

Booker T. Washington: The Atlanta Exposition Address, 1895 (Excerpts)

Background: Born a slave, Booker T. Washington (1856 – 1915), spent his childhood working in salt mines and coal mines. While a student at Hampton Institute, he paid his expenses by working there as a janitor. After later working as a teacher, he was named principal of Tuskegee Institute. When he arrived at Tuskegee in 1881, he discovered that the school had no land, buildings, nor money, other than the Alabama legislature’s having enacted an appropriation for staff salaries to establish a school for Blacks. With borrowed money, Washington bought an abandoned plantation and built a brick-making factory. Students at the school made bricks for buildings on the campus and for sale to others, and within a few years the school was self-sustaining and providing education for over 400 students. After thirty-four years under Washington’s leadership, Tuskegee was a respected institution with 1500 students. All students mastered basic academics, hygiene, manners, and character development. Boys studied skilled trades such as carpentry and printing, in addition to farming and dairying. Girls studied cooking and sewing.

In 1895, Washington was invited to address a white audience at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. Washington’s speech at the Atlanta Exposition, which came to be called the “Atlanta Compromise,” counseled fellow African-Americans to work hard and be patient, developing friendly relationships with their white neighbors and earning their respect.

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

One-third of the population of the South is of the Negro race. ... in no way have the value and manhood of the American Negro been more fittingly and generously recognized than by the managers of this magnificent Exposition at every stage of its progress. It is a recognition that will do more to cement the friendship of the two races than any occurrence since the dawn of our freedom...

A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a 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, water; send us water!” ran up from the distressed vessel, and was answered, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” And a third and fourth signal for water 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 we are surrounded.

Cast it down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions... 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. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities.

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 say 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 and love you have tested in days when to have proved treacherous meant the ruin of your firesides... While doing this, you can be sure in the future, as 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... 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...

Nearly sixteen millions of hands will aid you in pulling the load upward, or they will pull against you the load downward. We shall constitute one-third and more of the ignorance and crime of the South, or one-third [of] its intelligence and progress; we shall contribute one-third to the business and industrial prosperity of the South, or we shall prove a veritable body of death, stagnating, depressing, retarding every effort to advance the body politic...

The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing. No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized. It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of these privileges. The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera-house.

In conclusion, may I repeat that nothing in thirty years has given us more hope and encouragement, and drawn us so near to you of the white race, as this opportunity offered by the Exposition; ... yet far above and beyond material benefits will be that higher good, that, let us pray God, will come, in a blotting out of sectional differences and racial animosities and suspicions, in a determination to administer absolute justice, in a willing obedience among all classes to the mandates of law. This, coupled with our material prosperity, will bring into our beloved South a new heaven and a new earth.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are Booker T. Washington's main ideas in these passages?
2. What virtues and principles of constitutional government are addressed or implied in the document?
3. Why do you think Washington's address came to be called the Atlanta Compromise?
4. With what passages do you most agree? Disagree? Be prepared to explain your reactions to the document.
5. Explain Washington's reasoning in the paragraph that begins, "Nearly sixteen millions of hands will aid you in pulling the load upward, or they will pull against you the load downward..."