

Du Bois vs. Washington: Old Lessons Blacks Have Not Learned

Ellisandro Washington

*We claim for ourselves every single right that belongs to a free American, political, civil and social, and until we get these rights we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of America.*¹ —W. E. B. Du Bois

*The Wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing.*² —Booker T. Washington

W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington were the two dominant black leaders in America during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and they had similar goals: eradicating racism, segregation, and discrimination directed against their race. However, these Promethean figures' means to those ends were vastly different, and a century later blacks continue to debate their ideas.

As America sits poised at the dawn of the twenty-first century, relations between blacks and whites are steadily deteriorating. How could this be? We have had over thirty years of civil rights legislation, including affirmative action programs that helped create today's viable black middle class. Yet in the midst of the greatest increase of black affluence in American history, poverty and crime have exploded in our major cities, and sociologists have coined the term "underclass" to describe the intractable black poor. The question then arises: How should blacks have responded to the racism, segregation,

and discrimination to which they were subjected in the early twentieth century? Upon which philosophy should blacks have relied to help them overcome these hardships?

The conventional wisdom espoused by today's black leaders is that the civil rights movement grew out of the philosophical debate between Du Bois and Washington—a debate Du Bois won. It must be noted, however, that Du Bois's philosophy was born not in the minds of blacks, but in those of white liberal academics who fashioned it to comply with a cultural relativist outlook. The grass-roots people, so vital to any social movement, had little to do with the origins of the modern civil rights movement. As we shall see, this fissure between the black elite and common "black folk" would prove devastating.

The dichotomy between Du Bois and Washington is that between expediency and patience; political protest and self-help; overt activism in the streets and the quiet assiduousness of personal and moral development in the home; seeking redress of grievances in the courts for better jobs, schools and educational opportunities and seeking knowledge in the libraries and creating jobs, schools, and educational opportunities; forcing whites to accept blacks as equals and showing whites that blacks can first treat each other as equals. Such were the choices black Americans faced. By choosing Du Bois, the seemingly easy choice, they entered a Faustian bargain which has led them down a road of frustration and social pathology.

Ellisandro Washington, J.D., lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

The civil rights movement, with its well-known lineage of organizations—National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Black Urban League, *et al.*—enthusiastically embraced Du Bois's model of activism, protest, and legislated redress of grievances. But what have blacks gained after fifty years of civil rights activism? What have they lost? How much further socially, politically, economically, intellectually, and spiritually would blacks have gotten had they marched, shouted, and protested less and studied, self-examined, and self-denied more? Would not the short-term, largely symbolic, victories achieved by the NAACP and other civil rights groups now be eclipsed by the long-term growth of solid black institutional structures? After all, the substantive benefits achieved by one's own efforts can be taken away only with great difficulty, but that which government giveth, it can easily take away through legislative fiat.

Today, the name Booker T. Washington is venerated only by two groups of African Americans: conservative blacks (e.g., Walter Williams, Thomas Sowell, and Clarence Thomas) and the so-called "black nationalists" (e.g., Louis Farrakan and his "Nation of Islam"). Afrocentrist Molefi Asante states: "I'm not one of those people who is down on Washington.... I remind you that Washington was a hero for Marcus Garvey."³ Elizabeth Wright goes further:

Du Bois was a creation of Europe and Harvard, but Booker T. stayed to the land. He was one of us. Instead of following his example, instead of building ourselves as a people, we have this generation of self-promoting octoroons who are making a good living by playing the white man. Is this how we advance the race: by wailing and crying?⁴

Unfortunately, Washington today is largely dismissed and disdained as a caricature—a buffoon not to be respected as a serious black leader. Historian Alphonso Pinkney views Washington as a "collaborator"; for Martin Kilson, he is a "client or pup-

pet figure."⁵ Washington biographer Louis Harlan is contemptuous of his subject,⁶ while Du Bois's mythic status is preserved in a recent biography by David Levering.⁷ Why is Washington the target of such ridicule from black historians while his contemporary, Du Bois, is raised to legendary status?

One reason is that, historically, the majority of the so-called "black elite" (i.e., civil rights leaders, politicians, ministers, teachers, professors, lawyers, etc.) have been philosophically egalitarian and politically liberal. Du Bois, one of the founding members of the NAACP, mirrored the intellectual assumptions of the black liberals of his day.

1895 was a notable year for both men. While Du Bois was the first black person to receive a graduate degree from Harvard, Washington was delineating his vision of race relations at the Atlanta Exposition fair in Georgia. Whites from both the North and South responded to Washington's ideas on racial reconciliation with ovations; the press noted that white audiences had not been so moved by a black orator since the great speeches of Frederick Douglass a generation earlier. And never in American history had a black man attracted such public admiration from white Southerners.

Although born a slave, Washington triumphed against a well-nigh overwhelming set of circumstances to become one of America's great black educators, speakers and university builders. As a man of exceptionally high moral character, he harbored no hatred or animosity toward whites; nor did he manifest any obvious psychological debilitation from what had to have been a traumatic childhood as a slave.⁸ One important maxim Washington followed was: "It is a hard matter to convert an individual by abusing him."⁹ He believed that racial reconciliation could only be gained through compromise and finding common ground, even with the most radical white segregationists in the South.

Washington's response to white racism was sublime in its simplicity. His starting point was always with the individual: to improve the moral character, personal devel-

opment and intellectual enhancement of the targets of racism, instead of concentrating on white racism per se. By focusing attention away from a negative (white racism) and onto a positive (black personal improvement), his philosophy of self-help through industrial education, discipline, and hard work would foster racial unity as blacks, working together in a self-contained environment, improved their own lot in life without handouts from whites and the federal government. This he believed to be the most feasible and comprehensive way to end racism:

The Negro should not be deprived by unfair means of the franchise, but political agitation alone will not save him. Back of the ballot, he must have property, industry, skill, economy, intelligence and character. No race without these elements can permanently succeed.... We have a right to enter our complaints, but we shall make a fatal error if we yield to the temptation of believing that mere opposition to our wrongs will take the place of progressive, constructive action.... Whether he will or not, a white man respects a Negro who owns a two-story brick house.¹⁰

Unlike Washington, Du Bois was born a free man in the North and was of black, French, Dutch, and American Indian ancestry—"Thank God, no Anglo-Saxon," he liked to add.¹¹ Educated in the finest schools of Europe and the United States, he studied with such great minds as George Santayana and William James. In 1895, he became the first black person to receive a doctorate from Harvard.¹² Du Bois represented a privileged group within the black community, coming from a generation of Northern mulattoes whose parents had gained much more in material benefits than those ex-slaves from the South who knew well the barriers to upward social mobility placed on them by the color line.¹³

To Du Bois and his contemporaries, Washington's approach to race relations was embarrassingly accommodationist. Du Bois, in many of his writings (e.g., his magnum opus *The Souls of Black Folk*, articles in the *Crisis Magazine*, and in numerous speeches), mercilessly ridiculed Washington as the first Uncle Tom, passively tolerating maltreatment from whites in exchange for a pat on the head

and the hypocritical embrace of paternalistic benevolence. Du Bois disdained Washington's self-help program of general industrial education, considering it preparation for humiliating and servile work.¹⁴ Here, Du Bois reveals his unabashed elitism. Always dapper and a model of haberdashery refinement, he was rarely seen in public without his signature cane and gloves. In his article "The Talented Tenth," Du Bois urged the best and brightest of the black community to shepherd the docile black masses into the benefits of full American citizenship. "The Negro race," he said, "is going to be saved by its exceptional men."¹⁵

To Du Bois, black civil rights were pre-eminent and should be pursued through every institutional structure available—whether through the courts with lawsuits, or through boycotting segregated stores, or through marching and demonstrating in the streets. *Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!* was his rallying cry to force concessions and equal opportunities from whites. For Du Bois, blacks' singular enemy was white racism: "We claim for ourselves every single right that belongs to a free American, political, civil and social, and until we get these rights we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of America."¹⁶

Washington agreed with Du Bois that white racism was a major obstacle to black achievement, but emphasized a crucial factor largely ignored by Du Bois and the burgeoning civil rights establishment; namely, what Dinesh D'Souza calls "black civilizational backwardness." It was this lack of developed ability and demonstrated performance among blacks which gave life and the appearance of legitimacy to white racism and trapped blacks in the muck of promiscuity, ignorance, and crime. Washington demanded that blacks exorcise their own demons of profligacy, laziness, criminality, excessive complaining, and idleness, pick themselves up by their bootstraps and methodically develop and utilize their abilities to make a better life for themselves and their people. Thus, in response to Du Bois's cry of *Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!*, Washington extolled *Discipline! Discipline! Discipline!*

A race or an individual which has no fixed habits, no fixed place of abode, no time for going to bed, or getting up in the morning, for going to work; no arrangement, order or system in all the ordinary business of life—such a race and such individuals are lacking in self-control, lacking in some of the fundamentals of civilization.¹⁷

Washington's blunt assessment of the core problems of black culture irritated Du Bois, who retorted that Washington was excusing white America for centuries of slavery and unspeakable horrors heaped upon blacks while unduly blaming them for not competing with whites on an equal level. According to Du Bois:

If they accuse Negro women of lewdness, what are they doing but advertising to the world the shameless lewdness of those Southern men who brought millions of mulattoes into the world? Suppose today Negroes do steal; who was it that for centuries made stealing a virtue by stealing their labor?¹⁸

This nihilistic rhetoric sounds chillingly similar to the polemics of contemporary black leaders such as Jesse Jackson, Louis Farrakan, Al Sharpton, Marion Wright Edelman, John Lewis, and Joseph Lowery. Contrary to the clattering of the liberal civil rights race merchants, Washington was well aware that centuries of slavery in America contributed to the pathologies afflicting the black community—this was self-evident. Remember, Washington was born into slavery.

The critical issue for Washington was that black people had allowed themselves to believe that they were morally, spiritually, intellectually, economically and socially inferior to whites. Blacks, being entangled in the pathologies of crime, idleness, and ignorance, neglected to redeem the time by being all they could be and fulfilling their God-ordained destiny. Thus Washington held that Du Bois's proscription of activism and agitation to liberate black people from the bondage of racism, segregation and discrimination, while feasible, was premature. Washington stated:

In spite of all that may be said in palliation, there is too much crime committed by our people in all parts of the country. We should let the world understand that we are not going to hide crime simply because it is committed by black people.¹⁹

Just as Washington partly agreed with Du Bois's thesis that white racism hindered black achievement, later in his life Du Bois was forced to agree with Washington that the seemingly endemic civilizational deficiencies of black America would negate much civil rights progress. In an almost prophetic passage, he insisted that "a little less complaint and whining, and a little more dogged work and manly striving, would do us more credit than a thousand civil rights bills."²⁰ Yet he continued to insist that Washington's self-help philosophy was untenable unless white racism were vigorously addressed. It is not that Du Bois did not appreciate the value of personal development—his entire adult life was a veritable textbook for high intellectual development—but in order for blacks to develop economic opportunities and achieve social equality, he argued, they needed legal rights (secured through aggressive litigation and activism); only then could economic opportunities to develop their capacities and realize their cultural potential be achieved. According to Du Bois:

So to those people who are saying to the black man today, "Do your duties first and then clamor for rights," we have a right to answer and to answer insistently, that the rights we are clamoring for are those that will enable us to do our duties.²¹

Unlike Du Bois, who became so disenchanted with racism and discrimination in America that he spent his twilight years in Ghana, Washington was an enthusiastic adherent of the American dream. "Merit, no matter under what skin found, is in the long run recognized and rewarded," he said. Washington postulated that racism, like a two-edged sword, actually degraded whites to the same and perhaps to a greater degree as blacks, because racial hatred seared their conscience, attenuating their moral sense. Washington said, "No man whose vision is

bounded by color can come into contact with what is highest and best in the world."²²

Du Bois mocked Washington's color-blind approach, on both practical and ideological grounds, and contended that to ignore racism as manifested by white supremacy "ignores and overrides the central thought of all history." He further noted:

The history of the world is the history, not of individuals, but of groups, not of nations, but of races.... While race differences have mainly followed physical lines, the deeper differences are spiritual.... The full complete Negro message of the whole Negro race has not yet been given to the world.... As a race we must strive by race organization, by race solidarity, by race unity.... We believe it is the duty of Americans of Negro descent, as a body, to maintain their race identity until this mission is accomplished.²³

It is evident that while Washington's philosophy transcended race, Du Bois's was obsessed with it. The irony here is lamentably evident: after almost a hundred years of civil rights activism and thirty years of government largess and government-mandated civil rights programs, today's black Americans are in many ways worse off than previous generations. The genocidal statistics regarding black social pathology are legion and well documented. I cite only a few of the most egregious examples to underscore the crying need for black people to save their own race before it is too late.

- The black unemployment rate is nearly double that of the national average.
- One-third of blacks are poor, compared with just over one-tenth of whites.
- One-half of all black children live in poverty.
- The infant mortality rate for blacks is more than double that of whites.
- The proportion of black male high school graduates who go on to college is lower today than in 1975.

- More young black males are in prison today than in college.

- Homicide is the leading cause of death for black males between the ages of fifteen and thirty-four.

- Although African Americans make up 12 percent of the U.S. population, they account for more than 35 percent of all AIDS cases.

- The life expectancy of black men is sixty-five years, a rate lower than any other group in America and comparable to that of some Third World countries.

- Nearly 50 percent of all African American families are headed by single women.

- More than 65 percent of black children born each year are illegitimate.

Du Bois's belief in racialism and cultural relativism embraced race and racism, while Washington attempted to transcend race. According to Dinesh D'Souza, these views may have originated from Du Bois's exposure to the *Volk* philosophy of Franz Boas and Johann Gottfried Herder, two leading proponents of cultural relativism.²⁴ On issues regarding race, Du Bois's cultural relativism viewed all races and cultures as equal despite obvious civilizational differences. This combination of radical egalitarianism and radical racialism provided a ready weapon he and his own organization, the NAACP, used with great effect to force symbolic civil rights victories. While Du Bois postulated that blacks and whites were essentially equal, thus making assimilation possible, he also recognized that group equality implied that both races could, as unique racial and social groups, contribute significantly to American civilization. This so-called "double consciousness" theory (his phrase) was first delivered in a speech in which Du Bois remarked that "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."²⁵ While Du Bois blamed racism for this dual

consciousness, he also lauded it as a viable coping mechanism blacks had developed over the centuries to covertly fight racism, and to deal with their second-class status in America.

Du Bois followed a reactive, outward-directed, approach to racism, while Washington's approach was proactive and directed inward. Because of Du Bois's belief that all races are essentially equal, he held that when blacks achieved full civil rights, they would be able to compete effectively with whites for educational opportunities, jobs and eventually attain the full rights of American citizenship.

Competence, civility, and discipline cannot be legislated, however. These are qualities that must come from within the individual, not from his race. Washington allowed for segregation only as a temporary means for blacks, through self-help programs, to raise their own cultural and intellectual levels so that they could eventually compete with whites on an equal plane. He maintained that the road to equality lay not in antagonism and protest, but in black people living virtuous lives and becoming productive, model citizens. In essence, Washington argued that despite years of white brutalization, blacks could improve their own lot through discipline, industry, and hard work, while Du Bois maintained that it was the responsibility of the white oppressors to raise black people up.

History, common sense, and the current state of black America have proven Du Bois's egalitarianism to be a colossal failure. Why then are not blacks today turning away from Du Bois's ideas and toward Washington's? Herein lies the evil of all philosophies based on relativistic precepts: by blurring, corrupting and mocking standards, distinctions, and moral absolutes, they encourage scapegoating and a politics of victimhood.

In the early twentieth century, black people in America had few means of redress to combat racial discrimination. Recognizing the civilizational disadvantages of Southern blacks, Washington worked hard to de-

velop their social and economic skills. Now, ninety years after the birth of the civil rights movement, while blacks have achieved substantial civil rights progress, their economic, and social progress has been negligible. Enter the "race merchants" and "poverty pimps" (i.e., black leaders, who make their living keeping racism alive while feigning to combat it) who have woven a carefully crafted web of deceit over the past thirty years to maintain their hold on black influence and power. Martin Luther King, Jr. as early as the mid-1960s, saw his grip on power waning as civil rights promises from the Johnson Administration were slow to materialize. Sadly, King failed to train a successor to lead the movement which, after his assassination, degenerated into disparate groups lacking a clear, coherent agenda. Black leaders, playing to tribal loyalties, appealed to white guilt and black victimhood to extort federal government largess—primarily welfare programs. White politicians, fearful of renewed outbreaks of violence in the inner cities, capitulated. On this topic D'Souza aptly states:

The civil rights establishment has a vested interest in the continuation of spectacular episodes of racism: these provide an important justification for continuing transfer payments to minority activists.²⁶

This Faustian bargain, while bringing renewed influence and money to the civil rights leaders, left the black community, by and large, to languish in the inner-city ghettos. As frustration grew in black America, racial violence erupted in places like Harlem in 1964, and Newark and Detroit in 1967.²⁷ Whites then fled in droves from America's large cities, leaving them with neither a viable tax base nor trained blacks to fill the newly-vacant jobs. Large cities across America followed the same pattern of decline: black frustration led to black riots, which led to white flight, which led to a dwindling tax base; which led to ghettoization, which led to the emergence of a black underclass.

As we approach the millennium, the pivotal question for black America is who had the best philosophy for helping blacks attain equal treatment under the law, Booker

T. Washington or W. E. B. Du Bois? History, trillions of dollars in redistributed wealth, and thirty years of civil rights and affirmative action programs indicate Washington's self-help philosophy was indeed the path blacks should have taken. Washington's model was embraced and perfected by nineteenth- and twentieth-century immigrants to America—especially Jews and Asians. Both of these groups have long histories of discrimination, segregation and racism directed toward them by whites, but they overcame such circumstances by methodically improving their own lives through hard work, maintaining close family ties, and through the dogged pursuit of high scholastic achievement.

Had blacks followed Washington's philosophy of austerity, self-help, and industry, there now would be far less illegitimacy, teenage pregnancy, AIDS, crime, idleness, and drug addiction, and far more two-parent families, black-owned business, thriving city communities, and black Ph.D.'s, J.D.'s, M.D.'s, and professionals in all fields. The Jewish- and Asian-American experiences prove that hard work and self-control yield the fruit of success. If blacks are ever to compete effectively in American society, they must not rely on government programs, no matter how good their intentions. Washington, like the Jewish prophets of old, has proclaimed the word. Black people need to "have an ear to hear," apply Washington's principles of self-help and partake fully in the American Dream. If blacks continue to follow the false prophets of Du Bois, Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, and the mainstream civil rights establishment, continual frustration and cultural genocide will be their end.

NOTES

1. W. E. B. Du Bois, *W. E. B. Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses*, ed. Philip S. Foner, 2 vols., vol. 1: 1890-1919 (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), p. 4. See also Dinesh D'Souza, *The End of Racism* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), pp. 183-189. This groundbreaking book served as the general outline for this article. I am truly indebted to D'Souza's extensive scholarship for presenting his ideas on race and racism in such a revelatory, clear, and coherent manner.

2. Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 223.

3. D'Souza, *The End of Racism*, p. 184.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Alphonso Pinkney, *White Hate Crimes* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994), p. 29; Martin Kilson, "Anatomy of Black Conservatism," *Transition*, no. 59 (1994), p. 15.

6. Louis Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). Born a slave in 1856, and having worked as a janitor to finance his education, Washington in 1881 founded the first industrial training school for blacks with an entirely black faculty, the Tuskegee Institute. In the early 1900s, more liberal blacks viewed Washington as too accommodating to whites, saying he promoted his institute to whites as a way to keep blacks in the trade fields and away from the professions.

7. David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993).

8. "I have been a slave once in my life—a slave in body," Washington wrote. "But I long since resolved that no inducement and no influence would ever make me a slave in soul." See Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Negro in the South* (New York: George W. Jacobs, 1907), p. 10.

9. Washington, *Up From Slavery*, p. 201.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 208; Booker T. Washington, "The Awakening of the Negro," *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1896, pp. 322-28.

11. Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, p. 26.

12. *Ibid.*, esp. p. 80.

13. For a portrait of Du Bois as a person as well as a sympathetic analysis of his agenda, see Arnold Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois* (New York: Schocken Books, 1990).

14. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Books, 1969).

15. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," in Booker T. Washington, et al., *The Negro Problem* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 33.

16. Du Bois, *W. E. B. Du Bois Speaks*, p. 4.

17. Booker T. Washington, "For Old and New Students," speech to student body at Tuskegee delivered during the school term of 1913-1914. Cited in Emmett J. Scott and Lyman Beecher Stowe, *Booker T. Washington* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1932), p. 37.

18. Washington and Du Bois, *The Negro in the South*, pp. 181-82.

19. Booker T. Washington, "The Southern Sociological Congress as a Factor for Social Welfare," delivered May 8, 1914 in Memphis, Tennessee. Reprinted in E. Davidson Washington, ed., *Selected Speeches of Booker T. Washington* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1932), p. 137.

20. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," in Du Bois, *W. E. B. Du Bois Speaks*, pp. 82-84. Du Bois also wrote, "Unless we conquer our present vices they will conquer us. We are diseased, we are developing criminal tendencies, and an alarmingly large percentage of our men and women are sexually impure." See also W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Negro American Family* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970), p. 37; W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1899), pp. 389-90.

21. Du Bois, *W. E. B. Du Bois Speaks*, p. 176.

22. Washington, *Up From Slavery*, pp. 41, 229.

23. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," *American Negro Academy Paper*, 1897. For an analysis of the endorsement of race thinking implicit and sometimes explicit in this paper, see Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., "Race," *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 21-37.

24. Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois*, p. 74; Williamson, *The Crucible of Race*, p. 403.

25. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 45.

26. D'Souza, *The End of Racism*, p. 238.

27. Eric Foner writes: "Altogether between 1865 and 1868 there were more than a hundred riots: eight thousand people were killed or injured, fifty thousand were arrested, and an estimated half a million blacks participated." Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), pp. 151-152.