Booker T. Washington vs. W.E.B. Du Bois

By Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois
1895, 1903

Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) was a political advisor and civil rights activist. W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) was also a civil rights activist, as well as a public intellectual, sociologist, and educator. Washington and Du Bois wrote about their solutions for the social and economic issues of African Americans. As you read, identify the similarities and differences in the perspectives of the two authors.

Excerpt from the ‘Atlanta Compromise’ speech

By Booker T. Washington
1895

Booker T. Washington was born a slave in 1856 and was nine years old when slavery ended. He became the principal of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, a school designed to teach blacks industrial skills. Washington was a skillful politician and speaker, and he won the support of whites in the North and South who donated money to the school. On September 18, 1895, Booker T. Washington made the following speech before a mostly white audience in Atlanta.

Ignorant and inexperienced, it is not strange that in the first years of our freedom we began at the top instead of at the bottom; that a seat in Congress or the state legislature was more attractive than starting a dairy farm or garden.

A ship lost at sea for many days passed a friendly ship and sent out a signal, “Water, water; we die of thirst!” The answer from the friendly ship at once came back, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” A second time the signal, “Water, water; send us water!” ran up from the distressed ship, and was answered, “Cast down your bucket where you are”... The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket, and it came up full of fresh, sparkling water.

To those of my race I would say: “Cast down your bucket where you are”—cast it down in making friends with the Southern white man, who is your next-door neighbor. Cast it down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service... No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top.

1. a ship
2. **Heed (verb)**: to listen to
3. **Injunction (noun)**: an authoritative order or warning
To those of the white race who look to the incoming of those of foreign birth and strange tongue and habits for the prosperity of the South, were I permitted, I would repeat what I have said to my own race: “Cast down your bucket where you are.” Cast it down among the eight millions of Negroes, whose habits you know, whose fidelity\(^4\) and love you have tested... As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past... so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach... 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.

**Excerpt from The Souls of Black Folk**

*By W.E.B. Du Bois*

*1903*

The most influential public critique of Booker T. Washington came in 1903 when black leader and intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois published an essay in his book, The Souls of Black Folk. Du Bois rejected Washington's message and instead called for political power, insistence on civil rights, and the higher education of African-American youth. Du Bois was born and raised a free man in Massachusetts and was the first African American to earn a PhD from Harvard.

[5] The most striking thing in the history of the American Negro since 1876 is the rise of Mr. Booker T. Washington. His leadership began at the time when Civil War memories and ideals were rapidly passing; a day of astonishing commercial development was dawning; a sense of doubt and hesitation overtook the freedmen's sons. Mr. Washington came at the psychological moment when whites were a little ashamed of having paid so much attention to Negroes [during Reconstruction\(^5\)], and were concentrating their energy on dollars.

Mr. Washington practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races. Mr. Washington withdraws many of the high demands of Negroes as men and American citizens. He asks 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 pacifying\(^6\) of the South. As a result of this tender of the palm-branch,\(^7\) what has been the return? In these years there have occurred:

1. The disfranchisement\(^8\) 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.

Mr. Washington's doctrine has tended to make the whites, North and South, shift the burden of the Negro problem to the Negro's shoulders and stand aside as critical spectators; when in fact the burden belongs to the nation, and the hands of none of us are clean if we do not all work on righting these great wrongs.

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4. **Fidelity (noun)**: loyalty
5. Reconstruction was the period in American history immediately after the Civil War in which the U.S. government established conditions for controlling the power of the recently freed slaves and for the reentry of the Southern states back into the Union.
6. **Pacify (verb)**: to calm down; to appease
7. a peace offering
8. **Disfranchisement (noun)**: the deprivation of power and the right to vote
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. What does Booker T. Washington mean by “cast down your bucket where you are” in paragraph 3? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

2. PART A: Which statement best describes Washington’s views about whites in the South?
   A. They represent a model of economic success that blacks should strive to attain.
   B. They caused blacks’ economic struggle and should therefore repair race relations.
   C. They can focus on higher education and let Black people manage the agriculture.
   D. They should trust black people and work with them to achieve success.

3. PART B: Which quote from Washington’s speech best supports the answer to Part A?
   A. “there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem” (Paragraph 3)
   B. “It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top” (Paragraph 3)
   C. “we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand” (Paragraph 4)
   D. “to the incoming of those of foreign birth and strange tongue” (Paragraph 4)

4. How does Du Bois analyze and respond to Washington’s ideas? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.
5. Which of the following best states how Washington and Du Bois’ points of view differ?

A. Washington believes blacks should find dignity in unskilled labor, while Du Bois believes they should aspire to higher ambitions.

B. Washington believes blacks are innately inferior to whites, while Du Bois thinks blacks should pursue education because their intellect is superior to whites.

C. Washington does not believe blacks are smart enough for politics, while Du Bois thinks blacks should gain political power.

D. Washington believes blacks should be educated, while Du Bois believes they should focus on working and gaining financial capital.
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. How did you react to Washington's speech? Do you agree or disagree with his points?

2. Booker T. Washington was a successful, educated African-American man. Is he discouraging other African-Americans from trying to achieve what he achieved?


4. Today, where does our culture stand on issues of racism and discrimination? What civil rights issues are we currently dealing with? What should be the responsibilities of both whites and blacks? Explain.