

Booker T. Washington

"Atlanta Compromise Speech"

1895

On September 18, 1895 Booker T. Washington gave an address to the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition which became known as the "Atlanta Compromise Speech." The address appears below.

Mr. President, Gentlemen of the Board of Directors, and Citizens:

One-third of the population of the South is of Negro race...Ignorant and inexperienced, it is not strange that in the first years of our new life we began at the top instead of the bottom; that a seat in Congress or the State Legislature was more sought than real estate or industrial skill; that the political convention or stump speaking had more attractions than starting a dairy farm or truck garden. A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen the signal: "Water, water, we die of thirst." The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back, "Cast down your bucket where you are." A second time the signal, "Water, send us water," ran up from the distressed vessel 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 from the mouth of the Amazon River. To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land, or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man who is their next door neighbor, I would say, cast down your bucket where you are, cast it down in making friends, in every manly way, of the people of all races by whom you are surrounded. Cast it down in agriculture, in mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions. And in this connection it is well to bear in mind that, whatever other sins the South may be called upon to bear, when it comes to business pure and simple it is in the South that the Negro is given a man's chance in the commercial world... Our greatest danger is, that, in the great leap from slavery to freedom, we 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 draw the line between superficial and the substantial, the ornamental gewgaws of life and the useful. 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 the top.

...While doing this you can be sure in the future, as you have been 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. As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past, in nursing your children, watching by the sick beds of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defense of yours; interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one. 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.

Sources:

Alice M. Bacon, *The Negro and the Atlanta Exposition* (Baltimore: The Trustees, 1896), 12-16. - See more at: <http://www.blackpast.org/1895-booker-t-washington-atlanta-compromise-speech/#sthash.yvVmJXuH.dpuf>

Selection One:

The most influential public critique of Booker T. Washington came in 1903 when black leader and intellectual W.E.B. DuBois published an essay in his book, The Souls of Black Folk. DuBois rejected Washington's message and instead called for political power, insistence on civil rights, and the higher education of African-American youth.

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, 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 of the South. As a result of this tender of the palm-branch, what has been the return? In these years there have occurred:

1. The disfranchisement 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.

Source: W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago, 1903).

Selection Two:

"The Talented Tenth," was published in the *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-day* in 1903.

Full Version of Dubois's "The Talented Tenth" <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=174>

The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races. Now the training of men is a difficult and intricate task. Its technique is a matter for educational experts, but its object is for the vision of seers...if we make technical skill the object of education, we may possess artisans but not, in nature, men. Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools--intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it--this is the curriculum of that Higher Education which must underlie true life. On this foundation we may build bread winning,

skill of hand and quickness of brain, with never a fear lest the child and man mistake the means of living for the object of life....

Can the masses of the Negro people be in any possible way more quickly raised than by the effort and example of this aristocracy of talent and character? Was there ever a nation on God's fair earth civilized from the bottom upward? Never; it is, ever was and ever will be from the top downward that culture filters. The Talented Tenth rises and pulls all that are worth the saving up to their vantage ground. This is the history of human progress; and the two historic mistakes which have hindered that progress were the thinking first that no more could ever rise save the few already risen; or second, that it would better the uprisen to pull the risen down.

How then shall the leaders of a struggling people be trained and the hands of the risen few strengthened? There can be but one answer: The best and most capable of their youth must be schooled in the colleges and universities of the land. We will not quarrel as to just what the university of the Negro should teach or how it should teach it--I willingly admit that each soul and each race-soul needs its own peculiar curriculum. But this is true: A university is a human invention for the transmission of knowledge and culture from generation to generation, through the training of quick minds and pure hearts, and for this work no other human invention will suffice, not even trade and industrial schools.

Men of America, the problem is plain before you. Here is a race transplanted through the criminal foolishness of your fathers. Whether you like it or not the millions are here, and here they will remain. If you do not lift them up, they will pull you down. Education and work are the levers to uplift a people. Work alone will not do it unless inspired by the right ideals and guided by intelligence. Education must not simply teach work--it must teach Life. The Talented Tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people. No others can do this work and Negro colleges must train men for it. The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men.

Source: Henry Louis Gates and Jennifer Burton. *The Talented Tenth* reprinted in *Call and Response: Key Debates in African American Studies* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011).

- See more at: <http://www.blackpast.org/classroom/talented-tenth#sthash.WQehW9D8.dpuf>

