

## Woodrow Wilson: A Great Scholar and Educator

Samrit Yossomsakdi \*

Ph.D. (Philosophy)

Woodrow Wilson was one of forty-two Presidents of the United States. More specifically, Wilson was the twenty-eighth President serving the country for two terms between 1913 and 1921. Very few Americans know that almost his entire life before entering political career, Wilson had been engaged in academic pursuits. Wilson's academic career started as a student, then as a professor and writer, finally as a university president of Princeton and educational innovator. Wilson was the only President of the United States who had earned a doctoral degree. Even though Wilson's life was intriguing, the principal purpose of this study aims to capture only some portion of his contributions to higher education. However, his political life can not be ignored. The overview of Wilson's biography will reveal how a great statesman he was. The study will discuss some major academic studies of Woodrow Wilson by focusing on the issues which most scholars in public administration recognize as a turning point of the academic discipline. Finally, the study will also discuss Wilson's major contribu-

tions to higher education during his years as the president of Princeton University.

### Overview<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Woodrow Wilson was born on December 29, 1856, in Staunton, Virginia. He was the son of Joseph Ruggles Wilson, a Presbyterian minister. Wilson grew up in Augusta, Georgia, and Columbia, South Carolina, during the years of reconstruction. Because of illness, Wilson briefly attended Davidson College in North Carolina, before entering the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University, in September 1875. He became an ardent debater, writer, and editor for college magazines. After graduating from Princeton, Wilson continued his studies in the school of law at the University of Virginia from 1879 to 1883. He prepared for his law career by opening an office in Atlanta in June 1882. Discontented with unsuccessful law practice for a year, Wilson quit and then enrolled in the new graduate school at the Johns Hopkins University in 1883 to study political science and history. His Ph.D. thesis won consider-

<sup>1</sup> In writing this part, the author has summarized the contents from various sources, such as *Woodrow Wilson: American Prophet*, written by Arther Walworth; *Woodrow Wilson: The Academic Year*, by Henry Bragdon; *Woodrow Wilson: A Profile*, by Arther Link. Those interested in Wilson's biography may consult the literature listed in the references.

able acclaim and he went to teach as an associate professor at Bryn Mawr College between 1885 and 1888. Wilson assumed a professorship at Wesleyan University in 1888. Two years later in 1890, Wilson was offered a professorship of jurisprudence and political economy at Princeton. As a professor, Wilson had been engaging in academic teaching and writing for 12 years, when he was unanimously elected to be the president of Princeton in 1902.

After serving as a president of Princeton for 8 years, Wilson had gained wide public attention due to his work with university reform. New Jersey party leaders offered him the Democratic nomination for Governor in September 1910. After assuming the governorship, Wilson pushed an ambitious reform program that progressives of both parties had been advocating for a decade. This was a rapid rise to his political prominence, and as a result, Wilson won the Democratic presidential nomination in 1912. During his campaign, he outlined a program he labeled the "New Freedom," designed to restore competition and sweep away special privileges and individual energies. In the election, Wilson received an overwhelming electoral vote, at least in part due to the third party candidacy of former President Theodore Roosevelt.

During his presidency, Wilson endorsed various pieces of legislation passed by Congress: the Underwood Act; a Graduate Federal Income Tax Act; and the Federal Reserve Act. In 1914 antitrust legislation established a Federal Trade Commission

to prohibit unfair business practices. One new law prohibited child labors; another limited railroad workers to an eight-hour day.

Using the slogan "he kept us out of war," Wilson narrowly won re-election for a second term. But after the election, Wilson concluded that America could not remain neutral in the World War and asked Congress for a declaration of war on Germany which was ratified on April 6, 1917.

On January 18, 1918, Wilson presented Congress with a specific basis for peace negotiations base on his famous Fourteen Points<sup>2</sup>. After the German signed the Armistice in November 1918, Wilson tried to build a stable peace. He later presented to the Senate the Versailles Treaty<sup>3</sup>, containing the Covenant of the League of Nations. The Treaty of Versailles was signed in June 1919, and Wilson returned home to seek ratification by the Republican-Controlled Senate. However, the Versailles Treaty failed in the Senate. Wilson suffered a nervous breakdown from exhaustion followed by a massive stroke from which he never fully recovered. Even though he was awarded the 1919 Nobel Peace Prize for advocating the establishment of the League of Nations, Wilson's last hope for the presidential election was not fulfilled. The Republican Warren G. Harding swept into office with an unprecedented majority. Wilson went into retirement a sick and saddened man, and died on February 3, 1924.

<sup>2</sup> More details can be studied in *Woodrow Wilson: World Prophet* by Arther Walworth, pp. 148-156.

<sup>3</sup> See *Woodrow Wilson: World Prophet* by Arther Walworth, pp. 319-321.



In regard to his family, Wilson got married twice. He first married Ellen Louise Axson in 1885. They had three daughters: Margaret Wilson; Jessie Wilson, and Eleanor Wilson. After Ellen Axson Wilson died in 1914, Wilson married Edith Bolling Galt in 1915. Some have said that Edith Wilson was the first female president of the United States because she helped her husband run the oval office while Wilson was ill during his late political career.

### Scholarly Works of Woodrow Wilson

During his academic years as professor, the entire volume of Wilson's production was brought out nine books and nearly three dozen articles (Garraty, 1956: 20). Wilson's most important book was probably his first Congressional Government, which was also his dissertation for a Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins University in April 1886 (Bragdon, 1967: 154).

The focus of Wilson's first book was to compare the American governmental system to the cabinet system used in England to demonstrate that the U.S. lacked unified authority. On public administration, Wilson was concerned that departments technically answered to the president, but in reality answered to congressional oversight and budgetary committees (Martin, 1989: 219).

The other books of Wilson include *The State*, *The Philosophy of Politics*, *Division and Reunion*, *Epochs of America*, and *History of the American People*. However, the more books Wilson wrote, the more his scholarship deteriorated. *Division and Reunion* was a careful and scholar study, written

in simple and concise language; but his *History of American People* apparently served one useful purpose, increasing his income (Garraty, 1956: 23-24).

In his academic years, Wilson enjoyed constant demand as a speaker. Popular lecturing became a subsidiary career and a source of considerable income. From 1880 through 1897, Wilson delivered a set of annual winter lectures at Johns Hopkins on the subject of administration. He also gave lectures at the New York Law School, spoke widely, contributed to popular magazines, and wrote best-selling biography and history (Link, 1968: 1).

### Woodrow Wilson and the Study of Administration

The origins of public administration may be traced to the earliest human societies. European civilization influenced American public administration during the Colonial and Revolutionary periods. In the 1880s administrative reforms such as the Civil Service Reform Act (the Pendleton Act) greatly accelerated the development of a professional public administration. Wilson was one of the foremost pioneers in public administration to develop the field within the universities (Vocino & Rabin, 1981: 15).

Most scholars in public administration agree that the principle focus of public administration as an academic field began in 1887 by marking the year when Wilson's classic essay, "The Study of Administration," was published in the *Political Science Quarterly* in 1887. The article described the evolution of government through the three phrases

of absolute rule, constitutional government, and the administration of constitutional government. Wilson argued that politics and administration were different functions, making it practical to improve administration without harming political democracy. He issued a call to political scientists to study more effective techniques for administration (Martin, 1989: 219-220).

The timing of Wilson's essay on administration was crucial to its later influence. His model of the ideal American civil service reflected growing popular sentiment for a competent civil service. His insistence upon the application of scientific method based upon qualification and stable principle was reiteration of the idea of unlimited human progress.

In his essay, Wilson tried to separate administration from politics by asserting that administrative questions were not political questions. Although politics sets the tasks for administration, it should not be allowed to manipulate its offices. Wilson had accurately diagnosed the government ills of a nation during a fundamental transition. It is no exaggeration to say that his essay marked the beginning of the self-consciousness of public administration. Since no single figure has since dominated the field to an equal degree. Woodrow Wilson, with considerable justification, may be regarded as the

founding father of American public administration<sup>4</sup> (Simmons & Dvorin, 1977: 210).

### Wilson as the thirteenth President of Princeton<sup>5</sup>

When President Francis L. Patton was retired in 1902, the trustees unanimously elected Wilson to fill the position. Wilson as the new president presented a program to transform Princeton into a major university. He tightened academic standards so severely that enrollment declined sharply until 1907, when it again began to rise due to the quality of the program.

One of Wilson's first actions was to create departments of instruction with heads directly responsible to the president. He later arranged the creation of new deanships of the department of science and of the college. At the same time, he took the power of faculty nominations out of the control of the trustees and lodged it in the president and departments.

In 1904, Wilson led the faculty in instituting the most significant curricular reform in American higher education in the twentieth century. Wilson substituted a unified curriculum of general studies during the first two years, capped by concentrated study in one discipline (the first program for a

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted here that, besides Woodrow Wilson, Frank J. Goodnow was another prominent scholar in public administration who early posited the existence of a major distinction between politics and administration which later became the politics/administration dichotomy. According to Goodnow, politics has to do with policies or "the expression of state will," while administration has to do with the implementation of policies or "the execution of state will." Some scholars also argue that Goodnow should be considered the father of American public administration.

<sup>5</sup> In writing this part, the author has mainly utilized the book *Woodrow Wilson: The Academic Year*, written by Henry Bragdon, as his major source.



major) and related fields during the junior and senior years.

The following year, 1905, Wilson transformed the teaching system. Supported by the first organized yearly alumni fund-raising campaign in Princeton's history, Wilson overnight doubled the faculty by the appointment of almost fifty assistant professors called preceptors. With a remarkable eye for quality, Wilson assembled what was probably the finest young faculty anywhere. Out of this group came many of the professors and administrators who later made Princeton renowned among the universities of the world.

Wilson also strengthened the science program, insisting that research in science should be pure research. He took biblical instruction out of the hands of a fundamentalist and appointed scholars in his place. He broke the hold of conservative Presbyterians over the Board of Trustees. As a result of his efforts, the Board declared Princeton a non-sectarian institution.

## Conclusion

Most scholars have written the various facets of Woodrow Wilson's story, especially during the period of his Presidency. Many books describe his contributions during the period of his American Presidency. A great man's reputation tends to fluctuate with the passage of time, for each generation views him from a different view. However, considering Woodrow Wilson's works during the period of his academic career, we should accept that he made significant contributions to higher education. As a scholar, Wilson fulfilled his accomplished career by earning a doctoral degree, assuming a professorship in a great university, and becoming well-known as a founding father of American public administration. As a university administrator, he contributed notably to some major changes in higher education. Finally, as a politician, he became one of the great Presidents of the United States, and later a world's leader during the period of World War 1.

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