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Woodrow Wilson the “Possessive” and
Political Historian: Discovering an
Identification with the American
Founding

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Woodrow Wilson the “Possessive” and Political Historian:
Discovering an Identification with the American Founding

For Woodrow Wilson, the historian, his endeavors in the field of history can reveal as much about him as the figures about which he was writing. Before Wilson became President of the United States he was a prolific writer of both history and political science. In a letter to his wife written in the beginning of his academic career, Wilson reflects on the nature of writing and publishing, something that was becoming a major part of his life: “There is a keen satisfaction always in the act of creation—no matter how humble the scale of the creation or how small the thing created. If one is developing his own ideas, what he writes seems peculiarly his own. It is wrapped up in a possessive pronoun.”¹ For Wilson, his writings were very personal, and as a result one can only assume that they inevitably reflected the man writing them. Arthur S. Link, in his 1970 article “Woodrow Wilson: The American as Southerner,” suggests that Wilson was attracted to the writing of history for the very purpose of learning more about himself. “The *sturm und drang* of the mid-nineties,” Link writes, “caused Wilson for the first time to search for personal roots in order to find his own identification with the American past.”² Link ultimately argues—without providing much textual analysis of Wilson’s historical writing—that through the process of writing his works, “Wilson discovered that he was a southerner and a Virginian.”³

¹ Woodrow Wilson, Woodrow Wilson to Ellen Louise Axson, Wilmington, NC, July 28, 1884, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Volume III: 1884-5*, edited by Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 264.

² *Sturm und drang* is a German phrase referring to a movement calling for the exploration of individualism present in literature. Arthur S. Link, “Woodrow Wilson: The American as Southerner,” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Feb., 1970), pp.3-17, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2206599>, 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 13.

One complication to that thesis is that before writing his first major historical work, *Division and Reunion*, Wilson himself acknowledged that his identity was more complex than being solely a Southerner. As opposed to needing history to help him discover his identity, Wilson seemed to have a good sense of who he was, which is captured in the following letter written to fellow historian Albert Bushnell Hart:

Though born in the South and bred in its sympathies, I am not of Southern-born parents. My father was born in Ohio, my mother in England. Ever since I have had independent judgments of my own I have been a Federalist (!) It is this mixture of my elements in me—full identification with the South, non-Southern blood, and Federalist principles—that makes me hope that a detachment of my affectionate, reminiscent sympathies from my historical judgments is not beyond hoping for.⁴

In this one passage alone, Wilson has not only provided us with a portrait of how he views himself and his identity, but has also made the connection between how personal identity could influence his ability to write history. In this case, Wilson identifies himself as the product of a Southern upbringing, the “non-Southern blood” of his father, his mother’s close ties to England, and his own identification with “Federalist principles.” Wilson’s exposure and education in the North as well as his desire to rediscover his identity suggest that Wilson’s identity was more complex than one merely shaped by Southern heritage. Considering that the historians looking at this work do not provide textual analysis of Wilson’s historical writing, is it possible that Wilson discovered more about himself than his Southerness but was able to develop his other identities further? Herein lies the underexplored and overlooked complexity of Wilson’s mixed heritage and the resulting impact on his histories. With so many identifiers, as well as the acknowledgement that these loyalties must be detached from his “historical judgments,” it makes one wonder why no one has considered this conundrum before.

⁴ Woodrow Wilson, Woodrow Wilson to Albert Bushnell Hart, Middletown, CT, June, 3, 1889 in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Volume VI: 1888-90*, edited by Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 243.

This paper seeks to expand this investigation, exploring not only Wilson's identification as a Virginian, but also other identities and preferences present in the first three volumes of his often overlooked *History of the American People* and *George Washington*. I will only be considering Wilson's work regarding the American Revolutionary Era, as ever since it happened many Americans have looked back towards the founding period to determine their own political allegiances, and Wilson was no different. More than simply discovering he was a Southerner, and contrary to presenting a Jeffersonian bias, in his presentation of the American Revolution and founding, Woodrow Wilson further developed his Southern and Federalist identities, which manifested in his histories as strong identification with Virginia and Alexander Hamilton respectively.

In one of the many ways that Wilson's understanding of history as a personal endeavor contradicted all of the emerging standards for the historical profession, the act of writing history reinforced his prioritization of political men in the narrative of American history. Wilson's years as a historian set the stage for his later transition into public affairs, as through his examination and sorting of political men he was able to develop his own conception of good statesmanship and a clear understanding of himself that he would carry with him into the presidency. This paper will be divided into three major sections: 1) an examination of existing interpretations of Wilson's historical endeavors, 2) a section dealing with his Southern identity and the exceptionalism of Virginia, and 3) a discussion of Wilson's affinity for Alexander Hamilton and Federalist heroes.

EXISTING INTEPRETATIONS

When historians and political scientists analyze Wilson's written works, they focus on his endeavors in political science: *Congressional Government* and *Constitutional Government*. In contrast to his histories, these are taken with great importance, and John Milton Cooper, Jr. even

declares that “*Congressional Government* would be the best book that Wilson ever wrote.”⁵ *Congressional Government* (1885), which emerged from Wilson’s dissertation at Johns Hopkins, receives praise for its new contributions to the field of governmental scholarship. As political scientists Stephen Skowronek and Terri Bimes explain, “The book became formative for twentieth-century thinking because it dispelled an illusion of perfection found in nineteenth-century understandings of the American Constitution and placed that foundational structure at the heart of the problems facing American government on the eve of the modern era.”⁶ All in all, *Congressional Government* “dispelled an illusion of perfection” towards the Constitution, and in the words of Marvin Rintala, “To say that Woodrow Wilson was no worshipper of the Constitution [the founders] wrote would be an understatement.”⁷

On its own, *Constitutional Government* (1908) has not garnered very much attention. A review at the time of its publication by H.E. Flack highlights the main point of the book, that Wilson claims that Federalism is the main contribution of the U.S. to Constitutional government as a whole.⁸ More significantly, using *Congressional Government*, scholars place the philosophies professed in the two works in conversation with each other in an attempt to trace continuity—or lack thereof—in Wilson’s conception of the government and the Constitution. The commonly accepted thesis is that by the time he wrote *Constitutional Government* (1908), Wilson must have changed his opinion, easing on his criticism of the Constitution. As Christopher Wolfe argues, a shift occurs within Wilson’s writings concerning the interpretation

⁵ John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 48.

⁶ Terri Bimes and Stephen Skowronek, “Woodrow Wilson’s Critique of Popular Leadership: Reassessing the Modern-Traditional Divide in Presidential History,” *Polity*, Vol. 29, No.1 (Autumn, 1996), pp.27-63, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3235274>, 29.

⁷ Ibid.; and Marvin Rintala, “Wilson and Congressional Government: The Papers of Woodrow Wilson: 1885. Volume 4 by Arthur S. Link; Woodrow Wilson,” *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Oct. 1968), pp.502-506, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1406112>, 504.

⁸ H.E. Flack, “Constitutional Government in the United States by Woodrow Wilson,” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (May, 1909), pp.303-304, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1994762>, 303.

of the Constitution, from one traditionally espoused by the founders to a more modern understanding of the document's purpose, emphasizing its adaptability.⁹ The treatment of these two works demonstrates the possibility of extracting meaningful conclusions about Wilson from his writing, a conclusion that has yet to be substantially applied to the analysis of his histories.

Indecently, it is political scientists who have completed the most substantial study of Wilson's *History of the American People* (1902). In 1995, Stephen Skowronek and Terri Bimes examined the role of leadership and the American public in Wilson's history. They concluded that these "histories indicate a deep-seated anxiety" concerning popular leadership and demagoguery.¹⁰ Skowronek and Bimes also grant Wilson's *History of the American People* with some level of distinction, giving him credit for contributing something new to leadership studies. They argue, "If there was a new insight into the problem of leadership in these histories it was precisely this: that exemplary statesmen like Washington, Van Buren, Lincoln, and Cleveland were randomly interspersed with apostles of passion like Jefferson, Jackson, and Bryan."¹¹ While this scholarship is still substantially based off of Wilson's political science works, *Congressional Government* and *Constitutional Government*, Skowronek and Bimes have made a good start demonstrating how these writings demonstrate Wilson's personal conception of leadership.

In light of the overwhelming emphasis on Wilson as a political scientist, some secondary scholarship attempts to delegitimize his title as a historian whatsoever. For example, Marjorie Daniel, in her 1933 article entitled "Woodrow Wilson—Historian," made the following statement: "Wilson's sphere of writing was political science, not history."¹² In many respects, it

⁹ Christopher Wolfe, "Woodrow Wilson: Interpreting the Constitution," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Jan., 1979), pp.121-142, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1406981>, 121.

¹⁰ Bimes and Skowronek, "Woodrow Wilson's Critique of Popular Leadership," 58.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹² Marjorie L. Daniel, "Woodrow Wilson—Historian," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Dec. 1934), pp. 361-374, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1897380>, 373.

seems as though this statement characterizes the entirety of academic scholarship about Woodrow Wilson to follow. Henry Wilkinson Bragdon, in his study of Wilson's academic career, belittled Wilson's historical background: "He was not a professional historian. His formal training was limited to the thin courses at Princeton and a once a week seminar at Johns Hopkins."¹³ Niels Aage Thorsen even argues that "Wilson's turn to historical subjects has been somewhat puzzling to his biographers . . . the preoccupation with history has seemed a diversion."¹⁴ These sentiments illustrate the prevalent depiction of Wilson as a political scientist first, and a historian second. Whether it is as a result of his more successful political science work overshadowing his historical endeavors or his limited historical training, historians have yet to take up these works as sources of valuable insight into understanding Wilson.

There is, however, some importance placed upon Wilson's *Division and Reunion* (1893), his book on the Civil War and Reconstruction Era. At the time, this work received praise for its originality. This book was the first work about the Civil War by a Southerner, making the argument that the American nation did not exist until after the Civil War.¹⁵ The most notable review at the time by John Bell Henneman echoes this declaration, stating, "One is hardly wrong in making the assertion that this book, however small and modest, is unique. This is simply to say that it reflects the peculiar influences and training and position of Mr. Wilson among American scholars."¹⁶ The praise has even permeated into today's scholarship, as A. Scott Berg writes, "*Division and Reunion* remains a model of simplicity and clarity; and though it was intended as a textbook, it lacked neither drama nor original insights, especially in discussing the

¹³ Henry Wilkinson Bragdon, *Woodrow Wilson: The Academic Years* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1967), 232.

¹⁴ Niels Aage Thorsen, *The Political Thought of Woodrow Wilson, 1875-1910* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 142.

¹⁵ Daniel, "Woodrow Wilson—Historian," 373.

¹⁶ John Bell Henneman, "The Work of a Southern Scholar," *Sewanee Review*, III (February 1895), 172-88, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Volume IX: 1894-6*, edited by Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 160.

ramifications of slavery.”¹⁷ Unlike the treatment of his other works, *Division and Reunion* has escaped the wave of harsh criticism and assumed irrelevance of *History of the American People* and *George Washington* (1898). Yet, it is interesting to note that despite this positive portrayal, little has been done with scholarship of this work aside from some praise.

In contrast, the treatment of Wilson’s *History of the American People* not only lacks any praise, but it fails to garner any significance or analysis in the most prominent Wilsonian scholarship. The common consensus is that the volumes were badly written, missed out on relevant scholarship, did not amount to much in their own time, and were bad history. As Cooper states, “Though better written than *George Washington*, these volumes amounted to—in the words of a Princeton faculty member—‘a glit-edged pot boiler.’”¹⁸ While discussion of *Congressional Government* and to some extent, *Constitutional Government*, can garner a couple of pages at least, Wilson’s *History of the American People* fails to get even a full page in comprehensive biographies. Link, in his 1963 biography, was nicer than most in his depiction of the histories. He remarks, “Except for *Division and Reunion*, none of Wilson’s writing during this period was very scholarly or original. But it revealed a lively intellect, a conviction that moral purpose must infuse politics if it is to achieve right ends, and a profoundly conservative attitude toward political and social change.”¹⁹ Here, Link provides the beginnings of content analysis in Wilson’s histories. However, even this depth of discussion is not typical, as most historians disregard these works completely.

The criticism is especially harsh towards Wilson’s series of biographical essays that comprise *George Washington*. The critiques are twofold: his writing style, and the content. As far as writing style, Cooper states that “*George Washington* was a bad book, written in an

¹⁷ A. Scott Berg, *Wilson* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2013), 121.

¹⁸ Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography*, 76.

¹⁹ Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson: A Short Biography*, reprint (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1972), 256.

affected style with the saccharine, moralizing tone of contemporary children's books."²⁰ In the most recent comprehensive Wilson biography from 2013 by Berg, he continues this criticism but addresses the content as well. He portrays *George Washington* as "Wilson's poorest literary effort. Under-researched and overwritten, it adopted a foppish tone that did nothing to Americanize or even humanize the first President."²¹ Similarly, Bragdon writes that "one reads the book in vain for any solid information about Washington's character, his abilities, or his political opinions."²² The content criticism is especially insightful, considering that these historians are making definitive claims that this work contains nothing about Washington's character, a claim this paper will challenge. These harsh words reaffirm the work's diminished status in the narrative of Wilson's career, and this negative portrayal has prevented future historians from taking it seriously.

In light of this criticism, instead of seriously considering the ideologies and content contained in these histories, scholars studying Wilson fit these works into their accounts by emphasizing the economic incentives for writing. Around the time of writing these histories, Wilson was building a house, had a family to support, and his Princeton salary was not substantial. As Thorsen explains, "It has been suggested that Wilson made use of 'his facile pen to write popular books' in order to meet his growing financial responsibilities."²³ To gain some perspective, Cooper explains that *George Washington* garnered Wilson "\$300 for each of the six installments."²⁴ Furthermore, *History of the American People* made him \$40,000 by 1910.²⁵ These narratives emphasize Wilson's economic need and the following lucrative results from

²⁰ Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography*, 76.

²¹ Berg, *Wilson*, 133.

²² Bragdon, *Woodrow Wilson: The Academic Years*, 244.

²³ Thorsen, *The Political Thought of Woodrow Wilson, 1875-1910*, 142.

²⁴ Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography*, 76.

²⁵ Bragdon, *Woodrow Wilson: The Academic Years*, 251.

both *History of the American People* and *George Washington*. Doing so not only incorporates Wilson's various publications into a narrative of economic incentive, but devalues other benefits Wilson may have gained from writing these histories.

Marjorie Daniel's 1934 article, "Woodrow Wilson—Historian" was the first and only real study to date taking Wilson's work not as an economic venture or distraction, but as a valuable source for Wilsonian scholarship. She starts off her analysis with a personal and educational biography of Wilson, taking care to highlight his Scotch-Irish, Southerner background. While it seemed as though this would be relevant in her analysis, she soon reverses her trajectory, concluding that:

For one so imbued and impregnated with traditions, a product of the influences that have been suggested, a tinge of prejudice and partisanship would seem unavoidable. Yet, notably enough, Wilson's general historical work reveals, on the whole, a remarkable lack of bias and indicates a view moderate and somewhat catholic in scope.²⁶

Interesting enough, Daniel goes on to contradict herself again, reversing this decision of impartiality, and instead claims that Wilson shows a bias. She places in a footnote: "Wilson's leaning towards the Democrats was not altogether detached from his historical writing. In the *History* there is an apparent condemnation of Federalist measures during the administration of Adams and a bit of praise for Jefferson and his cohorts."²⁷ While this stark claim is hidden in a footnote, it is an argumentative claim that I intend to take on in this paper. Aside from this argument regarding bias, Daniel's analysis soon became a reiteration of reviews at the time, such as those by Frederick Jackson Turner and C.H. Tyne. For an article making claims about the content of Wilson's work, there is very little quoting from the text itself.

A good portion of Daniel's article, aside from critique, was concerned with evaluating Wilson's work in light of his own standards as put forth in the "Truth of the Matter" (1900)

²⁶ Daniel, "Woodrow Wilson—Historian," 363.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 363, footnote 7.

essay. In this essay, Wilson stresses the importance of capturing historical subjects in their own time, and avoiding what we would term “presentism.” He also says it is the responsibility of the historian to provide all angles of the historical time period, and to act as the interpreter for the ill-informed public. Wilson’s failure at this objective is illustrated in C.H. van Tyne’s review, as “the author’s interests are with men and their political activities, and in the portrayal of these he proves himself an artist.”²⁸ After highlighting Wilson’s imbalanced treatment of subjects, emphasis on politics, and tendency to judge, she concludes that “Wilson’s performance, to say the least, falls short of his ideals in certain particulars.”²⁹ While Daniel’s article began as a promising exploration of Wilson’s ideas in his histories, it soon became a critique of Wilson’s historical method. However, Wilson’s conception of history and the historian’s task demands more examination if we are to understand the context from which *History of the American People* and *George Washington* are coming from.

One part of Wilson’s “Truth of the Matter” that he did succeed in was the nature of his language. Reviews at the time praised Wilson’s prose, granting him the title of a “literary artist.” This term was one Wilson referenced in “Truth of the Matter,” as he explains, “the historian needs an imagination quite as much as he needs scholarship, and consummate literary art as much as candor and common honesty.”³⁰ A review in *The Athenaeum* states that “it would be unjust to Dr. Wilson to deny his merit as a writer of history.”³¹ Interesting enough, C.H. Tyne had even nicer words for *George Washington*. He writes, “The literary execution of the work is of a high character, but hardly equal to that of the masterpiece of biography, Mr. Wilson’s ‘Life

²⁸ C.H. Van Tyne, “A History of the American People by Woodrow Wilson,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 21 (May 1903), pp.131-34, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1010306>, 132.

²⁹ Daniel, “Woodrow Wilson—Historian,” 367.

³⁰ Woodrow Wilson, “Truth of the Matter,” *Mere Literature and Other Essays* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1900), 185.

³¹ “A History of the American People by Woodrow Wilson, President of Princeton University,” *The Athenaeum*, No. 3948, (June 1903), pp. 806-807, 806.

of George Washington.”³² Yet, the praise is limited to the language and enormous nature of the task, and does not extend to content or historical merit. Despite this, Berg claims that Wilson’s *History of the American People* “made him one of the best-known historians in the country.”³³

However, there is a discrepancy between public and scholarly audiences and their receptions of Wilson’s work. Bragdon illustrates that “although some general reviewers were ecstatic, the professional historians criticized its omissions, its lack of detail, and the thinness of its scholarship.”³⁴ For example, William Wirt Henry, the President of the American Historical Association in 1891, declares, “It may be said that Professor Wilson has given us no new facts, but he has taken the well-known events of Washington’s life and, with a pen of genius, has thrown around them a fresh charm.”³⁵ This was a common critique that Wilson only relied on secondary sources, as opposed to independent research, which led to a reiteration of existing scholarship. Frederick Jackson Turner, famed at the time for his “frontier thesis,” commented on Wilson’s narrow scope of his histories: “Wilson’s keenest interest is that of a critic of politics, more at home in characterizing political leaders and the trend of events than in dealing with the deeper undercurrents of economic and social change.”³⁶ So it is important to note that even at the time, Wilson’s work was controversial in that he rejected the emerging norms in the field of history, did not live up to his own portrait of a historian, but nevertheless received praise for his use of language.

Some of these critiques made by prominent historians of the time are coming as a result of the changes in the field of history occurring when Wilson was writing. The American

³² Van Tyne, “A History of the American People by Woodrow Wilson,” 134.

³³ Berg, *Wilson*, 134.

³⁴ Bragdon, *Woodrow Wilson: The Academic Years*, 250.

³⁵ William Wirt Henry, “George Washington by Woodrow Wilson; The True George Washington by Paul Leicester Ford,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (April 1897), pp. 539-545, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1833419>, 543.

³⁶ Frederick Jackson Turner, “A History of the American People by Woodrow Wilson,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (July 1903), pp.762-765, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1834363>, 762.

Historical Association was founded in 1884, and with it, Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob argue the profession “began to take on its modern form as an organized, disciplined inquiry into the meaning of the past.”³⁷ This modernization consisted of an adoption of the German concept of *objektivität*, which American historians understood to be scientific objectivity.³⁸ This sentiment stands in direct opposition to Wilson’s views on the purposes of history, as he stated in Wilson’s rejection of the emerging norms of history as a discipline adds another layer of tension that is worth exploring.

Wilson’s main objection to the new strain of objectivity was that he believed it was the purpose of the historian to interpret events for the ill-informed masses. In “Truth of the Matter,” Wilson describes the role of the historian, keeping the reader in mind: “Readers are a poor jury. They need enlightenment as well as information; the matter must be interpreted to them as well as related.”³⁹ *Objektivität* stood in opposition to this goal. Interesting enough, one of the key figures in the transmutation of German historical method, Hermann Eduard Von Holst, writes in praise of Wilson, whom was “no votary of that exaggerated, nay, impossible *objektivität* which virtually amounts to a denial of his right to hold any political or moral opinion as to the events and men he is treating.”⁴⁰ Instead, Wilson viewed it as immoral to abstain from giving interpretation. He states, in “Truth of the Matter,” “If he refrain from judgment, he may deceive us as much as he would were his judgment wrong; for we must have enlightenment—that is his function.”⁴¹ With Wilson’s rejection of objectivity and insistence upon making judgment in mind, it would seem as though the perspectives and beliefs of the historian would unavoidably

³⁷ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 52.

³⁸ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 25.

³⁹ Wilson, “Truth of the Matter,” 169.

⁴⁰ Hermann Eduard Von Holst in Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 25.

⁴¹ Wilson, “Truth of the Matter,” 170.

influence his presentation of history. Despite this conclusion, none of the reviews or articles since then have spent much time examining Wilson's biases and the identities in his life that would lead to those preferences.

Along with this sense of objectivity came a sharp distinction between the realms of history and public life. As Ellen Fitzpatrick notes in *History's Memory*, from the very start the American Historical Association "struggled to free the discipline from its explicit ties to contemporary politics."⁴² Peter Novick, in *That Noble Dream*, discusses the response to the new adoption of scientific objectivity and separation from policy: "With the development of new, autonomous, policy-oriented social science disciplines, there was a migration out of history on the part of those of more activist inclination" into fields such as political science.⁴³ This notion would suggest, for historians such as Woodrow Wilson, that the professionalization of history as a discipline led to the sorting out of those whose "chief interest was in current affairs."⁴⁴ So while modern historians have declared Wilson's endeavors in the field of history as a diversion from his true purpose of political science, perhaps it was that through the process of writing history while these changes were going on around him that Wilson reaffirmed his priorities and interests, which he then channeled through the more appropriate venue of political science and public service.

In line with this division between history and policy-oriented professions emerged a rejection of the traditional emphasis on political history in favor of a diversity of lenses. Novick highlights the fact that in the late nineteenth century, "some historians argued for the enlargement of the scope of history to include the social, economic, and intellectual as well as

⁴² Ellen Fitzpatrick, *History's Memory: Writing America's Past, 1880-1980* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 13.

⁴³ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 69.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

the political and constitutional.”⁴⁵ This sentiment is reflected in the review by Turner, who was himself instrumental in ushering in the importance of economic history and social change.

William M. Sloane, in the first essay of the *American Historical Review*, writes, “Mere political history, for example, will no longer suffice for a public hungering after information.”⁴⁶ Once again, this direction contrasted with the interests and priorities of Woodrow Wilson. In a letter to his wife Ellen Axson, he expresses, “My chief interest is in politics, in history as it furnishes object-lessons for the present.”⁴⁷ Because Wilson was choosing to write for a public audience, whom the responsibility fell on the historian to teach, this would suggest that Wilson’s emphasis on political figures and debates is what he thought was most relevant to the aims of history: to learn from the past in preparation for public service.

Taking into consideration that Wilson openly rejected the new method of scientific objectivity in the practice of history, confined himself to the realm of political history, and believed that it was the duty of the historian to interpret for the masses, it is a wonder that historians have yet to turn to the content of Wilson’s history for more insight into himself. It is not my intention to critique Wilson’s work or evaluate the quality of historical writing being done, as most historians have already accomplished that task. Instead, it is my intention to for the first time take his presentation of figures and events seriously, paying careful attention to the biases and preferences at play in his depiction of the American Revolution. I also seek to directly challenge two of Daniel’s claims: one, that the histories are (for the most part) unbiased and two, that the only traceable bias is of Wilson’s leaning towards the Democrats and Jefferson. I will also be taking on Bragdon’s assertion that *George Washington* has nothing to offer regarding Washington’s character. Most importantly, understanding that Wilson himself viewed writing

⁴⁵ Ibid., 87.

⁴⁶ William M. Sloane in Fitzpatrick, *History’s Memory*, 16.

⁴⁷ Woodrow Wilson in Daniel, “Woodrow Wilson—Historian,” 365, footnote 17.

with a “possessive pronoun” it is necessary to consider the larger implications of treating the writing of history as a process of personal discovery and for Wilson, how that journey may have influenced his identity, allegiances, and political ideology.

SOUTHERN SYMPATHIES AND VIRGINIAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Wilson was born in 1856, Stanton, Virginia, right before the outbreak of Civil War. Although he only lived there for about two years, his family moved around to other southern states during his childhood. Regarding the Civil War, Link states that “Dr. Wilson made his decision in 1861 to go with the Confederacy even though it meant ostracism then and ever afterward by most of his ardently pro-Union family.”⁴⁸ While this would put Wilson making this decision at the tender age of 6, the point Link is attempting to make is that Wilson began to form a deep attachment with the South at an early age, despite his mixed heritage mentioned above. The connection between Wilson and the South as demonstrated in his later writing did not go unnoticed by reviewers at the time, as George L. Beer in *The Critic* accredits aspects of Wilson’s style to his Southern roots. He remarks, “In the South before the war, oratory was practically the sole medium of intellectual expression. The essence of successful oratory lies in appealing to the emotions, to sentiment, rather than to cold reason. This is a fundamental characteristic of Wilson’s writing.”⁴⁹ While Link was quick to make an argument about Wilson’s Southern identity, he failed to provide substantial textual evidence in order to demonstrate how Wilson’s Southern affinity manifested in his histories. Furthermore, his analysis emphasizes Wilson’s Southernness but does not explore the specific role of Virginia in his preferences.

Wilson’s need or desire to rediscover his southern roots comes from the fact that although he spent much of his childhood in the south, he was educated in northern institutions such as

⁴⁸ Link, “Woodrow Wilson: The American as Southerner,” 5.

⁴⁹ Bragdon, *Woodrow Wilson: The Academic Years*, 250.

Princeton University—then the College of New Jersey—and had spent his academic career in the North as well. In an 1886 letter to his wife, Wilson reflects on Ed Cooper, a Southerner whom he had encountered:

He is so intensely Southern in every respect that I conceived at once a distinct liking for him—and yet his very *Southernness* has given me rather mixed feelings in his presence. Why do I notice it—why does some of it grate on my sensibilities—why does it seem to me so much like a reminiscence, if it be not because I myself have become *Northernized*? ...I love the South—don't you believe I do?⁵⁰

Wilson's doubts of his Southernness are echoed by his wife, as Link notes that “Ellen Axson Wilson said during this period, after Wilson had protested one time too many that he loved the South, that her husband was not a southerner in the conventional meaning of that word but was rather an American of southern birth, free of provincialism of any sort.”⁵¹ These concerns—nay, *fears*—about losing his Southernness support Link's assertion that rediscovering roots was a main motivation for Wilson to look to the American past.

In his histories, the main part of Wilson's affinity to the South—and Virginia specifically—was the region's connection to England. “What made the South home for him,” Link explains, “was the power of steadfast conviction that dwelled in the region. The South, alone among all the sections, had been left with her English stock unspoiled by immigration.”⁵² This affinity can be traced in Wilson's depiction of the South and those from it, as their very “Englishness” is a part of what made them great in Wilson's portrayal. In *George Washington* especially, Wilson holds back no praise of Virginia and the men which she bred, reminiscing with admiration that:

Something in her air or her life had given her in these latter years an extraordinary breed of public men—men liberated from local prejudice, possessed of a vision and an efficacy in

⁵⁰ Woodrow Wilson, Woodrow Wilson to Ellen Axson Wilson, May 16, 1886 in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Volume V: 1885-88*, edited by Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 232.

⁵¹ Link, “Woodrow Wilson: The American as Southerner,” 9.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 13.

affairs worthy of the best traditions of statesmanship among the English race from which they were sprung, capable of taking the long view, or seeing the permanent lines of leadership upon great questions, and shaping ordinary views to meet extraordinary ends.⁵³

In this description here, it is also important to note that Wilson perceived Virginians as “liberated from local prejudice.” In other words, these men were not only concerned with the affairs of their state, but had their eyes on national political concerns, which made them prepared for national leadership. The centrality of England and “Englishness” as a part of Virginian exceptionalism will be central to the remainder of this paper both in this section, as well as the one to follow on Federalists.

The relation between England and Virginian men can best be understood through the lens of politics and political men. Wilson is careful to portray a colony made up of “Virginians [who] bore themselves very much as Englishmen did everywhere,” which included their personal characteristics as well as their aptitude for public affairs.⁵⁴ Even more explicitly, in Volume I of *History of the American People*, Wilson reminds the reader that “it was men of the King’s party, the party of Restoration, to whom Virginia now became a familiar home.”⁵⁵ Wilson continues, “Their passion for freedom was born not of local feeling so much as of personal pride and the spirit of those who love old practices and the just exemptions of an ancient constitution.”⁵⁶ In other words, Virginia housed a group of promising men who are to be commended for their dedication to the English way of life and government which allowed them to transcend local interests to understand the national picture of political life. Because of this composition, Wilson

⁵³ Woodrow Wilson, *George Washington* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1898), 261.

⁵⁴ Woodrow Wilson, *History of the American People, Volume I* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1902), 112.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁵⁶ Wilson, *George Washington*, 159.

describes Virginia as the “most loyal of the colonies” and a place where “the King’s interests would be loyally looked after and safeguarded.”⁵⁷

Despite this relation to England, what made Virginia exceptional in Wilson’s eyes is that as soon as she was betrayed by the mother country, her citizens became active participants in the Revolution. In this argument, Virginia was not to be criticized for rebelling against England, but was to be applauded for defending the principle of autonomy in face of an emerging threat.

Wilson writes:

Her people were not Puritans. They were drawn from the general body of Englishmen who believed in the sanctity of the Church and of the crown, at the same time that they loved their own liberty and did not mean to be imposed upon by any man’s power, whether in church or state. Perhaps they did not know how much they were attached to the established order of things in England until those days of revolution came.⁵⁸

He echoes this sentiment in *George Washington*, placing the blame on England instead of Virginia for the breakout of Revolution: “They had even kept the English character as they had received it, against the touch of time and social revolution, until Virginians seemed like elder Englishmen. England changed, but Virginia did not.”⁵⁹ Here and elsewhere in his histories, Wilson is very careful to distinguish between those colonies and people that are naturally rebellious and those being lead to those conclusions out of protection of values.⁶⁰ Virginia was exceptional in Wilson’s mind for her composition of Englishmen, but also for her willingness to break with England and lead the movement for freedom when she was so demanded. It is through this relationship that Wilson is able to praise Virginia’s Englishness while still accounting for the eventual disfavor between the two societies.

⁵⁷ Woodrow Wilson, *History of the American People, Volume II* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1902), 1, 2.

⁵⁸ Wilson, *HOTAP, Vol I*, 181.

⁵⁹ Wilson, *George Washington*, 5.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

Not only was Virginia a participant in the Revolution despite her English loyalties, but Wilson wants to stress that she was the leader of the movement. He tells us in the very first few pages of *George Washington* that “a wholesome democratic spirit pervaded the colony,” and later that “Virginia, it turned out, was, after all, more forward than her neighbors when it came to action.”⁶¹ The part of this “forwardness” that Wilson emphasizes is the establishment of a political governing body in the colony, the House of Burgesses. On the first meeting of the assembly in Virginia in July, 1619, Wilson reflects somewhat dramatically: “We look back with some emotion upon it, as to the first representative assembly in America,—as to the beginning of liberty and self-government in the English colonies; but the colonists themselves seem to have taken it very quietly, as if they had expected it and looked upon it almost as a matter of course in the circumstances.”⁶² Staying true to his sole emphasis on political men, institutions, and affairs as is lamented in the reviews, Wilson’s praise of Virginia the colony outside of its Englishness revolve around her engagement in public affairs, a domain in which she surpassed her fellow colonies.

This distinctiveness carried on beyond the early House of Burgesses to include Virginia’s participation in the early conventions during the Revolution. In this depiction, Wilson places Virginia and all of the South in conflict with Northern expectations. On the distinctiveness of the South in relation to the Northeastern colonies, Wilson notes:

The high bearing and capacity of the Southern delegates came upon the New England men like a great surprise: where they had expected to see rustic squires they found men of elegance and learning. But there was, in fact, no good reason to wonder at the natural leadership of these men. Their life had bred them more liberally than others. It required a much more various capacity and knowledge of the world to administer a great property and live the life of a local magnate in the South than sufficed to put a man at the front of trade or of legal practice in Boston or New York or Philadelphia.⁶³

⁶¹ Ibid., 8, 70.

⁶² Wilson, *HOTAP*, Vol I, 58.

⁶³ Wilson, *George Washington*, 158.

Here we begin to see some of the Southern loyalty that Link saw so prominently in Wilson's historical work, as the "natural leadership" of Southerners separated them from the Northerners. Furthermore, from this passage alone Wilson's beliefs start to emerge concerning the influence of where one grows up on their later capacity and aptitude for leadership. In this case, growing up in the South gave these delegates "elegance and learning," "natural leadership," and "knowledge of the world" that the New Englanders lacked.

The foremost of these Virginians was George Washington. In contrast to Bragdon's claim that *George Washington* does nothing to illuminate the character of the man it is about, Wilson provides much insight into the personal nature of Washington, as well as how he was received at the time. First of all, concerning his nature, Wilson makes frequent references to his "manly" qualities and the fact that he "had displayed an older man's patience."⁶⁴ Interestingly enough, contrary to our perceptions of Washington as a humble, devoted civil servant with virtue, Wilson discusses Washington's great pride. When it came to the possibility of being deprived a rank in favor of ten "Independent Companies" during the Seven Years War, Wilson explains "it was no tradition of his class to submit to degradation of rank thus by indirection and without fault committed, and his pride and sense of personal dignity, for all he was so young, were as high-strung as any man's in Virginia."⁶⁵ Similarly, Wilson writes that "all the land knew him and loved him for gallantry and brave capacity; he carried himself like a prince."⁶⁶ The operative phrasing here that Washington carried himself in a prince-like fashion is once again at odds with expected character, as his desire for a position of authority in the army contradicts his image as a Cincinnatus of his own time. In both of these cases, Wilson is painting a picture of a different

⁶⁴ Ibid., 57, 66.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 79.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 100.

Washington than modern readers would expect, and contrary to the rest of the glorifying—verging on hagiographic—version of Washington that Wilson is displaying.

As a part of his hagiographic portrait of Washington, Wilson spends considerable time illustrating how the public viewed the general. For example, he states, “His very reserve, and the large dignity and pride of his stately bearing, made him seem the more like a hero in the people’s eyes.”⁶⁷ Here we see Wilson highlighting Washington’s very nature and “bearing,” not his accomplishments, as the reason for the public’s amazement. This depiction of Washington as a “hero” is only the beginning of comments of that nature, as Wilson says elsewhere: “Everywhere he was fêted as he went, everywhere he showed himself the earnest, high-strung, achieving youth he was.”⁶⁸ This comment is particularly insightful as he was celebrated everywhere, not just in the South; he was a *national* figure who transcended local loyalties. To put it simply, for the great “hero of the Revolution,” Wilson laments that “the old life would not come back, was gone forever. He was too famous.”⁶⁹

In all of his admiration of George Washington, Wilson attributes his personal exceptionalism to the fact that he was raised in Virginia. He narrates: “Curious folk who looked upon the celebrated young officer upon the road saw him fare upon his way with all the pride of a Virginian gentleman, a handsome man, and an admirable horseman—a very gallant figure, no one could deny.”⁷⁰ This praise in relation to being a Virginian is not limited to the overwhelmingly hagiographic *George Washington*, but is also present in *History of the American People*:

It was inbred in his principles that he should serve the people in true republican spirit, without affectation or presentation. He walked the streets like other men; rode forth for his

⁶⁷ Ibid., 214.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 93.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 241.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 93.

exercise on horseback, as was his Virginian habit; was but little more punctilious in dress and manner than he would have been at home. But the natural majesty of his person, his habitual gravity, his breeding in a formal society, the impression he made upon every one of a man of high passion self-controlled, inevitably gave him distinction, and magnified his office in the imagination of all who saw or dealt with him.⁷¹

In this case, Wilson's "Virginian habit" included not only riding horseback but his "pride," "republican spirit," and "natural majesty." Wilson even goes as far as to relate personal characteristics of Washington to his Virginian identity. For example, Wilson incorporates a discussion of Virginian identity in his description of Washington's courtship with Mary Phillipse: "No young Virginian could live twenty-six years amidst fair women in that hale and sociable colony without being touched again and again by the quick passion. . . he could not pass such a woman by and deem himself still a true Virginian."⁷² As evidenced by the association between breeding and resulting qualities, Wilson sees the importance of the circumstances in which Washington was born, and how that in turn influenced his aptitude for public service. In the case of Washington, his capacity for leadership, courtship habits, and gentlemanly ways were all thanks to his upbringing in the correct colony.

The praise for specific Virginian men does not begin and end with Washington, but extends to Wilson's portrayal of Patrick Henry, whom he deems as the leader of the Revolution.⁷³ Specifically, Wilson writes in Volume III that Henry's Resolutions "were the first word of revolution; and no man ever thought just the same again after he had read them."⁷⁴ Along with leading the Revolution, Henry was the leader of the House in the response to England's tyranny. When it came to responding to the infamous Stamp Act, "Only young men would have had the audacity to urge such action; only very extraordinary young men would have

⁷¹ Woodrow Wilson, *History of the American People, Volume III* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1902), 102.

⁷² Wilson, *George Washington*, 101.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁷⁴ Wilson, *HOTAP, Vol II*, 149.

had the capacity to induce the House to take it. But such young men were at hand, their leader as veritable a democrat as had ever taken the floor in that assembly.”⁷⁵ That leader was Patrick Henry. Once again there is an emphasis on not only Henry’s Virginia-ness, but his capacity for politics and public affairs. Wilson portrays this Virginian heritage as a bond between Henry and Washington that transcends other differences in their upbringing. He writes, “There was but one Virginia, and they were her children. It could not take long to bring them to an understanding and comradeship on affairs.”⁷⁶ In this case, it seems the definition of the Virginia Dynasty should be expanded beyond the first few Presidents to include Patrick Henry and other statesmen like him. Considering Wilson’s own association with Virginia, it makes one wonder to what extent he considered himself another one of these same sons.

Although Wilson’s works—*George Washington* especially—primarily focus on Washington’s excellence, the fact that Wilson’s praise so heavily emphasizes the Virginian nature of the man suggests that this praise applies to more men than the first president alone. As demonstrated by both the depictions of George Washington and Patrick Henry, their greatness can be traced to their Virginian breeding. In turn, what made Virginia great was both its composition of loyal Englishmen who maintained dedication to English principles while quickly shifting to the role of leader of the Revolution when the situation demanded it. In light of all of his praise for Virginian men, there is one notable exception to Wilson’s affinity for Virginian leaders: the man whom was forefront during the early years of the Republic and whom Wilson’s lack of emphasis reveals his preference for Federalist leaders. That man is Thomas Jefferson.

ALEXANDER HAMILTON AND FEDERALIST HEROES

⁷⁵ Wilson, *George Washington*, 126.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

Wilson's strong identification with the South and Virginia, as well as Link's hypothesis regarding rediscovering himself as a Southerner, are challenged once Wilson moves past the Revolution to his discussion about the founding of the American Republic. In his analysis of the founding of the Constitution and forming of the government after the Revolution, Wilson places all importance on the great men at the head of the parties and affairs of the country. He writes, "The common affairs of the country had therefore to be conducted as the revolution itself had in fact been conducted,--not by the authority or the resolutions of the Congress, but by the extraordinary activity, enterprise, and influence of a few of the leading men in the States who had union and harmonious common effort at heart."⁷⁷ While many reviewers, both modern and at the time, criticize his lack of emphasis on the efforts of ordinary people, Wilson focuses on what he believed was important: the political men at the founding. It was through his analysis of these "thoughtful and masterful spirits of the country," known to us as the founding fathers, that Wilson reaffirms that he was a Federalist.⁷⁸

These histories were not the first instance of Wilson forming this identity, as this process began during Wilson's educational years when he left the South to attend Princeton University. Link describes, "During his youth and early manhood, when his political opinions and ideology were being formed, Woodrow Wilson not only failed to think and act like a southerner but, in his strident affirmation of American nationalism and condemnation of sectionalism, indeed went far towards repudiating identification with the South."⁷⁹ It was at this institution, as well as the rest of his educational years, that he turned towards the North and across the Atlantic Ocean for inspiration. As Link puts simply, "Not a single one of Wilson's undergraduate heroes was a

⁷⁷ Wilson, *HOTAP*, Vol III, 22.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁷⁹ Link, "Woodrow Wilson—The American as Southerner," 6.

southerner.”⁸⁰ In these histories, this fact comes through in Wilson’s discussion of the Federalist and Anti-Federalist parties, which are better understood in his work through the proxy of Alexander Hamilton versus Thomas Jefferson respectively. It is in his depiction of these two men that Wilson’s Federalist tendencies emerge and his Southern sympathies are challenged, as Hamilton the New Yorker is applauded while Jefferson the Virginian is criticized.

Even more so than George Washington, Wilson’s histories are full of praise for Alexander Hamilton’s abilities, policies, and leadership. This worship of Hamilton can be traced even before these histories, as writing in an essay entitled “A Calendar of Great Americans” (1894), Wilson refers to Hamilton as a “great Englishman bred in America” and remarked that “certainly one of the greatest figures in our history is the figure of Alexander Hamilton.”⁸¹ The admiration for Hamilton even surpasses that of George Washington, who we have already seen was one of Wilson’s heroes. Of Hamilton, Wilson declares, “it is safe to say that, without men of Hamilton’s cast of mind, building the past into the future with a deep passion for order and old wisdom, our national life would have miscarried at the very first.”⁸² In other words, Hamilton’s leadership both during the forming of the government, ratification of the Constitution, and first administration was crucial for the new country. This sentiment is present in both *George Washington* as well as *History of the American People*, and even further developed to explore the political ideologies of Hamilton, his leadership abilities, and ultimately, his Britishness.

Wilson frequently applauds Hamilton for his political abilities and ability to lead men. As he claims, “The genius and the steadfast spirit of this man were absolutely indispensable to us.”⁸³ Similarly, Wilson, in characterizing Hamilton as the leader of the Federalist Party, emphasizes

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Wilson, “A Calendar of Great Americans,” in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Volume VIII: 1892-94*, edited by Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 369.

⁸² Ibid., 370.

⁸³ Ibid., 369-70.

that he was able to lead it not through demagoguery, but through reasoned control over other men of affairs. He declares, “Mr. Hamilton had been the real master of Federalist policy; but he had ruled the party through a minority in its ranks, not by persuasion or any tact of popular force, but by sheer mastery over men, a power in counsel, a gift of constructive statesmanship unmatched among his contemporaries.”⁸⁴ Wilson was not the only one to notice Hamilton’s superior abilities, as he argues that the early American government placed itself under his leadership: “Congress put itself in these matters under the guidance of Hamilton. The advice given by the young Secretary was characteristic alike of his capacity and of the purposes which he entertained with regard to government.”⁸⁵ Here Wilson is praising Hamilton for his ability to lead a political party, and ultimately, the entire government. But it is crucial to note that these abilities did not include “tact of popular force” but his ability to lead other public men of affairs, a much more noble ability to possess in Wilson’s estimation.

A part of what made Hamilton admirable to Wilson was his closeness with George Washington. In many ways Wilson portrays the two as a team, as “Hamilton’s measures jumped with Washington’s purpose, ran with Washington’s perception of national interests.”⁸⁶ In *George Washington*, after spending nearly the whole biography establishing Washington’s greatness, the reader is surprised to see his newly appointed Secretary of the Treasury surpass the father of the country in Wilson’s narrative. Wilson writes:

No man stood closer to him in his purpose to strengthen and give prestige to the government than Hamilton; and no man was able to discover the means with surer genius. Hamilton knew who the well-wishers of the new government were, whence its strength was to be drawn, what it must do to approve itself great and permanent, with an insight and thoroughness Washington himself could not match...Here was a man, unquestionably, who had a quick genius in affairs; and Washington gave him leave and initiative with such sympathy and

⁸⁴ Wilson, *HOTAP*, Vol III, 158-9.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁸⁶ Wilson, *George Washington*, 284.

comprehension and support as only a nature equally bold and equally originative could have given.⁸⁷

In his depiction of Hamilton, Wilson emphasizes his political skill and “genius.” But interesting enough in light of the kind of language Wilson used about Washington as mentioned above, he is clear that it was Hamilton, not Washington, who was the true “master of Federalist policy.”⁸⁸

In defining the Federalist and Anti-Federalist policy, Wilson divides them on two key dimensions: national versus local interests, and English versus French affinity. Here he describes the differences between the two parties regarding ratifying the Constitution: of the Federalists he describes, “Those who admired a centered and efficient government like that of England and regretted separation, were its advocates,” and of the Anti-Federalists, “those who ardently preferred their own little commonwealths and looked upon them as their best field of prosperity or of personal ambition were its opponents.”⁸⁹ As far as national versus local interests, the Federalists fell on the side of national interests, partly inspired by England, while the Anti-Federalists “preferred their own little commonwealths” and the philosophy of the French. So in his discussion of Alexander Hamilton, Wilson emphasizes his preference for national scope over sectionalized interests and Englishness. Concerning national interests he writes, that Hamilton “had established himself while yet a very young man in New York; but he had taken no color from the place; had kept a mind detached from merely local interests and provincial prejudices.”⁹⁰ In other words, Hamilton was not a committed Northerner. In contrast, he had maintained a national mindset, which only increased his aptitude for public affairs and set him above those who were limited by sectional interests.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 283-4.

⁸⁸ Wilson, *HOTAP*, Vol III, 158-9.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 80-82.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 64.

The second division between the parties was loyalty to England versus loyalty to France. As far as foreign policy, which country the new United States should maintain as an ally was a major platform issue for both parties during elections. Similar to Wilson's praise of Virginia for her Englishness, Hamilton gets the same treatment as his genius was equated with his Britishness. On a "British faction" from which he led the party, Wilson comments:

The men who had hitherto led the Federalist party feared democracy, distrusted it with a ineradicable distrust, believed a strong government was necessary, which should be entrusted to men of the older traditions of power and of statesmanship received from over sea, deemed the English government if stripped of its abuses, the safest model of free institutions, and thought England the only European power worth keeping close friendship with in international dealings.⁹¹

Hamilton's loyalty to England was reflected not only in his foreign policy, but in his views of government overall, and how institutions should be designed. Wilson echoes that sentiment in "A Calendar of Great Americans:" "He believed in authority, and he had no faith in the aggregate wisdom of masses of men. He had, it is true, that deep and passionate love of liberty, and that steadfast purpose in the maintenance of it, that mark the best Englishmen everywhere."⁹² Again, here we see an embrace of Hamilton's abilities in contrast to distrustful "masses of men" and fearful democracy. Hamilton was a statesman of the English variety, and this influence shaped not only his specific policy preferences, but his ability to lead parties and men. Overall, both in *History of the American People* and *George Washington*, Alexander Hamilton emerges as the star, and a clear leader of the Revolution on par with Henry and Washington themselves.

Standing in opposition to Hamilton was Thomas Jefferson, a Virginian and Anti-Federalist whom is surprisingly not among Wilson's heroes. One major difference between the two men is that while Hamilton was Washington's most trusted advisor, Jefferson remained on the sidelines. As Wilson narrates: "Mr. Jefferson became the real leader of the new party of

⁹¹ Ibid., 159.

⁹² Wilson, "A Calendar of Great Americans," 369-70.

opposition, even before he left the cabinet: at first covertly, at last openly; giving it the name *Democratic Republican*, but Washington accepted the leadership of Hamilton, as Congress did, and for a time nothing could withstand the purposes of those who meant to make the new government strong, national, and permanent.”⁹³ Wilson, although in other places he seemingly overlooks the fact that Jefferson was a Virginian man as well, does mention it briefly for the purposes of comparison to Hamilton. Wilson explains that Jefferson “must have expected to find himself, not Hamilton, preferred in the counsels of a Virginian President; was beyond measure dismayed to see the administration already in the hands, as it seemed, of a man just two months turned of thirty-three.”⁹⁴ Through the entire cabinet battle and interaction between Hamilton and Jefferson, Hamilton comes out as the victor with Washington on his side, while Jefferson sat back in the shadows conspiring to take leadership of the cabinet and figuring out a way to “win Washington.”⁹⁵

The main point of difference that separated Hamilton and Jefferson was their views on England and France. Opposed to the Englishness that made other political men great, Wilson portrays Jefferson’s French affinity as his main weakness. In “A Calendar of Great Americans,” where Wilson praised Hamilton so extensively, he had this to say about Jefferson: “Jefferson was not a thorough American because of the strain of French philosophy that permeated and weakened all his thought.”⁹⁶ This difference between French and English sympathies manifested itself most greatly in their relationship with Washington. While Hamilton was his greatest political ally, Wilson characterizes Jefferson as one “who needed watching” due to his French sympathies:

⁹³ Wilson, *HOTAP*, Vol III, 112.

⁹⁴ Wilson, *George Washington*, 287.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁹⁶ Wilson, “A Calendar of Great Americans,” 373.

Washington had taken Jefferson direct from France . . . watching a revolution come on . . . not by statesmen who were masters in the art and practice of freedom, like those who had presided in the counsels of America, but by demagogues and philosophers rather; and the subtle air of that age of change had crept into the man's thought. He had come back a philosophical radical rather than a statesman. He had yet to learn, in the practical air of America, what plain and steady policy must serve him to win hard-headed men to his following; and Washington found him a guide who needed watching.⁹⁷

In this case, the two factors of local-level interests and French sympathies were interconnected, as Jefferson's French loyalties made him sympathetic to the masses. This sentiment also ties into Bimes and Skowronek's argument regarding Wilson's fear of demagoguery, in this case traced through Jefferson and French philosophical ideals. It was this preference for France and lack of Englishness that prevented Jefferson from being one of Wilson's heroes in the way that Hamilton clearly was.

It would be a misrepresentation of Wilson's work to claim that it is entirely void of kind words for the third President. When it came to discussing the demise of the Federalists and ascension of the Anti-Federalists to the Presidency, Wilson writes, "In creed and principle [Jefferson] was the comrade and work-fellow of the people. By gift of insight and genius for organization he was a leader of parties and of concerted action in affairs. An infinite sensibility taught him moderation, lent him tact, pointed out to him the practicable courses of persuasion and the certain prospects of popular support."⁹⁸ It is important to note that this conception of popular leadership is exactly what Bimes and Skowronek argue Wilson was in fear of, so these seemingly favorable comments may not be actual support. Similar to the treatment of George Washington, Wilson attributes part of Jefferson's positive political qualities to his upbringing: "His personal charm, his high breeding without arrogance or pretence (*sic*), gave him gold upon every one with whom he came in contact. No other man could have so moderated, or so

⁹⁷ Wilson, *George Washington*, 289.

⁹⁸ Wilson, *HOTAP*, Vol III, 169.

competed, a revolution in the spirit and conduct of the government.”⁹⁹ However, Wilson still does not emphasize the fact that Jefferson was from Virginia in the way that he does with Washington or Henry. Despite this praise of sorts and acknowledgement of his ability to lead a revolution of government, all of his writing leads Wilson to conclude regarding Jefferson that “though a great man, not a great American.”¹⁰⁰

Between these two idealized founders and the parties they led lies the problem of James Madison, who aside from a few brief mentions is nearly absent from Wilson’s histories. What is perplexing about Madison is that he possesses qualities from both Hamilton and Jefferson. With Hamilton he shares advocacy for the Federalist Constitution, Englishness, and some sort of ties to the North through education. Similar to the depiction of Hamilton, Madison is praised a little in the “A Calendar of Great Americans” for his “English genius for affairs.”¹⁰¹ Furthermore, he worked alongside Hamilton in the writing of the *Federalist Papers*, and for a time was an avid Federalist. Wilson provides admiration for the *Federalist Papers*, writing:

They read like what they were, the utterances of statesmen,—of statesmen drawn for the nonce out upon the general field of the theory and practice of government . . . These papers were henceforth to be the chief manual of all students and historians of the constitution. And their style, with its unfailing lucidity, its cogency without artificial emphasis, its unmistakable distinction and elevation of tone, matched their matter. This was the masterpiece of letters in the sober kind bred by revolution.¹⁰²

These are the only words given to Madison’s role during the Constitutional convention, despite the worship as the “Father of the Constitution” that we grant him today. Unlike the other founding fathers, Madison is cast in a supporting role, and his association with England and Hamilton are not emphasized beyond what is shown here.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 169.

¹⁰⁰ Wilson, “A Calendar of Great Americans,” 373.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 370.

¹⁰² Ibid., 98.

With Jefferson, Madison shares a tie to the South and later embrace with Anti-Federalism, as Madison turned away from Hamilton and the Federalists later in life. Madison was a native of Virginia as well, something that is only mentioned in passing when listing delegates to the Constitutional Convention. As far as his Anti-Federalist turn, Wilson uses Madison to discuss the eventual demise of the Federalist Party. He describes Madison as “a man whose reaction against Federalist policy and whose slow alienation from Washington and Hamilton might well mark for every thinking man the measure of the Federalist mistake with regard to the temper and inclinations of the people they were governing.”¹⁰³ Here is some of the present, albeit brief, criticism of the Federalists that Marjorie Daniel claims dominated the bias of these histories. However, this is the extent to which Madison’s political views during the founding are discussed at any length, and it is strange that his Virginian heritage is not discussed to the extent of other members of the Virginia Dynasty.

In many ways, Madison seems to be very representative of Wilson himself. Interestingly enough, when Wilson became President, he would remark that he and Madison were “the only two Princeton men that have become President.”¹⁰⁴ Incidentally, Wilson would later draw the parallel between the circumstances which led him and Madison to war. It is interesting that he would point to the Northeastern identity that held them together, and not the fact that they were both from Virginia or (once) had an affinity for Federalist principles. The reason that Madison presents a problem is that he exists between the two idealized constructions of Hamilton and Jefferson that Wilson has created. Because Madison possessed qualities shared by both the hero Alexander Hamilton and the demagogue Thomas Jefferson, Wilson seems to have been unable to

¹⁰³ Ibid., 156.

¹⁰⁴ Wilson in Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography*, 266.

incorporate him adequately into the histories, as he presented somewhat of an enigma, much like Wilson himself.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Far from being free of bias or purely biased towards Jefferson's "Democrats," a careful examination and discussion of Wilson's *George Washington and History of the American People* reveals strong admiration for Washington and Hamilton, as well as for Virginia and the South. The common thread between these sympathies is the connection to England, manifested in loyalty, English statesmanship, and a preference for national interest. However, when faced with James Madison, who possesses many of these same identities, Wilson does not show praise but indifference. Maybe this is because he realized that he himself, like Madison, was drawing inspiration from sources that were in conflict with each other. For the case of Wilson, his strong admiration of Hamilton and his brand of Federalism made him an adversary of Jefferson, the man whose tradition he was continuing as a member of the Democratic Party. As Cooper explains concerning the contest between Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt during the election of 1912, "The true precedent and analogy to their adversarial relationship with the long-running clash a century earlier between Jefferson and Hamilton, with their conflicting visions for the nation's future. Roosevelt and Wilson were their twentieth-century successors."¹⁰⁵

As a result of this heritage, historians attempt to find a turn towards Jefferson later on as Wilson's political career began. The turning point for many historians is at the Jefferson Day Dinner in the National Democratic Club (1906) where Wilson referenced the "Jeffersonian spirit" and "had defined a 'Progressive Democrat' as someone who will try to carry forward. . . in the spirit of Thomas Jefferson."¹⁰⁶ As Bragdon remarks, "formerly Jefferson had not been one

¹⁰⁵ Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography*, 179.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

of Wilson's heroes"¹⁰⁷ Does this emergence of public praise imply that Jefferson suddenly became one of Wilson's heroes? Did his opinion change? Or was it merely a matter of political expediency? Cooper suggests that "something deeper than political expediency dictated Wilson's late-blooming affinity for Jefferson. It was Wilson's recognition that they shared the same optimistic view of human nature and the belief in the importance of creating an environment in which people can freely use their energies in the pursuit of their own happiness."¹⁰⁸ The notion of a Wilson whose politics evolved with the times would make him even more like his fellow "Princeton man," James Madison. However, it is doubtful that Wilson abandoned Hamilton completely.

Some would argue that the identities Wilson developed through writing these histories are inconclusive in the grander scheme of Wilson's political philosophy and party identification. For one, Link especially warns that "It would be risky indeed to try to establish any connection between Wilson's self-identification as a southerner with the development of his political thinking and policy."¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, although acknowledging Wilson's attachment to Hamilton, Link disregards the notion that it had any bearing on his politics: when Wilson referred to himself as a Federalist, "Wilson did not mean that he was a Hamiltonian in politics or economic philosophy. He meant simply what the record about his formative years emphasizes—that he had been a nationalist in his attitude toward the Union and the Constitution ever since he was an undergraduate."¹¹⁰ Considering the fact that in his histories Wilson defines Federalists by their dedication to national interests and Englishness, Wilson was Federalist—perhaps it is more

¹⁰⁷ Bragdon, *Woodrow Wilson: The Academic Years*, 339.

¹⁰⁸ Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography*, 179.

¹⁰⁹ Link, "Woodrow Wilson—The American as Southerner," 16.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

appropriate to say Hamiltonian—enough to put him at odds with the states’ rights centric Anti-Federalist tradition of Jefferson.

This study is just the beginning, as it only incorporates the first three volumes of his *History of the American People*. His later two volumes of *History of the American People*, as well as Wilson’s *Division and Reunion*, which all deal with Andrew Jackson’s presidency through the Civil War and Reconstruction, have yet to receive this treatment. It could be interesting to take on David Steigerwald’s thesis that Wilson was the “supreme political centrist” who “drew, far more than has been recognized, from a Whiggish conception of the statesman and of the mutual responsibilities of the state and citizen” and “carried his Whiggish political assumptions, which he qualified and updated, into Progressive Era politics.”¹¹¹ Roots of Wilson as a Whig can already be seen in the “A Calendar of Great Americans,” as it contains high praise for Henry Clay and Abraham Lincoln, two men fully entrenched in the Whig tradition.

Considering how Wilson conceptualized history with a “possessive pronoun” and the task of the historian as to interpret and provide judgment, it would be irresponsible not to look at the rest his works for more insight into himself. *History of the American People* and *George Washington* and the judgements that they contain belong to Wilson. While his aim may have been to educate the masses about the great political men of the past, it would be an injustice to overlook the narrative about Wilson being revealed alongside the American founding. After having gone through the process of writing history, Wilson reflected on what he had achieved and stated “I wrote the history of the United States in order to learn it.”¹¹² For Wilson, learning about the statesmen of the American past reaffirmed his belief in the importance of political men in making history and gave him an appreciation for his complex identity, effectively facilitating

¹¹¹ David Steigerwald, “The Synthetic Politics of Woodrow Wilson,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (Jul.-Sept., 1989), pp.465-484, 465, 477.

¹¹² Woodrow Wilson in Bimes and Skowronek, “Woodrow Wilson’s Critique of Popular Leadership,” 40.

his transition from Woodrow Wilson the historian to Woodrow Wilson the politician. What he learned in his sorting of political men was more than a list of their accomplishments or contributions to the US, but also the rediscovery of the very identities that would later shape another history maker.

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