

# Strategies for african-american racial uplift



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Strategies for African-American uplift throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries varied according to leaders' personal styles and the social and political contexts in which they operated. While some took a conciliatory approach and accepted racist laws and inequities, others adopted a more confrontational stance.

Washington, a former slave and founder of the Tuskegee Institute, was America's chief black leader before his death in 1915. He witnessed Reconstruction's premature end and the rise of Jim Crow laws, which began in piecemeal fashion and ultimately coalesced after *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896).

In the 1890s, seeing African-American rights eroded by discriminatory state laws (about which the federal government did nothing), Washington was forced to accept restrictions on black voting rights. The "Atlanta compromise" of 1895 urged blacks to work within the system; instead of agitating for political equality, Washington called for blacks to educate themselves, master their marketable skills at trades and agriculture, and to build up their economic standing.

Though W. E. B. DuBois condemned Washington as a coward and sell-out, he had little choice and no leverage in the battle (Goldfield et al, 2005, p. 459-461).

The Northern-born, Harvard-educated DuBois, angered by Washington's methods, maintained that African Americans could not enjoy citizenship as equals without political power and urged them to agitate for their rights. His strategy was based not on patient compliance with unfair laws, but on urging

African Americans to fight political power and equitable treatment under the law.

After leaving Atlanta in 1906 in the wake of a race riot, he helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which bridged the racial divide and relied on white support as well as black in order to combat discrimination.

DuBois explained that “ Any movement for the elevation of the Southern Negro people needs the cooperation, the sympathy, and the support of the best white people in order to succeed” (Goldfield et al, 2005, p. 461).

Journalist Ida B. Wells, born to slave parents in Mississippi and educated at Fisk, shared DuBois’ confrontational approach, using her Memphis newspaper column to attack lynching and other manifestations of white racism (particularly white resentment at black efforts to improve their lives).

She refused to heed discriminatory laws and challenged Tennessee’s segregation laws, refusing to acquiesce despite her losses in court. In 1892, after questioning white fears of miscegenation, whites in Memphis destroyed her paper’s facilities and forced her to flee to Chicago, where she became a co-founder of the NAACP and continued her agitation against racial discrimination, especially her campaign against lynching (Goldfield et al, 2005, p. 563).

Her outspoken, assertive approach, like that of DuBois, helped set the tone for the NAACP’s later activities.

At the same time as DuBois and Washington were at odds, middle-class black women’s clubs, which had existed for decades before the Civil War,

geared themselves toward mutual aid, and provided assistance in education, domestic skills, and social services, and health-care assistance to fellow blacks, which federal, state, and local governments did not.

Groups like the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) filled voids by helping African Americans - especially women, who lacked the franchise by virtue of both race and gender (Shaw, 2006). In addition, clubwomen promoted self-help - much like Booker T. Washington had done, though without Washington's reluctant acceptance of segregation.

In the 1920s, during blacks' " Great Migration" from the South to the urban North, African Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey believed that African Americans should uplift themselves by leaving a racist America behind and returning to the continent of their ancestors.

His United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) shared other black leaders' desire to unite blacks and practice self-help and racial pride, but he did not share many blacks' belief that leaving the South for the North led to substantial improvements in their lives, citing the poverty of urban ghettos and the North's long-standing racism (which lacked only official desegregation laws).

In Africa, he maintained, blacks could have full control over their politics, economics, and education, because he believed that blacks could never achieve equality in the United States, regardless of where they lived. However, Garvey's efforts did not meet the same widespread support that his activist predecessors did; his movement coincided with the Harlem Renaissance, which urged African Americans to express pride in their culture and heritage, and to assert themselves.

Also, says historian Paul Boyer, “ White Americans were not the only people to find Garvey’s mobilization of the black masses unsettling. . . . [The] NAACP, including W. E. B. DuBois, [was] among Garvey’s sharpest critics” (Boyer et al, 1998, p. 542). His efforts ultimately failed, as he was imprisoned and deported for fraud and his organization withered in his absence.

These figures shared a common desire to further the lives and standing of African Americans, though each worked in a slightly different social context and faced different obstacles. Where Washington urged self-help and self-reliance in the face of increasingly intransigent segregation, DuBois and Wells rejected his acceptance of unjust laws and called for increased agitation for social, political, and economic equality, and black clubwomen provided philanthropy and voids in social services that government social services did not.

Garvey’s approach differed most sharply from the others; rejecting America entirely and believing it could never wholly accept blacks, he urged blacks to resettle in Africa and thus achieve sovereignty over themselves. Their approaches reflect different approaches not only to racism, but to America as a whole.

## REFERENCES

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