

Booker T. Washington vs W.E.B. Du Bois

"When Israel was in Egypt's land: Let my people go,
Oppress'd so hard they could not stand, Let my People go... . "

([Go Down Moses](#) - is an American Negro spiritual. It describes events in the Old Testament of the Bible, specifically Exodus 7:26)

When studying the scholarly debates between [Booker T. Washington](#) and [W.E.B. Du Bois](#), one must take a look at their earlier experiences to understand the positions taken, the strategies they used to improve the conditions of blacks in the United States.

The debate between the two was centered around education. Education was not the only issue up for debate, but it was the central one. Washington took a position that focused on industrial education, while Du Bois focused on higher education.

Washington was born into slavery in Franklin County, Virginia. Washington spent a significant amount of his childhood enslaved. After emancipation he worked remedial jobs for much the remainder of his childhood. Washington's strong desire to learn allowed him to gain a basic childhood education while maintaining other jobs. Wanting to further his education, he attended Hampton Institute. The focus at Hampton Institute was vocational and industrial education. After his three years of studying at Hampton, Washington was recited that industrial education was the way to improve the conditions of the black race.

Du Bois was born in Massachusetts. He did not experience much racism as a child. He was an excellent student. He possessed an aptitude for learning. He finished high school at the young age of 16, and proceeded to further his education at Fisk, which was located in the south. While at Fisk, Du Bois experienced racism and segregation first hand. Du Bois responded to the new experience with "segregation without fear." Du Bois was quoted, "A new loyalty and allegiance replaced my Americanism: henceforward, I was a negro." After he completed his studies at Fisk, Du Bois went on to study in Berlin, and Harvard. He became the first African-American to

receive a doctorate from Harvard. Du Bois believed that the higher learning of a "[talented tenth](#)" would uplift the race.

Washington said there are two keys to racial progress: the first key to racial progress was developing skills that were useful to the larger community. The second key to progress was interracial harmony. Washington's belief in these two keys were shown in his famous "[Atlanta Compromise](#)" address of 1895. Washington uses the line: "Cast down your buckets where you are" to make the points to black that they should do a few things. Washington encourages blacks to stop looking to the north as a way of gaining the things they thought they needed. He also encourages blacks to obtain industrial and vocational training in order to gain wealth and prove to whites that they are deserving of equality and respect. He appeals to southern whites by informing them that they'd be better off casting their buckets with the blacks by hiring them instead of hiring people from outside the U.S. He also assures the white south that blacks will give up their pursuit of civil rights if the white southerners would show faith in them.

A few years later Du Bois responds to Washington's "Atlanta Compromise" in an essay entitled, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," Du Bois points out that there is a triple paradox in Washington's philosophy. First, his goal was to make blacks productive workers and property owners, yet without the right to vote. This meant that there was no way to guarantee protection of property under the law. All of the acquired property could be taken away without political challenge. Second, Washington called for thrift in self-respect, where he advised submission to whites and accepted an inferior social status that would rob blacks of that very self-respect. Third, he advocated the priority of industrial education over higher education. Du Bois agreed that industrial education had results for some black people, but self-harm in emphasizing that alone. Du Bois makes the argument that without blacks being trained in institutions of higher learning, there won't be enough teachers to teach at the industrial schools. By placing so much of their responsibility for the black condition on blacks, Du Bois argues that Washington had also given whites an excuse to step aside and do nothing to help blacks. Du Bois believed that white southerners needed to take responsibility for the effects of slavery, and begin to make up for past wrongs.

Du Bois was also fair in his criticism. He also stated that northerners needed to become active partners in the process instead of just giving money. Du Bois felt that blacks had a duty to support Washington when he was right, and to criticize him when he was wrong.

Both men were concerned with the big question of how to uplift the race. Washington's approach was a more basic one. Washington's focus was on getting jobs for blacks. The problem was that Washington's approach did not provide an effective solution for change. Change does not come by just sitting by passively and waiting for it.

Du Bois' approach was not very effective then because the conditions for social change were not right. Du Bois was ahead of his time. He did, however, lay the groundwork for the civil rights movement. The simultaneous hardwork and efforts of both contributed greatly to the ascension of the black race.