

Booker T. Washington: Understanding the Wizard of Tuskegee

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Editor's Note: The author challenges the view among most blacks and many whites that Booker T. Washington was an obedient accommodationist chosen by whites to maintain white supremacy. This essay is excerpted from "Understanding the Wizard: Another Look at the Age of Booker T. Washington," Norrell's essay in Booker T. Washington and Black Progress: Up From Slavery 100 Years Later, edited by W. Fitzhugh Brundage (University Press of Florida, November 2003). Subheads have been added for the reader's convenience.

From his day to ours, Booker T. Washington has been viewed as a symbol of the age in which he lived, but he has proved to be an elastic emblem, one pulled and stretched to mean different things to different people. Washington clearly recognized his symbolic role and acted always to shape its meaning, but often he failed to persuade his audience of the object lessons he meant to teach.

Washington's Critics

When Washington's autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, appeared in 1901, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois began to critique the Tuskegee principal as a black leader chosen by whites. Du Bois wrote that Washington had taken the idea of industrial training for blacks and "broadened it from a by-path into a veritable Way of Life." Washington thought the older black schools that offered a liberal education were "wholly failures, or worthy of ridicule," which was partly why, Du Bois claimed, other blacks had "deep suspicion and dislike" for the Tuskegeean. "Among the Negroes, Mr. Washington is still far from a popular leader."

In *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, Du Bois perfected his critique, asserting that Washington's program "practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races." In the 1895 Atlanta Exposition speech--Du Bois dubbed it the "Atlanta Compromise," a pejorative that would prove enduring--Washington had, he insisted, accepted the denial of black citizenship rights. Washington was "striving nobly to make Negro artisans, business men, and property-owners; but it is utterly impossible, under modern

competitive methods, for the workingmen and property-owners to defend their rights and exist without the right of suffrage.”

In the years after Washington’s death in 1915, many readers of *Up From Slavery* would come to a more positive evaluation of the book and its author, and little was added to Du Bois’ critique of Washington until 1951, when C. Vann Woodward’s sharp irony in *Origins of the New South* seconded Du Bois’ criticism of Washington’s materialist values: “The businessman’s gospel of free enterprise, competition, and *laissez faire* never had a more loyal exponent than the master of Tuskegee.”

Louis R. Harlan, a Woodward student, stepped forward as the most influential interpreter of Washington with the publication in 1972 of the first installments of both his two-volume *Booker T. Washington Papers*. Professor Harlan criticized Washington’s failure to protest the wrongs he witnessed against African Americans, writing that he “acquiesced in segregation,” accepted “complacently” the denial of equal rights after Reconstruction, rose to power only because whites chose him to lead blacks, and offered leadership that amounted to a “setback of

his race.” Professor Harlan emphasized the hypocrisy of Washington’s public disavowal of politics at the same time he was working constantly to influence federal appointments in the South.

Precisely because Harlan drove his thesis so well and paraded a variety of vivid symbols before the readers about the “faustian” Wizard, he shaped almost all the writing on post-Reconstruction race relations published after 1972. Still, Harlan mainly put Washington in two contexts: the conflict with Du Bois, and Washington’s influence in Republican politics. Placing Washington in other historical contexts, however, can yield different understandings. What follows is an attempt to broaden the contextual framework in which Washington’s life and work are judged.

Race Relations in Washington’s Day

One crucial context for understanding Booker T. Washington was the thinking of whites in the 1880s and 1890s about the future of race relations. Intellectuals and politicians writing to shape public opinion, from both North and South, had turned increasingly hostile toward African Americans.

White-supremacist southerners were disproportionately represented in the pages of such current-issue magazines--all published in the North--as *Forum*, *North American Review*, *Arena*, *Harper's Weekly*, *Nation*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Popular Science Monthly*, and *Outlook*.

Intellectuals and politicians writing to shape public opinion reflected the widespread presumption that blacks would not be able to survive in freedom. A belief that African Americans were degenerating into beasts bolstered the predictions of their disappearance. By the 1880s the assertions of black bestiality pervaded both the intellectual and popular sources of opinion. Ultimately the most influential writer on the future of African Americans in the 1890s was Frederick Ludwig Hoffman, a German immigrant who made a place for himself as an actuary in the emerging life insurance business in the United States by assembling information to justify his employer's refusal to write life insurance on blacks. In 1892 Hoffman presented evidence in *Arena* to support his conclusion that "the time will come, if it has not already come, when the Negro, like the Indian, will be a vanishing race."

These intensely hostile views toward African Americans found their way to the average person in the South through the white-owned newspapers in that region, which gave the suggestion of the all-encompassing nature of race trouble in the United States. In his study of small-town newspapers in the South, Thomas D. Clark found that most papers in the 1880s and 1890s clearly reflected the “Negro-as-beast” thinking of the time. The editors revealed “a general fear of the Negro,” whom they often depicted as uncivilized, a “wild, ignorant animal ... [a] black sensual fiend, whose intense hatred of the white race would cause him to strike with wild demoniacal fury at an unguarded moment.”

By the late 1890s the improving visual presentations that resulted from better photoengraving on web presses enabled the larger urban dailies to present more racially inflammatory visual material. Advertisements in daily newspapers began regularly to use anti-black stereotypes to sell products of all kinds. Sunday comic pages began to appear in the largest newspapers and several strips exploited vicious stereotypes of black stupidity. Southern newspapers made great fun of African Americans in the courts, demonstrating blacks’ alleged criminality

while providing great hilarity to readers. Many papers featured police-court columns that were illustrated with outlandish caricatures of black men and women.

American popular culture in the late nineteenth century reinforced the ideas of black criminality and moral decline, especially the minstrel show, which featured white male actors in blackface playing the stock characters of "Jim Crow" and "Zip Coon." Almost any town with a railroad station and a hall received a touring minstrel company. Near the end of the nineteenth century, the musical feature became the "coon song," which featured a bright melody and relentlessly racist lyrics. Popular titles included the perennial favorite, "All Coons Look Alike to Me."

The Zip Coon and Jim Crow characters and the coon song made the transition both to burlesque and to vaudeville. During the 1890s coon songs became a main offering of the emerging sheet-music industry known popularly as "Tin Pan Alley." A million copies of "All Coons Look Alike to Me" were sold within a few years of its appearance in 1896. One could not receive American popular culture or news in the 1890s without getting constant repetition of the

stereotyped African American, an image of laziness, stupidity, immorality, and criminality.

Challenging Racism

In his 1895 Atlanta Exposition speech, Washington challenged the images then current in white intellectual and cultural presentations of African Americans, insisting that blacks were a people of “love and fidelity” to whites, a “faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful” people. In its larger thrust, the Atlanta speech represented Washington’s attempt to counter the presumption on the part of the white South, and much of the rest of the nation, that African Americans had declined in character and morality in freedom. The overarching message that Washington intended was not acceptance of disfranchisement and segregation but rather a message of progress, of movement forward and upward. In Atlanta, Washington began to offer Americans a new point of view in order to challenge the ideology of white supremacy.

In the years after the Atlanta speech, Washington often spoke up for civil and political rights. This is contrary to Professor Harlan’s contention that “his

public utterances were limited to what whites approved” and that Washington’s actions on behalf of civil and political rights were exclusively part of his “secret life” of arranging court challenges and organizing protests but taking no public part. In fact, in 1896 Washington told the *Washington Post* that forcing blacks “to ride in a ‘Jim Crow’ car that is far inferior to that used by the white people is a matter that cannot stand much longer against the increasing intelligence and prosperity of the colored people.”

In a speech at a Spanish-American War Peace Jubilee in Chicago before 16,000 people, Washington asserted that the United States had won all its battles but one, “the effort to conquer ourselves in the blotting out of racial prejudice. ... Until we thus conquer ourselves, I make no empty statement when I say that we shall have, especially in the Southern part of our country, a cancer gnawing at the heart of the Republic, that shall one day prove as dangerous as an attack from an army without or within.”

In 1899, in response to the horrific Sam Hose lynching in Newnan, Georgia, Washington wrote to the *Birmingham Age-Herald* that he opposed “mob violence under all circumstances. Those guilty of

crime should be surely, swiftly, and terribly punished, but by legal methods." In June of that year, he published a long article on lynching that appeared in many southern and northern newspapers in which he offered statistics to show that only a small portion of those lynched were even charged with rape. Lynching did not deter crime, Washington insisted; it degraded whites who participated, and it gave the South a bad name throughout the world.

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