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Exceptionally Deficient: Why Quintessentially American Self-Reliance Is Never Enough

Despite the massive social progress made by the Civil Rights movement, the legacy of slavery and racial segregation continues to grip every facet of American life. Where the first few years of the twentieth century saw Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, two intellectual shepherds of the black community, vying to architect a plan to steer race relations out of troubled waters, the dawn of the twenty-first century would see U.S. presidential candidate Barack Obama deliver a speech addressing the palpable echoes of the suffering they had hoped to avoid. Whereas Washington argued for a myopic focus on rugged individual responsibility, Du Bois recognized that hard work alone would not be enough to deliver an entire race of people out of calamity, and history has borne that to be prescient. Although President Obama parallels Washington's commitment to American exceptionalism, he ultimately eschews Washington's accommodationism by agreeing with Du Bois that self-reliance is necessary but not sufficient for ameliorating the racial malady afflicting the post-Civil-Rights-era United States.

The Washington-Du Bois debate is best understood as a disagreement about the socio-economic conditions which would bring about the end of racial segregation and oppression. As pointed out by Gooding-Williams, the debate hinged on an analysis of the sufficiency of self-reliance (Gooding-Williams). Washington's call for black Americans to "cast down their buckets" (Washington 572), was a plea for all members of his race to accept a bifurcated social

structure in exchange for economic stability, in the hopes that one day that stability would bring social integration through passively building mutual respect. But although he encouraged them to "[c]ast [them] down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions," (Washington 573), he did not want those people to become organized in this pursuit. Washington wanted black Americans to join the work force, but not the labor struggle, as is evidenced by his deriding of strikes and direct action (Washington 573). He believed that submission to capital was the way forward, and as a result his compromise was predicated on the presupposition that social progress can be made through purely economic means. Then, if that were the case, after enough work had been accomplished, equality would be inevitable. But if this presupposition was not the case, then, as Du Bois argued, there would be nothing to compromise over because giving up the social struggle for equality would be tantamount to forever accepting oppression. Du Bois agreed with Washington that black Americans would need to become economically self-sufficient, or at least work towards that goal, and he makes this clear when he argued that one of the key demands to be made of the country is "the education of [black] youth according to ability," (Du Bois 700). However, he further believed that the industriousness which would result from this explosive influx of entrepreneurially trained men would not be sufficient to bring about the necessary changes to solve what he called the "Negro problem," that is, the problem of segregation and oppression. This is because civic engagement and the prolonged struggle for social acceptance and integration are just as important as economic stability, and without them, there can be no hope for equality, no matter how prosperous black businesses would become (Du Bois 698-700).

Where President Obama aligns himself with Washington is on the idea that America is a unique bastion of freedom and hope, and in just the same way that Washington's commitment to

the exceptionalism of America clouds his vision of justice, so too does President Obama's. Washington extols the South of his time as the sole place where "the Negro is given a man's chance in the commercial world" (Washington 573), despite the harsh reality of indentured servitude which haunted the South for over half a century after the end of slavery. President Obama, in concordance, decries the "profoundly distorted view of this country" which "sees white racism as endemic," professed by Reverend Jeremiah Wright as a means to, ostensibly, "denigrate both the greatness and the goodness of [America]" (Obama 1412). But isn't this 'nonexistent' endemic racism exactly the problem his speech is meant to address? How could it be denigrating to claim that these racial issues, which he himself is confronting, permeate our culture? He is making an ontological commitment to the existence of the endemic racism merely by arguing for why we should fight against it. Both Washington and President Obama hold a view of this country which, in the process of praising its limitless potential, needs to ignore its blights and sores (Obama 1415). This becomes a burden for President Obama's speech when he moves to argue for social progress through solidarity because, ultimately, American exceptionalism is undermined in the same way that all dogmatic beliefs are: it simply doesn't hold up to scrutiny. The dream promised by the founding fathers means nothing so long as there is even a single person living in this country without equal protection under the law, access to basic necessities, or an equitable chance at prosperity. Despite the real disagreements President Obama has with Washington, his shared belief in American exceptionalism leaves a deep hole in his rhetoric, one which needs to be filled by a rejection of Washington's sole call for rugged individualism.

In counterpoint to his nationalistic fervor, President Obama does ally with Du Bois to rout Washington's claim that robust self-reliance is both necessary and sufficient to end racial

discrimination. Du Bois argued that Washington's entire project is deeply flawed by paradox, and in particular that the entrepreneurial goals Washington wanted the black community to aspire to were "utterly impossible" to achieve without the legal means for those people to "defend their rights," (Du Bois 699). The paradox is that Washington wanted black Americans to withdraw from civil life and focus solely on the accumulation of property and capital, but without any form of civic engagement to attain equal protection under the law none of that capital would be able to be defended against economic exploitation or theft. It would be impossible for any headway to be made in a free market without equal legal protections, so casting the struggle for those protections aside would doom the entire project. So to Du Bois, although this kind of economic enterprise is a necessary component for the black American community to make progress, it fails to be sufficient to produce the larger societal changes that would alleviate racial oppression. President Obama notes how peculiar it is that this form of individualism is so "quintessentially American—and yes, conservative," (Obama, 1416), and in order to demonstrate how insufficient a pure reliance on individual responsibility is, he lays out the ways in which "embarking on a program of self-help also requires a belief that society can change," (Obama 1416). He does argue that the black community needs to take "full responsibility for [their] own lives—by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children," (Obama 1416), but he couples this with explaining how the "larger aspirations of all Americans" such as "better healthcare, and better schools, and better jobs," play crucial roles forming the balance between self-reliance and institutional support. Without a commitment to these wider social projects, and without a belief that these changes could come about through political struggle, any attempt to "move beyond some of our old racial wounds" would fail because they would leave only an anemic patchwork of individuals hopelessly attempting to roll their personal boulders of

oppression up the hill of poverty (Obama 1416). President Obama agrees with Du Bois that any attempt to address racial animosity on a societal level cannot succeed without wide reaching progressive policy changes because no amount of economic self-sufficiency is enough to shield an entire race of people from the brutal hand of systemic institutional discrimination.

An empathetic defense of Washington might argue that his compromise was borne of pragmatic concern for the lives of black Americans which were under constant threat of lynchings, and in that light, it makes sense why President Obama would agree so heavily with his conception of America as an exceptional place of hope and potential. All that needed to be done was to quell the suffocating oppression and an entire race of people would be free to live their lives to the fullest. But even taking this view, Du Bois's analysis of the insufficiency of self-reliance still shows how short the compromise falls, no matter how good its intentions may have been. This is what makes President Obama's acknowledgement of the mountain of work still needed to be done such a powerful rhetorical tool to fill the gaps left by his commitment to American exceptionalism. Perhaps if he had over the course of his presidency committed himself to the principles of social equality which he expressed in this speech, instead of folding into the neoliberal status quo by supporting the hegemonic power structures the speech wished to dismantle, the United States would be closer to achieving the unity he spoke of instead of wasting away in an endless state of arrested social development. Would that it were so.

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