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Black Leadership in Crisis

Second Edition

Edited and with an introduction by
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Booker T. Washington and His Critics

PROBLEMS IN AMERICAN CIVILIZATION

Under the editorial direction of
the late Edwin C. Rozwenc
Amherst College

INTRODUCTION

Although it destroyed chattel slavery, the American Civil War did not end "the race question." It left in physical proximity two races whose contrasting heritages were fastened in the minds of men by a difference in pigmentation. The resulting relationships were beset by problems that brought misery to individual human beings and challenged the sincerity of the highest ideals professed by Americans.

The war had given the former slave a semblance of freedom, but it had certainly not given him equality. Nor did two amendments to the Constitution and a dozen years of "reconstruction" significantly change the situation. Most blacks remained inferior to most whites in economic status, political power, and the exercise of civil rights, to say nothing of self-esteem or social prestige. The history of black Americans since 1865 has been in large part the story of changing strategies in the struggle against the inferior status in which they found themselves.

The nationwide attention which Civil War and Reconstruction focused on Americans of African ancestry reappeared only in the aftermath of World War II with such dramatic developments as the school desegregation decision, the emergence of direct-action nonviolent protest, and the black ghetto uprisings. During the years between these peaks of national concern, no movement affecting black life was more important than the program Booker Taliaferro Washington, principal of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, presented for the betterment of his race. A former slave, Washington received some of the most effusive praise ever given a living American; he received also some of the most extreme denunciations. The sharp contrasts in the judgments of his contemporaries recur in later estimations by historians.

By 1877, when the last federal troops were withdrawn from the South, the North seemed satisfied to leave the race problem to white Southerners who "understood the Negro." Immediate repression did not occur. During the 1880s, black men continued to vote in the South (though their votes were usually controlled by white men), and the physical segregation of the races which a later generation took for granted was not a codified system and was at times ignored. The origins of worsening race relations in the 1890s were complex. Particularly important were the division of the whites by the Populist movement of the early nineties, the resultant threat of political power for blacks, the fears aroused in the conservatives (traditionally paternalistic in race relations), and the frustration of the Populists.

Yet even before the rise of populism, in 1890, Mississippi had adopted several devices—notably the "understanding clause"—to disfranchise blacks. All other Southern states had followed suit by 1910. The annual rate of lynchings reached 235 in 1892 and did not drop below 100 until 1902. A long period of agricultural depression was intensified by the general depression that began in 1893; black farmers—and many of their white neighbors—were held in virtual debt peonage by the crop-lien system. Jim Crow laws for railroads began appearing ever more rapidly, and after 1900 such laws spread to nearly every facet of Southern life.

In the midst of these worsening conditions, Booker T. Washington was invited to speak before a biracial audience gathered for the opening of the 1895 Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition. He sensed the great potential for good or ill in the situation, since he would be the first black ever to address such a large group of Southern whites. He decided to be "perfectly frank and honest"; he decided also "not to say anything that would give undue offense to the South." He thus set himself a prodigious task.

Essentially, the program that he outlined at Atlanta pointed to the abundance that characterized America and urged both races to find their salvation there. It told white and black to turn to their own economic betterment, a goal more important than their differences. To whites Washington said, only by lessening your antagonism to the Negro can you properly use him in getting rich. To blacks he said, political and social equality are less important as present goals than economic respectability. His call for "a willing obedience among all classes to the mandates of law" rested directly on his economic

premise. To whites he said, it is profitable to give the Negro equal protection of the laws. To blacks he said, gain an economic foothold and equal protection of the laws is more likely to be yours. The program of industrial education which Washington had been promoting since 1881 at Tuskegee was similarly in accord with his underlying economic appeal.

His auditors overwhelmed him with applause. The editor of the Atlanta *Constitution* at once hailed the address as "a platform upon which blacks and whites can stand with full justice to each other," and other editors joined in a chorus of approval. Typifying the general assent of Northerners was President Grover Cleveland, who wrote thanking Washington for what he had done. From the moment of this address until his death in 1915, Washington remained one of the most powerful men in America. As adviser to presidents, philanthropists, and editors, and as a sought-after writer and speaker, he influenced the life and thought of the entire nation. His program for solving "the Negro question" was supported by millions of Americans, white and black. The years 1895 to 1915 have, in fact, been called "The Era of Booker T. Washington." Honors were heaped upon him, and the publication in 1901 of his autobiography, *Up from Slavery,* raised him to the pantheon of American heroes. It was the day of Horatio Alger, but Alger had never written a story to equal the rise of the ex-slave whom Queen Victoria invited for tea.

Certain black Americans raised their voices in opposition to this "Atlanta Compromise" with its admonition to work and wait. They could not topple Washington from power, but one of them did win recognition as leader of the opposition. The life of W. E. Burghardt Du Bois differed radically from that of Washington. He was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, shortly after the Civil War. His family had long been free, and he grew up in an environment containing little overt race prejudice. In fact, when he first entered the South to attend Fisk University, the degradation of black life shocked him profoundly. He decided to dedicate his life to his people, to serve them through knowledge and through protest. He studied in Germany and in 1895 won a Ph.D. at Harvard. Soon he was a professor at Atlanta University, producing scientific monographs on the condition of the Negro.

Though not at first an opponent of Washington's program, Du Bois began publicly criticizing it in 1903. He later led the vigorous

protest of the Niagara Movement and in 1910 became editor of *Crisis,* journal of the newly organized National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. No just estimate of Booker T. Washington can be made without a thorough examination of the criticisms by Du Bois and his colleagues. They pointed to the worsening conditions of the Negro at the very time when Washington was calling for patience and accommodation. Three injurious trends, Du Bois charged, had been aided by Washington's activities: the loss of political rights, the erection of caste barriers, and the deflection of funds from academic education for leaders to industrial education for the masses. He charged too that Washington and the "Tuskegee Machine" maintained a dictatorial control over black affairs that stifled other efforts for racial betterment. Though Washington grew more outspoken about discrimination before his death, he never joined the NAACP. In an obituary article, Du Bois repeated his criticisms of 1903.

Du Bois best symbolizes the anti-Washington movement and accordingly appears in this collection immediately after Washington's basic position is presented. Next in appearance (though it began somewhat earlier) is the program for blacks of Henry M. Turner, a bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal church. Born free in the slave South, Turner was considerably older than Washington. Shortly after the Atlanta address, Turner declared that Washington would "have to live a long time to undo the harm he has done our race," since his remarks about social equality would be used by whites "to prove that the Negro race is satisfied with being degraded."

Instead of accommodationist measures, the bishop called for emigration to Africa by large numbers of black Americans, and he urged blacks to think of themselves as a separate nation. More pessimistic than either Washington or Du Bois about America's ability to fulfill its promises of liberty and equality for all, he denounced racial injustice in pungent language. Partly because of his leadership in the black church, Turner was influential among his own race, though completely unknown to most white Americans. Especially poor farmers, who made up the majority of the black population, responded to his African dream. Thousands gave money to projects which promised to help them emigrate to Africa. Some of these undertakings were swindles, others hopelessly mismanaged. Of the few hundred blacks who did reach Liberia from the United States in

Turner's day, many died from tropical diseases and others returned to America sorely disappointed. More significant than the physical emigration, however, was the protest represented by the back-to-Africa movement. Through it, blacks could at least symbolically challenge the oppression of American life. They could refuse to limit their choice to being either second-class Americans waiting for promotion, or men without a country. Here in provocative form was the idea of black nationhood.

Although both Washington and Du Bois showed concern for Africa and criticized white imperialism (Du Bois in a remarkable series of writings and activities that lie beyond the scope of this volume), they both rejected proposals for black emigration to Africa. But black nationalism is a complex of beliefs and feelings which can express itself in many forms. In some ways, both Washington and Du Bois asserted black nationalist ideals, as the reader can discover in this collection, though the focus is primarily on Washington. His calls for solidarity and self-help tapped the vein of race pride in his fellow blacks. Accepting separation of the races, at least for a period, Washington wanted blacks to seize the "advantages of the disadvantages" in efforts which gave racial unity an economic cast, such as the National Negro Business League, founded in 1900. Cultural black nationalism was suggested in Washington's calls for the study of black history and recognition of black heroes. It should not be particularly surprising, then, that a black nationalist leader like Marcus Garvey, whose back-to-Africa movement of the 1920s reminds one of Turner's, could in fact claim to have been inspired by Washington, and that in the late 1960s Washington could be called by some a forerunner of "Black Power."

No present-day scholar is likely to deny that among Washington's ultimate goals was the achievement of all the rights of American citizenship for members of his race. But no two scholars agree completely on the wisdom of the means he chose. Which course was most appropriate—compromise with current prejudices and concentration on economic self-improvement, insistent demands for full civil and political equality, or dramatization of separate black identity through advocacy of emigration to Africa? If Washington's overall approach is rejected, can any part of his program be declared valid? To what extent could he have adopted an alternative course in 1895 or later? What about Washington's relationship to the black

masses? Did he legitimately speak for them? Did his message reach them? Assuming that black heroes were needed at a time of deep racial demoralization, was Washington a good candidate for the role? Was the abolitionist Frederick Douglass a superior model? Although the contrasts among Washington, Du Bois, and Turner are pronounced, it is worth inquiring what views these leaders shared. What meaning did each find in blackness? In American life? What can be learned about white Americans from the fact that they responded enthusiastically to Washington's approach? Not just a man and a program, but a nation and an era that elevated Washington to fame and power are up for judgment.

The articles presented in this volume represent a variety of approaches to these and other questions. Some stress the personality of the man, others the legend he inspired. The conflicts of class, race, and region in the society of his time are emphasized in others. Some are pro-Washington, some anti-Washington. None is indifferent to him.

The opening article presents Washington to readers of a popular magazine, suggesting a man of heroic proportions. Washington speaks for himself in the next two selections. The first, an address given in 1884, is an early description of his program, especially its educational side. The second, from his autobiography, tells of his hopes and fears at the time of the Atlanta address. He includes the full text of that address, which is properly considered the focal document of this collection. Then two of Washington's supporters, in a collaborative study written shortly after his death, defend his program and indicate the stands he took for the civil rights of blacks.

The next five documents trace the emergence of opposition to Washington and his program among better-educated blacks. Here Du Bois is the central figure. In a passage from his autobiography, he recalls the relationship between himself and Washington at the turn of the century and the background of his decision to oppose Washington publicly. There follows the widely known essay of 1903 in which Du Bois carefully launched his criticism. A biographer of Du Bois, Francis L. Broderick, then traces the early similarity of views between the two men, seeks causes for their break, and follows Du Bois as far as the organizing of the Niagara Movement. The next two items, by Ray Stannard Baker, a white journalist, and Kelly Miller, a black professor, were written while the Washington-

Du Bois controversy was growing in intensity. Though offering quite different interpretations, these two writers seek to find merit in both the Tuskegeean and his challenger.

The possibilities of building an alternative to Washington's program through an intense black nationalism are examined in the next section, where Bishop Turner speaks his mind. The scholar Edwin S. Redkey examines reasons for the failure of the back-to-Africa movement and points out some dilemmas peculiar to nationalism among black Americans. In a selection that recognizes the back-to-Africa proposals, Washington rejects them, but advocates other expressions of black pride and solidarity.

A later period of Washington's life gets the spotlight in Section Four. The first two selections comprise a statement issued from NAACP headquarters to counteract reports on American race relations given by Washington in England and part of a letter in which Washington defends his course to one of the white organizers of the NAACP. Although not centered on the NAACP, August Meier's study of the Talented Tenth shows that many blacks active in that group took ambivalent positions on Booker T. Washington and his program.

The concluding section reveals both changing attitudes of scholars toward Washington and more recently developed information about him. Horace Mann Bond, basing his interpretation on class relationships, includes a provocative passage on the importance of myths and heroes. C. Vann Woodward draws on his knowledge of the Southern society in which Washington built up his program and reaches an essentially negative judgment of the man's work. Both a deep faith in the integrationist solution to racial conflicts and a positive appraisal of Washington mark the selection from the biography of Washington by Samuel R. Spencer, Jr. Next, the challenging question of how Washington can be related to the Black Power advocates is addressed by Harold Cruse. The last article, by Louis R. Harlan, Washington's most recent biographer, takes us behind the public facade and lets us refine our thinking about the man's goals and means. Equally important, it reminds us that we should try, not merely to reconstruct a part of the American past and to face a persisting social problem, but to understand a fellow human being.

At the height of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, a leader of a small black community in North Carolina appeared late one morn-

ing at breakfast, having read far into the night in Charles Silberman's *Crisis in Black and White.* "Well!" she exclaimed to the assembled white and black student workers in the cause, "I can see now that Booker T. Washington was nothing but an Uncle Tom!" It was probably good to have the anti-Washington view more widely known in a community where male children were often honored with the name "Booker T." by their parents. But the judgment was essentially mistaken. Booker Washington is too complicated a figure to deserve a "nothing but" label. The pages that follow seek to explore some of the complexities involved and to give grounds for the reader's own careful judgment.

Conflict of Opinion

The president of Tuskegee Institute makes a speech in Atlanta in 1895:

> Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we [Negroes] may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labor and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life.... You [Southern white people] can be sure in the future, as in the past, that you and your families will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen.... 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.
>
> BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

In 1903, a black scholar decries this approach:

> As a result of this tender of the palm branch, what has been the return? In these years there have occurred:
>
> 1. the disenfranchisement of the Negro
> 2. the legal creation of a distinct status of civil inferiority for the Negro
> 3. the steady withdrawal of aid from institutions for the higher training of the Negro
>
> These movements are not, to be sure, direct results of Mr. Washington's teachings; but his propaganda has, without a shadow of doubt, helped their speedier accomplishment.
>
> W. E. B. DU BOIS

The same year, a black bishop objects to the proposals of both Washington and his critics among black intellectuals:

> Anything less than separation and the black man relying upon himself is absolutely nonsense. Negro nationality is the only remedy, and time will show it.
>
> HENRY M. TURNER

But a noted black lawyer says in 1915:

> While most of us were agonizing over the Negro's relation to the State and his political fortunes, Booker Washington saw that there was a great economic empire that needed to be conquered. He saw an emancipated race chained to the soil by the Mortgage Crop System, and other devices, and he said, "You must own your own farms"—and

> forthwith there was a second emancipation. He saw the industrial trades and skilled labor pass from our race into other hands. He said, "The hands as well as the head must be educated."
>
> WILLIAM HENRY LEWIS

Yet a historian insists that even in historical context Washington's program was misdirected:

> The shortcomings of the Atlanta Compromise, whether in education, labor, or business, were the shortcomings of a philosophy that dealt with the present in terms of the past. Not that a certain realism was lacking in the Washington approach. It is indeed hard to see how he could have preached or his people practiced a radically different philosophy in his time and place. The fact remains that Washington's training school, and the many schools he inspired, taught crafts and attitudes more congenial to the premachine age than to the twentieth century; that his labor doctrine was a compound of individualism, paternalism, and anti-unionism in an age of collective labor action; and that his business philosophy was an anachronism.
>
> C. VANN WOODWARD

A biographer of Washington makes a more favorable estimate:

> His predecessors had taken their lead from Thomas Jefferson. Washington took his from Benjamin Franklin, and by doing so, introduced a strain into the Negro's Americanism which strengthened his claim to full citizenship.
>
> SAMUEL R. SPENCER, JR.

But another scholar suggests that the heritage from Washington is not so much "Americanism" as black nationalism:

> Black Power is nothing but the economic and political philosophy of Booker T. Washington given a 1960s militant shot in the arm and brought up to date.
>
> HAROLD CRUSE

A recent biographer of the man offers a new way of looking at him:

> What strikes a later generation about Washington is not so much his accommodation to segregation and other aspects of white supremacy, which has long been recognized, but his complexity, his richness of strategic resource, his wizardry.
>
> LOUIS R. HARLAN

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