political machines, white southerners would "purify" the ballot box by restricting black voting, and they would prevent racial strife by legislating the social separation of the races. The strongest supporters of such measures in the South were progressive Democrats and former Populists, both of whom saw in these reforms a way to eliminate the racial demagoguery that conservative Democratic party leaders had so effectively wielded. Leaders in both the North and South embraced and proclaimed the reunion of the sections on the basis of white supremacy. As the nation took up the "white man's burden" to uplift the world's racially inferior peoples, the North looked to the South as an example of how to manage nonwhite populations. The South had become the nation's racial vanguard.[32]

The question was how to accomplish disfranchisement. The Fifteenth Amendment clearly prohibited states from denying any citizen the right to vote on the basis of race. In 1890, a Mississippi state newspaper called on politicians to devise "some legal defensible substitute for the abhorrent and evil methods on which white supremacy lies."[33] The state's Democratic Party responded with a new state constitution designed to purge corruption at the ballot box through disenfranchisement. African Americans hoping to vote in Mississippi would have to jump through a series of hurdles designed with the explicit purpose of excluding them from political power. The state first established a poll tax, which required voters to pay for the privilege of voting. Second, it stripped suffrage from those convicted of petty crimes most common among the state's African Americans. Next, the state required voters to pass a literacy test. Local voting officials, who were themselves part of the local party machine, were responsible for judging whether voters were able to read and understand a section of the Constitution. In order to protect illiterate whites from exclusion, the so-called "understanding clause" allowed a voter to qualify if they could adequately explain the meaning of a section that was read to them. In practice these rules were systematically abused to the point where local election officials effectively wielded the power to permit and deny suffrage at will. The disenfranchisement laws effectively moved electoral conflict from the ballot box, where public attention was greatest, to the voting registrar, where supposedly color-blind laws allowed local party officials to deny the ballot without the appearance of fraud.[34]

Between 1895 and 1908, the rest of the states in the South approved new constitutions including these disenfranchisement tools. Six southern

states also added a grandfather clause, which bestowed suffrage on anyone whose grandfather was eligible to vote in 1867. This ensured that whites who would have been otherwise excluded through mechanisms such as poll taxes or literacy tests would still be eligible, at least until grandfather clauses were struck down by the Supreme Court in 1915. Finally, each southern state adopted an all-white primary and excluded blacks from the Democratic primary, the only political contests that mattered across much of the South.[35]

For all the legal double-talk, the purpose of these laws was plain. James Kimble Vardaman, later governor of Mississippi, boasted that "there is no use to equivocate or lie about the matter. Mississippi's constitutional convention was held for no other purpose than to eliminate the nigger from politics; not the ignorant—but the nigger."[36] These technically color-blind tools did their work well. In 1900 Alabama had 121,159 literate black men of voting age. Only 3,742 were registered to vote. Louisiana had 130,000 black voters in the contentious election of 1896. Only 5,320 voted in 1900. Blacks were clearly the target of these laws, but that did not prevent some whites from being disenfranchised as well. Louisiana dropped 80,000 white voters over the same period. Most politically engaged southern whites considered this a price worth paying to prevent the alleged fraud that plagued the region's elections.[37]

At the same time that the South's Democratic leaders were adopting the tools to disenfranchise the region's black voters, these same legislatures were constructing a system of racial segregation even more pernicious. While it built on earlier practice, segregation was primarily a modern and urban system of enforcing racial subordination and deference. In rural areas, white and black southerners negotiated the meaning of racial difference within the context of personal relationships of kinship and patronage. An African American who broke the local community's racial norms could expect swift personal sanction that often included violence. The crop lien and convict lease systems were the most important legal tools of racial control in the rural South. Maintaining white supremacy there did not require segregation. Maintaining white supremacy within the city, however, was a different matter altogether. As the region's railroad networks and cities expanded, so too did the anonymity and therefore freedom of southern blacks. Southern cities were becoming a center of black middle-class life that was an implicit threat to racial hierarchies. White southerners created the system of segregation as a way to maintain white supremacy in restaurants, theaters,

public restrooms, schools, water fountains, train cars, and hospitals. Segregation inscribed the superiority of whites and the deference of blacks into the very geography of public spaces.

As with disenfranchisement, segregation violated a plain reading of the Constitution—in this case the Fourteenth Amendment. Here the Supreme Court intervened, ruling in the *Civil Rights Cases* (1883) that the Fourteenth Amendment only prevented discrimination directly by states. It did not prevent discrimination by individuals, businesses, or other entities. Southern states exploited this interpretation with the first legal segregation of railroad cars in 1888. In a case that reached the Supreme Court in 1896, New Orleans resident Homer Plessy challenged the constitutionality of Louisiana's segregation of streetcars. The court ruled against Plessy and, in the process, established the legal principle of separate but equal. Racially segregated facilities were legal provided they were equivalent. In practice this was almost never the case. The court's majority defended its position with logic that reflected the racial assumptions of the day. "If one race be inferior to the other socially," the court explained, "the Constitution of the United States cannot put them upon the same plane." Justice John Harlan, the lone dissenter, countered, "Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law." Harlan went on to warn that the court's decision would "permit the seeds of race hatred to be planted under the sanction of law."[38] In their rush to fulfill Harlan's prophecy, southern whites codified and enforced the segregation of public spaces.

Segregation was built on a fiction—that there could be a white South socially and culturally distinct from African Americans. Its legal basis rested on the constitutional fallacy of "separate but equal." Southern whites erected a bulwark of white supremacy that would last for nearly sixty years. Segregation and disenfranchisement in the South rejected black citizenship and relegated black social and cultural life to segregated spaces. African Americans lived divided lives, acting the part whites demanded of them in public, while maintaining their own world apart from whites. This segregated world provided a measure of independence for the region's growing black middle class, yet at the cost of poisoning the relationship between black and white. Segregation and disenfranchisement created entrenched structures of racism that completed the total rejection of the promises of Reconstruction.

And yet many black Americans of the Progressive Era fought back. Just as activists such as Ida Wells worked against southern lynching,

Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois vied for leadership among African American activists, resulting in years of intense rivalry and debated strategies for the uplifting of black Americans.

Born into the world of bondage in Virginia in 1856, Booker Taliaferro Washington was subjected to the degradation and exploitation of slavery early in life. But Washington also developed an insatiable thirst to learn. Working against tremendous odds, Washington matriculated into Hampton University in Virginia and thereafter established a southern institution that would educate many black Americans, the Tuskegee Institute, located in Alabama. Washington envisioned that Tuskegee's contribution to black life would come through industrial education and vocational training. He believed that such skills would help African Americans accomplish economic independence while developing a sense of self-worth and pride of accomplishment, even while living within the putrid confines of Jim Crow. Washington poured his life into Tuskegee, and thereby connected with leading white philanthropic interests. Individuals such as Andrew Carnegie, for instance, financially assisted Washington and his educational ventures.

The strategies of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois differed, but their desire was the same: better lives for African Americans. Photograph of Booker T. Washington taken between 1905 and 1915. Library of Congress.

Washington became a leading spokesperson for black Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, particularly after Frederick Douglass's death in early 1895. Washington's famous "Atlanta Compromise" speech from that same year encouraged black Americans to "cast your bucket down" to improve life's lot under segregation. In the same speech, delivered one year before the Supreme Court's *Plessy* v. *Ferguson* decision that legalized segregation under the "separate but equal" doctrine, Washington said to white Americans, "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."[39] Washington was both praised as a race leader and pilloried as an accommodationist to America's unjust racial hierarchy; his public advocacy of a conciliatory posture toward white supremacy concealed the efforts to which he went to assist African Americans in the legal and economic quest for racial justice. In addition to founding Tuskegee, Washington also published a handful of influential books, including the autobiography *Up from Slavery* (1901). Like Du Bois, Washington was also active in black journalism, working to fund and support black newspaper publications, most of which sought to counter Du Bois's growing influence. Washington died in 1915, during World War I, of ill health in Tuskegee, Alabama.

Speaking decades later, Du Bois said Washington had, in his 1895 "Compromise" speech, "implicitly abandoned all political and social rights. . . . I never thought Washington was a bad man . . . I believed him to be sincere, though wrong." Du Bois would directly attack Washington in his classic 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk*, but at the turn of the century he could never escape the shadow of his longtime rival. "I admired much about him," Du Bois admitted. "Washington . . . died in 1915. A lot of people think I died at the same time."[40]

Du Bois's criticism reveals the politicized context of the black freedom struggle and exposes the many positions available to black activists. Born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in 1868, Du Bois entered the world as a free person of color three years after the Civil War ended. He was raised by a hardworking and independent mother; his New England childhood alerted him to the reality of race even as it invested the emerging thinker with an abiding faith in the power of education. Du Bois graduated at the top of his high school class and attended Fisk University. Du Bois's sojourn to the South in 1880s left a distinct impression that would guide his life's work to study what he called the "Negro problem," the systemic racial and economic discrimination that Du Bois prophetically

Photograph of W. E. B. Du Bois taken in 1919. Library of Congress.

pronounced would be *the* problem of the twentieth century. After Fisk, Du Bois's educational path trended back North. He attended Harvard, earned his second degree, crossed the Atlantic for graduate work in Germany, and circulated back to Harvard, and in 1895, he became the first black American to receive a PhD there.

Du Bois became one of America's foremost intellectual leaders on questions of social justice by producing scholarship that underscored the humanity of African Americans. Du Bois's work as an intellectual, scholar, and college professor began during the Progressive Era, a time in American history marked by rapid social and cultural change as well as complex global political conflicts and developments. Du Bois addressed these domestic and international concerns not only in his classrooms at Wilberforce University in Ohio and Atlanta University in Georgia but also in a number of his early publications on the history of the transatlantic slave trade and black life in urban Philadelphia. The most well-known of these early works included *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *Darkwater* (1920). In these books, Du Bois combined incisive historical analysis with engaging literary drama to validate black personhood *and* attack the inhumanity of white supremacy, particularly in the lead-up to

and during World War I. In addition to publications and teaching, Du Bois set his sights on political organizing for civil rights, first with the Niagara Movement and later with its offspring, the NAACP. Du Bois's main work with the NAACP lasted from 1909 to 1934 as editor of *The Crisis*, one of America's leading black publications. Du Bois attacked Washington and urged black Americans to concede to nothing, to make no compromises and advocate for equal rights under the law. Throughout his early career, he pushed for civil rights legislation, launched legal challenges against discrimination, organized protests against injustice, and applied his capacity for clear research and sharp prose to expose the racial sins of Progressive Era America.

> We refuse to allow the impression to remain that the Negro-American assents to inferiority, is submissive under oppression and apologetic before insults. . . . Any discrimination based simply on race or color is barbarous, we care not how hallowed it be by custom, expediency or prejudice . . . discriminations based simply and solely on physical peculiarities, place of birth, color of skin, are relics of that unreasoning human savagery of which the world is and ought to be thoroughly ashamed. . . . Persistent manly agitation is the way to liberty.[41]

W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington made a tremendous historical impact and left a notable historical legacy. They were reared under markedly different circumstances, and thus their early life experiences and even personal temperaments oriented both leaders' lives and outlooks in decidedly different ways. Du Bois's confrontational voice boldly targeted white supremacy. He believed in the power of social science to arrest the reach of white supremacy. Washington advocated incremental change for longer-term gain. He contended that economic self-sufficiency would pay off at a future date. Four years after Du Bois directly spoke out against Washington in the chapter "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington" in *Souls of Black Folk*, the two men shared the same lectern at Philadelphia Divinity School to address matters of race, history, and culture in the American South. Although their philosophies often differed, both men inspired others to demand that America live up to its democratic creed.

VII. Conclusion

Industrial capitalism unleashed powerful forces in American life. Along with wealth, technological innovation, and rising standards of living, a

host of social problems unsettled many who turned to reform politics to set the world right again. The Progressive Era signaled that a turning point had been reached for many Americans who were suddenly willing to confront the age's problems with national political solutions. Reformers sought to bring order to chaos, to bring efficiency to inefficiency, and to bring justice to injustice. Causes varied, constituencies shifted, and the tangible effects of so much energy was difficult to measure, but the Progressive Era signaled a bursting of long-simmering tensions and introduced new patterns in the relationship between American society, American culture, and American politics.

VIII. Reference Material

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