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Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois: The Problem of Negro Leadership

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The problem of Negro leadership during the twenty years between 1895 and 1915 will be covered in this unit of Afro-American History. The issues raised by the celebrated debate between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois will be its central theme. For two decades Washington established a dominant tone of gradualism and accommodationism among blacks, only to find in the latter half of this period that the leadership was passing to more militant leaders such as W. E. B. DuBois.

During the four decades following reconstruction, the position of the Negro in America steadily deteriorated. The hopes and aspirations of the freedmen for full citizenship rights were shattered after the federal government betrayed the Negro and restored white supremacist control to the South. Blacks were left at the mercy of ex-slaveholders and former Confederates, as the United States government adopted a laissez-faire policy regarding the “Negro problem” in the South. The era of Jim Crow brought to the American Negro disfranchisement, social, educational, and occupational discrimination, mass mob violence, murder, and lynching. Under a sort of peonage, black people were deprived of their civil and human rights and reduced to a status of quasi-slavery or “second-class” citizenship. Strict legal segregation of public facilities in the southern states was strengthened in 1896 by the Supreme Court’s decision in the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case. Racists, northern and southern, proclaimed that the Negro was subhuman, barbaric, immoral, and innately inferior, physically and intellectually, to whites—totally incapable of functioning as an equal in white civilization.

Between the Compromise of 1877 and the Compromise of 1895, the problem facing Negro leadership was clear: how to obtain first-class citizenship for the Negro American. How to reach this goal caused considerable debate among Negro leaders. Some advocated physical violence to force concessions from the whites. A few urged Negroes to return to Africa. The majority, however, suggested that Negroes use peaceful, democratic means to change undesirable conditions. Some black leaders encouraged Negroes to become skilled workers, hoping that if they became indispensable to the prosperity of the South, political and social rights would be granted to them. Others advocated struggle for civil rights, specifically the right to vote, on the theory that economic and social rights would follow. Most agreed that solutions would come gradually.

Negro leadership near the turn of the century was divided between these two tactics for racial equality, which may be termed the economic strategy and the political strategy. The most heated controversy in Negro leadership at this time raged between two remarkable black men—Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois.

The major spokesman for the gradualist economic strategy was Washington. DuBois was the primary advocate of the gradualist political strategy.

Booker T. Washington emerged in the midst of worsening social, political, and economic conditions for American blacks. His racial program set the terms for the debate on Negro programs for the decades between 1895 and 1915. Born a slave in a Virginia log cabin in 1856, Booker T. Washington was founder and principal of Tuskegee Institute, a normal and industrial school in Alabama. Washington had worked his way through Hampton Institute in Virginia. General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, the principal of Hampton, had established a program of agricultural and industrial training and Christian piety for Negroes acceptable to southern whites. Washington learned the doctrine of economic advancement combined with acceptance of disfranchisement and conciliation with the white South from Armstrong. Washington taught at Hampton until 1881, when he was chosen to head a new school at Tuskegee. His rise to national prominence came in 1895 with a brief speech which outlined his social philosophy and racial strategy. Washington was invited to speak before an integrated audience at the opening of the Cotton States and International Exposition held in Atlanta in September, 1895. He was the first Negro ever to address such a large group of southern whites.

Washington is remembered chiefly for this "Atlanta Compromise" address. In this speech, he called on white America to provide jobs and industrial-agricultural education for Negroes. In exchange, blacks would give up demands for social equality and civil rights. His message to the Negro was that political and social equality were less important as immediate goals than economic respectability and independence. Washington believed that if blacks gained an economic foothold, and proved themselves useful to whites, then civil rights and social equality would eventually be given to them. Blacks were urged to work as farmers, skilled artisans, domestic servants, and manual laborers to prove to whites that all blacks were not "liars and chicken thieves."

The philosophy of Washington was one of accommodation to white oppression. He advised blacks to trust the paternalism of the southern whites and accept the fact of white supremacy. He stressed the mutual interdependence of blacks and whites in the South, but said they were to remain socially separate: "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." Washington counseled blacks to remain in the South, obtain a useful education, save their money, work hard, and purchase property. By doing such things, Washington believed, the Negro could ultimately "earn" full citizenship rights.

White Americans responded with enthusiasm to Washington's racial policies, and made him the national Negro leader. "It startled the nation," wrote DuBois, "to hear a Negro advocating such a program after many decades of bitter complaint; it startled and won the applause of the South, it interested and won the admiration of the North; and after a confused murmur of protest, it silenced if it did not convert the Negroes themselves." Northern whites saw in Washington's doctrine a peace formula between the races in the South. Southern whites liked the program because it did not involve political, civil, and social aspirations, and it would consign the Negro to an inferior status.

Because Washington's program conciliated whites, substantial contributions from white philanthropists were given to Tuskegee and other institutions that adopted the Washington philosophy. Washington's prestige grew to the point where he was regarded as the spokesman for the entire Negro community. With strong white support, Washington became the outstanding black leader not only in the fields of education and philanthropy, but in business and labor relations, politics and all public affairs.

In 1901, Washington published his carefully executed and immensely popular autobiography, *Up From Slavery*. It is a classic "Horatio Alger" success story containing Washington's program of accommodation and

self-help. *Up From Slavery* gave an overly optimistic view of black life and race relations in America. It gave another boost to Washington's career because it said what whites wanted to hear.

Washington's career is full of paradoxes. He advised blacks to remain in the South and avoid politics and protest in favor of economic self-help and industrial education. But he became a powerful political boss and dispenser of patronage, the friend of white businessmen like Andrew Carnegie, and advisor of presidents. Washington publicly accepted without protest racial segregation and voting discrimination, but secretly financed and directed many court suits against such proscriptions of civil rights. He preached a gospel of Puritan morality and personal cleanliness, yet engaged in acts of sabotage and espionage against his black critics. Before whites he was a model of humility and ingratiation; to his staff and students at Tuskegee he was a benevolent despot.

Several Negro leaders voiced their opposition to Washington's "Atlanta Compromise" with its admonition to work and wait. They could not topple Washington from power, but one of them did win recognition as a leader of the opposition—W. E. B. DuBois.

W. E. B. DuBois was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in 1868. His family had not known the stigma of slavery for over a hundred years. DuBois was educated at Fisk University, Harvard University (where he earned his Ph.D. in history in 1895) and the University of Berlin. DuBois was a professor of economics and history at Atlanta University where he conducted a series of sociological studies on the conditions of blacks in the South at the same time Washington was developing his program of industrial education.

DuBois was not an early opponent of Washington's program. He enthusiastically accepted the Tuskegeean's "Atlanta Compromise" philosophy as sound advice. He said in 1895 that Washington's speech was "a word fitly spoken." In fact, during the late 1890's, there were several remarkable similarities in the ideas of the two men, who for a brief period found issues on which they could cooperate. Both Washington and DuBois tended to blame Negroes themselves for their condition. They both placed emphasis on self-help and moral improvement rather than on rights. Both men placed economic advancement before universal manhood suffrage. The professor and the principal were willing to accept franchise restrictions based on education and property qualifications, but not race. Both strongly believed in racial solidarity and economic cooperation, or black nationalism. They encouraged the development of Negro business. They agreed that the black masses should receive industrial training.

The years from 1901 to 1903 were years of transition in DuBois' philosophy. DuBois grew to find Washington's program intolerable, as he became more outspoken about racial injustice and began to differ with Washington over the importance of liberal arts education when the latter's emphasis on industrial education drew resources away from black liberal arts colleges. DuBois noted that Washington's accommodating program produced little real gain for the race. Another factor that alienated DuBois from Washington was the fact that Washington and his "Tuskegee Machine"—an intricate, nation-wide web of institutions in the black community that were conducted, dominated, and strongly influenced by Washington—kept a dictatorial control over Negro affairs that stifled honest criticism of his policies and other efforts at Negro advancement. DuBois came to view Washington as a political boss who had too much power and used it ruthlessly to his own advantage. Although DuBois admitted that he was worthy of honor, he believed Washington was a limited and misguided leader.

DuBois launched a well-reasoned, thoughtful, and unequivocal attack on Washington's program in his classic collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in 1903. With the publication of this book, DuBois took the leadership in the struggle against Booker T. Washington and headed the radical protest movement for civil

rights for Negroes. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois took the position that “the Black men of America have a duty to perform; a duty stern and delicate—a forward movement to oppose a part of the work of their greatest leader.”

In an essay entitled, “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others,” DuBois said that Washington’s accommodationist program asked blacks to give up political power, insistence on civil rights, and higher education for Negro youth. He believed that Washington’s policies had directly or indirectly resulted in three trends: the disfranchisement of the Negro, the legal creation of a distinct status of civil inferiority for the Negro, and steady withdrawal of aid from institutions for the higher training of the Negro. DuBois charged that Washington’s program tacitly accepted the alleged inferiority of the Negro. Expressing the sentiment of the radical civil rights advocates, DuBois demanded for all black citizens 1) the right to vote, 2) civic equality, and 3) the education of Negro youth according to ability. Generally, DuBois opposed Washington’s program because it was narrow in its scope and objectives, devalued the study of the liberal arts, and ignored civil, political, and social injustices and the economic exploitation of the black masses.

DuBois firmly believed that persistent agitation, political action, and academic education would be the means to achieve full citizenship rights for black Americans. His educational philosophy directly influenced his political approach. He stressed the necessity for liberal arts training because he believed that black leadership should come from college-trained backgrounds. DuBois’ philosophy of the “Talented Tenth” was that a college-educated elite would chart, through their knowledge, the way for economic and cultural elevation for the black masses.

In 1905, DuBois helped found a radical civil rights protest organization called the “Niagara Movement” Its members were predominately northern, urban, college-educated black men—the “Talented Tenth.” This short-lived movement launched a campaign for complete equality and justice for blacks, with an emphasis on political rights. Lack of financial support caused the Niagara Movement—the direct forerunner of the NAACP—to dissolve by 1910.

In 1909, after an outbreak of rioting and murders of Negroes in Springfield, Illinois, a protest meeting was held in New York that led to the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. DuBois was one of the founding members of the organization. The NAACP was a coalition of black and white radicals which sought to remove legal barriers to full citizenship for Negroes. The association began an intensive campaign to bring about the enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. The NAACP fought against segregation and discrimination mainly in the courts.

DuBois was the director of NAACP publications and research, and founder-editor of the association’s official publication, *The Crisis*. This magazine, one of the best sources of information about the black world, became the vehicle through which DuBois could delineate his racial program and political ideals to the black American community. From 1910 to 1915, DuBois voiced the new aspirations of the American Negro in *The Crisis*. This was a period of increasing influence for the leadership of DuBois and the NAACP. Washington felt threatened by the rise of the association, and the ideological battle between Washington and DuBois continued until the former’s death in 1915.

Both Washington and DuBois wanted the same thing for blacks—first-class citizenship—but their methods for obtaining it differed. Because of the interest in immediate goals contained in Washington’s economic approach, whites did not realize that he anticipated the complete acceptance and integration of Negroes into American life. He believed blacks, starting with so little, would have to begin at the bottom and work up gradually to achieve positions of power and responsibility before they could demand equal citizenship—even if

it meant temporarily assuming a position of inferiority. DuBois understood Washington's program, but believed that it was not the solution to the "race problem." Blacks should study the liberal arts, and have the same rights as white citizens. Blacks, DuBois believed, should not have to sacrifice their constitutional rights in order to achieve a status that was already guaranteed.

Utilization of the Unit

Lessons

This unit is intended for high-school students, grades ten through twelve. It is designed to last approximately two weeks and will include the viewing of two filmstrips, listening to pertinent sections of "W. E. B. DuBois: A Recorded Autobiography," and a classroom debate.

The following questions are to be considered here by the teacher and students:

1. On what points do Washington and DuBois agree? Where do they disagree?
2. Compare the backgrounds of Washington and DuBois. What clues do they offer which help account for their views?
3. Which of these two strategies promised more immediate gains for the Negro? Why?
4. Why did Washington's philosophy lose favor following his death in 1915, while DuBois and the NAACP gained favor?
5. Why would Washington's program be rejected by many blacks today? Do you think that one can better his condition in American life without political and social rights?

Sequence of Lessons

- I. Introduction
 - A. Historical background
 1. Post-Reconstruction period and the Negro
 2. Jim Crow Era
 - II. Various strategies to deal with the "Negro problem"
 - A. Colonization (emigration)
 - B. Physical violence
 - C. Gradualist political strategy
 - D. Gradualist economic strategy
 - III. Comparison of Washington's and DuBois' background and education
 - A. Washington
 - B. DuBois
 - IV. Washington's work and ideology
 - A. Tuskegee Institute

- B. Atlanta Compromise Speech
 - 1. content
 - 2. response and results
- C. *Up From Slavery*
- V. Washington's rise to power
 - A. Tuskegee machine
 - 1. Political and social influence
 - 2. Control of philanthropy to black causes
- VI. DuBois' criticism of Washington
 - A. Their ideological similarities (1890's)
 - B. Events leading to DuBois' attack
 - C. DuBois' major criticism of Washington (*Souls of Black Folk*)
- VII. DuBois' program and organized opposition to Washington
 - A. Talented Tenth
 - B. Formation of the Niagara Movement
 - 1. Purpose and program
 - 2. Membership
 - C. Formation of the NAACP
 - 1. Purpose and program
 - 2. Membership
 - 3. *The Crisis*
- VIII. Decline of Washington's influence and rise of new radical protest thought (NAACP)
 - A. Reasons for Washington's declining influence
 - B. Reasons for rising influence of NAACP and other civil rights groups
- IX. Summary: Same goals different tactics

Sample Lessons

Lesson I. Introduction

- A. Familiarize the students with the social, political and economic conditions of blacks in the South and North after reconstruction and the effects of "Jim-Crowism"
 - 1. Social condition
 - a. Blacks reduced to near-slavery status in South
 - b. Racial segregation and job discrimination
 - c. Lynching, rioting, anti-black mob violence
 - 2. Political condition
 - a. Federal government's laissez-faire Negro policy
 - b. 14th and 15th Amendments ignored: Disfranchisement
 - c. Poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses, etc.: state laws to disfranchise blacks
 - 3. Economic condition
 - a. Blacks reduced to servile class and abject poverty

Lesson III. Comparison of Washington's and DuBois' background and education—Familiarize the students with the family and educational backgrounds of Washington and DuBois to discover how they affected the views of these two men.

A. Booker T. Washington

1. Have students consider what effect being born a slave on a Virginia plantation had on Washington.
2. Have students consider what effect growing up in dire poverty in the post-reconstruction South had on Washington.
3. Encourage students to see the effect Gen. Armstrong and industrial school education at Hampton had on Washington.

B. W. E. B. DuBois

1. Have students consider what effect being born a free black in the North had on DuBois.
2. Have students consider what effect growing up in an economically stable home environment would have on DuBois.
3. Encourage students to see what effect liberal arts training at Fisk, Harvard, and the University of Berlin had on DuBois.

C. Effect of background on the character and leadership of Washington and DuBois

1. Compare these two contrasting backgrounds.
2. Try to get students to think of several ways these backgrounds influenced their political, social, and economic views.

Lesson IV. Washington's Work and Ideology

The purpose of this lesson is to give students pertinent information to demonstrate how a relatively unknown principal of a southern agricultural-industrial school built up that institution to become the most well-known and widely supported black school in America, and how Washington used his influence to become the major spokesman for black America.

A. Tuskegee Institute

1. Give a brief history of the founding of the school and Washington's appointment as principal.
2. Describe the school's curriculum, discipline, and philosophy.
3. Describe the philanthropic support of Tuskegee and how it was obtained by Washington.
4. Have students consider why this type of black school was widely supported by southern whites and northern businessmen.
5. Have students consider why being principal of Tuskegee would make Washington so popular and influential.

B. Atlanta "Compromise" Speech

1. Have students read entire speech.
2. Define the word "accommodation".
3. Outline and discuss the speech.
4. Have students consider the white and black reaction, in the North and South, to the speech.
5. Have students express their reactions to Washington's program.

Activities-Projects

- Arrange for a classroom debate in which the topics of voting rights, education, racial
1. segregation, migration, and anti-black mob violence are discussed by Washington supporters and DuBois supporters. Each side must prepare a defense of its ideological viewpoint.
 2. Hold a “Meet the Press” interview with members of the class playing the roles of Washington and DuBois.
- Complete a written project: Look for similarities between the strategies of black leaders and
3. movements today and the ideologies of Washington and DuBois. Do modern black leaders agree on the best ways to bring about full equality for blacks?

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