

Chapter 8

Two Paths Towards Equality

African-Americans started the 20th century under terrible disadvantages. Most were trapped as sharecroppers on small southern farms. All were hurt by laws that denied them the most basic freedoms, and few were even allowed to vote against the men who deprived them of their rights. These problems required a strategy that would allow black Americans to survive and change the condition of their lives.

With the death of Frederick Douglass in 1895 a void developed in African-American leadership. However a new spokesman arose to fill this gap and speak for African-Americans in the post Reconstruction Era. His name was Booker T. Washington.



Booker T. Washington

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Born a slave in Virginia shortly before the Civil War, Washington's early life had been a constant struggle to survive and to obtain a meager education. His success came through hard work and subservience to all-powerful whites on whose good will he depended. His great opportunity in life came in 1881 when he was asked to take charge of a struggling school in Tuskegee, Alabama. Upon arriving in Tuskegee, Washington learned that the Alabama legislature had appropriated a small amount of money for teachers' salaries, but nothing for buildings. Beginning with a church with a leaking roof and a small shanty next door, Booker T. Washington forged Tuskegee into a beautiful and prosperous campus through persistence and force of character and the help of sympathetic

whites. All of its buildings were constructed by its students, who had been taught the art of carpentry, brick making, and masonry at Tuskegee, as well as such skills as the use of a toothbrush and proper eating utensils.. The work done at the school was so good, that whites came from miles around to buy bricks, cabinets and other items made at Tuskegee. Washington's work and philosophy was so appreciated by white Americans that they donated millions of dollars to Tuskegee and welcomed Washington as the spokesperson for African-Americans. He was even invited to the White House by President Theodore Roosevelt, and died in 1915 a much honored man.

Washington did so well, that he thought he had found the secret of success for his entire race. His motto became, 'build from the bottom up.' Do not ask for the right to vote or hold office — which he saw as the mistake made during Reconstruction. First, learn a trade and be so good at it that you earn the white man's respect. Washington's philosophy could be summed up in the following statement:

The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth much more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera house

W.E.B. Du Bois

Not all members of his race agreed with Booker T. Washington. Some believed he deliberately neglected demanding the political rights needed to protect the material gains his students attained. The outstanding spokesman for the opposing school of thought was W.E.B. Du Bois. Raised in western Massachusetts



where he was born, Du Bois did not experience the abject poverty that Washington suffered. He excelled in the white grade school he attended, and after a stint in an African-American college in the South, graduated from Harvard University in 1895. Rather than shower whites with respect and deference, Du Bois chose to speak his mind. He devoted his life to teaching, writing, editing and organizing. He taught at several different black colleges, wrote many works of history, published studies of how African-Americans lived, and helped organize the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). It became the nation's first and most successful organization devoted to securing the rights of African-Americans. During the many years he edited the NAACP Journal, Du Bois helped make white Americans aware of the plight of their black countrymen. Yet, after some sixty years of struggling for equality, Du

Bois gave up on his country and moved to Africa. He died there in 1963, just one year before Congress passed effective laws designed to end the injustices that Du Bois had spent his life opposing. Du Bois's efforts were directed at ending the hateful Jim Crow laws that denied equal rights to his race. In opposition to Booker T. Washington, Du Bois's philosophy could be summarized as follows:

The freedom to earn a dollar in a factory is almost meaningless without the opportunity to spend it, keep it, or save it, the way you want to.

Booker T. Washington and the Atlanta Compromise

In 1895, Washington was called upon to speak at the Atlanta, Georgia fair. This was going to be a very important occasion because it marked the first time that an African-American man was asked to speak before a white audience in the South. As he prepared to make his speech, Washington kept "uppermost in his mind," the desire to say something that would bring about "friendship of the races." His speech was well received by his white audience and became known as the "Atlanta Compromise." Parts of it are reproduced here:

Our greatest danger as we pass from slavery to freedom is that we may forget that most black people will have to live by the work they must do with their hands, not their heads. We shall be prosperous only to the extent that we are willing to work with our hands. We must concentrate on the important things of life, and not on the glamour & glitter. It is more important that we learn how to plow a field, than that we learn how to write a poem. It is at the bottom of life where we must begin, not at the top. Nor shall we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities.

The past and the present has taught one important lesson to the Negro and his friends. That lesson is that the Negro can prosper in America only if he works hard, saves carefully, buys property, and lives by Christian ideals. The people and the race that practices these four golden principles, are the ones who will control the government.

We, the black people, have proved our loyalty to the South in the past. We have nursed your children, watched by the sick beds of your mothers and fathers, and often followed them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves. In the future, we can stand by you in our own way, as no foreigner could, and stand ready to lay our lives down, if need be, in defense of yours. Our industrial, our commercial, our political, and our religious lives can be intertwined with yours, in a way that makes certain what is good for one race will also be good for the other.

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In all things that are purely social, we can be as separate as the fingers, and yet be one as the hand, in all things essential to the progress of both races.

The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing. No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized. It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared to the exercises of these privileges. The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth much more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera-house.²⁴

W.E.B. Du Bois Criticizes the Atlanta Compromise

Born and raised in the North, William Du Bois did not have to continually humble himself in order to survive. He, like Frederick Douglass, was able to demand those rights that were due African-Americans, and not just ask for or show himself deserving of favors which whites would be willing to give. In his book, *Souls of Black Folks*, first published in 1903, Du Bois enumerated his points of difference with Washington:

Mr. Washington asks that black people give up, at least for the present, three things.

1st, political power,

2nd, insistence on civil rights,

3rd, higher education of Negro youth.

He asks black people to work only to increase their wealth, learn a trade, and appease the South. He has argued for these things for over fifteen years. The question now comes, is it possible that nine million men can make progress on economic lines if they are denied political rights, are treated like second class citizens, and are only given the slightest chance of developing their exceptional men. If history and reason have anything to say about it, the answer is No, Mr. Washington, here-to fore, faces 3 major contradictions:

He is trying to make Negro craftsmen, businessmen and property owners, but it is utterly impossible for workingmen and property owners to defend their rights and exist without the right to vote.

He insists on thrift and self-respect, but at the same time advises black people to silently submit to whites in such a way that it is bound to make any race lose its self-respect.

He argues for elementary school and manual training, talks against colleges and universities but he could not run Tuskegee or his elementary schools without teachers trained in Negro Colleges.

²⁴Freely adopted from Richard Wade, *Negroes in American Life*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1970), pp. 107-11.

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It would be unfair to Mr. Washington not to recognize that he has on several occasions spoken against injustices committed against Negroes. Nevertheless, it is equally true that the distinct impression left by him is that the South is justified in its present attitude toward the Negro because of the Negro's low position in society; that the main reason for the Negro's failure to rise more quickly, has been the wrong emphasis in his education, and, finally, that his future rise depends mainly on his own efforts. Each of these ideas state a dangerous half-truth. The other half of these truths must never be forgotten.

1st, slavery and race prejudice are powerful if not completely explanations of the Negro's position in society.

2nd, elementary and manual education were slow in getting started because they had to wait for black teachers trained by colleges, and

3rd, while it is true that the Negro must work to help himself, it is also true that he has little chance unless helped by richer and more powerful white majorities.

In his failure to emphasize this third point, Mr. Washington must be especially criticized. His ideas tend to make whites in both the North and the South, blame the Negro himself for his problems. In fact, the blame lies with the whole nation, and the hands of none are clean unless we make great efforts to right these great wrongs.

So far as Mr. Washington apologizes for injustice, both North and South, does not properly emphasize the privilege of voting, does not recognize the terrible burden of racial discrimination, and opposes higher education for the brightest, black people, we must firmly and without ceasing, oppose him. By every civilized and peaceful method we must work for the rights which are our due. We must cling without flinching to the words, which the sons of our forefathers would like to forget:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident. That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights - that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."²⁵

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Note that both Washington and Du Bois worked during their entire lives to improve the conditions of African-Americans. Explain how the life work and early experiences of each were reflected in their philosophies.
2. With whom do you agree on the issue of earning and spending the dollar, Washington or Du Bois?
3. Do you think Washington rather than Du Bois was right for his time? For today? Explain.

25 Freely adopted from Richard Wade, op. cit., pp. 131-33.