

Primary Source

W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903



To what extent did Founding principles of liberty, equality, and justice become a reality for African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century?

- I can interpret primary sources related to Founding principles of liberty, equality, and justice in the first half of the twentieth century.
- I can explain how laws and policy, courts, and individuals and groups contributed to or pushed back against the quest for liberty, equality, and justice for African Americans.
- I can create an argument using evidence from primary sources.
- I can analyze issues in history to help find solutions to present-day challenges.

Building Context

W. E. B. Du Bois was a Harvard-trained professor at Atlanta University who published essays about the Black experience in America. In his seminal book, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois argued that the quest for justice and equality was dependent on higher education for Blacks and the creation of Black educators. He argued that they would comprise a “Talented Tenth” who would educate the minds of the other Black Americans and prepare them for citizenship, civil rights, and voting. Du Bois helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909.

The Souls of Black Folk

Source: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm>

It is a peculiar situation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face . . . Negroes must insist continually . . . that voting is necessary to modern manhood, that color discrimination is barbarism, and that black boys need education as well as white boys. . . . In failing thus to state plainly and unequivocally the legitimate demands of their people, even at the cost of opposing an honored leader, the thinking classes of American Negroes would shirk a heavy responsibility—a responsibility to themselves, a responsibility to the struggling masses, a responsibility to the darker races of men whose future depends so largely on this American experiment, but especially a responsibility to this nation . . . When in fact the burden belongs to the nation, and the hands of none of us are clean if we bend not our energies to righting these great wrongs. . . . By every civilized and peaceful method we must strive for the rights which the world accords to men, clinging unwaveringly to those great words which the sons of the Fathers would fain forget: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Notes

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

1. What is the “double consciousness” Du Bois describes? How is it an effect of racial prejudice?

2. According to Du Bois, what is the role of African American leaders in the fight for equality?

3. How does Du Bois connect his argument to the Declaration of Independence?