

“Reflections on Booker T. Washington” in *Uncle Tom or New Negro? African Americans Reflect on Booker T. Washington and UP FROM SLAVERY 100 Years Later*, editor Rebecca Carroll, Harlem Moon, 2006

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My general sense of Booker T. Washington is that he was committed to the betterment of black people in the United States, and that he was very forward looking and insightful. I think people often fail to appreciate his insights, particularly with regard to race relations. Washington was a pragmatist in the John Dewey sense of pragmatism, where you're really working with a significant problematic, and Washington's problematic was: How do you resolve or improve race relations between black people and white people in the South, given the history of race and racism in the United States at that particular point in history? He thought that the best way to do that was for the races to work together, and in order to accomplish that, black people had to be able to bring something to the table. That's what building Tuskegee was about—bringing something to the table.

I have been recognized as a defender of Booker T. Washington, and that, I think, is only because so many people seem to be against him. During the 60s, when Black Nationalism became the rage, people read certain select things—subsequently, most people only know or have read three things about Booker T. Washington, at best: *Up from Slavery*, the Atlanta Exposition Speech, and “Of Washington and Others,” the essay by W.E.B. Du Bois. And sometimes they know the Dudley Randall poem, “Booker T. and W.E.B.” If you read *Up from Slavery* in isolation of Washington's other work, then I do think that you will get a skewed view of who and what he was. But when you start

reading *Working with Hands*, *My Larger Education*, *The Man Farthest Down*, the biography he wrote of Frederick Douglass, or his letters, and you see what he wrote about his projects, you come away with a completely different view of what Washington was trying to do.

For example, Washington never said, as many have claimed, that black people should only get an industrial education. He never said that black people shouldn't participate in the political process. What he did say was, if there are going to be voting requirements made for black people, the same requirements should be made for white people. He also said that the electorate should be literate—people should be able to read and write if they're going to participate in the political process. I mean, look, here is a moment in history, where white people as a population were predisposed to dislike black people. Washington understood that black people had to overcome the forces of that predisposed group, while simultaneously working with the people who were concerned with the advancement of black people. Did most white people want to have the kind of social interaction with black people that we take for granted now? No! It's not really a matter of whether black people wanted to have social interaction with white people—if you are a leader, you've got to have a vision of how these things are going to play out, and what process is best for the group you're serving. Washington's was not a consensus program.

I believe that Washington's leadership had less to do with what white people thought than most assume. In much of his work, he often says: "There shall be no unmanly cowering to the wishes of white people." But he also says, you've got to bring something to the table. In the context of black people being at that point, a small step beyond chattel slavery, Washington had to focus on what these people really needed, and

what they needed were skills. That was the purpose of his program—to provide black people with skills. With Tuskegee, Washington was able to do something that no other black person was able to do, and he also felt that black men and women should be provided with the same education—there were women in the first graduating class of Tuskegee. That’s impressive and significant. But here’s what I like about Washington and his approach—not only was Tuskegee seen as an industrial training school, but it also taught people how to read and write. So Washington was able to send these people from Tuskegee out into rural Southern communities who were not just able to teach skills, but who were also able to set up schools to teach other black people to read and write. That in and of itself—spreading literacy throughout the South—is exceptional.

I think the reason people tend to prefer the legacy of Du Bois over Washington’s, is because Du Bois was so much more elegant and poetic in his arguments against Washington. He was seductive. But Washington was quite aware of this. In 1903, Washington wrote: “When a people are smarting under the wrongs of injustices inflicted from many quarters, it is but natural that they should look about for some individual in whom to lay the blame for their seemly misfortunes. In this case, I seem to be the one. It is not a responsibility which I have sought, but since it has come to me I’m willing to do my duty as best as I can.” So he understood how some black people saw him. Within a contemporary context, why or how it is that most black people cling to these negative ideas about Washington, I think that once you get branded with something, it’s hard to separate yourself from that branding. But it’s important to understand that during that time, it was just the black intellectuals that didn’t like Washington—the statue of Washington down in Tuskegee was built from funds raised by poor black people, which

shows you that on the ground level, there was all this love for Washington among the masses.

Another important point in understanding the difference between Washington and Du Bois is that Washington, unlike Du Bois, never expressed any feeling of two-ness. Black intellectuals are drawn to Du Bois' metaphor of two-ness—"one ever feels his two-ness n American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body." I know I've felt that myself. As a philosopher, when I was younger and attending the APA (American Philosophical Association) conference, I would stand there in line with all these white people and think of the part of that famous Du Bois quote: "only his dogged strength keeps in from being torn asunder." But with Washington, there is no two-ness—black people are human beings struggling to make a life in this country, and what is the best way for them to make a life in this country. If you need skills, if you need to learn how to support yourself, you've got to start someplace, and Washington saw Tuskegee as the place to do that. Here's another nice thing about Washington—he understood that there was no history of black philanthropy. You could not run a school if you waited for black folks to give you money. If he had tried to go that route, Tuskegee would have failed.

Was Washington the kind of person that you might want to go to dinner with? Probably not. But Du Bois wouldn't want to go to dinner with you.

I think when you're considering Washington, you have to step back and look at not whether he was a megalomaniac, but what was the nature of his project and what were the fruits of his project. It's also important to keep in mind that when Washington came on the scene, the segregation train was well on its way—there was nothing Washington could have done to stop that. No one black man could have stopped that.

One could debate as to whether he aided the segregation train, but when you look at his work trying to stop segregation in railroad cars, trying to get officials elected who were sympathetic to both blacks and whites, and all his work behind the scenes, you have to think that here was a person who was, in a very real sense, committed to the cause.

I think what you get with most of these people who look at Washington in a negative light is just playa-haters. They're just playa-hating on Washington. Why? You know how black folks playa-hate on people—some playa-hate on Cornel West. But if you're talking about the part of Washington's Atlanta Compromise speech when he says, "all things social shall be separate," it's really the same thing as what the Black Nationalists were talking about. The scholar *Harold Cruse* pointed this out years ago—that all Black Nationalist rhetoric was just warmed over Washington. In his essay, "Of Washington and Others," when Du Bois writes about how Washington said no higher education for the negro, no social integration, no involvement in politics—if you go back and read Washington, there's no place where he ever says any of those things. But I think that became the mantra of the young black militant shift in the 60s, and so once they had that view of Washington, there was no reason to go back and read his work.

When I was in college and I read Washington's Exposition speech, it wasn't until years later that I learned the speech was not called the Atlanta Compromise. If you look up that speech in books from the 60s, where Washington is cited, it's called the Atlanta Compromise speech. But it's actually should be called the Atlanta Exposition speech. So even in widely read and accepted books, there is already a bias working against Washington. Though I find that when you talk to black people today about what Washington was really about, they start agreeing with you. And I think what Washington was about, and another nice thing about him, is pragmatism. As a pragmatist you have to

be creative and do a real assessment of the situation. You have to have a clear understanding of the problem, and be open to attempts to solve that problem. When Washington got to Tuskegee, he writes, “there was no students, no schools, no land, and no building.” He got the people from Hampton to loan him money so he could buy land, he started teaching his students how to build—he built Tuskegee from the ground up. He saw the problem, and he found a solution to the problem.

If there is a failing of Booker T. Washington, and there has to be because he was a human being, they were personal. But I think his personal failings have to be, to some degree, separated from his overall project and contribution to racial uplift in the United States. People say he was an Uncle Tom, and that he was a pawn of Armstrong. I say, Booker T. Washington had too much influence to be somebody’s pawn. He stated very clearly that he was concerned with the race problem, but that he was not a theorist. He felt theory without practice was worthless. He wrote: “I do not care to venture an opinion about the nature of knowledge in general. But it is pretty clear to anyone that reflects upon the matter, that the only kind of knowledge that has any sort of value for a race that’s trying to get on it’s feet, is knowledge that has some definite relationship to the daily lives of the men and women who are seeking it.”

I think that in a country where racism is still a problem, black people would do well to remember Washington’s pragmatism—looking at the real problem, and trying to solve it. For example, there is now such a nationwide push to bring black kids into colleges and universities, but my position is that it may turn out that at this moment in history not all black children need to go to college. There are other things that are needed in the black community—plumbers, electricians, and all sorts of jobs. People are so focused on getting black kids into college, but is that what we really need right now? And

this is the beauty of Washington—what do black people need now? We needed black people who could serve in trades and start businesses in our communities then, and we need them now. Today. People will say I'm trying to stop black people from progressing, just as they said about Washington, but it's simply a realistic fact that not everyone should go to college.

I've written two papers about Washington. The first paper I wrote about five or six years ago, when I knew just a little bit about Washington—I'd read Cornel West, Bernard Boxill, and a little Booker T. The second paper I wrote fairly recently. I reread the first paper a couple of days ago, and my position on Washington from the first to the second is like a 180 degree shift, because I realized that I hadn't read enough about him to know what I thought about him. Washington was a true American pragmatist. He said, look, the history is showing that white people do not want to be with us, they don't like to be with us, there's animosity—but it doesn't mean that we can't work together. We can work together and still have our own. Finally, Washington left us Tuskegee, where are the lasting institutions started by Malcolm and W.E.B?