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AMH 4403

Exam One Essay

Question A

“To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man, who is their next-door neighbor, I would say: Cast down your bucket where you are—cast it down in making friends in everly manly way of people of all races by whom we are surrounded” (Washington p.3 Atlanta Compromise Speech). On September 18, 1895, Booker T. Washington defined his view of progress in front of a mixed crowd of Southern Whites and Blacks at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta.

Washington asserted that progress would not come easily, and there were several issues that whites and blacks had to address before bettering their economic, political and social standing in the New South. First and foremost, Washington asserted that every race would have to realize that they are on a level playing field, and that halting one’s mission to “achieve higher intelligence” is a crime against not only the individual, but a crime against that individual’s entire race. Secondly, Washington contended that Southern Blacks must “prepare themselves for privileges of the law” by working hard in agriculture, factory work, and other trades. Future generations of blacks would earn greater privileges—allowing for the growth of successful “black lawyers, congressmen and music teachers.”(Washington, 93) Ultimately, Washington believed that in order to achieve progress, the black man must do whatever possible to aid “the southern white man” in this New South commercially, which would help black Americans reach the status of respected citizens. Washington predicted that progress would only come with the self-development of Black Americans in important trades and through peaceful cooperation with their white peers in political, commercial, and social affairs.

Booker T. Washington was born into slavery in Virginia and learned the value of hard work at a young age after working in the salt furnaces of West Virginia. His humble mentality morphed by his simple beginnings from slavery, coupled with his deep passion for learning, would eventually bring him inordinate levels of success. In his Atlanta Compromise Speech, Washington argued “there is no defense or security for any of us except in the development of the highest intelligence of all” (Washington p.6, Atlanta Compromise Speech). Washington believed that blacks coming up from slavery like him would not be prepared for the privileges that come with the law if people actively halted them from learning how to be more successful and responsible citizens in this new “foreign land” of the South.

However, Washington was also deeply concerned over the resentful attitudes of southern Blacks coming up from slavery. In Washington’s autobiography *Up From Slavery*, he says, “No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities” (Washington, 220). Washington argues that the new south yields a great wealth of opportunity, and blacks coming up from slavery, must take any chance they get to achieve prosperity by applying their skills to trade. He emphasized this in his Atlanta Compromise speech “the opportunity to earn a dollar at the factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera-house.” (Washington, p. 11, Atlanta Compromise Speech) Just like the millions of immigrants pouring into the countries’ biggest cities at the time, Black Americans would have to work hard to achieve higher status in this country; and because of increasing attempts to maintain white supremacy in the south, they would have to do this by remaining humble and patient in their efforts to reach social and economic equality.

Although Washington is often criticized for cozying up to Northern philanthropists like Andrew Carnegie and other prominent white men throughout the country, I personally viewed it as political moves made by a leader that felt responsible for the progression of the black race. W.E.B. Dubois, a radical supporter of black equality through militant protest and one of Washington’s biggest rivals of the day, said “Washington had no faith in white people, not the slightest”. Washington used Northern philanthropists money however, establishing his influences in many influential circles around the region; furthermore, transforming black schools into industrious institutions of higher learning. Washington founded the Tuskegee Institute in 1881 and helped bring support to rival institutions like Atlanta University and Talladega College.

Similarly, Washington believed that the black population must befriend whites rather than openly resent them. He supports this idea when admiring his mentor Samuel C. Armstrong in his autobiography “He cherished no bitterness against the South, and was happy when an opportunity offered for manifesting his sympathy. I never heard him speak, in public or in private, not a single bitter word against the white man in the South.“(*Up From Slavery*, pg. 164) Washington believed that actively protesting political freedoms would only lead to more resentment and bitterness from southern whites that were still recovering from a world without slavery. He argues that militant protests would only increase racial tensions, and would eventually lead to more lynch deaths and stricter Jim Crow laws. In Washington’s opinion, the easiest way for Southern Blacks to earn the trust of Southern Whites was by gaining their respect in the commercial sector first; and more importantly, improving their social position through secure self-development.

Booker T. Washington, often nicknamed the “Wizard of Tuskegee,” was hell-bent on improving the economic and social status of African Americans. The founding of the Tuskegee Institute was just one of Washington’s many successes in improving Black student’s skills in practical and industrial education, which he believed would help create “professional black men and women”; therefore, creating business relationships off of trust between Southern Blacks and Southern Whites. Washington’s definition of progress did not come easily, but he predicted that by working hard and capitalizing off of opportunities, there would be a great level of progress for future generations of southern blacks and whites.