

Booker t. washington
versus w. e. b.
duboise



Booker T. Washington believed that blacks should not push to attain equal civil and political rights with whites. That it was best to concentrate on improving their economic skills and the quality of their character. The burden of improvement resting squarely on the shoulders of the black man.

Eventually they would earn the respect and love of the white man, and civil and political rights would be accrued as a matter of course. This was a very non-threatening and popular idea with a lot of whites.

. For two decades Washington established a dominant tone of gradualism and accommodationism among blacks, only to find in the latter half of this period that the leadership was passing to more militant leaders such as W. E. B. DuBois

During the four decades following reconstruction, the position of the Negro in America steadily deteriorated. The hopes and aspirations of the freedmen for full citizenship rights were shattered after the federal government betrayed the Negro and restored white supremacist control to the South. Blacks were left at the mercy of ex-slaveholders and former Confederates, as the United States government adopted a laissez-faire policy regarding the " Negro problem" in the South. The era of Jim Crow brought to the American Negro disfranchisement, social, educational, and occupational discrimination, mass mob violence, murder, and lynching. Under a sort of peonage, black people were deprived of their civil and human rights and reduced to a status of quasi-slavery or " second-class" citizenship. Strict legal segregation of public facilities in the southern states was strengthened in 1896 by the Supreme Court's decision in the Plessy vs. Ferguson case. Racists, northern and southern, proclaimed that the Negro was subhuman, barbaric, immoral, and

innately inferior, physically and intellectually, to white people, and totally incapable of functioning as an equal in white civilization.

Between the Compromise of 1877 and the Compromise of 1895, the problem facing Negro leadership was clear: how to obtain first-class citizenship for the Negro American. How to reach this goal caused considerable debate among Negro leaders. Some advocated physical violence to force concessions from the whites. A few urged Negroes to return to Africa. The majority, however, suggested that Negroes use peaceful, democratic means to change undesirable conditions. Some black leaders encouraged Negroes to become skilled workers, hoping that if they became indispensable to the prosperity of the South, political and social rights would be granted to them. Others advocated struggle for civil rights, specifically the right to vote, on the theory that economic and social rights would follow. Most agreed that solutions would come gradually.

Negro leadership near the turn of the century was divided between these two tactics for racial equality, which may be termed the economic strategy and the political strategy. The most heated controversy in Negro leadership at this time raged between two remarkable black men Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois. The major spokesman for the gradualist economic strategy was Washington. DuBois was the primary advocate of the gradualist political strategy.

Washington learned the doctrine of economic advancement combined with acceptance of disfranchisement and conciliation with the white South from Armstrong.

His rise to national prominence came in 1895 with a brief speech, which outlined his social philosophy and racial strategy. Washington was invited to speak before an integrated audience at the opening of the Cotton States and International Exposition held in Atlanta in September 1895. He was the first Negro ever to address such a large group of southern whites

Washington is remembered chiefly for this “Atlanta Compromise” address. In this speech, he called on white America to provide jobs and industrial-agricultural education for Negroes. In exchange, blacks would give up demands for social equality and civil rights. His message to the Negro was that political and social equality was less important as immediate goals than economic respectability and independence.

Washington believed that if blacks gained an economic foothold, and proved themselves useful to whites, then civil rights and social equality would eventually be given to them. Blacks were urged to work as farmers, skilled artisans, domestic servants, and manual laborers to prove to whites that all blacks were not “liars and chicken thieves.”

The philosophy of Washington was one of accommodation to white oppression. He advised blacks to trust the paternalism of the southern whites and accept the fact of white supremacy. He stressed the mutual interdependence of blacks and whites in the South, but said they were to remain socially separate: “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.” Washington counseled blacks to remain in the South, obtain a useful education, save their money, work hard, and purchase property. By

doing such things, Washington believed, the Negro could ultimately “earn” full citizenship rights.

Several Negro leaders voiced their opposition to Washington’s “Atlanta Compromise” with its admonition to work and wait. They could not topple Washington from power, but one of them did win recognition as a leader of the opposition W. E. B. DuBois.

DuBois was not an early opponent of Washington’s program. He enthusiastically accepted the Tuskegeean’s “Atlanta Compromise” philosophy as sound advice. He said in 1895 that Washington’s speech was “a word fitly spoken.” In fact, during the late 1890’s, there were several remarkable similarities in the ideas of the two men, who for a brief period found issues on which they could cooperate. Both Washington and DuBois tended to blame Negroes themselves for their condition. They both placed emphasis on self-help and moral improvement rather than on rights. Both men placed economic advancement before universal manhood suffrage. The professor and the principal were willing to accept franchise restrictions based on education and property qualifications, but not race. Both strongly believed in racial solidarity and economic cooperation, or Black Nationalism. They encouraged the development of Negro business. They agreed that the black masses should receive industrial training.

The years from 1901 to 1903 were years of transition in DuBois’ philosophy. DuBois grew to find Washington’s program intolerable, as he became more outspoken about racial injustice and began to differ with Washington over the importance of liberal arts education when the latter’s emphasis on

industrial education drew resources away from black liberal arts colleges. DuBois noted that Washington's accommodating program produced little real gain for the race. Another factor that alienated DuBois from Washington was the fact that Washington and his " Tuskegee Machine" an intricate, nation-wide web of institutions in the black community that were conducted, dominated, and strongly influenced by Washington kept a dictatorial control over Negro affairs that stifled honest criticism of his policies and other efforts at Negro advancement. DuBois came to view Washington as a political boss who had too much power and used it ruthlessly to his own advantage. Although DuBois admitted that he was worthy of honor, he believed Washington was a limited and misguided leader.

DuBois launched a well-reasoned, thoughtful, and unequivocal attack on Washington's program in his classic collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in 1903.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois took the position that " the Black men of America have a duty to perform; a duty stern and delicate a forward movement to oppose a part of the work of their greatest leader."

In an essay entitled, " Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," DuBois said that Washington's accommodationist program asked blacks to give up political power, insistence on civil rights, and higher education for Negro youth. He believed that Washington's policies had directly or indirectly resulted in three trends: the disfranchisement of the Negro, the legal creation of a distinct status of civil inferiority for the Negro, and steady withdrawal of aid from institutions for the higher training of the Negro.

DuBois charged that Washington's program tacitly accepted the alleged inferiority of the Negro. Expressing the sentiment of the radical civil rights advocates, DuBois demanded for all black citizens 1) the right to vote, 2) civic equality, and 3) the education of Negro youth according to ability.

Generally, DuBois opposed Washington's program because it was narrow in its scope and objectives, devalued the study of the liberal arts, and ignored civil, political, and social injustices and the economic exploitation of the black masses.

DuBois firmly believed that persistent agitation, political action, and academic education would be the means to achieve full citizenship rights for black Americans.

He stressed the necessity for liberal arts training because he believed that black leadership should come from college-trained backgrounds. DuBois' philosophy of the "Talented Tenth" was that a college-educated elite would chart, through their knowledge, the way for economic and cultural elevation for the black masses.

The NAACP was a coalition of black and white radicals which sought to remove legal barriers to full citizenship for Negroes.

DuBois was one of the founding members of the organization.

Both Washington and DuBois wanted the same thing for blacks first-class citizenship but their methods for obtaining it differed. Because of the interest in immediate goals contained in Washington's economic approach, whites did not realize that he anticipated the complete acceptance and integration

of Negroes into American life. He believed blacks, starting with so little, would have to begin at the bottom and work up gradually to achieve positions of power and responsibility before they could demand equal citizenship even if it meant temporarily assuming a position of inferiority. DuBois understood Washington's program, but believed that it was not the solution to the "race problem." Blacks should study the liberal arts, and have the same rights as white citizens. Blacks, DuBois believed, should not have to sacrifice their constitutional rights in order to achieve a status that was already guaranteed.