

“Souls of Black Leaders: The Rival Strategies of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois,”  
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Booker Washington made his reputation as a leader initially as a public speaker, and his success at the podium was based a lot on his humor. He adapted a white joke about the affinity between blacks and mules, noting the absence of mules in the vicinity and then saying, “I feel lonesome tonight.” But much of his humor was satire about whites. On the social conditions in the South, he often said: “The colored men down south are very fond of an old song entitled ‘Give me Jesus and you take all the rest.’ Well, the white man has taken him at his word.” He told the story of a white man who asked a black fellow to loan him three cents for the fare for a ferry across a river, to which the black man replied, “Boss, seems like a man who ain’t got no three cent, just as well off on one side of the river as on de other.”

Tonight I’ll attempt to do four things. First, I will address the problems with judging BTW’s and DB’s leadership, because judgment depends on the historical record, and the historical record since the 1960s has been skewed heavily in favor of DuBois’s leadership and overwhelmingly against Washington’s. Second, I’ll examine both men’s goals in their leadership. Third, I will offer an assessment of what each actually achieved. Finally, I will place each man’s leadership in a longer historical context and compare their works to other leaders in American history.

Washington emerged as the leader of African Americans after he gave a speech at the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta in 1895. The passages of the speech that are typically quoted are: “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;” and “agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly.” Each has been interpreted as demonstrating that Washington was a toady to white supremacists. But the remainder of the text implicitly acknowledges the ugly race images projected in the popular culture about blacks in the 1890s, and the corresponding prejudices that whites held about blacks. Washington believed that the white mind needed to have a different image of blacks from the evil, beast-like reputation that had become embedded since emancipation, as whites insisted that in freedom former slaves had declined in character and morality. Washington said blacks were a people of “love and fidelity” to whites, that they were “faithful, law-abiding,” contradicting the contemporary opinion that blacks were idle, criminal, and hostile to whites. The overarching message in Atlanta was a prophecy of black progress, of movement forward and upward, and of interracial peace.

At the same time that he was conducting a public-relations campaign to change the black image, Washington in the next two decades made many protests in the media against lynching, discrimination on railroads, unfair voting qualifications, discriminatory funding in education, segregated housing legislation, and discrimination by labor unions. At the same time, he arranged and financed an extensive legal campaign against the various forms of the Jim Crow system—court suits against disfranchisement, peonage, discrimination on juries and public accommodations. He arranged the court cases secretly, in the belief that public knowledge of his challenges would project an aggressive image of blacks—and probably jeopardize the his safety and the existence of Tuskegee Institute. There is a fundamental similarity between Washington’s actions and the protest agenda put forward starting in 1909 by the NAACP, which would make the same protests against segregated public accommodations, lynching and the criminal justice

system, and economic discrimination, and it would bring legal challenges to protect blacks' right to vote, get an education, and have fair access to housing. It would also condemn the ugly race images prevalent in American life, starting with *Birth of a Nation*. Washington's anticipation of virtually all the NAACP protest agenda suggests that a consensus of what needed to be done to protect black rights had been identified as early as 1895, and he and the NAACP had pursued it in turn.

This basic congruence has been lost in the historical record. How and why did that happen? In *Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, Du Bois declared Washington a black leader chosen by whites, having won their favor with the 1895 speech, which Du Bois dubbed "the Atlanta Compromise," because Washington allegedly had surrendered civil and political rights for economic opportunities. The "Atlanta Compromise" would prove to be an enduring pejorative. In fact, Washington was selected in much the same fashion as Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King—a powerful voice who got the attention of whites at the same time he earned the respect and admiration of the black masses by helping them imagine a better future. The conflict between Washington and Du Bois has been universally explained as an ideological clash between an accommodationist to segregation and a man committed to protest. David Lewis, Du Bois's admiring biographer, writes that in fact their alienation was personal before it was ideological. Du Bois privately complimented Booker's racial diplomacy in Atlanta and supported Washington's rise to leadership in the late 1890s. Washington offered him jobs at Tuskegee, some of which Du Bois took. But in 1900 Du Bois suspected that Booker did not fulfill a promise to support him for a position at the Washington DC school system. I believe that by 1901 Du Bois simply did not think Washington should be the leader of the race. One of the common perils of leadership is that one faction has power and another does not. Or opposition emerges because the leader in power manifests qualities that some detest irrationally. Booker was not Du Bois's kind of person: a fellow with a middle-school education who was as careful as he could be to get along with whites. By 1903, Du Bois agreed with a minority of middle-class black intellectuals in the North that blacks should be protesting all the wrongs all the time. Living in the Deep South, Washington knew he could not get away with that. With the loss of voting rights and expansion of Jim Crow, conditions for blacks were declining. The Herbert Hoover example seems relevant: the one in charge when things go to hell gets blamed, whether or not he had anything to do with the trouble.

In *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois said Washington "practically accept[ed] the alleged inferiority of the Negro races" and asked blacks to forego political power, civil rights, and higher education—none of which was true, and Du Bois knew it. Du Bois understood precisely why Washington said what he had at Atlanta, Du Bois failed to note his own earlier support for Washington's leadership or to explain why he had changed his mind to put the speech in such a negative light. He knew that Booker had neither accepted inferiority nor relinquished political or civil rights, because he had worked closely with Booker to challenge railroad discrimination and disfranchisement in Georgia. Du Bois surely saw that Washington understood that blacks already had lost on voting rights and public accommodations and that he was now fighting a rearguard action to keep southern states from abolishing **all** black public education. He had witnessed the hysteria surrounding a horrific 1899 lynching near Atlanta and surely could imagine the possibility of terrorism aimed at Tuskegee or Washington himself. Yet he extended no empathy to Booker for the precariousness of his existence.

Du Bois pushed relentlessly the red herring that Washington opposed all higher education. He knew of Washington's support for Fisk University, his preference for hiring teachers from good liberal arts schools and his frequently stated position that higher academic education was entirely appropriate for blacks who could put it to use. It was purely partisan not to acknowledge that Washington's public posture was intended to defuse white hysteria. If Du Bois did not understand the purpose of the propaganda of interracial peace, he may have been the only black man in the South in 1903 so obtuse—and there was nothing dim-witted about Du Bois.

Du Bois surely knew of attacks that pelted Washington after Theodore Roosevelt invited him to dinner at the White House in 1901 to discuss patronage appointments. Senator Ben Tillman of South Carolina said Roosevelt and Washington had committed an act so obnoxious that it would require “lynching a thousand niggers in the South before they will learn their place again.” A popular song on the Vaudeville stage went “coon, coon, coon, Booker Washington is his name . . . I think I'd class Mr. Roosevelt with a coon, coon, coon.” The memory of the White House dinner did not die. Two years later, Governor James K. Vardaman of Mississippi insisted that the White House was “so saturated with the odor of the nigger that the rats have taken refuge in the stable.” Du Bois could not have missed the white South's hatred of Washington.

Two historians who knew well the context of Washington's life were most influential in shaping the negative view of his leadership. Du Bois's views reverberated through C. Vann Woodward's 1951 *Origins of the New South*, which adopted Du Bois's pejorative “Atlanta Compromise” and repeated his blame for disfranchisement on Washington. Woodward did not acknowledge the intense demonization of black character that preoccupied Washington or recognize the public-relations strategy that he was pursuing. Woodward had to know that Booker was fighting a defensive battle to save black education from official abandonment, or that much black education would not have existed except for the northern philanthropy that Washington promoted. In Woodward's view, Washington was guilty of perpetrating the fraudulent “New South” by his collaboration with Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, J.P. Morgan, Collis P. Huntington—all of whom admired Booker's ability, common with their own, to build a great enterprise—except he had executed it with the considerable handicap of being black. Woodward's anti-business views compelled him to condemn the friend of the capitalist villains in his master narrative, *Origins of the New South*.

Woodward may not have known about Washington's secret challenges to segregation, but he surely knew that by the time that Booker made public statements about voting in the mid-1890s, disfranchisement was an unstoppable movement. He wrote about Vardaman and Tillman but ignored their curses of Washington, leaving the impression that Booker had more freedom to speak and act than he actually did. He ignored Washington's efforts to bolster black morale and was silent on Tuskegee as symbol of black achievement and competence.

Woodward's student Louis Harlan, author of a celebrated biography of Washington and the fourteen-volume *Booker T. Washington Papers*, condemned Washington as “master of the Tuskegee plantation, ruling his campus and its people personally, absolutely.” Harlan flung epithets at Washington: He was “a minotaur, a lion, a fox, or Brer Rabbit, some frightened little man like the Wizard of Oz.” “If we could remove those layers of secrecy as one peels an onion, perhaps at the center of Washington's being would be revealed a person with a single-minded concern with power.” Harlan originally thought of Washington as an Uncle Tom but the

Washington's secret ways put him in mind of Richard Nixon. Harlan made Washington's "'dirty tricks' and his mealy-mouthed moderation in the face of racial injustice" into the main theme of his biography. Instead of putting Washington's actions in the context of political competition between groups competing for power—southern blacks versus southern whites, southern blacks versus northern blacks, and southern blacks in pursuit of northern help—Harlan situated them in a Manichean struggle between northern-black idealists of "distinction and dignity"—Du Bois—and the Tuskegee Machine, ruled by the power-hungry Wizard of Tuskegee.

Harlan chose not to show the mounting white hysteria about Washington's role in politics. He mostly ignored the impact of the White House dinner. He did not discuss the sustained attacks made by Vardaman or Tillman, or that of Tom Heflin, Tom Watson, or Thomas Dixon. In 1904 Heflin, the congressman who represented Tuskegee, threatened Washington with lynching *in the Tuskegee courthouse*. Thomas Dixon, author of the wildly popular racist fiction of the day, *The Leopard's Spots* and *the Clansman*, said Booker was preparing blacks not to work for white men but was "training them *all* to be masters of men, to be independent, to own and operate their own industries, . . . and in every shape and form destroy the last vestige of dependence on the white man for anything." Dixon asked: Would the southern white man allow the Negro "to master his industrial system, take the bread from his mouth," or would he "do exactly what his white neighbor in the North does when the Negro threatens his bread—kill him!"

Harlan covered none of the Washington haters in either his biography or the 14-volumes of Washington papers. He also neglected the intensifying opposition to black education, even though Harlan had written an earlier book on the declining support for it. He ignored Washington's effort to raise black morale and missed his prophetic purpose and the positive symbolism of Tuskegee Institute.

Strong leaders inevitably must deal with criticism. Washington made a policy of not responding publicly to it. He explained privately: "If a charge is made to-day and I deny it, and another false one is made tomorrow and I fail to deny it, people will reason that because I denied the first and failed to deny the second, that the second is true, and so I should be in continual controversy and hot water." He quoted Oliver Wendell Holmes: "Controversy equalizes wise men and fools, and the fools know it." But I believe the policy of avoiding controversy, though generally shrewd for his time, was wrong in a few cases. In 1906 Theodore Roosevelt betrayed Booker by court-martialing a group of black soldiers wrongly charged with rioting in Brownsville, Texas, ignoring Booker's pleas to let him investigate the situation. Washington should have taken Roosevelt to task publicly, because the incident severely damaged his leadership. On the other hand, Booker answered the criticism of northern blacks led by William Monroe Trotter not publicly but by scheming quietly against them, when in fact his detractors did not amount to much, and the action distracted Booker. Washington seemed to believe that all blacks should support his leadership of the race when so much power was arrayed them. I think that was an unrealistic expectation of solidarity. Leaders in significant positions inevitably will have critics.

The posthumous attack on Washington's leadership coincided with the rise of the civil rights movement, which caused a re-thinking of racial strategies, and any approach other than direct-action protest came to be viewed as illegitimate. At first, Martin Luther King, Jr., invoked Booker's memory as a moral authority for King's ethic of love and his posture of passive

resistance to white hatred. He quoted Washington's saying, "Let no man pull you so low as to make you hate him" in speeches and twice in his first book *Stride Toward Freedom*. As direct resistance to segregation accelerated starting in 1960, Du Bois's life became a paradigm of correct black leadership, the pure exponent of protest, and Booker was dispatched to the opposite pole, from which right-thinking Americans had to be repelled. Younger blacks began to condemn Booker. John Lewis, chairman of SNCC, said Washington was "ridiculed and vilified by his own people for working so closely with white America"—an assertion true for only a tiny minority of blacks during Booker's life but a mounting majority during Lewis's. By 1963, King had revised how he interpreted Washington. "Be content . . . with doing well what the times permit," he erroneously paraphrased Booker, which King said now dismissed as cowardly resignation.

At the same time, Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* became a primary text of the black studies movement. The most influential other text was *Autobiography of MX*. There are important parallels between DB and MX. They were the leading influences in the development of black nationalism. Black nationalists embrace a history, often mythologic, about their common past as African people. They see whites as an enemy race, and they exist in opposition to white power. Both Du Bois and Malcolm were anti-Semites, though each refrained from expressing it at the end of their lives. Both men articulated their oppositional ideology, but neither was an activist advancing a reform program in the way that Washington and King did. Du Bois did not actually lead in protest during the time he shared the historical stage with Washington; he is often credited with founding the NAACP, but real responsibility for that lay with Oswald Garrison Villard and other whites.

The distortions of Washington's record have created misunderstandings about black leadership. He has often been called conservative. Modern conservatives like this, but they misunderstand much about Washington. Washington's purpose was to *change* conditions for blacks. He was a conservative only in his belief that capitalist enterprise offered blacks their best opportunity to rise in America. Similarly, the frequent designation of Washington as an accommodationist to segregation is wrong. He worked too hard to resist segregation in its various forms to say he accommodated Jim Crow. Having conditions forced on him, with threat of destruction clearly the cost of resistance, is not accommodation but coercion. The accommodation-protest binary has obscured the similarity of the substance of Washington's action to the protest agenda put forward by the NAACP.

This distortion of Washington contributed to a narrowing of the limits Americans have put on black aspirations and accomplishments. Led by Du Bois, historians confused the style with the substance. Historians have shown an unfortunate narrow-mindedness about black leaders' styles. We should not hold black leaders to different standards of behavior from whites, but we have. To borrow the metaphors used by James MacGregor Burns about Franklin Roosevelt, African American leaders must always be "lions" like Frederick Douglass or Martin Luther King, Jr. They cannot be "foxes" or "rabbits," else they will be accused either of lacking manhood or resembling Richard Nixon. By the 1960s, understanding of the role of black leaders was cast in the context of King, Jr.'s leadership, which suggested that blacks can only rise with direct-action protest against the political order. To be sure, that accounted for King's great success, but as the sole model for group advancement, it often doesn't work. Protest has yielded the desired results

more episodically than consistently. Washington's emphasis on educational, moral, and economic development became virtually a lost artifact for Americans thinking about how to integrate disadvantaged groups. This was ironic, because his ideas have inspired and instructed struggling people in the Third World.

Now, let me assess the relative successes and failures of Du Bois and Washington. Which man most shaped the thinking of his followers? Transformational leaders are said to offer followers something more than just working for self gain; they provide followers with an inspiring mission and vision and give them an identity. Again, while the historical record denigrates Booker Washington's efforts to try to motivate followers through his charisma, and while I think he offered his people ways to challenge the status quo and to alter their environment, the circumstances of African Americans were really no better when he died in 1915 than they were when he became their leader in 1895. I think it is clear that, up to now, Du Bois has been more successful overall in leading the thinking of African Americans than Washington was. Washington's calculated vagueness about seeking racial equality enabled the misrepresentation of his ideas, whereas Du Bois's clarity about protest and his deep-seated hostility to white power have been vindicated by subsequent events. One may believe as I do that Washington inspired hope among blacks of his time and that he showed the only practical way to improving black conditions at the time, but that doesn't compare favorably with the achievements of the civil rights movement which Du Bois's ideology directly upheld. We admire the leadership examples of Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt not just because they gave eloquent expression to democratic values, but also because amid terrible circumstances their leadership shaped events that came out the way that leader wanted, winning the Civil War and World War II.

Washington taught that economic uplift would ultimately bring the return of political rights. He promised that a black who acquired economic independence would command the respect of white neighbors and ultimately with it would come the full rights of citizenship. But he did not acknowledge, not even privately, what was clear from segregationists' arguments against black industrial education—that whites objected to the rising status of a black skilled worker, business proprietor, or landowner. For Washington to have conceded that, of course, would have undermined his economic strategy. There was no other realistic avenue for progress; certainly, neither politics nor protest worked in the South of 1901.

Washington's effort to re-make the black image in the American mind mostly failed during his lifetime. His efforts could not overcome the intense political and cultural authority of white racism. But neither did the efforts of the NAACP in that regard until after World War II, when the demands of defeating racist enemies sparked the rejection of racial stereotypes in American culture. Washington should be recognized for anticipating the modern world in which image was more readily manipulated than reality, where pessimism had little social utility. In the face of recurring failure, Washington did what any good public-relations man does—he ignored the facts that did not fit his presentation of reality. He insisted that blacks would rise in status through education and economic success. Events after his death vindicated his faith: World wars, migrations, and an expanded national government brought economic opportunity that freed many blacks from the South's hostility to black economic progress. But those events also brought a better chance for political solutions, and it would be political action in the 1960s that ended segregation and disfranchisement.

Successful leadership often depends on support during difficult times. Using the criterion for judging transformational leadership suggested by Bernard Bass, we must ask, did Washington and DuBois “garner trust, respect, and admiration from their followers?” Du Bois maintained that Washington was not popular among blacks but very popular among southern whites. I think that is wrong, that the reality was more nearly the opposite. But it is difficult to measure popularity when there were no polls taken. Evidence of his appeal to the rank-and-file of blacks has emerged, I think, in the naming practices of black Americans. “Booker T.” became one of the most popular names for black male babies born after 1895. The average number of children named Booker for the years from 1902 through 1916 was almost 260, and among them the average number with the middle initial T was 185. Four southern states annually had about 200 Booker Ts—and there were thirty in Chicago, twenty-four in Detroit, and twenty in New York City in 1930. In the decade after his death in 1915, 1,567 black male babies were named Booker T. In 2007 the Social Security Death Index recorded 7,142 Bookers; 2,601 Booker Ts; and 173 Booker T. Washingtons—117 of whom were born after their namesake had died. During the same years, one finds scarcely a Du Bois and very few other famous black namesakes. Public institutions across the United States used Washington’s name extensively to memorialize black achievement. For almost two generations after his death, scores of schools, parks, community centers, libraries, and streets were named for Booker T. Washington. As public high schools for blacks were built for the first time in many southern communities in the 1920s and 1930s, Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver became the most likely name for the schools.

Like Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr., Booker Washington should be credited for exercising prophetic leadership. He told his people that they would endure the dark present and, as far as possible, he showed them how to survive. By building an institution that demonstrated blacks’ potential for success and autonomy, he gave them a symbol of progress and a reason to imagine a better future. Indeed, his life itself was an object lesson for progress, for hope that black people could rise to something better. Even if he didn’t succeed in his efforts to shape his own symbolism, and that of blacks as a group, his life should be marked as a shrewd and valiant effort to help his people move up from history.