Washington, Booker T. (1856-1915)

Born into slavery in Virginia, Booker Taliaferro Washington was the most prominent spokesman for Black Americans at the end of the nineteenth century. After attending the Hampton Institute, a school established to educate freedmen (freed black slaves), he was named head of the new Tuskegee Institute, a teachers college in Alabama that, like Hampton, would become one of the historically black universities in the United States. At Tuskegee, Washington earned the respect of a wide array of white businessmen, industrialists, and philanthropists, from George Eastman and Julius Rosenwald (a president of Sears, Roebuck and Company) to Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller. Washington’s most important intellectual contribution may have been his *Atlanta Address of 1895.* In the midst of Jim Crow laws enforcing racial segregation, which arose in response to failed reconstruction policies in the American South, Washington argued that the direct legal confrontation of the segregation of white and black Americans was premature. Instead, in his Address at the Atlanta Exposition of 1895 (also known as the “Atlanta Compromise”), Washington argued for a slow, ameliorative approach to racial equality and desegregation, one that emphasized technical and industrial schooling, self-help, and success in business in order to demonstrate a black citizenry capable of responsible and reliable political participation, one deserving of full civil rights, including equal access to electoral polls (that is, free of poll taxes and literary tests) and equal representation before the law. Initially, Washington’s approach drew wide support, even among black intellectuals in the North such as W. E. B. Du Bois. But the Plessy v. Ferguson case decided by the Supreme Court in 1896 proved to be a fresh affront to African-American attempts at compromise. (The decision remained in force until the equally historic Brown v. Board of Education decision of 1954.) Plessy v. Ferguson declared that the “separate but equal” laws found in many southern states, which enforced the separation of the races in transportation, schools, businesses, housing, beaches, hotels, bathrooms, and public water-fountains, that is, in any public facility, were in fact consistent with the US constitution. This elevation of state policy into federal law marked a turning point of sorts in the way segregation was approached. Although Booker T. Washington’s policy of compromise and slow evolution continued to have appeal up to WWI, especially in the American South where the broader approach to racism had long been less confrontational than in the North, the die was cast for future attempts to dismantle segregation. In 1903, W. B Du Bois published *The Souls of Black Folk,* a book that addressed the weaknesses of the ameliorative approach head on in its third chapter, “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others.” From this point on, increasing numbers of whites and blacks would come to question the basic tenets of Washington’s “Atlanta Compromise,” though it would remain a popular solution well into the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s. In 1905, a group of thirty-five black activists, joined by three whites, met on the Canadian side of Niagara (where hotel segregation did not exist) to discuss black voter disenfranchisement in Southern states. Known as the Niagara Movement, the group outlined a position decidedly opposed to that of Washington. Black and white members of this group, including Du Bois, would later form the NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), now headquartered in Baltimore, Maryland. (Ironically, Washington would financially support this group’s efforts in secret.) Despite Washington’s immense contributions to the cause of black education and black advancement during the Jim Crow era, it was finally the NAACP’s more confrontational approach that led to the ultimate dismantling of legally enforced racial segregation in the 1960s.

Bibliography:

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