



OVER-LOOKED, NEWLY RELEVANT, OR
OTHERWISE DESERVING OLDER BOOKS

BLACK LIKE WHO?

By Roger Clegg

Up from Slavery

By Booker T. Washington, 1901

The Souls of Black Folk

By W.E.B. DuBois, 1903

Thanks to Dover Thrift Editions, you can buy Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* and W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* for two dollars each. (For another dollar, you can also get the 76-page autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*). These are wonderful bargains—because despite being nearly a century old, these complementary works have great insight into problems that bedevil us still.

The autobiography *Up from Slavery* traces Washington's life—his birth on a southwest Virginia plantation just before the Civil War, struggle to obtain an education in the post-bellum South, establishment of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, and emergence as a leading spokesman for black Americans—while interweaving his views on a variety of public policy issues, particularly education. It is personal and specific—sometimes overwhelmingly so, as when Washington discusses “the use and value of the bath” and “the influence of the tooth-brush.”

DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* has its autobiographical elements, but it is essentially a collection of highly polished essays, ranging from history (a nuanced and evenhanded chronicle of the Freedmen's Bureau) to economics (the futility bred into sharecropping) to sociology (black churches). Reading it brings to mind the joke about a

student complaining that *Hamlet* was good except for all the clichés. Phrases like “the Talented Tenth” and “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line” are DuBoisms.

One can view Washington and DuBois as the progenitors of, respectively, a conservative black tradition (practical, no-nonsense, self-helping) and a liberal one (activist and integrationist à la the NAACP, which DuBois co-founded). But there is more to their tension than this simple conflict.

It is hard to pigeonhole, for instance, their disagreement over academic curricula. Washington criticizes the “craze for Greek and Latin learning” and says “one of the saddest things” he had seen was a young man “sitting down in a one-room cabin, with grease on his clothing, filth all around him, and weeds in the yard and garden, engaged in studying a French grammar.” DuBois replies: “One wonders what Socrates and St. Francis of Assisi would say to this.”

DuBois also has no patience with what lawyers now call “disparate impact” theory: the notion that nondiscriminatory standards somehow become discriminatory if they disproportionately affect racial minorities. So long as you don't use race, DuBois writes, “Draw lines of crime, of incompetency, of vice, as tightly and uncompromisingly as you will, for these things must be proscribed.” Nor is his book consistent with today's affirmative action, since he yearns for “a morning when men ask of the workman, not ‘Is he white?’ but ‘Can he work?’ When men ask artists, not ‘Are they black?’ but ‘Do they know?’”

Washington and DuBois each has his weaknesses. DuBois is more likely to excuse black failures and to blame the system. Washington is an Adam Smith capitalist, confident that filling an economic niche is the surest way to success. On the other hand, Washington's optimism—

particularly about the goodwill of Southern whites—was in retrospect tragically naive, for most of the last century.

One of the greatest values of these two books is the way each deals with the cause-and-effect relationship between failure and discrimination that continues to challenge us today. DuBois notes both that prejudice limits what blacks can achieve and that black underachievement reinforces white prejudice. Prejudice and behaviors “act as reciprocal cause and effect,” DuBois writes, and “both must change.”

Washington also attacks prejudice, but in the end puts the burden on blacks to “cast down your bucket where you are” (as he put it in his famous Atlanta Exposition Address) and rely on themselves and their own efforts to rise. As prejudice diminishes—as it is doing today by any objective standard—the call to black self-help and self-improvement is more and more compelling.

Washington is likewise timely in stressing the importance of black self-respect and self-confidence. Recently, educators have emphasized the importance of communicating high expectations to students, after finding that when children sense that they are expected to fail, they will. A hundred years ago, Washington lamented that “when a white boy undertakes a task, it is taken for granted that he will succeed,” but “people are usually surprised if a Negro boy does not fail.”

Let's give the last word to DuBois: “The question of the future is how best to keep these millions [of African Americans] from brooding over the wrongs of the past and the difficulties of the present, so that all their energies may be bent toward a cheerful striving and co-operation with their white neighbors toward a larger, juster, and fuller future.”

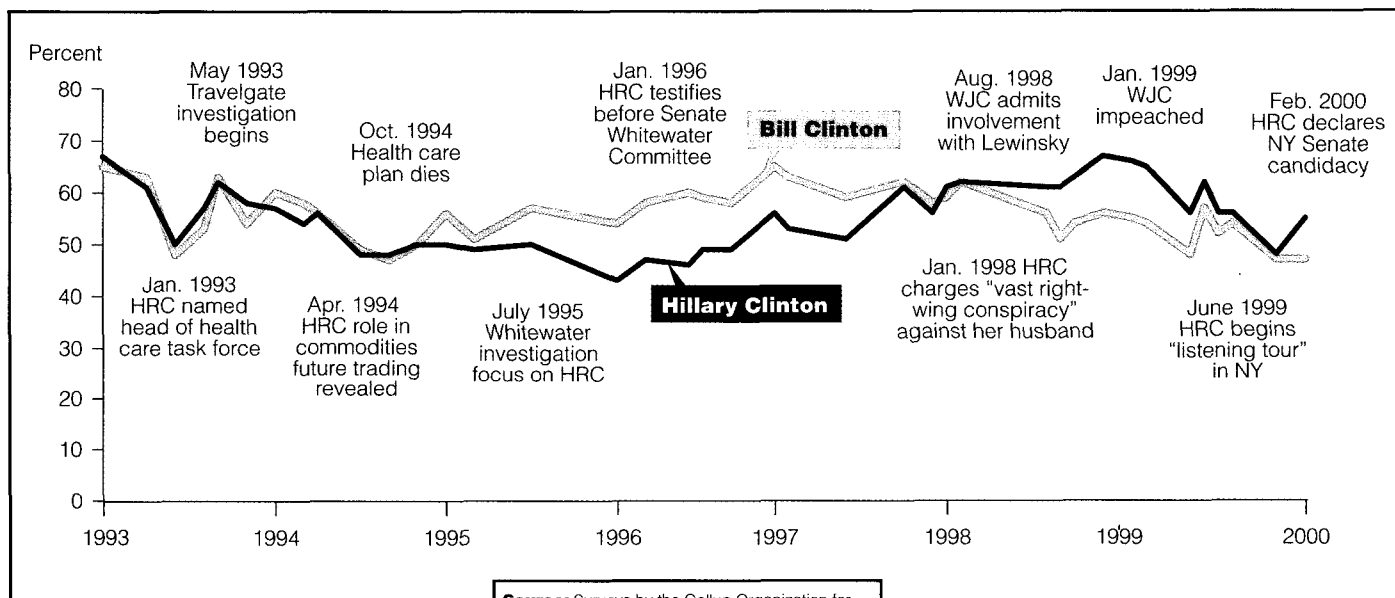
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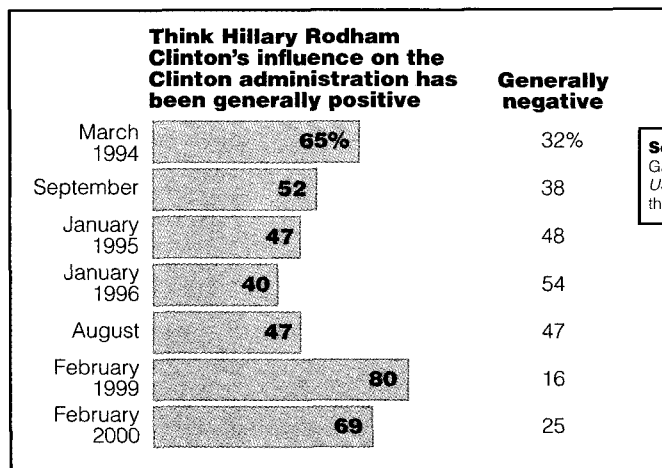
HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

Public views about Hillary Rodham Clinton suffered with her involvement in the administration's health care initiative and during the Whitewater investigation. During the impeachment drama, her image improved and became more favorable than her husband's. Americans have been divided about her involvement in policy making. A near majority say they want the next First Lady to play about the same role in policy as Mrs. Clinton has played, 14 percent want her to play a more prominent role, and 34 percent a less prominent one.

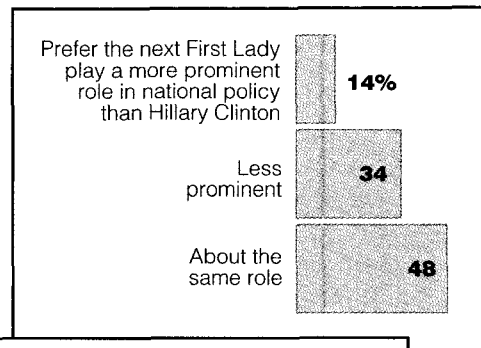
Question: Do you have a favorable impression of Hillary Clinton/Bill Clinton?



Question: Do you...?



Question: Regardless of who is elected president in 2000, would you...?



Note: Eight percent of self-described Republicans wanted the next First Lady to play a more prominent role, 53 percent a less prominent role, and 36 percent about the same. Those responses for Democrats were 16%, 20% and 59%, respectively. For Independents, they were 17%, 33% and 46%.

Source: Survey by CBS News, October 1999.