

African-american history

[History](#), [American History](#)



African-American history Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois had contrasting views on how to deal with the problems facing American-Americans. Which was superior in dealing with these conflicts? Booker T. Washington and WEB Du Bois are perhaps the two most important and influential African-American's of the late nineteenth century and they both played pivotal roles in the Civil Rights movement. However, as the question suggests, they also had very contrasting political beliefs when it came to impacting the African-American movement.

To fully understand where the two leaders had similarities and contrasts in their political views, I will first study Washington's contributions to the African-American cause, and the reasons behind his choices. Focus will then shift to Du Bois' views and his main criticisms of Washington, and whether these criticisms were valid or not. To understand the methods and reactions of Washington and Du Bois it is first essential to understand the background they were functioning in.

During the late nineteenth century, when Washington and Du Bois were at their peak, Reconstruction had failed and life for many African-American's was considerably worse than it had been before the American Civil War and the abolishment of slavery. African-American's found themselves in the worse paid jobs in both rural areas, where they were exploited by an unfair sharecropping system, and in more urban areas, where the industrial revolution was beginning to take hold. Segregation was also rapidly moving throughout American society being reinforced in 1896 by the Plessy vs.

Ferguson case where it was decided that segregation was constitutional under the argument that it was "separate but equal". More worryingly,

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during this time the number of African-Americans falling victim to lynching was rapidly growing. Due to these worsening conditions many African-American leaders of the time developed a tolerating attitude towards the obvious oppression there people were suffering, believing that outspoken protest would only make situations worse, and so instead they would appeal for aid from wealthy and influential whites and encourage African-Americans to “ lift themselves by their bootstraps”[1].

When looking at the background context it becomes clear why Washington and Du Bois had differing views when it came to Civil Rights. Washington had been born a slave in the South and grew up poorly fed and clothed and was denied an education. Growing up in the South Washington would have had first hand experience with the sort of discrimination many African-American's were faced with at the time and would have also understood the real fear many African-American's had of lynching.

With this in mind it can be seen why Washington would have been more cautious in his methods of progressing Civil Rights. Du Bois by contrast was born a freeman in the North and didn't suffer discrimination until he entered higher education, and so it is understandable why he would not have had the same reservations as Washington when it came to a more radical approach to dealing with the oppression of African-Americans. Washington's work for the African-American race can be most clearly seen when looking at the Tuskegee Institution, which still exists today.

The school opened in July 1881 and was at the outset only space rented from a local church, with only one teacher, that being Washington. The following year Washington was able to purchase a former plantation, which became

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the permanent site of the school, and the students themselves erected and fitted the buildings, as well as growing their own crops and rearing their own livestock. While the Tuskegee Institute did offer some academic training for teachers, its main focus was on providing practical skills needed to survive in rural areas, such as carpentry and modern agricultural techniques.

It can be argued that this more vocational slant towards teaching was damaging in the progression of African-American rights, however Washington believed that to become socially equal to whites, African-Americans must first become economically equal and show that they are responsible American citizens, who had something to offer society. Also, it can be argued that the practical teaching of the Tuskegee Institute was far more beneficial for the time than academic teaching would have been. The Institute is also a good example of why perhaps Washington had some merit with his views of appeasement.

Washington was able to use his friendship with powerful white men to help finance the school and even got ex-slave owners, such as George W. Campbell, to support the new school. Without this aid it is unlikely that the Tuskegee Institute would have ever evolved from a small rented room into the huge institution that it is today. While the Tuskegee Institute showcased Washington's views on education the Atlanta Expedition Address illustrated what he supposedly believed African-American's place in society should be. Washington delivered the address in 1895, and was designed to “cement the friendship of the races and bring about hearty cooperation between them” [2]. Washington's main purpose with the Atlanta Address was to help achieve a realistic settlement between Southern Whites, Northern Whites and the

African-American community in a time when race relations were only getting worse. Washington was no doubt anxious not to antagonise the white population who held African-American's at their mercy, and so he “ urged blacks to remain in the South, work at the ‘ common occupations of life', and accept the fact of white supremacy” [3].

When addressing the white population in his speech Washington reassured them that African-American's had no intention or interest in securing socialequality, that all they required was economic cooperation, “ 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” [4]. The work Washington did for African-American crossed over into the twentieth century with the creation of the National Negro Business League in 1900.

The aim of the League was to help promote and further the commercial and financial development of African-American business [5], not only in the South but also the North of America. The creation of the League empathized Washington's belief that to become socially equal to whites that African-American's must first become economically equal. However it can be argued that the League held little importance when considering African-American business as it did little to assist, but that it allowed Washington to have a “ stronghold” of men in every black population of importance [6].

Compared to Washington Du Bois political views can be seen as being quite radical for the social climate of the time. Du Bois probably had more radical views because of his different background, as he didn't have a history of slavery and did live in fear of lynching the way many African-American's did at the time. However, Du Bois did share some similarities in thought with <https://assignbuster.com/african-american-history-research-paper-samples/>

Washington, for example Du Bois also believed that African-American's needed to help bring themselves out of social inequality.

However, unlike Washington, Du Bois believed that African-American's needed leadership from a college-educated elite and that simple vocational education wasn't enough to elevate the position of African-American's in society, “ Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools - intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it - this is the curriculum of that Higher Education which must underlie true life.

On this foundation we may build bread winning, skill of hand and quickness of brain, with never a fear lest the child and man mistake the means of living for the object of life”[7], Du Bois set out the ideas of an elite group of African-American's teaching other African-American's in his “ The Talented Tenth” article, the idea being that there was one in ten African-American's, the talented tenth, was capable of becoming an influential leader, who would lead other African-American's to a better future.

Du Bois had many criticism of Washington, many of which he set out in an essay in 1903 titled “ Of Mr Booker T Washington and Others”. Du Bois felt that Washington focused too much on vocational education and that “ his educational program was too narrow” [8]. This particular criticism no doubt evolved from Du Bois' own education which was wide and varied, and his more privileged background which allowed him the luxury of exploring avenues of education that wouldn't directly lead to work. Du Bois also believed that Washington's methods and arguments “ practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races”[9].

This criticism is almost entirely valid as Washington himself stated that African-Americans should accept White Supremacy in his Atlanta Expedition Address, and while it is doubtful that Washington himself saw the African-American race as inferior, he did little to try and convince the general population otherwise. Washington urged African-American's to earn security through economic means and technical skills, and he put little importance on higher education and political and social rights, believing that they would follow naturally from economic freedom.

However Du Bois argued that this approach would lead to many African-American's living below the poverty line, because he believed that it was impossible for most people to gain economic rights and freedoms when they were unequal socially. Du Bois also clashed with Washington due to their differing political ideologies. While Washington championed capitalist ideals, Du Bois, who became a leading Black Marxist, felt that any social freedoms gained by economic progress would make the African-American population into dishonest moneymakers [10].

Du Bois' Marxist views came into play with other disparagements he had with Washington, most apparent in 1903 when Du Bois tried to prove Washington was using “ hush money” to control the African-American press, to make sure his own views were the more favoured in print [11]. To some degree Du Bois' criticisms of Washington were valid, as Washington did little to resolve the social issues that plagued the African-American race, so as not to seem controversial or threatening to the white population. However, when looking at the backgrounds of the two leaders it becomes obvious why they had such opposing views.

Washington had been born a Slave in the South and so he would naturally be more cautious and reserved when dealing with the white population as he knew the damage that a majority population could cause to African-American's. He matured in a time when the number of lynchings was ever growing, and so he would fully recognise and understand the fear most African-American's lived with. Du Bois by contrast, was born a freeman in the North, which was far more liberal and accepting than the South and so he didn't have a proper grasp of the everyday problems and anxieties many African-Americans' dealt with.

It can also be argued that while Du Bois spent large amounts of his time criticising Washington, he actually did nothing practical to forward the progress of African-Americans' the way Washington did with the Tuskegee Institute. While Du Bois was Washington's most vocal and famous opponent, he was far from the only challenger. A black president of Atlanta University, John Hope, was vocal of his disagreement with Washington's Atlanta Address, stating in 1896 “ I regard it as cowardly and dishonest for any of our coloured men to tell white people and coloured people that we are not struggling for equality.

Now catch your breath, for I am going to say that we demand social equality” [12]. While this view was to be expected among Northern black leaders, Hope shattered the illusion that all African-American's in the South were willing to simply accept their lowered social status. William Monroe Trotter, editor of the Boston Guardian, was another of Washington's most unforgiving critics and claimed that “[Washington], whatever good he may do, has injured and is injuring the race more than he can aid it by his school.

Let us hope that Booker Washington will remain mouth-closed at Tuskegee. If he will do this, all his former sins will be forgiven”[13]. Trotter's views are to some degree far harsher than Du Bois' were, but the general idea theme is the same, that Washington was not helping the African-American race by deemphasising the importance of social equality, and that he was in fact hindering to movement. Trotter also challenged Washington at a National Negro Business League meeting in Boston while Washington was giving a speech.

Trotter posed a number of questions that challenged Washington and his views, before he was arrested. While Washington did not respond to the challenges, Trotter made his point and the incident was reported as “ The Boston Riot” the next day in papers. As can be seen, Washington and Du Bois had to some degree very opposing views on how to handle and progress the African-American race. Washington put great empathise on vocational education that would give practical skills to African-American's living in the South.

Rather than focus on social and political equality, Washington stressed the importance of economic advancement, believing that once the average African-American had the power of wealth that political and social freedoms and powers would follow. Washington felt there was great importance in appeasing the white majority, for the economic and political power it affording him in furthering the African-American cause and because he lived in the turbulent South, where it was dangerous to be a radical black man.

Du Bois' political ideas contrasted with Washington's idea of “ appeasement” and he had a far more radical approach to Civil Rights. Du Bois didn't think

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that it was possible for African-American's to achieve economic equality before they had achieved social and political equality. Du Bois' more radical approach stems from his background, as he did not share the same fear as Washington and did not experience the same forms of racism. Du Bois could afford to be more radical as he had not experienced slavery and his placement in the North meant that he did not share the fear of lynching that many in the South had.

Du Bois also put more emphasis on academic teaching and did not feel that Washington's vocational education would be useful in helping the progress of African-Americans. However, Washington and Du Bois did share some similarities in political thought. They both recognised the importance of having the support of powerful white men, who could both finance and encourage their cause. While both Washington and Du Bois had good arguments for doing things in their particular ways, it is probably safe to say that neither had perfect strategies. Washington was too timid to argue for equality, and Du Bois had no practical ideas he could implement.

It is fair to suggest that a mixture of their two views would have been the best way to progress the African-American cause, as Washington had practical methods of improved the average African-American's life, such as the Tuskegee Institute, and Du Bois was able to protest the obvious oppression that African-Americans' suffered.

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