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Birth of a Quotation: Woodrow Wilson and “Like Writing History with Lightning”

By Mark E. Benbow, Marymount University

In February 1915, upon viewing *The Birth of a Nation* at a special White House screening, President Woodrow Wilson reportedly remarked, “It’s like writing history with lightning. My only regret is that it is all so terribly true.” This line has appeared in numerous books and articles over the past seventy years. This article examines the history of this alleged quotation and the sources where it has appeared. The article weighs the evidence that Wilson effusively praised in these words one of the most racist major movies in American history.

The quotation by Woodrow Wilson is famous. In February 1915, after viewing David Wark Griffith’s film *The Birth of a Nation* at a special White House screening, President Wilson reportedly exclaimed, “It’s like writing history with lightning. My only regret is that it is all so terribly true.” This line has appeared in numerous books and articles over the past seventy years. Histories of race, of the movies, and of the Wilson administration often repeat the quotation as an illustration of Wilson’s racial views. It is one of the most famous of Wilson’s remarks, along with “making the world safe for democracy.” However, there remains an unanswered question: Did Wilson actually make this remark or is “writing history with lightning” like “a war to end all wars,” a misattribution? I have located nine different variations of the “lightning” quotation that have appeared during the ninety years since *Birth* first screened. In this essay, I propose to trace the origin of this remark and to try to answer the question of whether Wilson praised in this manner this infamously racist movie.¹

I need to begin, however, by noting that this essay is not intended to be a denial that Wilson was, in fact, a racist. Born in antebellum Virginia in 1856, Wilson grew up during the Civil War and Reconstruction in Georgia and South Carolina. Wilson’s Presbyterian minister father defended slavery in the pulpits of his churches, and although the Wilson family did not own slaves, the household did have black servants. Their status is unclear, as they

¹For the variations and where they appeared, see the appendix. The author wishes to thank all those who reviewed this article in its many early forms, but special thanks are due to Dan Murphy and the journal’s anonymous readers for their helpful comments, and to my wife, Annette, who is a diligent and patient sounding board. Also thank you to Edmund Potter, formerly of the Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library, who sparked my interest in this topic, and to the helpful staff at the Library of Congress who aided my research. An early version of this paper was delivered at the 2007 Popular Culture Association meeting in Boston. Of course, any remaining errors are my own.

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may have been slaves provided along with the manse as a service to Wilson's father by his congregation, or they may even have been free blacks hired by the family or by the church. As president of Princeton (1902–10), Wilson dissuaded black students from applying for admission. As president of the United States (1913–21), Wilson allowed most of his cabinet members to segregate federal workplaces for the first time since the Civil War. When a delegation of blacks protested his discriminatory actions, Wilson told them, "If the colored people made a mistake in voting for me, they ought to correct it."²

What this essay explores is not Wilson's opinion on race, which is well-known at least in general terms, but the history of the one specific quotation, "like writing history with lightning." If Wilson did not make the remark, then it should not be attributed to him, and if he did say it, then it should be a part of the historical record with better evidence than its popularity. The fact that the quotation is now, as Wilson scholar Arthur Link expressed it, a "tradition" is not sufficient reason to continue using it.³

First, however, some background is needed. To what was Wilson reacting when he saw *The Birth of a Nation* in February 1915? The film evolved out of the racist crusade by Thomas Dixon Jr., a Baptist minister from North Carolina who served in churches in New York City, but also worked as a lawyer and an author. However, Dixon might be best described as a professional racist who made his living writing books and plays attacking the presence of African Americans in the United States. A firm believer not only in white supremacy, but also in the "degeneration" of blacks after slavery ended, Dixon thought the ideal solution to America's racial problems was to deport all blacks to Africa. In the short term, however, his main goal was to proselytize a Southern view of Reconstruction to the rest of the country. Dixon had been outraged by a performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and resolved to undo its influence on attitudes toward the South and slavery. In Dixon's mind, white southerners were the victims, not the villains, in American history and ought to be portrayed as such.

In 1902, Dixon published *The Leopard's Spots*, in which Simon Legree, the villainous slaveowner in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is a pro-Yankee scalawag. In *The Leopard's Spots*, the Klansmen appear as heroes, bringing order to the disorder caused by Reconstruction and freed Southern blacks. Although it sold well, it received poor reviews, mostly because Dixon's prose was more purple than polished. One review noted that it was "thrown into the form of a novel, so far as it can be said to possess form at all." Dixon followed *The*

²Email with Erick Montgomery, executive director, Historic Augusta, Oct. 2006; "Remarks by Wilson and a Dialog," Nov. 12, 1914, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur Link (Princeton, 1979), 31:301. Hereafter referred to as *PWW* followed by volume and page numbers.

³Editorial note by Link, *PWW*, 32:267.

Leopard's Spots with *The Clansman* in 1905. In both novels, Dixon portrayed freed blacks as incapable of suppressing their animalistic instincts and unable to resist their urges for white women. Once again the Ku Klux Klan was the hero of the story. More propaganda than literature, the novel sold enough copies to encourage Dixon to turn it into a play. However, producing the play must have been sometimes difficult as most theaters were not large enough to stage the climax—the ride of a small army of Klansmen to rescue the imperiled white heroine from a threatening former slave, accompanied by an actual cross-burning. Despite these technical difficulties, *The Clansman* made a successful tour of the South even while earning scathing newspaper reviews such as the one by the *Richmond News-Leader*, which called it “about as elevating as a lynching.” In 1906, the play opened in New York City and again received poor reviews. Financially successful despite the reviews, Dixon formed a second touring company, and the play was performed for five years in cities outside of the former Confederate states, including Washington and Philadelphia.⁴

In 1911, Dixon began approaching film companies, beginning with Kinemacolor, a company that made early color films. Kinemacolor began production of *The Clansman* in 1912 or early 1913 but went out of business before the film was completed. Dixon began looking for a new backer and found director David W. Griffith. Griffith had left the Biograph company in 1914 and, along with financial backer Harry Aitken, began looking for a “special” story to make as a first film to launch their new company. Griffith was familiar with Dixon from his acting days, when he starred for a time in the play *The One Woman*, produced by Dixon in 1906. Moreover, Griffith shared many of Dixon’s views on race and the South. A native of Kentucky and son of a Confederate cavalry officer, Griffith had grown up listening to stories about his father’s heroics in defense of Southern civilization. It was not difficult for Griffith to transplant those feelings into Dixon’s story. In his memoirs, Griffith noted that when he reached the climax of the novel, he could “just see these Klansmen in a movie with their white robes flying.”⁵

In 1914, Griffith purchased the option to film Dixon’s story. The resulting film, initially entitled *The Clansman*, was only partly based on Dixon’s work. The first half of the film took place just before and during the Civil War and

⁴*Dial*, May 1, 1903, quoted in Anthony Slide, *American Racist: The Life and Films of Thomas Dixon* (Lexington, KY 2004), 26–37, 51–69; *Richmond News-Leader*, quoted in *ibid.*, 60. Dixon also wrote other plays with white supremacist themes, none of which enjoyed the same popular success as *Clansman*.

⁵Slide, *American Racist*, 71–73; Richard Schickel, *D. W. Griffith: An American Life* (New York, 1984), 23–24; David W. Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood: The Autobiography of D. W. Griffith*, ed. James Hart (Louisville, KY, 1972), 88; Melvyn Stokes, *D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: A History of "The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time"* (New York, 2007), 53–54.

was written by Griffith. The second half of the film, which takes place during Reconstruction, was based on the play version of *The Clansman*. The film's script followed two families, the Northern Stonemans and the Southern Camerons. Friends before the war, they were separated by the conflict in which each family lost sons on the battlefield. After the war, the two families were finally united in opposition to the abuses of the freed blacks and their Northern carpetbagger supporters. In the end, the families are linked by marriage signifying the reunion of the United States. Filmed in southern California beginning on July 4, 1914, it opened in Los Angeles on February 8, 1915. The film was renamed *The Birth of a Nation*, the "nation" in this case being a reunited United States, reunified by the Ku Klux Klan restoring white rule to the South.⁶

The film was received warmly by the initial test audiences, but Dixon's plays had sparked protests and even small riots in the past. Dixon was concerned that the film would draw even heavier demonstrations, as it was designed to be far more emotionally powerful than the plays. Throughout the United States, censorship boards and local political leaders had the power to ban a film from screening if they felt the movie was somehow injurious to the public. Dixon needed a way to bypass such obstacles. In late January 1915, he wrote to President Wilson's secretary, Joseph Tumulty, and asked if he could have a half-hour appointment with the president. Tumulty scheduled the appointment for February 3. Dixon did not specify what he wanted to discuss with Wilson, only that he was working on a new powerful form of communication, a "universal language."⁷ Dixon believed that if he could tell would-be censors that the president of the United States had viewed the film, then they would have less reason to stop it from being shown.⁸

Dixon and Griffith had both admired Wilson's historical writings. The director used Wilson's five-volume *History of the American People*, originally published in 1902, as a reference source for *The Birth of a Nation*. Dixon knew Wilson from Johns Hopkins University, where they were both graduate students in history in 1883–84, after which the two exchanged letters but did not remain in frequent contact. In 1887, Dixon arranged for Professor Wilson to receive a honorary degree from Wake Forest College, where Dixon was one of the most notable alumni. It was not unreasonable for Dixon to assume that his old school friend would receive him and agree to view the film.⁹

Wilson met with Dixon at the White House on February 3, 1915, a few days

⁶There are numerous accounts of the making of the film. See, for example, Schickel, *D. W. Griffith*, 212–50.

⁷Thomas Dixon Jr. to Joseph Patrick Tumulty, Jan. 27, 1915, *PWW*, 32:142.

⁸Thomas Dixon, *The Flaming Sword* (Atlanta, 1939), 203–04, 254–56.

⁹For Dixon's earlier relationship with Wilson, see *PWW*, 4:259, 5:515–16, 534.

before the film opened in Los Angeles. Dixon asked if he could show Wilson the new historic film he had been involved in making, a favor requested of Wilson as a historian and scholar, not as president. Wilson noted that he was still in official mourning for his wife Ellen, who had died the previous August. As such, it would be inappropriate for him to go to the theater. However, if Dixon could show his film at the White House, then Wilson could invite family and some cabinet members to come watch. Dixon agreed.¹⁰

It is unclear if Dixon ever told Wilson just what his film was about, but given Dixon's career and the notoriety attached to the play *The Clansman*, it is not unreasonable to assume that Wilson must have had some idea of at least the general tenor of the film.¹¹ Dixon later told Wilson's secretary, Joseph Tumulty, "Of course I didn't dare allow the President to know the real big purpose back of my film—which was to revolutionize Northern sentiments by a presentation of history that would transform every man in my audience into a good Democrat!...What I told the President was that I would show him the birth of a new art—the launching of the mightiest engine for molding public opinion in the history of the world."¹²

The Birth of a Nation was shown at the White House on the evening of February 18, 1915, in the East Room. Contrary to the common belief, it was not the first film shown in the White House. The president and his family had viewed *Cabiria* in June 1914.¹³ The attendees included Wilson, his daughter Margaret, White House physician Cary Grayson, and several members of Wilson's cabinet and their families. Dixon and Griffith were also present. At Wilson's request, there was no press coverage of the screening, and Washington newspapers took only minimal notice of the event. The *Washington Post* society page observed only that "noted author" Thomas Dixon was visiting Washington and staying at the New Willard Hotel. The *Evening Star* reported that Wilson was interested in the film "due to the great lesson in peace it teaches." It is at this point that the historical record becomes unclear. How, specifically, did Wilson react to the showing?¹⁴

¹⁰PWW, 32:142n1.

¹¹There were no copies of any of Dixon's books in Wilson's library at the time of Wilson's death in 1924. (The original list is in the collection of the Woodrow Wilson House, Washington, DC). It can be tempting to assume that Wilson's taste in books was too elevated to enjoy Dixon's rather overheated prose, but Wilson's fondness for various westerns and detective novels make such a judgment untenable.

¹²Thomas Dixon Jr. to Joseph Tumulty, May 1, 1915, quoted in PWW, 32:142. One wonders what Tumulty, a Northern urban Catholic Democrat, thought of Dixon's remark that "good Democrats" viewed race relations through a Southern prism.

¹³Noted by Arthur Lennig, "Myth and Fact: The Reception of *The Birth of a Nation*," *Film History* 16 (Apr. 2004): 117–41. "Movies on the Lawn," *Washington Post*, June 27, 1914.

¹⁴*Washington Post*, Feb. 19, 1915; *Washington Evening Star*, Feb. 18, 19, 1915. The complete guest list is unknown but may also have included Wilson's middle daughter, Jessie, as well as

One of those present in 1915 was Marjorie Brown King, the wife of a friend of the Wilson's. In 1977, she told historian Arthur Link that Wilson seemed lost in thought during the showing. He then walked out of the room without saying a word when the movie was over. Wilson also left his program behind where it was picked up by his friend, Dr. Grayson. The White House physician saved the program, and in 2003 his family gave it to the Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library in Staunton, Virginia. The program appears at some point to have been crumpled. It seems unlikely that Grayson did so, as he normally kept his souvenirs of Wilson in good condition. Did Wilson crumple the program as he watched the film, and if so, why? The evidence is far too thin to reach a definite conclusion, but the questions raised by the program are intriguing. Was Wilson angered by what he saw on the screen? If so, why was he angry? Did the film bring up unpleasant memories? Was he reacting to the melodramatic villains on the screen? Was he reacting to the exciting and dramatic images? Was he as emotionally invested in the attempted rape of a white heroine by a black man as Griffith and Dixon intended their audiences to be? Unfortunately, Grayson made no mention of the screening in his diaries and Mrs. Brown's recollections were recorded six decades after the event, leaving the record ambiguous at best.¹⁵

Further weakening confidence in Mrs. Brown's account is a letter in Wilson's papers from Griffith to Wilson dated March 2, 1915. Griffith mentioned future films, noting that he hoped to "carry out the proposed series of motion pictures dealing with matters historical and political, of which I spoke to you." Wilson replied a few days later, telling Griffith, "I am very much interested...in your plans with regard to future motion pictures." Wilson promised to help in the future if he could, time permitting given his duties as president. Clearly Wilson and Griffith had conducted a discussion on Griffith's future plans for historical films, but did they discuss Griffith's projects before or after *Birth's* screening?¹⁶

The night after the White House showing, the film was shown before a other family members. According to Dixon, Margaret Wilson, who often acted as First Lady after her mother's death, arranged for the showing. Thomas Dixon, *Southern Horizons: The Autobiography of Thomas Dixon*, ed. Karen Crowe (Alexandria, VA, 1984), 298; Griffith argued that the film's "realistic" depiction of war made his film a plea for peace.

¹⁵Marjorie Brown King's account may be found in *PWW*, 32:267 n1. Mrs. King was the wife of Benjamin King, a friend of Wilson's daughters who often visited the White House. Wilson's program from the showing is in the collection of the Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library, Staunton, Virginia, a gift from the Grayson family. It was shown to the author by the library's curator, Dr. Edmund Potter, in 2005. Many of Wilson's other theater programs are in the collection of the Woodrow Wilson House, Washington, where the author served as staff historian.

¹⁶David Wark Griffith to Woodrow Wilson, Mar. 2, 1915, *PWW*, 32:310–11; Wilson to Griffith, Mar. 5, 1915, *PWW*, 32:325.

large audience at the National Press Club. Dixon had arranged the showing by meeting with Chief Justice Edward Douglas White. According to Dixon, White claimed to have been a member of the Klan in New Orleans as a young man. The chief justice approved of the showing for members at the Press Club and attended along with thirty-eight senators, fifty representatives and members of the Supreme Court with their families. Also in attendance was Wilson's secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, a pro-segregation Southerner who had facilitated Dixon's meeting with Justice White. Five hundred people attended the screening, which was mentioned in the Washington papers. If showing the film for a private audience at the White House did not gain Dixon and Griffith enough political cover to show the film nationwide, then this showing certainly made up the difference. Now the filmmakers could point to members of all three branches of government as having seen the film and had also gained several specific endorsements to quote.¹⁷

Having previewed the film in Washington, Dixon and Griffith opened *The Birth of a Nation* in New York City in early March. Wilson's supposed remark about "history written with lightning" did not appear in the initial accounts of the film. However, in an interview in the Hearst newspaper *New York American*, Griffith claimed that the film "received very high praise from high quarters in Washington." Griffith also noted "I was gratified when a man we all revere, or ought to, said it teaches history by lightning." While Griffith did not specifically claim that it was Wilson who made this remark, his description does fit. Had he been referring to the showing before the Supreme Court and Congress he likely would have said "men we all revere" instead of the singular "man." Moreover, Griffith was a Democrat and a Wilson supporter. Note, however, that the quote says "teaching history." This initial variation would soon be replaced by "writing history."¹⁸

The comment apparently did not immediately become well-known, because Wilson's opinion of the film was not used in advertising *The Birth of a Nation*. Instead, advertising for the film used quotes from other leading progressives including George Foster Peabody, Senator James Martine, a New Jersey Democrat, and Republican governor Hiram Johnson of California, Theodore Roosevelt's running mate on the Progressive Party ticket in 1912. The remark about "writing history" was also not used in the different pamphlets and souvenir programs issued for the movie in 1915. As with the newspaper advertisements, endorsements from notable religious and political leaders were prominently printed, including those from Dorothy

¹⁷"Movies at Press Club," *Washington Post*, Feb. 20, 1915; "Press Club to Witness Noted Films," *Evening Star*, Feb. 19, 1915; For Dixon's account of his meeting with Chief Justice White, see Dixon, *Southern Horizons*, 300–01.

¹⁸*New York American*, Feb. 28, 1915, M9, quoted in Lennig, "Myth and Fact."

Dix (“history vitalized and made living”), Governor Johnson (“the most glorious accomplishment in any art I have ever seen”), and Reverend Thomas B. Gregory (“That the story as told by the pictures is true I am ready to swear on the Bible”). The filmmakers bragged that twenty-one members of Congress had “sent voluntary letters of enthusiastic commendation” for the film. However, none of the long lists of endorsements mentioned Wilson either by name or by office. In short, neither Wilson’s implied endorsement nor his famous quotation, aside from the one oblique reference in the *New York American*, appeared in any of the material during the film’s opening weeks after the White House showing.¹⁹

The failure to cite Wilson’s supposed remarks directly may have been due to reluctance to use the president’s words in an advertisement for a controversial commercial subject.²⁰ While the filmmakers did not use Wilson’s image or words in their advertisements, they did use the fact that the film was shown to Wilson in the White House as an implied endorsement. As Dixon had hoped, the fact that *Birth* had been shown to Wilson as well as to Supreme Court justices, representatives, and senators served to counter many of the legal challenges to the film before various state censorship boards. In Boston, it was Wilson the historian, not the president, who was used in defense of the film. The manager of a theater that hoped to show *Birth* noted, “All the historical circumstances therefore can be verified by reference to the [historical] works of Woodrow Wilson.” In a hearing before Boston mayor James Michael Curley, a lawyer representing one of the theater owners noted that Wilson and members of his cabinet had seen and approved of the film. Wilson’s name was booed by the largely African American crowd, probably due to the understandable resentment toward the administration’s racial record, including establishing Jim Crow segregation in federal offices. Yet in

¹⁹Examples of the programs and pamphlets are included in Griffith’s papers on microfilm in the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, reel 2. For an example of an advertisement with the endorsement of various political and religious leaders, see “Why ‘*The Birth of a Nation*’ is Shown,” *Boston Globe*, Apr. 9, 1915. Film historian Thomas Cripps footnotes Wilson’s quotation “history with lightning” as appearing in the *New York Post*, Mar. 4, 1915. See Cripps, “The Reaction of the Negro to the Motion Picture ‘*Birth of a Nation*,’” *Historian* 25 (May 1963): 349. However, in reviewing the microfilm copies of the *Evening Post*, the paper’s correct name, at the Library of Congress, this author has not been able to locate the quotation in either the advertisement for the movie or in an article about *Birth* that appeared on page 9 for the date cited by Cripps. Nor does the quote appear in the *Evening Post* for any other day that month. It also does not appear in either the *Washington Post* or the *Boston Post*.

²⁰In contrast, Wilson apparently issued no objection in 1918 when brewer’s associations in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and New York used his words and his image in newspaper ads opposing state prohibition measures. He took no action despite pleas from prominent prohibition leaders. However, the brewers used Wilson’s words in their proper context, so he may have felt that objecting would only create more controversy. Examples of the anti-Prohibition ads may be found in the Woodrow Wilson Papers at the Library of Congress in the Prohibition subfile.

none of these meetings was Wilson's comment "history with lightning" used, even when Griffith spoke in person.²¹

Even without Wilson's explicit endorsement, however, his words could be used to defend *Birth*, as Griffith had used Wilson's own histories as sources. Several title cards in the film quote Wilson directly. At the beginning of the second half of the film, the part that took place during Reconstruction, three title cards appeared with excerpts from Wilson's five-volume *History of the American People*. The first title card denounced the carpetbaggers who moved South after the war:

[A]dventurers swarmed out of the North, as much the enemies of one race as of the other, to cozen, beguile, and use the Negroes....In the villages the Negroes were the office holders, men who knew none of the uses of authority, except its insolences.

The second title card read:

The Policy of the congressional leaders wrought...a veritable overthrow of civilization in the South....in their determination to "put the white South under the heel of the black South." [Emphasis added in the title card.]

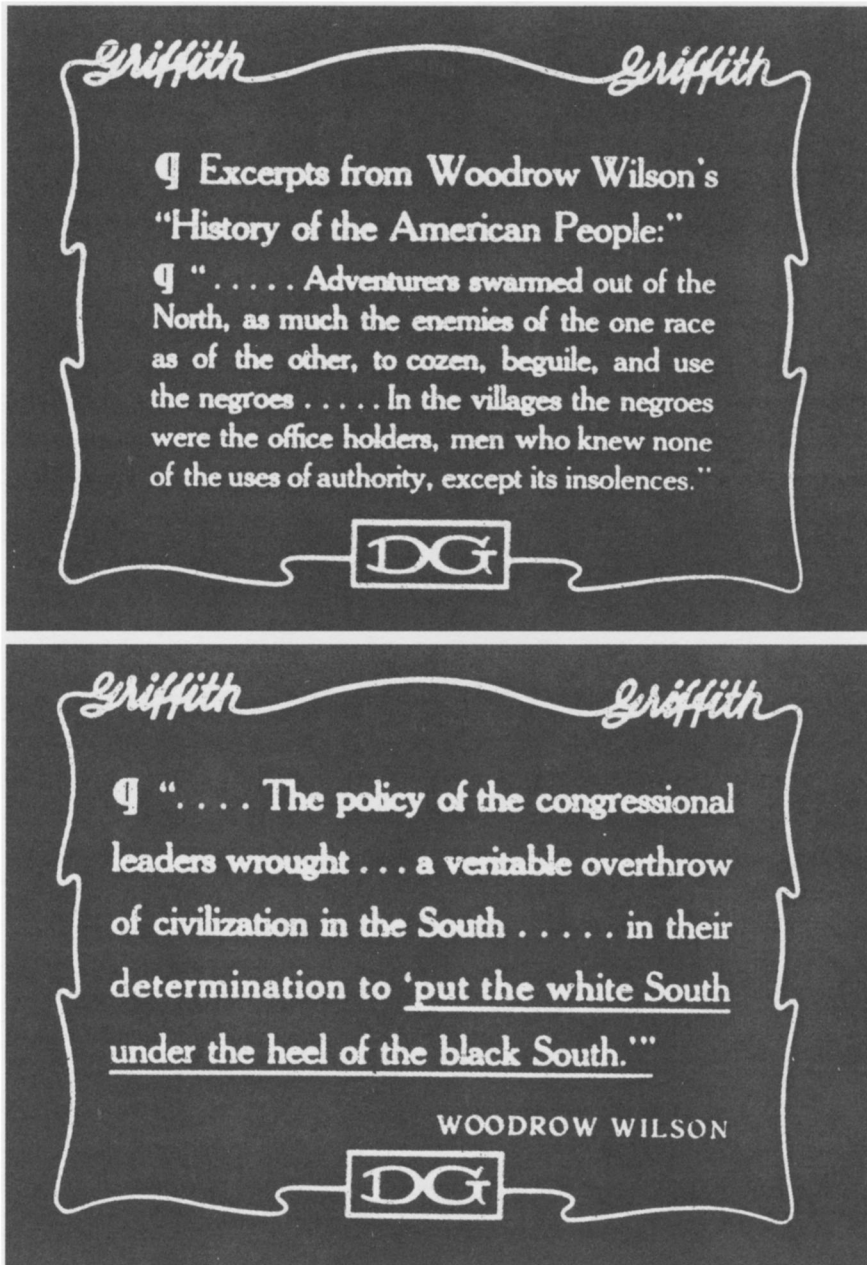
The third title card read:

The white men were roused by a mere instinct of self-preservation...until at last there had sprung into existence a great Ku Klux Klan, a veritable empire of the South, to protect the Southern country.²²

Griffith took some liberties with Wilson's writings in his title cards, however, as discussed in Melvyn Stokes's *D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*. The title cards omitted sections of Wilson's writings that conflicted with Griffith's judgments. This was especially notable in the third card, the one that praised

²¹"'Birth of a Nation' Managers Defend Play," *Boston Post*, Apr. 7, 1915; "'Birth of a Nation' to Be Shown," *Boston Post*, Apr. 8, 1915. This assumes that Wilson's quotation would have been reported in newspaper accounts, had Griffith used it. This is a reasonable assumption, given the force of the image of "writing history with lightning."

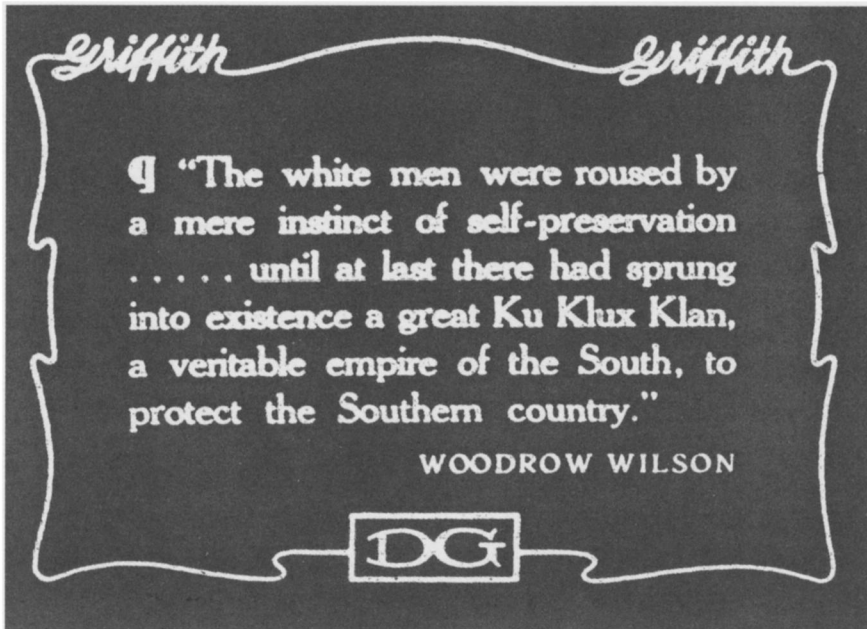
²²John Cuniberti, *The Birth of a Nation: A Formal Shot-by-Shot Analysis Together with Microfiche* (Woodbridge, CT, 1979), D7-D9; The original quotations appear in Woodrow Wilson, *A History of the American People* (repr. New York, 1931), 5:50, 60. A paraphrase of the first title card appears on 47; Griffith altered the quotation for the movie.



The three title cards by director D. W. Griffith that quoted Woodrow Wilson as an authority in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Screen captures by the author.

the Klan. As Stokes notes, Griffith took parts of sentences on different pages to make it seem that Wilson considered the Klan to be “the only response by Southern whites” rather than as part of a larger reaction, by what Wilson termed “fair means or foul.”²³

²³Stokes, D. W. *Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*, 198–200.



As demonstrations against *Birth* grew, Wilson came under increased political pressure to denounce the movie. On March 29, 1915, Joseph Tumulty received a letter from a prominent New Yorker, Margaret Blaine Damrosch, daughter of politician James Blaine and wife of conductor Walter Damrosch, asking if it were true that Wilson approved of the film. The letter noted that *Birth's* producer, Harry E. Aitken, claimed, "President Wilson and Chief Justice White saw it, and saw nothing objectionable in it." Tumulty suggested that Wilson issue "some sort of letter" showing that he did not approve of the film. Chief Justice White told Tumulty that he wrote to Aitken and threatened to denounce the movie publicly if they did not stop claiming that White approved of the film. White also told Tumulty:

Incidentally in the letter I said, "I have reason to know—although not authoritatively so—that the name of the President also has been used and that he might perhaps be obliged to take the same course that I have indicated if the rumors are not stopped. I do not speak with any authority, but only by way of rumor."²⁴

Neither White nor Damrosch made any reference to Wilson's alleged comment "like writing history with lightning." Instead they quoted the colorless "saw nothing objectionable in it." This suggests that the lightning comment, if it existed, was at the very least not then in wide circulation.

²⁴Margaret Blaine Damrosch to Tumulty, Mar. 27, 1915, *PWW*, 32:455; Edward Douglas White to Tumulty, Apr. 5, 1915, *PWW*, 32:486–87.

Wilson initially asked Tumulty to “please say I have expressed no opinion about it [the film],” but the question of whether Wilson approved of the movie remained. On April 24, Wilson told his secretary, “I would like to do this [issue a statement],” but he did not want to seem to be “trying to meet the agitation...stirred up by that unspeakable fellow [Trotter].” Wilson was referring to Boston civil rights activist William Monroe Trotter, who had met with Wilson previously to confront the president over his administration’s segregation policy. The meeting went poorly. Wilson was angered, probably because he believed Trotter was not showing the deference due to Wilson as a white man and president. Trotter was thrown out of Wilson’s office, and Wilson thereafter regarded him as a political enemy and as a troublemaker.²⁵

Instead of a full denouncement of the film, Wilson issued a short statement reading,

It is true that ‘*The Birth of a Nation*’ was produced before the President and his family at the White House, but the President was entirely unaware of the character of the play before it was presented and has at no time expressed his approbation of it. Its exhibition at the White House was a courtesy extended to an old acquaintance.

This rather colorless declaration was Wilson’s only public statement on the matter in 1915, but it was circulated in the African American press. The *Chicago Defender* noted, “We take great pleasure in erasing one demerit mark from our high chief.” The NAACP printed a copy of the statement in a pamphlet titled, “Fighting a Vicious Film: Protest Against *The Birth of a Nation*.” The pamphlet was issued in part as a response to *Birth*’s promoters’ claim that Wilson had seen and approved of the film. Once again, the “writing history with lightning” quote does not directly appear, but the fact that the film was screened for Wilson was seen as an implicit endorsement.²⁶

While the “lightning” comment did not seem to be in wide circulation in the spring of 1915, that does not mean that Wilson did not make the statement. As noted earlier, a variation first appeared soon after the White House showing in Griffith’s *New York American* interview. Later in 1915, however, the phrase “teaching history with lightning” appeared briefly. The

²⁵Tumulty to Wilson, Mar. 29, 1915, file 2247, Wilson Papers, Library of Congress; Wilson to Tumulty, Apr. 24, 1915, *PWW*, 33:68. Wilson’s note actually read “Tucker” rather than Trotter, but this was most likely a mistake by Wilson’s stenographer.

²⁶Wilson to Tumulty, Apr. 28, 1915, *PWW*, 33:86; Wilson opposed showing *Birth* during the First World War because he believed it to be divisive; NAACP, “Fighting a Vicious Film: Protest Against *The Birth of a Nation*,” repr. in *Focus on D. W. Griffith*, ed. Harry M. Geduld (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1971), 101–02; *Chicago Defender*, May 8, 1915.

first appearance appears to have been in the *Atlanta Constitution* on December 12, 1915, in an advertisement for the film. The advertisement included the line, "Persons saw history written with lightning at the Atlanta theater last week." On December 15, the same newspaper noted, "'History written with lightning' is the description applied to *The Birth of a Nation*, now in its second week at the Atlanta theater, by a very eminent man for whom a private exhibition was given in Washington some months ago." A third version of the same quote appeared in late 1916 when *Photoplay Magazine* published a multipart biography and interview of Griffith. In the October issue, Griffith spoke about the controversy over *Birth of a Nation* and noted:

They have told us repeatedly that the motion picture can impress upon a people as much of the truth of history in an evening as many months of study will accomplish. As one eminent divine said of pictures, "They teach history by lightning."²⁷

Was this quote from Wilson? Wilson was a well-respected historian and political scientist as well as president of Princeton from 1902 to 1910, so he could easily be considered an "eminent divine." Griffith's version of the quotation used the word "teaching" rather than "writing." The Atlanta quotes, however, are fairly close, and the advertisements include the added detail that the film was seen "by a very eminent man for whom a private exhibition was given in Washington some months ago."

The "lightning" portion of the quote is especially interesting as it echoes some comments Wilson made earlier. While still an active historian in the late 1800s, he wrote an essay comparing Thomas Carlyle's writings to seeing history by "flashes of lightning." In *Mere Literature* (1896), Wilson wrote in a discussion of the place of wit in historical writing, "It is the summer lightning, which will bring more to your startled eye in an instant, out of the hiding of the night, than you will ever be at the pains to observe in the full blaze of noon."²⁸

In none of the published 1915 references to history written or taught "by lightning" did the second part of Wilson's reported quotation appear: "My only regret is that it is all so terribly true." The full quotation first appeared

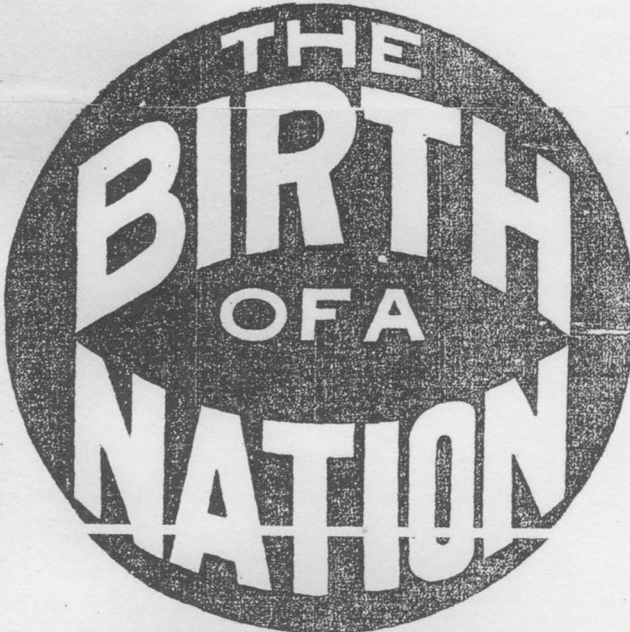
²⁷*Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 12, 1915; "At the Theaters," *Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 15, 1915; Henry Stephen Gordon, "The Story of David Wark Griffith, Part V," *Photoplay Magazine*, Oct. 1916, 93. Note that Griffith refers to "pictures" rather than to one specific film.

²⁸Many thanks to the anonymous reader who pointed me in this direction and who provided me with specific examples; Woodrow Wilson, *Mere Literature and Other Essays* (Boston, 1900), 101; Wilson, however, dismissed Carlyle, noting "the whole matter of what he writes is too dramatic." Wilson, "On the Writing of History," June 17, 1895, *PWW*, 9:299.

19,759

- Persons saw history written with lightning at the Atlanta theater last week.
- They laughed, they shouted and they gasped.
- And through it all they shed hot, slippery tears.
- Never before such scenes in an Atlanta playhouse; never such tumult nor so many damp kerchiefs.
- ASK ANY OF THEM!
- Those who have regained their voices will tell you that you'll regret it to your dying day if you fail to witness

D. W. GRIFFITH'S GIGANTIC SPECTACLE



YOU WILL SEE

18,000 People—3,000 Horses—5,000 Scenes

- Petersburg at the height of battle.
- Lee and Grant at Appomattox.
- The shot that killed Abraham Lincoln.
- The pillaging of Atlanta by Sherman's invaders.

YOU WILL HEAR

- A splendid symphony orchestra of thirty play the best-loved melodies of the Southland.
- Roaring cannon, sputtering machine guns, rushing cavalry and clashing bayonets in the mad stampede of battle.

YOU WILL FEEL

- The spirit of '61.
- The hot surging patriotism that drove your grandfather to don a suit of gray.
- The pang of sweethearts parted and the anguish of wives and mothers bereaved.
- And above it all a glow of undying pride that they're YOUR stars and YOUR bars.

12 MORE PERFORMANCES

—To relieve the disappointment of hundreds turned away at the week-end performances, the engagement has been extended until next Saturday, inclusive. Twice daily at 2:30 and 8:15 the spectacle will be shown all next week, beginning Monday afternoon, and seats for the twelve additional performances went on sale yesterday morning.

- THEY'RE GOING FAST.
- SO YOU'D BETTER HURRY.

BOX OFFICE OPEN FROM 9 A. M. UNTIL 9 P. M.

PRICES: NIGHTS—Best Orchestra Seats \$2; Others at 75c, \$1 and \$1.50. Gallery 50c. MATINEES—Best Orchestra Seats \$1; Others at 50c and 75c. Gallery 25c.

You can get the seats you want if you buy early. No Phone Reservations. SPECIAL—"The Birth of a Nation" will positively never be presented except at the important theaters at regular prices—D. W. Griffith.

Advertisement for *The Birth of a Nation*. The phrase, "Persons saw history written with lightning," appears in the first line at the top under "19,759." Reprinted from the *Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 12, 1915.

in 1937 in an article by journalist and writer Milton MacKaye in *Scribner's Magazine* that described *Birth* as "accurate enough but one-sided" and not as much an "indictment" of blacks as it was sometimes portrayed. The article concludes with the story of Wilson rising after the movie is over, wiping his eyes and remarking, "It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." The first part of the quotation appears again in 1939 in Lewis Jacobs's *The Rise of the American Film Industry*. Once again, the source of the remark is not specified. Jacobs simply noted that "President Wilson is said to have remarked. . . ."²⁹

These two citations—from MacKaye and Jacobs—are the most frequently cited after 1939. The quote also appears in some memoirs. Lillian Gish, who played Elsie Stoneman in the movie, claimed that Wilson said, "It is like writing history with lightning, and it's all too true." However, Gish was not present at the White House screening, and she wrote the account decades after the fact. Moreover, she changes the second part of Wilson's supposed words somewhat, leaving out the phrase "and my only regret." *Birth's* financial backer, Roy Aitken, also claimed in a memoir of the movie that Wilson made the remark. Aitken was at the White House showing, but he also erroneously notes that the Supreme Court justices were present. In both cases, it appears that the authors' memories faded over the years, which is certainly normal. However, it places the accuracy of their accounts in doubt.³⁰

The most important account of Wilson making the statement comes from Thomas Dixon, but even here there is considerable room for doubt. In his memoirs, *Southern Horizons*, published after his death, Dixon does not quote any statement from Wilson, noting only that he congratulated Griffith and Dixon. However, Dixon's widow later claimed that Dixon told her that Wilson made the statement, but that a section discussing the screening had been removed from Dixon's draft by a historian doing research. Moreover, this information came from Dixon's second wife, whom he married in 1939, long after the 1915 screening. She was a longtime fan and friend of Dixon, but Mrs. Dixon's account is still little better than the other secondary accounts by friends and family of the participants.³¹ The quotation does not appear in Dixon's last novel, *The Flaming Sword*, published in 1939. *The Flaming Sword* contains a fictionalized account of Dixon's meeting with Wilson and of the White House and Supreme Court viewings. Dixon wrote, "No opinion was asked of the President and under no circumstances would it have been

²⁹Milton MacKaye, "The Birth of a Nation," *Scribner's*, Nov. 1937, 46, 69; Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film* (New York, 1939), 175.

³⁰Lillian Gish with Ann Pinchot, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith and Me* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1969), 6; Roy E. Aitken, *The Birth of a Nation Story* (Middleburg, VA, 1965), 154.

³¹James Zebulon Wright, "Thomas Dixon: The Mind of a Southern Apologist" (PhD diss., George Peabody College for Teachers, 1966), 202.

quoted after the understanding about publicity.” This account would have been a logical place for Dixon to quote any praise from Wilson, but he did not do so.³²

Even if the question remains open of whether or not Wilson made the reported remark, historians can also judge from the content of the film and how it matched Wilson’s views. If Wilson had not agreed with the film’s interpretation, it is unlikely he would have claimed that it was “writing history” or that it was “all so terribly true.” Here the record is clearer. Dixon and Griffith’s view was not far from Wilson’s, but there were some critical differences. In *The Crucible of Race*, Joel Williamson divides the Southern attitude towards race into three general schools of thought: liberal, conservative, and radical. The liberals were the smallest of the three groups and the most optimistic about the future role of blacks in the United States. The liberals were impressed with the progress that blacks had made in the South during Reconstruction and believed that the North had abandoned black Southerners before they had been able to achieve lasting equality. Neither Wilson, Dixon, nor Griffith fit into this school. Wilson was probably the closest to it because he did not assume that black inferiority was an everlasting status, although he did assume that black advancement was set so long into an indeterminate future that, for all practical purposes, black inferiority was permanent.³³

The conservatives assumed that white supremacy was permanent. Following the Dunning School, named after Columbia University professor William Dunning, the race problem for conservatives was one of defining the degree of black inferiority and setting society’s rules to recognize that status. As Williamson notes, “Place was the vital word in the vocabulary of Conservatives, and it applied to whites as well as blacks.” To the racial conservative, Reconstruction was unsuccessful not because the North had abandoned the blacks, as in the liberal view, but because it upset the natural order of society. As one uncited source in Wilson’s *History of the American People* put it, Reconstruction “put the white South under the heel of the black South.”³⁴ It placed natural superiors under their inferiors. Once the situation was corrected, and the races restored to their rightful places in the racial hierarchy, then peace was restored. Williamson places both Wilson and Griffith into this school with some justification. Wilson agreed with the conservative view on Reconstruction in his books, and Griffith used Wilson’s

³²Dixon, *Flaming Sword*, 206.

³³Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race* (New York, 1984), 5-6; The judgment of Wilson is my own, not Williamson’s. Williamson placed Wilson squarely in the ranks of the conservatives. See also Gary Gerstle, “Race and Nation in the Thought and Politics of Woodrow Wilson,” *Reconsidering Woodrow Wilson: Progressivism, Internationalism, War and Peace*, ed. John Milton Cooper Jr. (Washington, 2008), 105–06.

³⁴Wilson, *History*, 5:50.

historical writing in his research in making *Birth*, although he rephrased Wilson's judgments, especially in regard to the Klan.³⁵

In Williamson's model, Dixon clearly counted as a radical white supremacist. Indeed, Williamson notes that Dixon's novels *The Leopard's Spots* and *The Clansman* exemplified the radical mindset. In Dixon's view, since the ending of slavery blacks had regressed. They were unable to be truly civilized and not only occupied a permanent place as racial inferiors but actually posed a danger to whites and to the United States. Dixon was convinced that every black male desired sex with white women in order to "mongrelize" the races. Dixon made his career as a novelist, playwright and speaker spreading this message, which only grew more urgent as time passed.³⁶

Dixon was convinced that the United States could not survive as a democracy so long as blacks remained in the country. His solution was to deport every black American (and presumably every person of mixed race) to Africa to form a new country there. Part of his reason for writing the novels that led to *The Birth of a Nation* was to raise white Americans' awareness of what Dixon saw as an intractable problem. To a radical like Dixon, the conservatives were naïve in assuming that education and segregation could preserve the social order. Griffith may have agreed at least in part, as the early version of *Birth* included a scene labeled "Lincoln's vision" in which black Americans were being led to ships to be sent back to Africa. The short scene was deleted before the film reached wide distribution but may still have been part of the movie when Wilson viewed it.³⁷

Although Dixon admired Wilson, there were differences in not only their attitudes toward blacks, but in their view of the Civil War. Dixon blamed abolitionists and the slaves themselves for the war. The abolitionists, in Dixon's view, stirred up the slaves and split the nation along ideological lines until a war was inevitable. Slavery was unfortunate in Dixon's mind, but it was the "kindest" slavery ever known, and besides, Dixon claimed, most Africans were slaves anyway, held in thrall by despotic witch doctors.³⁸

In contrast, Wilson wrote one of the first ostensibly unbiased accounts of the Civil War, *Division and Reunion*, published in 1893. Wilson's book was generally well-received, although some reviewers in both the North and the South felt he had taken sides. Wilson's interpretation was based on the assumption that both Northern and Southern partisans were in error and

³⁵Williamson, *Crucible*, 6.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷John David Smith, "'My Books Are Hard Reading for a Negro': Tom Dixon and His African American Critics, 1905–1939" in *Thomas Dixon Jr. and the Birth of Modern America*, eds. Michele K. Gillespie and Randal L. Hall, (Baton Rouge, 2006), 59–60. The deportation scene was mentioned in the 1915 NAACP pamphlet "Fighting a Vicious Film."

³⁸Williamson, *Crucible*, 279.

so that, in Hegelian fashion, the truth could be found somewhere in the middle. It seems not to have occurred to Wilson that one narrative might be closer to the truth than the other. The result was an account of the Civil War that claimed that the North was correct in 1860 about the unbreakable nature of the American Union but that the Southern view of the United States as a league of independent states, while outdated by the middle of the nineteenth century, had nonetheless been correct when the union was founded. The South, Wilson wrote, “had stood still while the rest of the country had undergone profound changes; and, standing still, she retained the old principles which had once been universal.”³⁹

Slavery had a role in Wilson’s narrative, but he downplayed the institution’s cruelty and emphasized its economic inefficiency. Slavery, in Wilson’s view, was harshest in the border states, where owners feared that their slaves might try to escape. Farther south, however, “the greater part of the slave owners were humane in the treatment of their slaves—kind, indulgent, not over-exacting, and sincerely interested in the physical well-being of their dependents.” Certainly, in contrast to Dixon, he did not blame the slaves themselves for the war.⁴⁰

Unlike Dixon, Wilson did not portray the Reconstruction Klan as unmitigated heroes. As noted above, *Birth* used some of Wilson’s words from his *History of the American People* to justify the Klan’s existence. “The white men of the South,” Wilson wrote, “were aroused by the mere instinct of self-preservation to rid themselves, by fair means or foul, of the intolerable burden of governments sustained by the votes of ignorant Negroes.” Wilson credited the Klan with acting to frighten blacks into submission, writing, “It threw the Negroes into a very ecstasy of panic to see these sheeted ‘Ku Klux’ move near them in the shrouded night; and their comic fear stimulated the lads who excited it to many extravagant prank and mummery,” a scene copied in *Birth* when Ben Cameron takes the idea of dressing the Klan members in white sheets from watching some white children frighten black children. As for the Klan’s violence, Wilson saw it as a natural result of the Klan’s mission: “It was impossible to keep such power in hand. Sober men governed the counsels and moderated the plans of these roving knights errant; but it was lawless work at best.” Wilson’s final judgment of the Klan, however, was not one with which Dixon would have agreed. “Brutal crimes were committed,” Wilson noted, “the innocent suffered with the guilty; a reign of terror was brought on, and society was infinitely more disturbed than defended.” In short, Wilson’s Klan was not as heroic as in Dixon’s books and *The Birth of a Nation*.⁴¹

³⁹Woodrow Wilson, *Division and Reunion, 1829–1889* (New York, 1901), 211–12.

⁴⁰Wilson, *Division*, 125–27.

⁴¹Wilson, *History*, 5: 58–64, 74–75; The difference can be seen in their views of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Dixon thought it a lie, Wilson thought it an exaggeration taken from isolated cases. For

Wilson promoted the moderate Southern narrative of the Civil War and Reconstruction in a way that made it acceptable to Northern and Southern readers who desired national reconciliation. Standing in contrast to the remaining defenders of slavery and the still emotionally powerful *Uncle Tom's Cabin* narrative, Wilson's account seemed to be an acceptable middle ground. This view fit Griffith's ideas and indeed, that of much of the country in 1915, the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Civil War. The anniversary was celebrated by reunions and the dedication of monuments to both sides of the conflict, events that mostly excluded blacks and ignored the African American role in the war itself. Significantly, the climax of *Birth* includes Union and Confederate veterans fighting side by side against rampaging blacks and the rescue by the Klan of a Northern white woman who then marries the head of the local Klan.

To return to the original question, did Wilson make the remark, "It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true"? The second portion of the quote, "my only regret" is most likely a latter addition and not Wilson's words. This part of the comment did not appear until decades after the initial release of *Birth*, and the best source for the remark seems to be the account of Dixon's widow, who did not marry Dixon until late in his life. There simply is insufficient evidence to support Wilson's having made this part of the remark.

The first part of the quotation, "It is like writing history with lightning," is better supported by the evidence. A variation appeared soon after the White House screening and can be directly traced to Griffith, who was present with Wilson. Griffith reported the phrase as "teaching" in 1915, and given Wilson's career as a professor and university president, this phrasing sounds more accurate. Moreover, Wilson was interested in the use of film as an educational tool. His campaign in 1912 created the first real campaign film to enlist supporters, and during the First World War, Wilson created the Committee on Public Information (the Creel Committee), which used, among other tools, propaganda films to sell the public on the war effort. Contemporary accounts of *The Birth of a Nation*, both favorable and critical, agree that the film had a tremendous emotional impact on its audience. Wilson could not have failed to be impressed by *Birth's* power and most likely realized how effective a tool it was for presenting Dixon and Griffith's vision. The use of the term "written" appeared later in 1915, so it can not be entirely eliminated from contention as Wilson's actual comment, but it appears as if "teaching" was turned into "writing" in advertisements for the movie, perhaps to make the film more appealing. Audiences generally did not go to the movies to be taught, but rather to be entertained, and the word "written"

Ben Cameron's watching the children see *The Birth of a Nation*, shots 914–24.

fits this motive better.

What of Marjorie King's account that Wilson said nothing? Like the version told by Mrs. Dixon, this account came decades later, so her memory may simply have been distorted by the passage of time. It is also possible that Wilson made his comment quickly to Griffith and then left without Mrs. King hearing it. Alternatively, Wilson may have discussed the film with Griffith before the screening as well. Moreover, when Mrs. King gave her account in 1977, *The Birth of a Nation* was infamous for its racism, and she may not have wanted Wilson to be any more associated with it than he was already. Mrs. King's testimony is simply insufficient to rule out Wilson's having made a comment after the screening was over.

Did Wilson then make this quoted remark? While we will never know for certain, I believe that Wilson did make a comment to Griffith that film would be useful as a teaching tool, that it could "teach history by lightning." He may have made the comment before the screening rather than after, which would fit Mrs. King's account and still allow for Griffith's later letters to Wilson remarking on their conversation. The full comment, as so commonly quoted, evolved from there. The latter portion, "my only regret is that it is all too terribly true," may well have been Dixon's invention. Dixon had a vivid imagination when it came to race. One need only read his continued insistence that Booker T. Washington was intent on social equality to get a sense of how Dixon fit his view of the world to meet his racial expectations. He defended *The Birth of a Nation* in later writings, such as his novel *The Flaming Sword*, which ended with an African American communist army taking over the United States. He insisted that *Birth* was historically accurate, and both Dixon and Griffith bragged about how much research they had done, including using Wilson's books. However, the evidence trail for the full quotation simply does not extend earlier than 1937. Moreover, the full remark was too quotable to have been ignored by the many press accounts published during 1915–16, had it been known.

Where does this leave the historian? Wilson never gave an overt, open endorsement of *The Birth of a Nation*. He agreed with most of the views expressed in the movie but not the more radical ones, such as the deportation of American blacks to Africa. Nor did he agree with Dixon, who thought that the mere presence of African Americans in the United States was intolerable, even in a subservient position. Moreover, Wilson did not hold the Klan in as high a regard as did Dixon or Griffith. The film did, however, accurately portray Wilson's view of Reconstruction as a disorderly time when white Southerners were denied their civil rights. Dixon and Wilson both blamed radical congressional Republicans, who in Wilson's words "were proof against both fact and reason in their determination to 'put the white South

under the heel of the black South.”

More important than whatever was said or not said, Wilson gave the filmmakers all the endorsement they needed by agreeing to view the film in the White House. In Griffith's words, by viewing the film in the White House, Wilson “conferred” an “honor” upon *The Birth of a Nation*. The screening was in itself a tacit endorsement sufficient to protect the film from censors and to allow it to be shown around the country. While the film probably would have been a hit even if Wilson had never seen it, his viewing it made the filmmakers' task easier. Moreover, Wilson's other racist policies, such as introducing Jim Crow to the federal government, are enough to place his administration in the bottom tier of presidencies for civil rights and race relations. Apocryphal quotations are simply not needed for the historian to illustrate Woodrow Wilson's policies on race when the facts are sufficient.⁴²

* * * *

Appendix: Sources and Variations of the Quotation “Writing History with Lightning”

This list shows nine different variations of the “lightning” quotation as they have appeared since 1915. Selected major sources are shown, including contemporary accounts, as well as secondary sources commonly referenced by historians. The first variation is the most commonly used, with succeeding variations listed in order of how closely they resemble the first.

I: Quote Variations:

1) “It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true.”

Roy E. Aitken, *The Birth of a Nation Story* (Middleburg, VA, 1965), 6. Aitken was present at the showing for Wilson, but he confuses the showing at the White House with the one at the National Press Club.

Raymond Allen Cook, *Fire From the Flint* (Winston-Salem, NC, 1968), 170. Cook wrote this admiring biography of Dixon and had access to Dixon's then unpublished memoirs, but he only cites the 1937 *Scribner's* article as his source.

Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black* (New York, 1977), 52. Cripps cites two sources: a conversation in 1962 with Dixon's widow and Cook, *Fire from*

⁴²Griffith to Wilson, Mar. 2, 1915, *PWW*, 32:310–11.

the Flint. He also changes the quotation slightly from his 1963 article. (See variation 6, below.)

Arthur Link, ed. *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton, 1980), 32:267. Link discusses the controversy over the lightning quotation in the footnotes for the correspondence in the Wilson papers relating to the White House showing. Link, however, casts doubt on the accuracy of the quotation, noting that it did not appear until 1937 and that Dixon did not mention the remark in *Southern Horizons*. Link apparently did not know about the shorter variation attributed to Griffith in 1915 and 1916 (see variations 7 and 8, below).

Milton MacKaye, "The Birth of a Nation," *Scribner's Magazine*, Nov. 1937, 69. No source is listed.

Richard Schickel, *D. W. Griffith: An American Life* (New York, 1984). The standard biography of Griffith. Schickel cites Cripps's *Slow Fade to Black* as his source.

Anthony Slide, *American Racist: The Life and Films of Thomas Dixon* (Lexington, KY, 2004), 83.

2) "It is like writing history with lightning. My only regret is that it is all so terribly true."

Russell Merritt, "Dixon, Griffith, and the Southern Legend," *Cinema Journal* 12 (Fall 1972): 28. Mistakenly sourced to *New York Post*, March 4, 1915, as explained below.

3) "writing history with lightning...my only regret is that it is all too true."

Arthur Lennig, "Myth and Fact: The Reception of *The Birth of a Nation*," *Film History* 16 (Apr. 2004): 119. Lennig notes that the quotation's "provenance remains hazy." Lennig paraphrases the quotation in his article.

4) "It is like history written with lightning"

Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film* (New York 1939), 175. Jacobs writes, "Wilson is said to have remarked. . . ." No source is listed.

5) "History written with lightning"

Advertisement, *Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 12, 1915. No attribution given. The full line reads "Persons saw history written with lightning at the Atlanta theater last week."

"At the Movies," *Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 15, 1915. Attributed to "a very eminent man for whom a private exhibition was given in Washington some months ago."

6) "History written in lightning"

Thomas Cripps, "The Reaction of the Negro to the Motion Picture *Birth of a Nation*," *Historian* 25 (May 1963): 349. Cripps is commonly referenced by other authors. He credits four sources:

- A conversation with Dixon's widow in 1962, along with a letter to him from Mrs. Dixon.
- A draft of *Southern Horizons* in Mrs. Dixon's possession.
- The *New York Post*, March 4, 1915, apparently a mistaken attribution, as explained below.
- Cripps also notes that the source is cited in Eric Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny* (New York, 1956), 176–77, and Arthur Knight, *The Liveliest Art* (New York, 1959), 35. Goldman, however, only notes that Wilson was "enthusiastic." Knight quotes Wilson as saying, "like writing history in lightning," but does not list his source.
- Cripps used Dixon's widow as a source, but not the *New York Post*, in his 1984 book *Slow Fade to Black*, listed above under variation 1.

7) "They teach history by lightning"

David Wark Griffith, interview with *Photoplay Magazine*, Oct. 1916, 93. Griffith credits this remark to "an eminent divine."

8) "It teaches history by lightning"

David Wark Griffith, *New York American*, Feb. 28, 1915, M9. Griffith attributes the quotation to "a man we all revere, or ought to" and mentions that *Birth* "received very high praise from high quarters in Washington." The first part seems to refer to Wilson, while the "high quarters" could also apply to the Supreme Court justices, senators, and representatives who saw the film in addition to Wilson.

9) “seeing history by flashes of lightning”

Karl Brown, *Adventures with D. W. Griffith* (New York, 1973), 97. Griffith’s cameraman’s account. He did not attend the White House showing and paraphrases the remark.

II: Mistakenly Attributed

New York Post, March 4, 1915. The *New York Evening Post* is often attributed as a source for different versions of the quotation, but this appears to be a mistake. A careful review of microfilm copies of the paper for February and March 1915 does not show the quotation as having appeared. It also does not appear in either the *Boston Post* or the *Washington Post*.

III: Where the Quotation Does Not Appear

The quote does not appear in these sources. They are listed because they discuss Wilson and the White House showing of *The Birth of a Nation* or might otherwise be expected to include Wilson’s remarks.

Linda Arvidson, *When the Movies Were Young* (New York, 1925). Arvidson was Griffith’s first wife. However, the book ends with *The Birth of a Nation*, and she barely discusses the film.

Thomas Dixon, *Southern Horizons: The Autobiography of Thomas Dixon*, ed. Karen Crowe (Alexandria, VA, 1984) (probably written in 1934). According to James Zebulon Wright’s account of his conversations in the 1960s with Dixon’s widow, only a shortened version of the manuscript was available. Wright notes that Mrs. Dixon claimed other researchers had stolen pages relevant to *Birth*. See Wright, “Thomas Dixon: The Mind of a Southern Apologist” (PhD diss., George Peabody College for Teachers, 1966), 202. Anthony Slide, *American Racist: The Life and Films of Thomas Dixon* (Lexington, KY, 2004), 216, suggests that Mrs. Dixon herself destroyed some pages.

David Wark Griffith with James Hart, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood* (Louisville, 1972). A shortened version of Griffith’s unpublished memoirs edited by James Hart into a coffee table book format.

Arthur Link, *Wilson: The New Freedom* (Princeton, 1956). Link discussed the showing of *Birth* at the White House on pages 252–54. He does not mention the lightning quote and defends Wilson as having fallen into "Dixon's trap." Later, Link did discuss the issue in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (see above).

Seymour Stern, "Griffith I: *The Birth of a Nation*," *Film Culture* 36 (Spring–Summer 1965): 1–210. Stern spent his career defending and studying Griffith, but his eccentric views—he was convinced that "Stalinists" were responsible for persecuting Griffith—make his analysis unreliable. His dedication to documenting the filming of *Birth* provides useful details for later historians.