

American Presidents and Their Attitudes, Beliefs, and Actions Surrounding Education and Multiculturalism

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Second Installment:

Examining Presidents Andrew Jackson, Woodrow Wilson, & Dwight D. Eisenhower



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Introduction

The presidents of the United States have had a lasting impact on the history of the United States. From the founding of this nation to the new century, the presidents have set the tone of the nation in matters of race. For centuries, the ideology of the country has been one in which only one perspective that of the white, European man has been dominant. The presidents have had the power to change this perspective but have failed to do so for many reasons, such as greed, weakness, timidity (Brands, 2003; Steinfield, 1972).

This article focuses on three presidents — Andrew Jackson, Woodrow Wilson, and Dwight D. Eisenhower — and their legacy to a nation still fighting towards racial equality.

The United States Presidents and Multiculturalism

For many years, certain groups in the United States have been fighting for equal

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rights. Many advances have been made due to the hard work, determination, and struggles of different individuals and groups. People have fought to have equal rights in the workplace as well as in the schools and communities. Groups have formed and together have changed laws that denied them the same rights given to others.

From slavery and civil rights, to the Chicano and women's movements, laws and political decisions have had a big influence on the power and advancement of these groups. Through the advancement of multiculturalism in United States society, the presidents have many times played a major role in its success or failure.

Presidents have served as inspirations as well as warnings. They have provided bad examples as well as good (Remini, 2002). And in their leading the country, they have also led a nation to become a more just and pluralistic society or have endorsed a society which values only one race, one color, and one perspective. They have led a nation to become richer by valuing other cultures or they have continued the legacy of racism that many of them have helped institutionalize. It is this role of the president that will be examined in this article, in particular the roles of Jackson, Wilson, and Eisenhower.

The Presidents

The presidents have almost always been portrayed as wonderful, brave, and honest human beings. We always hear about how good and moral these men are or have been. Rarely do we hear about their stance on racism and civil liberties. The media neglects to be honest with us or makes us believe that presidents have always done what is best for the nation. The media chooses selectively what is known about these men although their decisions as chief executives have had a lasting impact on the history of our nation.

Kenneth O'Reilly (1995) reveals that instead of being the agents of progress in racial relations, American presidents have a long and consistent history of supporting slavery, obstructing civil rights and deliberately fanning racism. Almost every president has been known to have sacrificed black votes for white votes. Through word as well as deed, over and over again, American Presidents have reflected the racism of the wider society from which they sprang. The victims have been white, red, brown, and yellow, as well as black (Steinfield, 1972). According to Steinfield (1972) virtually every American President has been racist and has shown his racism in many ways.

With few exceptions, the deeds and dreams of our presidents, and the choices they made and did not make on matters of race, deepened the racial rut, a rut that

has existed in the United States since George Washington's administration (O'Reilly, 1995). From slavery to affirmative action, the presidents have had the choice to change the nation to a more just and free one. Unfortunately, most presidents have chosen to turn their back on racial matters and to continue the ingrained ideologies of a white, Eurocentric perspective. Through these choices, racism and division continue to be a potent part of American ideology, thought and action.

Andrew Jackson

Andrew Jackson was born on March 15, 1767, in South Carolina. His parents had left Ireland in search of a better life. Andrew's dad died suddenly after working hard to build a home for his family and bringing in enough crops to feed them. At the time, Andrew's mom was pregnant with Andrew. Jackson attended common backcountry schools. He was often in trouble as he was hot-tempered and he liked to frighten and bully other children. He remained uninformed most of his life. He refused to take his studies seriously because he liked reckless freedom (Osinski, 1987; Remini, 1988).

Jackson never really acquired an adequate education, even for the late eighteenth century, and this severely hampered his efforts as President to achieve some of his most cherished goals (Remini, 1988). He relied more on his instincts and intuition as he is considered one of the most poorly educated of the American presidents (Osinski, 1987). It was well known that Andrew was the most roaring, rollicking, game-cocking, horse-racing, card-playing mischievous fellow that ever lived in Salisbury (Osinski, 1987). He acquired an unsavory reputation, a reputation as a leader of a hooligan gang (Remini, 1988). Yet there was a quality about him that commanded attention, respect, and occasionally fear (Remini, 1988).

In 1828 Andrew was elected the seventh president of the United States. He was the first (and arguably the only chief executive in American history) not to consider slavery a moral evil (O'Reilly, 1995). He traded in men, became master of the Hermitage in Tennessee and owned eighty-three slaves. He became the southwest's biggest slave holder. Throughout his presidential term, he stood with the South and for slavery.

He has been seen as a defender of the working class, but when he worked against the Bank Act he hurt the farmers, mechanics, and laborers. However, his idea of working class did not refer to factory workers and day laborers, but to the members of



what he considered the American producing class as contrasted to the non-producing financial and commercial class (Cole, 1993). His policies did often side with the working class.

Andrew Jackson was seen as a very temperamental man. He had an absolute determination to win at whatever cost. As a consequence, he was capable of extraordinary feats of courage and daring, feats of perseverance in the face of incredible odds. Nothing less than victory was acceptable to him. Defeat was unthinkable (Remini, 1988). Ironically, Jackson was also seen as a very cautious and prudent man. He was a conservative and deliberate man whose ambition and determination to succeed conditioned everything he did (Remini, 1988).

Woodrow Wilson

Woodrow Wilson was born on December 28, 1856, in Staunton, Virginia. As a boy, Woodrow moved to Augusta, Georgia, and then to Columbia, South Carolina, when he was fourteen (Brands, 2003). Through his own family, Wilson received an early and convincing introduction to orthodox Southern attitudes about race (Clayton, 1972). His father was pro-slavery and a supporter of the Confederacy. Wilson grew up amid the Civil War and Reconstruction (Freund, 2003). Throughout his life, he remained very proud of his Southern heritage, which was to become very obvious through his actions as President.

At age seventeen, Woodrow went to a small college in North Carolina and in 1875 he went on to Princeton in New Jersey. From there he returned to Virginia and

enrolled at the University of Virginia, where he studied law. He got bored with law after a short time of practicing it and enrolled in the graduate school of the John Hopkins University in Baltimore. He earned a doctorate and became a scholar of national reputation (O'Reilly, 2003). In 1902, he accepted the presidency of Princeton University (Clements, 1992).

As president of Princeton, he turned away Black applicants (Freund, 2003). This made Princeton the only major Northern university that refused to admit Blacks (Loewen, 1995). To Wilson's mind, the paramount issue in this matter was not the admission of Blacks, but rather the social peace and harmony of the university which, he feared, would have been disturbed (even though Blacks had been attending this university peacefully for years). He did not want to create complications for the many Southern students who attended Princeton (Garrett, 1982). It is said that while he was president at Princeton, no Black ever received a degree from that university (Garrett, 1982).

Pledging "New Freedom" and guaranteeing "fair and just treatment for all" was Woodrow Wilson's platform as he ran for president. It became evident that "all" referred only to whites as he took office as the President of the United States in 1912.

Wilson was an outspoken white supremacist and his wife was even more so (Loewen, 1995). It was during his term in office that the position of Blacks, Native Americans, and immigrants deteriorated. He used his power as president to segregate the federal government and to reduce the land that belonged to Native Americans. He permitted a White House screening of the racist film *Birth of the Nation* which is said to have sparked a major Ku Klux Klan revival (Freund, 2003; O'Reilly, 2003; Loewen, 1995).

Wilson is seen by many as a great leader, but that leadership did not include issues in support of anyone who was not white. Wilson has been seen by many historians as a man of words and peace. He led the nation to World War I and fought hard for a vision of collective action and peace through the formation of the League of Nations. Although he fought hard for world peace, the same cannot be said of the nation he was leading.

During the Wilson administration, outbreaks of mob violence against Blacks increased greatly. At least eighteen major interracial disturbances occurred between 1915 and 1919 (Garrett, 1982). When race riots broke out in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1917, Wilson left the matters to locals to deal with (Brands, 2003).



Woodrow Wilson

Black lynchings increased, and women both Black and white, went to jail, picketed the White House, and chained themselves to its fence in hopes that the president would finally listen and pass an amendment that would allow them to vote. Wilson eventually signed the 18th amendment granting women the right to vote, but only after years of women's struggles and him dodging the issue (Clements, 1992).

Dwight D. Eisenhower

Dwight D. Eisenhower was born on October 14, 1890 in Denison, Texas. He was one of six boys. His father worked in a creamery and the family raised almost all their own food (Ambrose, 2003). He was raised in Abilene, Kansas, where there was little racial and political diversity in a town in which virtually everyone was white, Republican, Christian, and of European descent. The Eisenhowers encouraged Dwight to be independent and self-reliant.

In 1952, Eisenhower became the 34th president of the United States. As a president he was seen more as a "caretaker" president rather than a strong chief executive in the White House (Wicker, 2002). He is seen as a father figure and was strongly conservative in domestic affairs and a convinced internationalist in foreign relations — though a hard-line anti-Communist.

He is credited with ending the Korean War but also for avoiding personal involvement in school desegregation. He minimized the importance of racial tensions and of socioeconomic antagonism that



Dwight D. Eisenhower

erupted so explosively in the 1960s (Ambrose, 2003). As president his political strength was his dedication to middle-of-the-road policies and his insistence that he was guided only by devotion to duty and a sense of the national interest (Wicker, 2002). Critics contend that Eisenhower was content to merely administer over the status quo (Ambrose, 2003). He is criticized for always getting someone else to do his dirty work.

Eisenhower was known to be honest, self-reliant, hard working, ambitious, and God-fearing. He had a ferocious temper which he learned to control. He loved to play golf and bridge, usually in the company of the same group of wealthy businessmen, "achievers like himself whom he admired and from whom he accepted expensive gifts that might well make a president today the target of a special prosecutor" (Wicker, 2002).

Eisenhower was known to be a presence anywhere he went. He had a lot of confidence and a magnetism that greatly attracted people. But it appears he did not have the courage to do the right thing and instead turned the other cheek or let people take care of his problems. Although he is a very well liked president (maybe more for his success as a military general), he failed to provide leadership to the nation through one of the biggest critical issues in our history, the civil rights movement.

Jackson and Slavery

Many American presidents have been faced with tough issues that they have to

deal with in order to win re-election or please the many groups that pressure them to make changes. The first presidents had to deal with the tough issue of slavery and the latest presidents have had to deal with civil rights issues. How they dealt with these issues says a lot about the presidents and the stance and feelings they had towards other races and minority groups.

Many times when we read about the presidents one of the facts that is always omitted from the history books is their ownership of slaves. Slavery is a horrible part of the United States history that many would rather not remember, but it is crucial that even as these men are being portrayed as good and brave, they also be portrayed as slave owners.

Jackson was one of the biggest slave owners in the South. He owned a big plantation, the Hermitage in Tennessee, and had more than 83 slaves. By the time he became President of the United States he had 95 slaves, and a few years later that number reached 150 (Remini, 2001). Ownership of slaves was as American to Jackson as was capitalism, nationalism, and democracy (O'Reilly, 1995). Jackson's goal was to protect slavery forever. He saw the abolitionist as a monster who intended to free the Negro and drive him north to drive down working class wages (O'Reilly, 1995). Jackson used slaves to gain economic power and to run and expand his mercantile interests. Slaves produced a variety of crops for Jackson like cotton, corn, and wheat and made him a very rich man.

Throughout his presidency Jackson was unwilling to support abolitionism. He continued to own slaves in Washington and in the Hermitage while he was president and he was surrounded by past or present slaveholders (Cole, 1993). Jackson feared that the Union faced an immediate threat from abolitionist literature. He ordered the Postmaster General to deny the use of mail by abolitionists (O'Reilly, 1995). Anti-abolitionist mobs roamed the land destroying printing presses and even murdering editors of abolitionist newspapers.

Jackson proposed to Congress a law prohibiting the circulation of publications against slavery (Cole, 1993). The bill died, but it is a good example of Jackson's feeling towards the abolition of slavery. It was during Jackson's presidency that the "gag rule" was passed. This bill proposed that the House receive all antislavery petitions, and then immediately table them (Cole, 1993). All this was done to protect slavery.

Many argue that Jackson opposed abolition because he loved the union. Others say that he was pro-slavery because as a Democrat he would oppose almost any ob-

stacle to party unity. We can give many reasons to why Jackson was against abolitionism, but above all it is clear that Jackson needed slaves. He needed them to run his plantation and serve his interests. Without them, he would lose many crops and maybe even lose his plantation (Beschloss, 2003; Wilkins, 2001; Wills, 2003). His belief in slavery was so strong that he was a slave owner to his deathbed.

Wilson and Segregation

Before Wilson took office his predecessors had routinely appointed Blacks to important offices. Wilson changed all that (Loewen, 1995). He was responsible for segregating the federal government. He permitted subordinates to segregate, discharge, or downgrade Black employees, often in cruel ways (Clement, 1992). An example is given by Clement (1992) from the Post Office Department where Wilson transferred all but one black employee to the dead letter office. The only employee who remained worked at a desk surrounded by screens so that white workers would not have to look at him.

Wilson appointed southern whites to offices traditionally reserved for Blacks. It seemed his goal during his administration to remove all people of color from representation in the federal government. Never had there been more segregation in the country since Reconstruction than during Wilson's presidency. Jim Crow began to take control of the nation. For the first time since the Civil War, the Treasury and Post Office Departments and the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, with the President's approval, provided segregated offices, lunch rooms, and lavatories for their white and Black employees (Garrett, 1982). Blacks got demoted or lost their jobs and all of this was a crushing blow to those active in the cause of racial democracy.

People tried to justify the Wilson's actions by claiming that he did not know what was happening. When the first minor changes were performed in spring and summer of 1913, many people blamed only the cabinet members (Steinfeld, 1972). They said that perhaps the president was not aware of what was going on in the nation since there had never been an executive order. But not only did he know, he fully supported it and believed it was in the interests of both races (Steinfeld, 1972).

Wilson is said to have brought intelligence, leadership, and democratic idealism to the White House, yet under his direction and with his full approval the federal government strengthened the color line and supported the forces of racism (Clayton,

1972). He also helped frame race and ethnic relations through the legal elements of a model based on a superior-inferior mode (Boyer & Baptiste, 1996).

Eisenhower and Civil Rights

Although slavery no longer existed during Eisenhower's presidency, racism and the idea of equality amongst all races in America was non-existent to most whites. Throughout his presidency, Eisenhower chose to continue a legacy of racism and injustice not only to Blacks but to those of low socio-economic backgrounds also. Eisenhower was uncomfortable in Black company, believed in segregation of the armed forces, and knew very little of racial matters in the United States (O'Reilly, 2002).

One of Eisenhower's biggest failures as a president was his non-active role in the civil rights movement and efforts to desegregate schools. He chose to remain at a distance from the civil rights movement. One of the best ways to describe the president on these issues of racism was his silence. According to Tom Wicker (2002), Eisenhower avoided direct personal involvement in the two great moral issues of 1950s America — school desegregation and McCarthyism — although he was responsible for the appointment of Chief Justice Earl Warren to the Supreme Court.

Eisenhower grew up in a part of the United States where there were no people of color. He was in a segregated army, which he believed should continue, and worked in a White House where only one Black man, Fred Morrow, was part of the staff (Morrow was seen to many as merely window dressing to make it appear that the Eisenhower administration was interested in civil rights) (O'Reilly, 2002).

Eisenhower believed civil rights should be handled by the states and that such rights should vary from state to state. This was his way of avoiding issues like desegregation and racism. His own feelings of racial superiority led him to remain silent on important issues that have had a lasting negative impact on equality and justice in the United States.

Similar Thinking

As has been discussed, Jackson, Wilson, and Eisenhower had similar thinking when it came to other races. All three believed in the superiority of the white race and all three made decisions to keep other races from the forefront of American society. Wilson and Eisenhower seemed to have helped people of color on some occasions, like the passing of the 18th amendment and

the sending of troops to Little Rock. But action was taken only because the presidents believed it was their duty to uphold the Constitution and not because they truly believed or wanted change.

All three presidents were at some point pressured or forced through their own self-interest to do something about the situations at hand. None of the three really believed in the advancement of any other than the white man. They used their power to continue the belief that whites were superior and should remain that way.

Policies, Laws, and Cases

The presidents are responsible for many of the laws and political policies that run and change the course of the country. Many times these policies have great consequences in the progress of racial relations in the United States, as was the case with the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision by the Supreme Court in 1954. According to Boyer and Baptiste (1996), in spite of that Supreme Court decision, the sociology of the 1950s and 1960s did not support equity educational programs for all students.

American presidents have a long and consistent history of supporting slavery, obstructing civil rights, and deliberately fanning racism (O'Reilly, 2002). Many times with a veto or a strong stance on racial issues a president can create much change in the racial tensions of the country and the advancement of all society. Historically, presidents have made choices based on personal interests or feelings and pressures by political groups that have hurt many and have not improved things. Jackson, Wilson, and Eisenhower have their place in history when it comes to making the wrong choices or remaining silent when strong action and leadership was greatly needed.

The Indian Removal Act of 1830

As was the case with slaves, Jackson felt Native Americans were inferior and likened their culture to that of the dark ages. As far as he was concerned, Native Americans were savages who needed to be removed and sent elsewhere where they would not "brutally" kill whites.

Jackson wanted to expand the United States. During the Monroe Administration, Andrew Jackson was sent to Florida with his army in search of Indians who had killed Americans. Jackson not only shattered Indian resistance, killed many Seminole chiefs and warriors, and destroyed their villages, but he seized Pensacola and St. Marks, raised the American flag over both Spanish towns, and executed two Brit-

ish nationals for arming the Indians and encouraging their assaults on American settlements (Remini, 2002).

At the time of Jackson's presidency, the United States had acquired Indian land through the treaty-making clause of the Constitution, necessitating Senate ratification. Those treaties implied that the tribes were sovereign, independent states, just like European powers. But the United States had no intention of recognizing the tribes as independent.

Still, rather than seize the land and fight off resisting "savages" (the Native Americans were just trying to defend their land), the government signed treaties that were rarely enforced and constantly violated by settlers who continued to move south and west and encroach upon Indian territory (Remini, 2002).

Jackson had never been a friend of the Indians. He participated in the removal of tribes from their native land and in the senseless murders of many Native Americans. First as a general he was in charge of the removal and killing of the Seminoles from Florida. Later as president he was responsible for passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830. This act authorized the government to establish an area west of the Mississippi to be divided into enough districts to accommodate as many tribes as might choose to go west, and then relocating them there. The scheme also involved an exchange of land for all the tribes residing in the east (Remini, 1988).

This bill was harsh, arrogant, racist, and was the doom of the Native American. Biographers argue that Jackson was afraid for the safety of the United States and was concerned that Indians living as tribes within the boundaries of the sovereign states constituted a distinct threat to the nation and must be expelled (Remini, 1988). Historians also claim that Jackson's objective was not the destruction of Indian life and culture, but rather that he thought that their removal was the Indians' only salvation against extinction (Remini, 1988).

In a sense, Jackson thought he had saved the Indians from certain death. He implemented their removal in an inefficient, confused, and disorganized manner without regard for the Indians rights as human beings. Determined to save costs in order to reduce the budget and eliminate the federal deficit, Jackson cut costs of the removal operation (Cole, 1993). This caused much suffering. The Native Americans were hungry, cold, and getting sick with cholera, and proper care was impossible. The removal became known as "The Trail of Tears" and is one of the most disgraceful and heart-rending episodes in American history

(Remini, 1988). The cost in human life and suffering can not be measured.

In his so called attempt to "save the Indian," Jackson was responsible for the horrors, suffering, deprivation, and death of many men, women, and children.

Wilson also thought of Native Americans as inferior. Under the Dawes Act of 1887, the Curtis Act of 1898, and the Burke Act of 1906, federal policy was developed to dissolve tribal governments, divide up tribal property, and allot tribal lands to individual natives, all with the supposedly benign goal of integrating them into white society (Clements, 1992). During Wilson's administration, Native Americans were allotted 10,956 patents taking the land away from the Native Americans and opening up large areas to white farmers and cattlemen. Native Americans land was reduced from 138 million acres to 47 million acres (Clements, 1992). Wilson simply ignored protests and justified his actions in the name of progress.

The Espionage Act

Because of World War I, the Wilson administration passed the Espionage Act in June, 1917. This act is seen as one of the most serious attacks on civil liberties of Americans in our history (Loewen, 1995). The act had the power to suppress all mail that was socialist, anti-British, pro-Irish, or that in any other way might have threatened the war effort (Loewen, 1995).

The Espionage Act provided heavy fines and jail terms for spying, sabotage, refusing military service, or obstructing recruitment (Clements, 1992). The act also authorized deportation of any alien who advocated the destruction of property or overthrow of the United States government (Clements, 1992). Because of this, in the autumn of 1919, the Justice Department began the roundup of leftist immigrants, many of whom were deported (Brands, 2003). The act was responsible for many innocent people (mostly immigrants) spending time in jail and being mistreated. It also demanded that foreigners living in America give up all loyalties to their former countries, learn English, and merge as quickly and as completely as possible into American society (Clements, 1992).

The Civil Rights Act and the Desegregation of Schools

Although Eisenhower did not deal with Native American issues like Jackson and Wilson, he set a tone of opposition during the civil rights movement and the desegregation of schools. As president he was a strong internationalist, but when it came to dealing with domestic problems such as racial justice and civil liberties, he

chose to not advance the cause. Nothing made this more evident than the decisions taken by Eisenhower on civil rights and the 1954 decision of *Brown vs. the Board of Education*.

The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1957 and provided for a Civil Rights Commission, a Civil Rights Division in the Justice Department, and empowered the attorney general to seek an injunction when someone was deprived of the right to vote. But it's penalties were slaps on the wrist, and the compromise jury trial amendment would put few rights offenders behind bars (Wicker, 2002). Eisenhower wanted this bill because it was very mild. Pressured by Southern senators the bill that passed was weak on the most important civil rights issues of that time.

Eisenhower considered himself a "moderate" on the race issue. He wanted to uphold the Supreme Court, but he did not want to offend his many Southern friends. He wanted to enforce the law, but he did not want to use force to do so. He did not want to antagonize anyone, but "anyone" always seemed to turn out to be white Southern segregationists. He had waged two successful campaigns to become the nation's leader, but he did not want to lead on the issue of civil rights. The upshot of his conflicting emotions and statements was confusion, which allowed the segregationists to convince themselves that the President would never act (Ambrose, 1984).

It was this thinking that led Governor Orval Faubus of Arkansas to present Eisenhower with the problem he had most wished to avoid. In 1954, *Brown vs. the Board of Education* went to the Supreme Court and the court ruled that segregated schools were inherently unequal and in violation of the 14th amendment. Eisenhower condemned the decision and promised that he would not enforce school desegregation. When a newsman asked him what he would do about the schools, Eisenhower replied that he never gave answers to suppositions or to possible future situations, that he would have to look at the facts at the time.

He said, however, that any decree issued by a duly constituted Federal court must be respected by all citizens and officials, regardless of their personal views (Morrow, 1963). He tried to delay the court orders until he was obliged to act in 1957 during the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. The president tried to avoid federal intervention but could not when Governor Faubus of Arkansas used State Guard troops at the school to keep nine black students from entering the school.

Eisenhower then made it clear that

he would put his personal feelings aside to enforce the law. He sent the 101st Airborne Division to restore order. He did not believe in forced integration. He had tried desperately to keep the integration problem “under control,” but according to him agitators wouldn’t let it be that way (Ambrose, 1984). In a statement to the nation, the President emphasized that he was not sending U.S. troops into the South to desegregate the schools, but only to maintain the law.

He went out of his way to state that his personal opinion on *Brown vs. Board of Education* had no bearing on its enforcement (Ambrose, 1984). He used troops, but some think only because Governor Faubus had insulted him, and not from any strong conviction that a serious injustice had been inflicted upon a large segment of the American people (Morrow, 1963). Southern segregationists were outraged by Eisenhower’s actions, but he had to do something if he wanted to remain president. To him, Little Rock was about order. Order was a principle of justice. Civil rights were a mere abstraction that varied from state to state and city to city (O’Reilly, 2002).

Of course Eisenhower had hoped that matters could be taken care of by the state. He did his best to forget about what was going on in Little Rock by playing golf and bridge with his friends. He had tried to divorce himself from civil rights problems, especially the desegregation of schools. He had always thought and hoped desegregation would remain a responsibility of the courts and that the judges would take care of the problem.

While generally he refused to take responsibility, with the situation in Little Rock he had no choice. If he had done nothing, he would have been accused of defying the orders of the Supreme Court and not living up to his oath of office. People would have seen him as disrespecting the Constitution and ignoring his duties and responsibilities. If he could have, he would have remained hands-off on the subject of civil rights and continued his legacy of injustice towards people of color.

Eisenhower has been highly criticized for his reluctance to get involved in the civil rights movement and the desegregation of schools. At a time when he could have done many positive changes in race issues in a nation torn between racial lines, his personal feelings of white superiority and racism, and his need for approval from his Southern friends got in the way of the desegregation of a nation.

Eisenhower had the moral responsibility as president to talk against racial segregation, but he chose to remain silent.

It was obvious that he would never take any positive giant step to prove that he unequivocally stood for the right of every American to walk this land in dignity and peace, clothed with every privilege as well as every responsibility accorded a citizen of the Constitution (Morrow, 1963).

Eisenhower could well have swung the nation into acceptance, however reluctant, of the Supreme Courts interpretation of the Constitution (Wicker, 2002). His actions were a reflection of how he really felt as a human being. He truly did not believe in desegregation or racial equality. His silence and his decisions to look the other way were no doubt his biggest failures as President of the United States.

Their Legacies and Some Suppositions

All three of these presidents passed and enacted laws that have had a lasting impact on the history of the United States. Our country could have been so different if these men would not have given in to their greed, corruption, and self-interest. Maybe this country would be richer in the cultures, traditions, and languages of the many Native American tribes that lost their humanity because of men whose only concern was for more land and the expansion of the Union.

If Jackson would have condemned slavery, maybe things would have been so different for Wilson and Eisenhower. Maybe they would not have had to deal with issues of racial inequality. In his acceptance of slavery, Jackson continued to instill the notion that only one race was of value, only those people of white, European descent. This perception still continues in today’s society.

We see it everyday in media use of people of color depicted as “dumb,” “lazy,” and “criminal.” We see it when school children read about only one history and perspective of the United States, that of the white man, in school textbooks. We see it when people of color are denied a higher education by being administered tests that have no relevancy to them or by being tracked to vocational schools. The legacy continues in laws that benefit only the rich, white, and elite and that work against Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and women. And we see it when history books portray only one view of our presidents as men who were brave, moral, and strong but neglect to mention the fact that they were also slave owners or racist.

Just when a nation might have been ready for action, change, and equality for all, men who had the power to lead the nation to change failed to do so. As presi-

dents, they allowed their personal feelings and biases to get in the way of upholding the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. They failed morally to lead a nation to become a true democracy for all people. They continued a legacy of racism and inequality in which only a few elite are able to taste the fruit of the labor of many.

Why did they make the choice they did? One can’t help but wonder how the United States would be different if these men, our presidents, would have made different choices. How would our history be different? How different would our society be? Would we have more Blacks, Latinos, women, Native Americans, and other people of color in more positions of power? Would we still be dealing with issues such as affirmative action and English Only? How would our cities be different? Would we still have as much crime and a large percentage of our people of color in jail? Would our varied cultures have remained intact and our languages alive?

A denial of civil rights still prevails in the entire nation. Maybe we have made positive advances in racial equality, but a history of racism and injustice can still be found throughout the country and in the presidency.

Concluding Thoughts

All of this is not to say that our presidents were not men who made changes and led a nation during their administration. Maybe they went in to the White House expecting to make changes but were not able to do so. Morrow (1963) states that the man does not make the Presidency, the Presidency makes the man. No matter what great convictions and determinations a candidate may have about burning issues when he is on the stump, their complexity and solution change when he becomes President (Morrow, 1963).

Morrow goes on to say that every President finds certain inevitable forces at work against him when he enters 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. No matter what a candidate promises, the stark reality of political life greets him the minute he crosses the threshold of the White House and he is never the same man again (Morrow, 1963).

In opposition to Morrow’s view, Schlesinger (Brands, 2003, p. xiii; Wicker, 2002, p. xiii; Willis, 2003, p. xv) states,

The president is the central player in the American political order. . . . The executive branch alone is structurally capable of taking that initiative. The founders must have sensed this when they accepted Alexander Hamilton’s proposition in the Sev-

entieth Federalist that “energy in the executive is a leading character in the definition of good government.” *They thus envisaged a strong president . . .* (italics not in original)

The three presidents portrayed in this article were soldiers, thinkers, fighters. But they failed in many cases to fight the most important battles of all, the ones that needed the most attention and the fights that nobody else wanted to fight.

We think such moral leadership should be the role of the president. He (forty-two white males) should be willing to put aside all biases to try to create a nation where all can live freely and democratically. A president should be willing to help those who are in most need and those who have been marginalized for so long, not just those who look like and feel like the president. The president sets the tone of the nation and leads by example. If a president does not believe in equality of all races, how can she or he lead a nation to believe in equality? To be a truly great president, one must genuinely believe in equality and social justice for all, and do anything in her or his power to uphold these ideals.

Note

Photographs of Presidents Jackson, Wilson, and Eisenhower are from the United States government website on presidents, accessed at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents>

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The first installment in this series of research articles on Presidents of the United States and educational and multicultural policy appeared in the Winter 2003 issue of *Multicultural Education*, presenting information on President James Madison, Rutherford B. Hayes, and John F. Kennedy.

Look for additional installments in the next issue and future issues of *Multicultural Education*.

