

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 230

### “Keep Cool with Coolidge”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Hardly anyone knew who Calvin Coolidge was when he became President. Even those who did know him did not think of him as a visionary or a gifted public speaker, and few would call him charismatic.

But his unlikely accession to the Presidency would lead to a surprisingly successful administration, one even few of his friends could have predicted.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 230. Keep Cool with Coolidge.

Vice President is an obscure office in the US political system, and that combined with Calvin Coolidge's natural reticence meant he was an unfamiliar figure to many Americans. Less than four years had passed between the Boston police strike that had thrust him into the national spotlight and his assuming the Presidency, making the new President a bit of an enigma. Coolidge approached the office with humility and with the conviction that, given how he had come to the office, it was his duty to continue to pursue Harding's policies rather than substitute his own.

The period from 1924-1929 is fondly remembered in many countries, but nowhere more so than the USA and Germany. But the prosperity was not broadly shared. It was a time of great economic inequality. It was also a tough time to be a farmer, as crop prices remained stubbornly low, despite the good times. Perversely, the problem was high productivity. Farmers were investing heavily in tractors and other modern machinery, which greatly increased yields. Unfortunately for the farmers, yields rose faster than demand, so farmers found themselves working harder and going deeper into debt just to maintain their existing incomes. The prospect of increasing their incomes always seemed as close as the latest new machine on sale in the town, but that new machine never quite did the trick either.

Some in Congress proposed programs under which the Federal government would guarantee crop prices by buying up surplus produce, to be stored against future shortfalls or sold on the international market, but President Coolidge, along with Treasury Secretary Mellon, and Commerce Secretary Hoover were all staunch opponents of any kind of relief for farmers. “Farmers never have made much money,” Coolidge said. It was like the weather. What can you do about it?

At first, no one was even sure if Calvin Coolidge wanted to run for President in his own right. Remember that as of this moment in history, Coolidge is the sixth Vice President to assume the office following the death of his predecessor, but only one of those five previous Presidents was then elected to the office for a subsequent term: that would be Theodore Roosevelt in 1904, twenty years ago. In December 1923, after just four months in office, Coolidge announced that he was indeed running for President in 1924, and in fact he would have little difficulty in winning his party’s nomination.

The year 1924 would be an eventful one for the new President, and not just because he was a candidate. It was a year in which Congress passed important new legislation, including the Revenue Act of 1924, Andrew Mellon’s brain child that lowered income tax rates. There was also the Indian Citizenship Act, which gave US citizenship to all indigenous people living within the borders of the United States. Let me say that again, because it’s hard to believe, but it was only in 1924, less than one hundred years ago as I record this, that all Native Americans became US citizens. Prior to that time, native people only became US citizens if they were naturalized, say by serving in the US military or marrying a US citizen. Most, but not all, indigenous Americans fell into this category at the time. Now at last, every one would be a citizen and have the right to vote, although legal impediments to indigenous peoples voting would remain in force in some US states until the 1950s.

And while I’m on the subject of civil rights, I’ll note that Calvin Coolidge was a typical Republican of this period, in that he was formally in support of equal rights for African Americans and called for a Federal anti-lynching law. On the other hand, he maintained segregation in Federal employment. Coolidge did give the 1924 commencement address at historically Black Howard University in Washington, DC, during which he thanked African Americans for their contributions to the nation.

Coolidge made similar remarks in other venues in which he praised the contributions of immigrants to America, and that brings us to the politically fraught issue of immigration.

Issues around immigration to the US have come up several times before on the podcast. From the early days of the American Republic, just about anyone could come to the US and become a citizen. So long as they were white Europeans. Not only come to the US, but during the era of homesteading, newly arrived European immigrants could get free land from the United States government, subject only to the condition that they live on the site and farm it.

After the Civil War, the ban against immigrants of African ancestry was removed. Asian immigration to the West Coast of the US, especially from China, became a controversial topic and led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Japanese immigration was limited under the so-called Gentlemen's Agreement between the US and Japan in 1907, episode 43.

By the early twentieth century, resistance was rising even against immigration from Europe. In the aftermath of the assassination of President McKinley by Leon Czolgosz, the American-born son of Polish immigrants, new laws were passed barring anarchists and people who believed in the overthrow of the US government from entry into the US. Not that any of these laws would have stopped Leon Czolgosz, who was born in the United States, but never mind. Further new laws banned immigrants who were "likely to become a public charge," as the language went, meaning people who seemed as if they wouldn't be able to support themselves. This gave immigration officials broad latitude to block pretty much anyone they didn't like the looks of.

In 1912 and again in 1915, Congress passed immigration legislation that would have banned the illiterate from becoming US citizens. These bills were both vetoed by Presidents Taft and Wilson respectively, as they took the view that people who lacked education should be offered the opportunity to improve themselves.

In early 1917, shortly before the US declared war on Germany, Congress passed a new immigration bill, this time over President Wilson's veto. This bill finally enacted the ban on immigrants unable to read that had been vetoed twice before, but it far went beyond that. It expanded the ban on immigration from China, in place since 1882, to cover all immigrants from anywhere in Asia or the Pacific Islands. The only exceptions were Japan, still covered by that Gentlemen's Agreement, and the Philippines, which were a US territory. It also expanded language barring immigrants with physical or mental disabilities. It did not specifically mention homosexuality, but since the prevailing view of the time was that homosexuality was a mental illness, the new law could be and was interpreted as barring the immigration of LGBT people.

Let me underscore that this law was passed before the US entered the Great War. Once the US did enter the war, there was a backlash against Americans of Irish and German ancestry, many of whom had opposed US involvement in the war. You recall Theodore Roosevelt's embarrassing 1915 speech in which he declared that "There is no such thing as a hyphenated American who is a good American." After the US actually entered the war, this only got worse. Even Woodrow Wilson got into the act, declaring, "Any man who carries a hyphen about with him carries a dagger that he is ready to plunge into the vitals of this Republic..."

We saw on this podcast how, almost as soon as the Armistice was declared, fear and suspicion around Germans and possible German sabotage segued into fear and suspicion of Bolshevism. Just as quickly, worries about Irish- and German-Americans putting their ethnic identities ahead of their loyalties to America segued into worries about Americans of Italian, Jewish, and Eastern European ancestry. In recent decades, immigrants from Italy and Eastern Europe had far

outnumbered the more familiar immigrants from the British Isles, Germany, and Scandinavia who were more characteristic of 19<sup>th</sup> century immigration. It was from these immigrant communities that came the socialists and the anarchists and the Bolsheviks. They were also accused of bringing crime. Their Catholic and Orthodox religious backgrounds made Protestant Americans uncomfortable. You heard many arguments that people from these more hierarchical faith traditions did not understand or value democracy the way Protestants did.

And they were accused of being too close knit, communities where people spoke the language of the old country as they worked together, studied together, worshipped together. They failed (or refused) to learn English or mingle with the larger American society or assimilate its values. Of course, this is an old story. Benjamin Franklin complained about German immigrants before the Revolution, and you still hear this complaint in our time, now leveled by the great-grandchildren of immigrants who once stood accused of the very same thing.

If you don't mind my inserting a personal observation here, my own maternal grandmother was an ethnic Polish immigrant to the United States. She arrived during the Theodore Roosevelt administration and lived in this country for more than fifty years, until her death, but never learned English or became a US citizen. When she needed something from the larger English-speaking community, she made one of her kids deal with it. Sometimes I think I'm the only descendant of Eastern European immigrants to the US who still remembers what our ancestors were actually like. That's why it's so important to know your history.

But I digress. After the turmoil of 1919 and 1920, when Warren Harding was elected to restore normalcy, there was a general consensus in Washington that there were too many of the wrong sort of immigrant coming to the United States. Too many Italians and Eastern Europeans. In 1921, just two months after the new Republican President and Congress were sworn in, Congress passed, and Warren Harding signed, the Emergency Quota Act to limit immigration from Europe.

It was framed as emergency legislation, meant to bridge the time it would take to develop a more considered immigration policy, but this 1921 bill marked a sharp departure from previous practice. For the first time, there would be quotas set on immigrants from particular countries. The Act set the limit for each country at 3% of the number of US residents from that country listed in the 1910 census. The new Act reduced overall immigration to about one-third of what it had been in 1920, but the results differed sharply, depending on the country of origin. The Act had almost no impact on immigration from Britain or Germany, but drastically reduced the numbers from Italy and Eastern Europe.

In 1924 came the new, comprehensive immigration act, which laid out even stricter quotas. The limit was reduced from 3% to 2% of the number of US residents from each country, and instead of the 1910 census, the standard would be the 1890 census, which had been done before immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe really got going. The overall number of

immigrants allowed into the US per year would be reduced to 165,000, and later to 150,000. Again, the limits restricted Southern and Eastern European immigrants far more tightly than people from Northern and Western Europe. For example, the new law reduced immigration from the UK by about 60%; it reduced immigration from Italy by 98%, down to just 4,000 people per year.

Jewish people were not singled out for special quotas, but the Act curtailed immigration from Russia and Poland, the two countries that had the largest Jewish populations. These quotas would not be relaxed even as persecution of Jews became increasingly common over the 1920s and 1930s. In fact, the 1924 Immigration Act would remain in force with only minor changes until 1965.

Finally, the 1924 Immigration Act also shut the door on Japanese immigration. For many Americans, this was the most significant aspect of the bill; some called it the “Japanese Exclusion Act,” by analogy to the 1882 “Chinese Exclusion Act.” Even President Coolidge had doubts about the wisdom of this provision, but despite those doubts, and despite his praise for the contributions of immigrants, he did sign the bill. Henceforth, Japan would be included in the general ban on immigrants from Asia, much to the displeasure of the Japanese government. We’ve seen in the podcast how Japan has repeatedly protested discriminatory treatment of Japanese immigrants in the US and how this became one of the major sticking points in US-Japanese relations. It was just five years ago that the Japanese Foreign Ministry was pushing for an anti-racist provision in the League of Nations charter. Now, we are here. This 1924 Act was the last straw for the Japanese; US relations with Japan would not recover until after the two nations fought a war.

Oops. Spoiler alert.

Besides the immigration act, and the American Indian Citizenship Act and the income tax cuts, there was one more major piece of legislation passed in 1924, but this one over Calvin Coolidge’s veto: the so-called Bonus Bill, previously also vetoed by Warren Harding, that would provide additional benefits to war veterans. What made this bill different from the earlier version, different enough to allow it to carry enough support in Congress to override a Presidential veto, was that payments to veterans would not be made in cash, but rather in the form of certificates that could be redeemed in twenty years, in 1945, by the veteran or by the veteran’s estate. Coolidge dismissed the proposal, as a mockery of patriotism “bought and paid for.”

This flurry of legislative activity came at the same time Coolidge was running for President in his own right. Coolidge’s conservative, pro-business stance was disappointing to Progressive Republicans like Senators Fighting Bob LaFollette of Wisconsin and Hiram Johnson of California. Johnson was moved to enter the race in an effort to wrest the nomination away from

Coolidge, but he was unsuccessful. Johnson won only one primary election in the campaign, the one in South Dakota, losing to the incumbent everywhere else, including in his home state.

Hiram Johnson, remember, was Theodore Roosevelt's Vice Presidential candidate in the 1912 election, the one in which Roosevelt ran on the third-party Progressive ticket, episode 63. Twelve years later, Johnson, now 57, was a less-than-ideal standard bearer for the Progressive movement. As conservative as Coolidge was, there were a few issues where Johnson stood to his right, such as the immigration bill. Johnson, as a Californian, enthusiastically supported excluding Asian people from the United States. Johnson also opposed the Harding-Coolidge proposal for the United States to join the World Court.

[music: LaRocca and Shields, "At the Jazz Band Ball"]

The Republican National Convention opened on June 10 in Cleveland, Ohio, and Calvin Coolidge was nominated for President overwhelmingly on the first ballot. What drama there was at the convention was over the Vice Presidential nomination. Coolidge refused to name a candidate, leaving the decision to the convention. The decision was made with more consideration than usual, given that the two previous Presidents, Wilson and Harding, both had had health emergencies while in office and one of them had died, underscoring the importance of selecting a Vice President capable of taking on the top job if needed. It took the convention just three ballots to settle on the 58-year-old Charles Dawes, a banker who was serving on the Allied Reparations Commission. Earlier in the year, Dawes had helped broker a compromise over one of the many spats between the Allies and Germany over reparations payments. Dawes had arranged some US loans to help finance German industry and thus ease the way to a compromise. We will certainly dig into the Dawes Plan in more detail in future episodes, but for now I'll just note that for his efforts in peacemaking in Europe, Dawes would win the 1925 Nobel Peace Prize; by then he would also be Vice President of the United States.

The Democratic National Convention was held two weeks later in New York City. The Democratic Party's large gains in the 1922 mid-term elections had buoyed their confidence in a 1924 comeback, but by June, when the convention opened, it was already clear the party was in deep trouble. The leading candidate for the nomination was the now 60-year-old William Gibbs McAdoo. He was Woodrow Wilson's Secretary of the Treasury and son-in-law. In the first role, he had ably handled the financial crisis in the US caused by the outbreak of the Great War, episode 89. In his second role, as both political and literal heir to Woodrow Wilson, he could hope to parlay his father-in-law's stature within the party into a Presidential nomination.

But things went wrong for McAdoo from the start. First of all, in January 1924, Edward Lawrence Doheny, testifying before the Senate investigating committee and defending his practice of hiring ex-government officials, named McAdoo as one of the political leaders on his payroll, which linked McAdoo to the Teapot Dome scandals. Doheny did this specifically to embarrass the Democrats, since Thomas Walsh, the committee chair, was a Democrat. A couple

of weeks later, in February, Woodrow Wilson passed away, too soon for his support to carry much weight at the convention.

But it wasn't only McAdoo's relationship with Doheny that was troubling. He hobnobbed with a lot of millionaires, some of whom were bankrolling his campaign, and also with the Hollywood aristocracy, people like Charles Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford. This was hardly what you wanted to see in a candidate meant to lead a Progressive challenge against an administration that included the likes of Andrew Mellon. And, it must be said, as Treasury Secretary, he had helped implement segregation in the Treasury Department, which was a major employer of African Americans. He was one of the few national figures of the time who had the enthusiastic support of the resurgent Ku Klux Klan. This had as much to do with McAdoo's support of Prohibition as anything; the Klan was staunchly in favor of Prohibition and enforced it with vigilante justice in places where it had a presence. McAdoo did not openly embrace the support of the Klan, but he was not willing to repudiate it, either.

Some Democratic Party leaders urged McAdoo to drop out of the race: among them Colonel Edward House, Josephus Daniels, William Jennings Bryan, and Thomas Walsh, the Senator who was leading the investigation into Teapot Dome. McAdoo refused. Dissatisfaction became strong enough to attract the Governor of New York into the race; that would be the 50-year-old Alfred E. Smith. Smith was a product of the New York City Democratic political machine—his name was put into nomination by fellow New York Democrat Franklin Roosevelt. Smith's mother was the child of Irish immigrants; his father was half Italian, and Smith himself was Catholic, making him emblematic of the urban ethnic wing of the Democratic Party.

New York City and state were emerging as America's leading center of resistance to Prohibition, which is a topic we will return to, and as governor, Smith acted to block New York state law enforcement from enforcing the laws against alcohol, which made him the national leader of the repeal movement.

But this split was a problem for the Democratic Party. Georgia-born McAdoo was the perfect representative of the dry, conservative, Southern wing of the party, while Smith was the perfect representative of the wet, urban, ethnic, Northern wing of the party, and this division between Progressive, ethnic Northerners and traditionalist Southerners will be the major fault line in the Democratic Party for the rest of the twentieth century. The Klan went berserk at the thought of a wet, Catholic President, especially one from New York, or "Jew York," as the Klan's literature liked to refer to the city. On the other hand, the idea that a candidate's Catholicism would disqualify them from the Presidency was a deal-breaker for Northern Democrats, at a time when Catholic voters were a major Democratic constituency in the North.

If the situation I've just laid out doesn't already spell "deadlock" for you, allow me to remind you that at this time, the Democratic Party required a two-thirds vote for a Presidential nomination. The result was that it took an unprecedented 103 ballots to pick a nominee. McAdoo

polled just under 50% most of the way through, with Smith drawing about a third of the vote. Not a single delegate from a Southern state voted for Smith in any ballot. At last, after days of exhausting balloting, the two front-runners agreed to withdraw, and the nomination went to the little-known John Davis of West Virginia, who had previously served as Solicitor General and later US Ambassador to the United Kingdom, in the Wilson Administration.

Yeah, nobody at the convention knew who he was either, but by this time, they were too tired to ask. The Vice Presidential nomination went to Charles Wayland Bryan, the Governor of Nebraska and younger brother of William Jennings Bryan.

The ugly infighting for the Democratic nomination left it worth very little by the time Davis got his hands on it. What remained of Democratic hopes was lost when Fighting Bob LaFollette, the firebrand Republican Progressive Senator from Wisconsin opted for a third-party campaign, along with his running mate, Montana Senator Burton Wheeler. LaFollette and his Progressive supporters were dissatisfied by the distinctly un-Progressive candidates both major parties had put up.

So by the end of June, it was already clear that Calvin Coolidge had the upper hand. Republicans came up with the catchy slogan “Keep Cool with Coolidge.” There was even a song to go with it. Everything looked pretty sweet for the incumbent, until just days after the Democratic convention was over, when tragedy struck. On June 30, the President’s two children, 17-year-old John and 16-year old Calvin, played tennis on the White House tennis court. Calvin didn’t bother to wear socks under his tennis shoes and developed blisters, which became infected, which in an age of no antibiotics could be life-threatening. Seven days later, Calvin Coolidge Jr. died.

The loss was a terrible blow to the President, and afterward his campaign was distinctly subdued. Of course, “subdued” is the default Coolidge style anyway, and when you’re the front runner, it often pays to be aloof, to speak in generalities, and hardly acknowledge the existence of your opponents, let alone attack them. The booming economy did the rest, and all this led to one of the quietest election campaigns in American history. When the votes were counted, Davis carried only the eleven states of the former Confederacy, where the Democratic Party was deeply entrenched, plus Oklahoma. Neither Davis nor Bryan were even able to carry their home states of West Virginia and Nebraska, respectively. LaFollette’s Progressive campaign siphoned off enough northern liberal Democrats, especially in the Midwest and Plains states to shut out Davis in those regions, although LaFollette came first only in his home state of Wisconsin. Coolidge carried the other 35 states, winning 54% of the popular vote and 382 electoral votes, in a landslide that rivaled that of Warren Harding just four years ago. The Republicans picked up three seats in the Senate and 22 in the House of Representatives, padding their majorities in both Houses of Congress.

Calvin Coolidge was not what you would call charismatic. I am so old that I can remember a 1968 Off-Broadway musical titled *How to Steal an Election*. The main characters of this show



were two disillusioned young American political activists of the time who were visited by the ghost of Calvin Coolidge and taken on a tour of US political history as Coolidge explains to them how it “really” works. The Coolidge character even got a solo number titled “Charisma,” in which he laments his own lack of it. You can listen to the song on Spotify; I’ll post a link at the website.

In hindsight, Calvin Coolidge does not cut an impressive figure. But he was popular in his day, and I think the explanation is that he was seen as having delivered on Warren Harding’s promise of a return to normalcy. The Coolidge Administration is the last gasp of the old, prewar American Presidency, where the government is small, foreign affairs are a minor concern, and the President is mostly a manager, the CEO of the Executive Branch, so to speak. Coolidge did not have big ideas or an enthusiastic following, but that was the whole point. He was a reliable person the American people hired to do a job. He did it competently, without being annoying or embarrassing. In 1924, that was all anybody wanted from a US President.

The day will come when this will no longer be enough, when Presidents will have to be larger than life in order to be effective, when Roosevelts and Wilsons will become the norm, not the exception. The people of 1924 don’t realize it, but that day will arrive sooner than they expect.

We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Erik and Joshua and Dylan for their kind donations, and thank you to Philip for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Dylan, Erik, Joshua, and Philip help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you’d like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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Speaking of Prohibition, I’ve been punting this topic for a while now, but I think it’s time to bring it into our narrative. You see, the Anti-Saloon League, which was the most important temperance organization, pursued a very shrewd, nonpartisan political strategy. They didn’t distinguish between Democrats and Republicans; they aimed to produce a pro-temperance majority in both of the major American political parties. They were the first example of what we might today call a single-issue advocacy group.

And they were very successful. Prohibition was enacted with a broad, bipartisan majority, but with little national debate. That’s one of the reasons it hasn’t come up much in the podcast so far.

But after Prohibition was enacted, its arrival came as a shock to many people, and it was later afterward that an anti-Prohibition movement began to come together. By 1924, as we saw in today's podcast, the "wet" side of the debate was poised to wrest the support of one of America's major parties—the Democrats—away from the Prohibitionists. Over the next eight years, Prohibition will, for the first time, become a partisan political issue.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, now. Before we can talk about the next eight years, we need to review the last eight years, and those of you who know me well know that we're likely to start the story farther back than that. Prehistoric times? A distinct possibility. I hope you'll join me next week and find out, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we explore the complexities of humanity's relationship with ethyl alcohol and the rise of the temperance movement. That's next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. As I mentioned in this episode, Woodrow Wilson passed away in February 1924, at the age of 67. He never did fully recover his health after his stroke in 1919. After leaving office, Wilson remained in Washington. In 1923, he attended Warren Harding's funeral, an outcome that would have been hard to predict in 1920. Later that year, on the eve of the fifth anniversary of the Armistice, Wilson gave an address over the new medium of radio. And thanks to the even newer medium of network radio, his address was carried to multiple cities in the United States. It was as if the nation had forgotten about him, and suddenly remembered again. His address had been quiet, his voice quavering, but it led to an upsurge in support for him. The following morning, Armistice Day, Wilson awoke to discover a crowd of well-wishers standing in the street outside his house, and went out onto the porch to address them. After his passing, the lifelong Presbyterian was interred in the Washington National Cathedral of the Episcopal Church, another surprising development. Woodrow Wilson is, as of the date I release this podcast, the only former President to be buried in the US capital city.

What are we to make of Woodrow Wilson? His administration was the high-water mark of Progressivism in the United States, and his New Freedom program moved America forward in ways the nation still benefits from today. The Federal Reserve Act finally gave the US a modern banking system and a tool to break the vicious circle of booms and panics that had impeded America's economic development. He was the best friend the labor movement ever had in the White House, up to that point. He replaced tariffs with a graduated income tax, which provided tax relief to the Americans who needed it the most. He rightly opposed both Prohibition and the rising anti-immigrant tide in American politics.

Remember that Wilson had been elected on the strength of his domestic policy positions. He had no background in foreign policy and took office fervently hoping he would face no major foreign policy challenges. And then he went on to face the US's biggest single foreign policy challenge since the War of 1812. Wilson wisely resisted the temptation to get involved in the fighting, which Theodore Roosevelt would certainly have done, had he been elected in 1912. Earlier US

intervention might have done some small good for the Allied cause, but at a huge cost to America.

Wilson's opposition to the war was principled and brave, and it almost cost him the 1916 election against a Republican Party that seemed to want to go to war with Germany and Mexico simultaneously, even though the United States of 1916 was in no position to fight two wars at once.

Wilson did take the US to war in 1917, but only after German overreaching made it politically impossible for him to do otherwise. During the war, Wilson used America's military and financial clout within the alliance to force an early end to the fighting and, along with the other Allied leaders, made the first-ever attempt to create a formal system of international agreements meant to prevent war. Wilson's vision was also ardently anti-imperialist, in an age when imperialism was the norm. He was opposed, even mocked, for this vision, but by the end of the next world war, everyone will have become a Wilsonian.

It is unfortunate that in our time, Woodrow Wilson is primarily remembered for two negative things, the failure of US to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and his racism. It is unfair to criticize Wilson too harshly on either score. Ratification of the Treaty required a two-thirds vote in a Senate controlled by the opposition party. Henry Cabot Lodge and the Senate Republicans had to choose between world peace on the one hand and a partisan political advantage that might help win them back the White House on the other. They, not Wilson, made their own choice, they, not Wilson, are responsible for the consequences of their decision. They got exactly what they wanted.

Wilson did his best to convince the Republicans. Ferdinand Foch's prediction that the Treaty of Versailles would prove to be more of a twenty-year armistice is often cited with admiration in our time, never mind that he probably never said that. Woodrow Wilson really did say, in 1919, that if the Treaty were not ratified, some of the American children he met on his whistle-stop tour of the nation would be casualties of the next world war, and he was absolutely right. One might object that American involvement in the League of Nations might not have been enough to make the difference in 1939, but Woodrow Wilson had an answer for that objection, too. He argued at the time that even if the League had only a ten percent chance of success, that was reason enough to make it worth a try. Given the costs of the Second World War, it's hard to argue with that.

Then there's the question of racism. Was Woodrow Wilson a racist, as we understand the term today? He certainly was. But so was virtually every other prominent American of his time. He was not singularly, uniquely racist compared to say, William McKinley or Theodore Roosevelt, who still has something to answer for in the Brownsville Affair, or William Howard Taft or Warren Harding or Calvin Coolidge, and he was less racist than most Southern Democrats, though admittedly that's not saying much.

In 2020, the Trustees of Princeton University voted to remove the name of Woodrow Wilson from the University's School of Public and International Affairs because of his racism. I support that decision, because it is a school of public policy, and some of Wilson's public policies, like introducing segregation into Federal employment, were racist. It is not appropriate for a school meant to teach public policy to future leaders to lionize a figure whose own public policies were tainted with racism.

But this is not the same as saying we must deplore and condemn everything about Woodrow Wilson because of his racism. I suspect the modern prominence of this complaint against him is partisan. It comes from those eager to find a prominent and admired Democrat, any prominent and admired Democrat, that they can plausibly accuse of racism for the sake of scoring a few political points.

Wilson's legacy is complex, and in that regard, the historical figure of whom he reminds me the most is Thomas Jefferson. Like Jefferson, Wilson laid out bold, broad, stirring pronouncements that called for a new political order, based on a new moral order. Like Jefferson, Wilson in his personal life fell painfully short of his own professed ideals.

But the thing about Jefferson is, he was the man who wrote "all men are created equal" while imposing slavery on fellow human beings. That's horrifying. That's hypocritical. We expect people's deeds to match their words, and rightly condemn them when they don't. But it's also true that Jefferson's words left a far greater mark on history than his slavery did, even if not in exactly the way he intended. Judge Jefferson the human being any way you like, but when you consider his historical legacy, you can see that the world is a better place for Jefferson's having lived in it and having written those words.

Similarly, when Woodrow Wilson spoke out for the right of all people to self-determination, he then quietly added an asterisk and made exceptions for the Irish and the Chinese and the Vietnamese and even African-descended citizens of his own country. That's hypocritical, and judge Wilson the human being as you like for it. But as for Wilson's legacy, you have to acknowledge that the asterisk was eventually erased, and it was his advocacy of self-determination for all peoples that stuck. And the world is a better place today for Woodrow Wilson's having lived in it.

[music: Closing Theme]

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