



African Americans after Reconstruction: Booker T. Washington vs. W.E.B. DuBois



Booker T. Washington

Booker T. Washington was born a slave in Virginia. After emancipation, his family resettled in West Virginia, where he worked in the salt and coal mines. He was later able to attend school, and eventually graduated from college. In 1881 he was named as the first leader of the new Tuskegee Institute in Alabama – a vocational school for African Americans. He gained national attention for his success at the school, and became the leading voice of disfranchised former slaves newly oppressed by Jim Crow Laws in the South.

W.E.B. DuBois

Born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, W.E.B. Du Bois grew up in a relatively tolerant and integrated community. After graduating from Harvard, where he was the first African American to earn a doctorate, he became a professor of history, sociology and economics at Atlanta University. Du Bois was one of the co-founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. Du Bois rose to national prominence as the leader of the Niagara Movement, a group of African-American activists who wanted equal rights for blacks.

Document A: Excerpt from Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Compromise" Speech, 1895

Ignorant and inexperienced, it is not strange that in the first years of our new life we began at the top instead of at the bottom; that a seat in Congress or the state legislature was more sought than real estate or industrial skill; that the political convention or stump speaking had more attractions than starting a dairy farm or truck garden.

A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal, "Water, water; we die of thirst!" The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back, "Cast down your bucket where you are." A second time the signal, "Water, water; send us water!" ran up from the distressed vessel, and was answered, "Cast down your bucket where you are." And a third and fourth signal for water was answered, "Cast down your bucket where you are." The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket, and it came up full of fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River. To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man, who is their next-door neighbor, I would say: "Cast down your bucket where you are"— cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded.... Cast it down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions.... No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top.

To those of the white race who look to the incoming of those of foreign birth and strange tongue and habits for the prosperity of the South, were I permitted I would repeat what I say to my own race, "Cast down your bucket where you are." Cast it down among the eight millions of Negroes whose habits you know, whose fidelity and love you have tested... As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past, in nursing your children, watching by the sick-bed of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defense of yours, interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one. In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.

Document B: Excerpt from W.E.B. DuBois' The Souls of Black Folk (1903)

Easily the most striking thing in the history of the American Negro since 1876 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; a sense of doubt and hesitation overtook the freedmen's sons,—then it was that his leading began. Mr. Washington came, with a simple definite programme, at the psychological moment when the nation was a little ashamed of having bestowed so much sentiment on Negroes [during Reconstruction], and was concentrating its energies on Dollars....

Mr. Washington's programme practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races.... Mr. Washington withdraws many of the high demands of Negroes as men and American citizens.... 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, and 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.

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.

Document C: Booker T. and W.E.B. By Dudley Randall

"It seems to me," said Booker T.,
"It shows a mighty lot of cheek
To study chemistry and Greek
When Mister Charlie needs a hand
To hoe the cotton on his land,
And when Miss Ann looks for a cook,
Why stick your nose inside a book?"

"I don't agree," said W.E.B.
"If I should have the drive to seek
Knowledge of chemistry or Greek,
I'll do it. Charles and Miss can look
Another place for hand or cook,
Some men rejoice in skill of hand,
And some in cultivating land,
But there are others who maintain
The right to cultivate the brain."

"It seems to me," said Booker T.,
"That all you folks have missed the boat
Who shout about the right to vote,
And spend vain days and sleepless nights
In uproar over civil rights.
Just keep your mouths shut, do not grouse,
But work, and save, and buy a house."

"I don't agree," said W.E.B.
"For what can property avail
If dignity and justice fail?
Unless you help to make the laws,
They'll steal your house with trumped-up clause.
A rope's as tight, a fire as hot,
No matter how much cash you've got.
Speak soft, and try your little plan,
But as for me, I'll be a man."

"It seems to me," said Booker T.--
"I don't agree,"
Said W.E.B.

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Booker T. Washington Document A	W.E.B. DuBois Document B
1. After being freed from slavery, what was the initial goal of African Americans? Why would they want this?	1. What is DuBois' main criticism of Washington's plan?
2. What does Washington mean by his "Cast down your bucket where you are" anecdote?	2. What does he point out as the central rights given up under Washington's plan?
3. What type of work does Washington suggest for African Americans? Why?	3. Why do you think DuBois was insistent on higher education for African Americans?
4. Who does Washington recommend Southern whites look to for labor? Why?	4. What results have come from Washington's plan?
5. What are his views on social interaction?	5. Who does DuBois feel should bear the burden of the "Negro problem"?
6. How might Washington's background influence his view on the role of African Americans?	6. How might DuBois' background influence his view on the role of African Americans?
7. Why would Washington's ideas be popular with whites?	7. Why wouldn't DuBois' ideas be popular with whites?
8. Why would his ideas not be popular among blacks?	8. Why would his ideas be popular among blacks?
Document C: Booker T. and W.E.B. by Dudley Randall	
1. How does this poem reflect the conflict between these two African American leaders? Give examples.	
Critical Thinking: How might this conflict between Washington and DuBois limit the progress of African Americans at the time? How might it drive the movement forward?	