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Dixiecrats Triumphant
The menacing Mr. Wilson
By Charles Paul Freund

It was Inauguration Day, and in the judgment of one later historian, "the atmosphere in the nation's capital bore ominous signs for Negroes." Washington rang with happy Rebel Yells, while bands all over town played 'Dixie.' Indeed, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, who swore in the newly elected Southern president, was himself a former member of the Ku Klux Klan. Meanwhile, "an unidentified associate of the new Chief Executive warned that since the South ran the nation, Negroes should expect to be treated as a servile race." Somebody had even sent the new president a possum, an act supposedly "consonant with Southern tradition."

This is not an alternate world scenario imagining the results of a Strom Thurmond victory in the 1948 election; it is the real March 4, 1913, the day Woodrow Wilson of Virginia moved into the White House. The details, above and below, are drawn from the work of historian Lawrence J. Friedman, especially 1970's *The White Savage: Racial Fantasies in the Postbellum South*.

The extended scandal involving Sen. Trent Lott's dismal remarks in honor of Thurmond's 100th birthday, especially Lott's stated regret that Thurmond's segregationist Dixiecrats failed to win the 1948 presidential campaign, have led a number of writers to examine the Dixiecrats' old platform so as to put Lott's statement in perspective. But the whole Dixiecrat enterprise has a historical perspective of its own.

Breakaway segregationist Democrats didn't need to pluck the racist dystopia implicit in their 1948 platform from thin air, nor did they have to base their political hopes on hazy Lost Cause nostalgia and distant antebellum dreams. An openly racist Southern

presidency had existed fewer than 30 years earlier: Wilson's. His White House had not only approved of the South's discriminatory practices (many of which were also widespread in the North), it implemented them in the federal government. Had Dixiecrat dreams come true, a Thurmond administration would have revived Woodrow Wilson's racial policies.

Wilson's historical reputation is that of a far-sighted progressive. That role has been assigned to him by historians based on his battle for the League of Nations, and the opposition he faced from isolationist Republicans. Indeed, the adjective "Wilsonian," still in use, implies a positive if idealistic vision for the extension of justice and democratic values throughout the world. Domestically, however, Wilson was a racist retrograde, one who attempted to engineer the diminution of both justice and democracy for American blacks—who were enjoying little of either to begin with.

Wilson's racist views were hardly a secret. His own published work was peppered with Lost Cause visions of a happy antebellum South. As president of Princeton, he had turned away black applicants, regarding their desire for education to be "unwarranted." He was elected president because the 1912 campaign featured a third party, Theodore Roosevelt's Bullmoose Party, which drew Republican votes from incumbent William Howard Taft. Wilson won a majority of votes in only one state (Arizona) outside the South.

What Wilson's election meant to the South was "home rule;" that is, license to pursue its racial practices without concern about interference from the federal government. That is exactly what the 1948 Dixiecrats wanted. But "home rule" was only the beginning. Upon taking power in Washington, Wilson and the many other Southerners he brought into his cabinet were disturbed at the way the federal government went about its own business. One legacy of post-Civil War Republican ascendancy was that Washington's large black populace had access to federal jobs, and worked with whites in largely integrated circumstances. Wilson's cabinet put an end to that, bringing *Jim Crow* to Washington.

Wilson allowed various officials to segregate the toilets, cafeterias, and work areas of their departments. One justification involved health: White government workers had to be protected from contagious diseases, especially venereal diseases, that racists imagined were being spread by blacks. In extreme cases, federal officials built separate structures to house black workers. Most black diplomats were replaced by whites; numerous black federal officials in the South were removed from their posts; the local Washington police force and fire department stopped hiring blacks.

Wilson's own view, as he expressed it to intimates, was that federal segregation was an act of kindness. In historian Friedman's paraphrase, "Off by themselves with only a white supervisor, blacks would not be forced out of their jobs by energetic white employees."

According to Friedman, President Wilson said as much to those appalled blacks who protested his actions. He told one protesting black delegation that "segregation is not a humiliation but a benefit, and ought to be so regarded by you gentlemen." When the startled journalist **William Monroe Trotter** objected, Wilson essentially threw him out of the White House. "Your manner offends me," Wilson told him. Blacks all over the country complained about Wilson, but the president was unmoved. "If the colored people made a mistake in voting for me," he told *The New York Times* in 1914, "they ought to correct it."

Wilson appears to have perceived his presidency as an opportunity to correct history, and to restore white Americans to unambiguous supremacy. That is apparently the reason he embraced the poisonous message of D.W. Griffith's 1915 film, *The Birth of a Nation*; it offered a congenial narrative.

Griffith's notorious film portrays the overthrow of debasing black rule in the Reconstructionist South by the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. The film's black characters (most of them white actors in blackface) are either servile or savages; Klan members are represented as both heroic and romantic. The movie was based primarily on *The Clansman*, a novel written by Thomas Dixon in 1905. Not only was Dixon a personal

friend of Wilson's, he had been pushing for a Wilson presidency for years, and Wilson regarded himself as being in Dixon's debt.

Wilson discharged that debt by helping Dixon and Griffith publicize their movie. He arranged for preview screenings for his cabinet, for Congress, and for the Supreme Court, and he gave Dixon and Griffith an endorsement they could exploit. "It is like writing history with lightning," Wilson said of this KKK celebration, "and my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." The first half of Wilson's endorsement is still affixed to prints of the film that are screened for film students studying Griffith's advances in editing.

Obviously, Southern hopes that Wilson could force blacks into servility were always delusional. Nevertheless, Wilson's Jim Crow presidency remained an available model for segregationists and supremacists who came later. Thurmond and his fellow Dixiecrats didn't necessarily require a model of triumphalist racism, but the point is that in Wilson they had one. The Lott Affair has been treated as if its origins lie in 1948; they don't. The past isn't dead, said Mississippian **William Faulkner**. "It's not even the past." He might have added that the past we attempt to grapple with usually isn't even the real past.