed the Federal Reserve Act, which established the Federal Reserve System, aka the Fed, or the central banking system of the United States that...yep...still exists today. It was one of the most significant (turning) (turning) and controversial (turning) (turning) financial reforms in American history.

Less controversial? The Federal Trade Commission Act, which created the FTC to prevent shady business practices. Wilson signed that bill into law on September 26, 1914. And the Clayton Antitrust Act, which strengthened earlier antitrust laws and banned shady stuff like price discrimination and mergers that hurt competition. Wilson signed that one on October 15, 1914. By that time, World War One was raging in Europe, terrifying the world. Wilson, recognizing that most Americans were deeply divided in their loyalties, declared neutrality, basically saying the United States wouldn't take sides in the war. Neutrality was pretty popular with the American public. While the United States stayed out of what was going on across the Atlantic Ocean, it couldn't escape what was happening south of its border...the Mexican Revolution. When Wilson was president, the United States' relationship with Mexico was unsatisfactory. After Mexican authorities arrested American sailors, Wilson ordered the U.S. Navy to occupy Veracruz, which ultimately led to more than 300 Mexicans getting killed and big anti-American riots breaking out. After a revolutionary leader named Pancho Villa attacked New Mexico, killing 17 Americans, Wilson ordered more than 10,000 American troops into Mexico to capture him. They never did. Wilson would ultimately send nearly 100,000 soldiers to guard the American border with Mexico.

Despite a growing number of Americans being AGAINST imperialism, they seemed to let the Mexico stuff slide. More controversial was Wilson's invasion and occupation of Haiti in 1916, his invasion of the Dominican Republic that same year, and his bullying of Nicaragua in order to undermine its sovereignty in favor of American interests. Yep, Wilson was the first "regime change" president. Of course, Wilson did all this in the name of "spreading American values," but make no mistake...he often used military force without declarations of war. Some did criticize Wilson for being imperialist, but many others were like, "hey, at least we're staying out of Europe."

Wilson was quite popular by 1916, his popularity helped by more Progressive laws like... The Federal Farm Loan Act, which made it easier for farmers to borrow money And you wanna know why else Wilson was popular during his- The Keating-Owen Act, which banned child labor And you wanna know why else Wilson was popular during his-

The Adamson Act, which established an 8-hour workday for railroad workers. Only having to work eight hours in one day? It was completely unheard of. Crazy times, man.

Wilson ran for re-election campaigning around the slogan “He Kept Us Out of War,” actually scaring people into thinking that the REPUBLICANS would get the country in a war with both Germany and Mexico. Well, he won re-election, becoming the first Democrat to win two consecutive Presidential elections since Andrew Jackson.

“He kept us out of war.” He kept us out of war, did he? Oh my, how quickly things changed at the beginning of Wilson’s second term. First of all, by the end of 1916, the United States had become deeply connected to the Allied side of the war- we’re talking mainly Britain, France, and Russia, here. The United States had lent BILLIONS to the Allies. In January 1917, Germany had resumed unrestricted submarine warfare, meaning it would sink all ships without warning headed to Allied ports- even American ones. This is a policy that had previously led to the sinking of the Lusitania, a British ship that had 128 Americans on board. In February, what became known as the Zimmerman Telegram, a telegram intercepted sent as a secret message from German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann to Mexico asking Mexico to join Germany in a war against the United States in return for getting Texas, Arizona and New Mexico back, outraged Americans.

Now supposedly Wilson did not want to get involved in this war, but by early 1917 he thought the United States had no choice. Not only that, he saw entering the war as an opportunity to transform it into a moral mission. They weren’t just gonna defeat Germany, they were gonna spread democracy. These beliefs that the United States had a moral responsibility to spread American values like democracy, free trade, and international cooperation around the world came to be known as Wilsonianism. That’s a mouthful.

On April 2, 1917, Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany, famously saying “The world must be made safe for democracy.”⁵ Congress overwhelmingly approved. Wilson oversaw a huge mobilization of troops. He created agencies like the War Industries Board and Food Administration. Wilson signed a law creating the Selective Service System after the Army failed to recruit enough soldiers. This caused the first American military draft since the Civil War. Indeederoo, all American men aged 21 to 30 had to enlist to fight for a period of 12 months, whether they wanted to or not. The Selective Service would draft more than 2.8 million men.

Contrary to what you might think, the country’s entry into World War One was pretty dang controversial.

Many Americans began protesting. And Wilson anticipated this backlash. He promoted propaganda to sway public opinion, promoting the idea that it was “patriotic” to support the war. Yeah, that’s when you saw posters like that. In order to create a chilling effect and basically scare the crap out of ANYONE even REMOTELY criticizing the war effort, Wilson signed two of the most-hated laws in American history: the Espionage Act and the Sedition Act. The

⁵ <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/the-world-must-be-made-safe-for-democracy/>

Espionage Act made it a crime to interfere with military operations, particularly the draft or military recruitment. The Sedition Act, which was even worse, in my opinion, made it a crime to 🎵 TALK TRASH 🎵 about the war. Wait a second, doesn't that go against the First Amendment?!? Breaking both laws could get you up to 20 years in prison... holy crap. And yeah, the Wilson administration arrested thousands of Americans for breaking these laws, including prominent folks like Eugene Debs, who got a sentence of 10 years in prison for giving a speech that criticized the war and praised folks resisting the war. He'd later run for President from prison. And I'm not even done yet. Wilson also essentially ran a nationwide spy program for people to rat out fellow citizens resisting the war effort. He authorized his Justice Department to spy on critics of the war, especially those who leaned to the left politically and immigrants. It's always freaking immigrants who get blamed for stuff. He even had the Post Office not deliver mail that was critical of the government. Big time oofness.

By the time American troops actually got to Europe to fight in the war, the war was winding down. On January 8, 1918, Wilson announced to Congress his blueprint for a postwar peace that became a big part of his legacy- The Fourteen Points. Yes, there they are. I'm not going to read all of them, ain't nobody got time for that, but it included stuff like reducing weapon supplies, free and fair trade, avoiding future wars through diplomacy, not force, and self-determination, or the idea that people around the world should have their own say regarding who governs them. His Fourteen Points also included his arguably most important and lasting idea- an international organization in which countries could all resolve disputes peacefully... what we now call The League of Nations. Meanwhile, after YEARS of ignoring protests in front of the White House calling for the right for women to vote, Wilson finally gave lukewarm support to the idea, and the 19th Amendment would pass by the end of his term. And speaking of the 18th Amendment.... that's the one banning alcohol... he vetoed its enforcement, but Congress overrode his veto.

After the war officially ended at the 11th hour on the 11th day of the 11th month of the year, Wilson, like, just straight up left the United States for six months to hang out in Paris, where he became a big time influential member of the peace talks. He'd become the first American president to travel to Europe while in office. Edith would join him, of course. What resulted was the infamous Treaty of Versailles. Wilson got the League of Nations into the treaty, but unfortunately the treaty also severely punished Germany, which... wouldn't ya know it... set up the stage for World War Two less than twenty years later.

When Wilson finally returned to the United States, it was kind of a mess. Lynchings of African Americans had dramatically been on the rise, and the federal government had done little to stop it. A series of race riots in the summer of 1919 led to the deaths of hundreds of innocent African Americans and the destruction of their private property. By that time, the First Red Scare was in full swing, a period of extreme paranoia and hatred of not just communism, but anyone who had non-mainstream left-leaning political views. This fear led to Wilson's new Attorney General, A. Mitchel Palmer, arresting and deporting all kinds of random people. Known as the Palmer Raids, he'd end up overseeing the detention of thousands of INNOCENT people, often without

warrants. And all this is going on during one of the worst pandemics in U.S. history, the Spanish flu, which killed hundreds of thousands of Americans, many of them young adults.

Deciding to ignore all this, Wilson toured the United States to rally the people to urge Congress to support the Treaty of Versailles. He traveled 8,000 miles in 22 days, and it ended up taking a huge toll on his health. On October 2, 1919, Wilson suffered a really bad stroke that nearly killed him and left him paralyzed on his left side for the rest of his life. Edith, who was almost always by his side, along with Wilson's good friend Dr. Cary Grayson, famously helped hide his recovery and kept things carrying on as if he was just fine after this. Edith even took over "routine duties" while her husband recovered. Heck, some historians argue she did even quite a bit more than that, which is why some call her the "first female President." And that tour that led up to the stroke? It was kind of all for nothing. The Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles, and the United States, crazy enough, never joined the League of Nations.

You could say that Wilson never recovered. He spent his final year as president isolated, physically disabled, and politically defeated. He had refused to delegate power or resign...even hoping to run for a third term.

After he left office, Wilson and Edith lived just about a mile and a half from the White House...just down the street basically. His health never fully recovered, and he'd die on February 3, 1924, at the age of 67. He is buried at the Washington National Cathedral...the only American president buried in Washington, D.C.

-Legacy-

(walking, turn back suddenly) Ok, you could say Woodrow Wilson had a mixed legacy. You could say that. (keep walking one way but then go the other)

He helped redefine the role of the presidency with his leadership during and after World War One, but also DEEPLY damaged civil liberties in the process. He is celebrated for championing democracy and self-determination around the world, but also made racial segregation worse back at home. He battled elitism at Princeton yet firmly believed in hierarchies. Though known as being president when women finally got the right to vote and many half-joke his wife was the first female American president, he thought women shouldn't be involved with politics. He was a steadfast progressive, yet those same progressive views caused him to believe in eugenics.

But personally, I think the bad outweighs the good.

And at the root of it is his character. His ego was just too big. Not only did Wilson think that he was the bee's knees, he thought he was right about everything. Some historians have claimed that Wilson was merely a product of his time. A product of his time. From everything I have read about him, he was EXCEPTIONALLY racist and sexist...like...more racist and more sexist than most politicians of his time. Wilson was one of the most authoritarian presidents in American history, and his authoritarian precedents led to future American presidents also abusing their power, often in the name of "spreading democracy." Ugh.

So yes, while Woodrow Wilson may have reshaped America's role in the world with bold idealism, he ultimately only seemed to care about white men. And for a president in the 1900s...as opposed to 1700s, this is really, really bad.

Why he's still seen as a top-tier president to me is just evidence that he had a big impact. But having a big impact doesn't mean being uh...good. Why does the internet hate Woodrow Wilson? Because sometimes the internet is right.

A shout out to the Cynical Historian and Vlogging Through History. Both absolutely LOVE Woodrow Wilson. I'm kidding, of course. They hate his guts. But what do YOU think about Woodrow Wilson? Did I give him a fair shake? Send me words in whatever language you like. And I've got more president videos coming, believe you me, so you might wanna stay in the loop for that. Thanks for staying curious. How am I gonna make it back home?

Sources/further reading:

Wilson by A. Scott Berg

Purchase here: <https://amzn.to/4kVGPUn>

The Moralist by Patricia O'Toole

Purchase here: <https://amzn.to/416c7AY>

Woodrow Wilson: A Biography by John Milton Cooper Jr.

Purchase here: <https://amzn.to/45lloX7>

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