

The struggle for social and economic equality in america

Law



DiscriminationThe struggle for social and economic equality of Black people in America has been long and slow. It is sometimes amazing that any progress has been made in the racial equality arena at all; every tentative step forward seems to be diluted by losses elsewhere. For every " Stacey Koons" that is convicted, there seems to be a Texaco executive waiting to send Blacks back to the past. Throughout the struggle for equal rights, there have been courageous Black leaders at the forefront of each discrete movement. From early activists such as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. DuBois, to 1960s civil rights leaders and radicals such as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and the Black Panthers, the progress that has been made toward full equality has resulted from the visionary leadership of these brave individuals. This does not imply, however, that there has ever been widespread agreement within the Black community on strategy or that the actions of prominent Black leaders have met with strong support from those who would benefit from these actions.

This report will examine the influence of two " early era" Black activists: Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois. Through an analysis of the ideological differences between these two men, the writer will argue that, although they disagreed over the direction of the struggle for equality, the differences between these two men actually enhanced the status of Black Americans in the struggle for racial equality. We will look specifically at the events leading to and surrounding the " Atlanta Compromise" in 1895. In order to understand the differences in the philosophies of Washington and Dubois, it is useful to know something about their backgrounds.

Booker T. Washington, born a slave in 1856 in Franklin County, Virginia, could be described as a pragmatist. He was only able to attend school three months out of the year, with the remaining nine months spent working in coal mines. He developed the idea of Blacks becoming skilled tradesmen as a useful stepping-stone toward respect by the white majority and eventual full equality. Washington worked his way through Hampton Institute and helped found the Tuskegee Institute, a trade school for blacks.

His essential strategy for the advancement of American Blacks was for them to achieve enhanced status as skilled tradesmen for the present, then using this status as a platform from which to reach for full equality later.

Significantly, he argued for submission to the white majority so as not to offend the power elite. Though he preached appeasement and a "hands off" attitude toward politics, Washington has been accused of wielding imperious power over "his people" and of consorting with the white elite.

William Edward Burghardt DuBois, on the other hand, was more of an idealist. DuBois was born in Massachusetts in 1868, just after the end of the Civil War and the official end of slavery. A gifted scholar, formal education played a much greater role in DuBois's life than it did in Washington's. After becoming a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Fisk and Harvard, he was the first Black to earn a Ph. D. from Harvard in 1895. DuBois wrote over 20 books and more than 100 scholarly articles on the historical and sociological nature of the Black experience.

He argued that an educated Black elite should lead Blacks to liberation by advancing a philosophical and intellectual offensive against racial

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discrimination. DuBois forwarded the argument that " The Negro problem was not and could not be kept distinct from other reform movements. . . " DuBois " favored immediate social and political integration and the higher education of a Talented Tenth of the black population.

His main interest was in the education of 'the group leader, the man who sets the ideas of the community where he lives. . . " To this end, he organized the " Niagara movement," a meeting of 29 Black business and professional men, which led to the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The crux of the struggle for the ideological center of the racial equality movement is perhaps best exemplified in Mr. DuBois's influential *The Souls of Black Folk*. In it, he makes an impassioned argument for his vision of an educated Black elite.

DuBois also describes his opposition to Booker T. Washington's " Atlanta Compromise" as follows: " Mr. Washington represents in Negro thought the old attitude of adjustment and submission... " According to DuBois, Washington broke the mold set by his predecessors: " Here, led by Remond, Nell, Wells- Brown, and Douglass, a new period of self-assertion and self-development dawned.... But Booker T. Washington arose as essentially the leader not of one race but of two--a compromiser between the South, the North, and the Negro. "

DuBois reported that Blacks " resented, at first bitterly, signs of compromise which surrendered their civil and political rights, even though this was to be exchanged for larger chances of economic development. DuBois's point and, according to him, the collective opinion of the majority of the Black

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community, was that self- respect was more important than any potential future economic benefits. Before Washington's conciliatory stance gained a foothold, " the assertion of the manhood rights of the Negro by himself was the main reliance. "

In other words, DuBois resented what he saw as Washington " selling" Black pride: "... Mr. Washington's programme naturally takes an economic cast, becoming a gospel of Work and Money to such an extent as apparently almost completely to overshadow the higher aims of life.

The compromise included, in DuBois's words, " 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, the accumulation of wealth, and the conciliation of the South. " The final point comprised the centerpiece both of Washington's strategy for the ultimate redemption of Black Americans and of DuBois's condemnation of that strategy. Indeed, Washington backed up his assertions by founding the Tuskegee Institute as a trade school for young Black men.

DuBois could not abide this type of appeasement. In his mind, this step was tantamount to the Black community telling the white community that, henceforth, Blacks would cease pretending to be equal to whites as human beings; rather, they would accept an overtly inferior social status as being worthy of maintaining the white majority's physical world, but unworthy of true equality, of conducting socio-cultural discourse with the mainstream

society. The paradox must have been maddening for both men, especially Mr. Washington.

He no doubt understood that, as a group, Blacks could never hope to progress to the point of equality from their position of abject poverty. Moreover, without skills, their hopes of escaping their economic inferiority were indeed scant. Washington's plan for blacks to at least become skilled artisans and tradesmen must have seemed logical to him from the standpoint of improving the economic lot of the average Black man. At the same time, he must have realized that, by accepting inferiority as a de- facto condition for the entire race, he may have broken the black spirit forever.

In considering this matter, the writer is reminded of more recent events in American history--the affirmative action flap that occurred after Clarence Thomas's appointment to the U. S. Supreme Court, for example. Mr. Thomas, clearly a beneficiary of affirmative action, announced that he was nonetheless opposed to it. His argument was that if he had not been eligible for benefits under affirmative action programs, he would have still achieved his current position in the inner circle of this society's white power elite. Similarly, Booker T. Washington enjoyed access to the power elite of his time, but one must wonder whether President Roosevelt, for example, in his interactions with Mr. Washington, was not merely using the situation for public relations value.

"[Mr. Washington] was 'intimate' with Roosevelt from 1901 to 1908. On the day Roosevelt took office, he invited Washington to the White House to advise him on political appointments of Negroes in the south. " After all, he

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did not become a popular president by being oblivious to such political maneuvering. Perhaps Mr. DuBois was the more prescient visionary.

Perhaps he understood what Mr. Washington did not, that after the critical historical momentum toward social acceptance that had been established prior to the late nineteenth century, if political pressure were not maintained, the cause of true equality would be lost forever. Moreover, DuBois understood that equality would not be earned through appeasement. From our perspective of over 100 years, we must admit that he may have been right. For example, in the aftermath of the "Atlanta Massacre" of September 22, 1906 and a similar incident in Springfield, Illinois, "it was clear to almost all the players that the tide was running strongly in favor of protest and militancy.

"For six days in August, 1908, a white mob, made up, the press said, of many of the town's 'best citizens,' surged through the streets of Springfield, Illinois, killing and wounding scores of Blacks and driving hundreds from the city." However, it later turned out that DuBois was considered to be too extreme in the other direction. For example, as the NAACP became more mainstream, it became increasingly conservative, and this did not please DuBois, who left the organization in 1934. He returned later but was eventually shunned by Black leadership both inside and outside of the NAACP, especially after he voiced admiration for the USSR.

In the political climate of the late 1940s and 1950s, any hint of a pro-communist attitude--black or white--was unwelcome in any group with a national political agenda. We can see, then, that neither Washington's

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strategy of appeasement nor DuBois's plan for an elite Black intelligentsia was to become wholly successful in elevating American Blacks to a position of equality. However, perhaps it was more than the leadership of any one Black man that encouraged African Americans to demand a full measure of social and economic equality.