

Of Mr. Washington and Others

W.E.B. Du Bois

Introduction

William Edward Bughardt Du Bois was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in 1868. He was the first African American man to earn a Ph.D. (in history!) from Harvard University in 1896 (women were not admitted to Harvard College until the 1960s). A prolific writer, Du Bois published over 30 scholarly books across a variety of disciplines in addition to hundreds of essays, editorials, papers, and other material¹. He also gave hundreds of public talks and speeches around the world.

Du Bois was not a fan of Booker T. Washington's 1895 "Speech at the Atlanta and International Cotton Expositions" Immediately following the speech, Du Bois published a series of essays criticizing Washington's "accommodationist" message, and calling the speech "the Atlanta Compromise" (Du Bois coined both phrases). Du Bois believed Washington encouraged African Americans to comply with segregation and disenfranchisement which only validated white supremacy. Washington responded, also in the press. Basically, he called Du Bois an elitist: born in the North after the Civil War (remember Washington was born a slave in Virginia), educated at Harvard, and a person who never had to survive in the rural South, something Washington did every day. Washington and Du Bois carried on a public dialogue until Washington's death in 1916.

Du Bois embraced his elitism, arguing that the black community needed elites more than ever – scholars, doctors, writers, artists, innovators, what he called "the talented tenth." In 1905, he formed The Niagara Movement with several other prominent African American men personally invited by Du Bois. Men he considered the talented tenth of the black community. Washington was not invited. The Niagara Movement was the predecessor of the National Association

¹ Du Bois published his most influential scholarly work, *Black Reconstruction in America* in 1935, which remains one of the most important works of American History ever published. I read it in graduate school, roughly seventy years after it was published. I usually link to [Archive.org](https://www.archive.org/details/blackreconstructioninamerica_du01), but *Black Reconstruction* has a 50 person waiting list for access to the book. It remains in high demand. In his book, Du Bois challenged the prevailing school of thought in historical analysis, called "The Dunning School." William J. Dunning taught American History at Columbia University from 1888 until 1922, where he trained four generations of historians who went on to promulgate Dunning's scholarship on Reconstruction. Dunning argued that Reconstruction was a Republican conspiracy to destroy the South and subjugate white southerners to northern capitalists and black men, enforced by Federal troops. The Dunning School – the graduate students who studied with him at Columbia – taught at colleges and universities around the country for the next six decades. Millions of students and hundreds of future historians learned Reconstruction as told by the Dunning School. It was not until the 1960s that historians started challenging the Dunning School with new analysis and interpretation. Du Bois, of course, published the blueprint for dismantling the Dunning School 30 years earlier, but he was dismissed as too biased to be taken seriously at the time.

for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). For the next 25 years, Du Bois ran the organization and edited its monthly magazine called *The Crisis*. During the 1930s, Du Bois had a falling out with his protégé, Walter White, and quit the organization he founded.

Two years before the first meeting of the Niagara Movement, Du Bois published his best-known and most important book, a collection of essays called *The Souls of Black Folk*. In the book, Du Bois argued that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” The first essay, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” is one of the most eloquent, powerful consideration of race and identity ever written. In the third essay, “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others,” Du Bois argued once again against Washington’s “Atlanta Compromise” It was eight years after the speech, Du Bois pointed out, and the damage caused by Washington’s accommodationist message was clear.

Du Bois moved to Africa in 1961 at the age of 95. He died on August 27, 1963, the day before the March on Washington where Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous “I have a Dream” speech. The crowd of 250,000 people stood in silence for an entire minute in honor of Du Bois and his incredible legacy. Du Bois was born three years after the Civil War and died one month after passage of the Civil Rights Act. His life was an arc of history².

Primary Source

Easily the most striking thing in the history of the American Negro since 1876³ is the ascendancy of Mr. Booker T. Washington. It began at the time when war memories and ideals were rapidly passing; a day of astonishing commercial development was dawning...Mr. Washington came, with a single definite program, at the psychological moment when the nation was a little ashamed of having bestowed so much sentiment on Negroes and was concentrating its energies on Dollars. His program of industrial education, conciliation of the South, and submission and silence as to civil and political rights, was not wholly original... But Mr. Washington put enthusiasm, unlimited energy, and perfect faith into this program, and changed it from a by-path into a veritable Way of Life. And the tale of the methods by which he did this is a fascinating study of human life.

To gain the sympathy and cooperation of the various elements comprising the white South was Mr. Washington’s first task; and this, at the time Tuskegee was founded, seemed, for a black man, well-nigh impossible. And yet ten years later it was done in the words spoken at Atlanta: “In all things purely social we can be as separate as the five fingers, and yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.” This “Atlanta Compromise” is by all odds the most notable thing in Mr. Washington’s career. The South interpreted it in different ways: the radicals received it as a complete surrender of the demand for civil and political equality; the

² [W.E.B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*](#), (Chicago: McClurg Publishing, 1903). Believed to be in the public domain.

³ Why does he mention 1876? What happened in 1876, implemented in 1877?

conservatives, as a generously conceived working basis for mutual understanding. So, both approved it, and today its author is certainly the most distinguished Southerner since Jefferson Davis, and the one with the largest personal following.⁴

Next to this achievement comes Mr. Washington's work in gaining place and consideration in the North. Others less shrewd and tactful had formerly essayed to sit on these two stools and had fallen between them; but as Mr. Washington knew the heart of the South from birth and training, so by singular insight he intuitively grasped the spirit of the age which was dominating the North. And so thoroughly did he learn the speech and thought of triumphant commercialism, and the ideals of material prosperity that the picture of a lone black boy poring over a French grammar amid the weeds and dirt of a neglected home soon seemed to him the acme of absurdities...

So, Mr. Washington's cult has gained unquestioning followers, his work has wonderfully prospered, his friends are legion, and his enemies are confounded. To-day he stands as the one recognized spokesman of his ten million fellows, and one of the most notable figures in a nation of seventy millions. One hesitates, therefore, to criticize a life which, beginning with so little has done so much. And yet the time is come when one may speak in all sincerity and utter courtesy of the mistakes and shortcomings of Mr. Washington's career, as well as of his triumphs, without being thought captious or envious, and without forgetting that it is easier to do ill than well in the world...

Booker T. Washington arose as essentially the leader not of one race but of two, - a compromiser between the South, the North, and the Negro. Naturally the Negroes resented, at first bitterly, signs of compromise which surrendered their civil and political rights, even though this was to be exchanged for larger chances of economic development. The rich and dominating North, however, was not only weary of the race problem, but was investing largely in Southern enterprises, and welcomed any method of peaceful cooperation. Thus, by national opinion, the Negroes began to recognize Mr. Washington's leadership; and the voice of criticism was hushed.

Mr. Washington represents in Negro thought the old attitude of adjustment and submission; but adjustment at such a peculiar time as to make his program unique. This is an age of unusual economic development, and Mr. Washington's program naturally takes an economic cast, becoming a gospel of Work and Money⁵ to such an extent as apparently almost completely to overshadow the higher aims of life. Moreover, this is an age when the more advanced races are coming in closer contact with the less developed races, and the race-feeling is therefore intensified; and Mr. Washington's program practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races. Again, in our own land, the reaction from the sentiment of war time has given impetus to race-prejudice against Negroes, and Mr. Washington withdraws many of the high demands of Negroes as men and American citizens.

⁴ Jefferson Davis was a US senator from Mississippi until southern secession, when he became President of Confederate States of America. Davis, along with Confederate General Robert E. Lee, quickly became anointed tragic heroes in Lost Cause mythology; thousands of memorials and statues to Davis and Lee remain throughout the United States, especially in the southern states.

⁵ Du Bois intentionally uses Andrew Carnegie's language from the essay we read, *On Wealth*, published 14 years before this essay.

In other periods of intensified prejudice all the Negro's tendency to self-assertion has been called forth; at this period a policy of submission is advocated. In the history of nearly all other races and peoples the doctrine preached at such crises has been that manly self-respect is worth more than lands and houses, and that a people who voluntarily surrender such respect, or cease striving for it, are not worth civilizing.

In answer to this, it has been claimed that the Negro can survive only through submission. Mr. Washington distinctly asks that black people give up, at least for the present, three things, -

First, political power,
Second, insistence on civil rights,
Third, higher education of Negro youth,

- and concentrate all their energies on industrial education, the accumulation of wealth, and the conciliation of the South. This policy has been courageously and insistently advocated for over fifteen years and has been triumphant for perhaps ten years. As a result of this tender of the palm-branch, what has been the return? In these years there have occurred:

1. The disfranchisement of the Negro.
2. The legal creation of a distinct status of civil inferiority for the Negro.
3. The steady withdrawal of aid from institutions for the higher training of the Negro.

These movements are not, to be sure, direct results of Mr. Washington's teachings; but his propaganda has, without a shadow of doubt, helped their speedier accomplishment. The question then comes: Is it possible, and probable, that nine millions of men can make effective progress in economic lines if they are deprived of political rights, made a servile caste, and allowed only the most meagre chance for developing their exceptional men? If history and reason give any distinct answer to these questions, it is an emphatic No. And Mr. Washington thus faces the triple paradox of his career:

1. He is striving nobly to make Negro artisans, business men, and property-owners; but it is utterly impossible, under modern competitive methods, for workingmen and property-owners to defend their rights and exist without the right of suffrage.
2. He insists on thrift and self-respect, but at the same time counsels a silent submission to civic inferiority such as is bound to sap the manhood of any race in the long run.
3. He advocates common-school and industrial training, and depreciates institutions of higher learning; but neither the Negro common-schools, nor Tuskegee itself, could remain open a day were it not for teachers trained in Negro colleges, or trained by their graduates.

...(Many) acknowledge Mr. Washington's invaluable service in counselling patience and courtesy in such demands; they do not ask that ignorant black men vote when ignorant whites are debarred, or that any reasonable restrictions in the suffrage should not be applied; they know that the low social level or the mass of the race is responsible for much discrimination against it, but they also know, and the nation knows, that relentless color-prejudice is more often a cause than a

result of the Negro's degradation; they seek the abatement of this relic or barbarism, and not its systematic encouragement and pampering by all agencies of social power from the Associated Press to the Church of Christ. They advocate, with Mr. Washington, a broad system of Negro common schools supplemented by thorough industrial training; but they are surprised that a man of Mr. Washington's insight cannot see that no such educational system ever has rested or can rest on any other basis than that of the well-equipped college and university, and they insist that there is a demand for a few such institutions throughout the South to train the best of the Negro youth as teachers, professional men, and leaders.

This group of men honor Mr. Washington for his attitude of conciliation toward the white South; they accept the "Atlanta Compromise" in its broadest interpretation; they recognize, with him, many signs of promise, many men of high purpose and fair judgment...but, nevertheless, they insist that the way to truth and right lies in straightforward honesty...They do not expect that the free right to vote, to enjoy civic rights, and to be educated, will come in a moment; they do not expect to see the bias and prejudices of years disappear at the blast of a trumpet; but they are absolutely certain that the way for a people to gain their reasonable rights is not by voluntarily throwing them away and insisting that they do not want them; that the way for a people to gain respect is not by continually belittling and ridiculing themselves; that, on the contrary, Negroes must insist continually, in season and out of season, that voting is necessary to modern manhood⁶, that color discrimination is barbarism, and that black boys need education as well as white boys.

In failing thus to state plainly and unequivocally the legitimate demands of their people, even at the cost of opposing an honored leader, the thinking classes of American Negroes would shirk a heavy responsibility, - a responsibility to themselves, a responsibility to the struggling masses, a responsibility to the darker races of men whose future depends so largely on this American experiment, but especially a responsibility to this nation, - this common Fatherland⁷. It is wrong to encourage a man or a people in evil-doing; it is wrong to aid and abet a national crime simply because it is unpopular not to do so. The growing spirit of kindness and reconciliation between the North and South after the frightful difference of a generation ago ought to be a source of deep congratulation to all, and especially to those whose mistreatment caused the war; but if that reconciliation is to be marked by the industrial slavery and civic death of those same black men, with permanent legislation into a position of inferiority, then those black men, if they are really men, are called upon by every consideration of patriotism and loyalty to oppose such a course by all civilized methods, even though such opposition involves disagreement with Mr. Booker T. Washington. We have no right to sit silently by while the inevitable seeds are sown for a harvest of disaster to our children, black and white⁸.

It would be unjust to Mr. Washington not to acknowledge that in several instances he has opposed movements in the South which were unjust to the Negro; he sent memorials to the Louisiana and Alabama constitutional conventions, he has spoken against lynching, and in other

⁶ Remember Indian reformer, Merrill Gates: the highest right of a man is to be a man. A lot of concern about manhood lately.

⁷ Du Bois rejects the Goddess Columbia as the personification of America. Instead, manhood personifies the nation.

⁸ Read this paragraph again. Remember Du Bois died the day before the March on Washington in 1963, a protest demanding the same civil rights he argues for in this 1903 essay.

ways has openly or silently set his influence against sinister schemes and unfortunate happenings. Notwithstanding this, it is equally true to assert that on the whole the distinct impression left by Mr. Washington's propaganda is, first, that the South is justified in its present attitude toward the Negro because of the Negro's degradation; secondly, that the prime cause of the Negro's failure to rise more quickly is his wrong education in the past; and, thirdly, that his future rise depends primarily on his own efforts. Each of these propositions is a dangerous half-truth. The supplementary truths must never be lost sight of: first, slavery and race-prejudice are potent if not sufficient causes of the Negro's position; second, industrial and common-school training were necessarily slow in planting because they had to await the black teachers trained by higher institutions,—it being extremely doubtful if any essentially different development was possible, and certainly a Tuskegee was unthinkable before 1880; and, third, while it is a great truth to say that the Negro must strive and strive mightily to help himself, it is equally true that unless his striving be not simply seconded, but rather aroused and encouraged, by the initiative of the richer and wiser envioning group, he cannot hope for great success.

In his failure to realize and impress this last point, Mr. Washington is especially to be criticized. His doctrine has tended to make the whites, North and South, shift the burden of the Negro problem to the Negro's shoulders and stand aside as critical and rather pessimistic spectators; when in fact the burden belongs to the nation, and the hands of none of us are clean if we bend not our energies to righting these great wrongs.