

A Champion of Black Employment

Booker T. Washington (1856-1915)

By Robert Kyser

Many Americans think about black history in only one dimension: the emancipation of deep South plantation blacks and their progress toward employment, civil rights and equality in accommodations. This is an understandable legacy of the abolitionist movement and the wide distribution of such descriptions as are found in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But the status of blacks at the outbreak of the Civil War was as variegated as was the American landscape from Biloxi to Boston.

The black leaders who emerged in the late 1800s differed from one another and thus their strategies for social change differed as well. Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington diverged widely from one another on the question of how to lift their people — a divergence that resulted largely from their previous experience, as Thomas Sowell reminds us in his article "Up From Slavery" (*Forbes* December 5, 1994). Douglass escaped from slavery in Maryland and migrated to Massachusetts where he became an articulate speaker for the abolitionists, describing life in bondage. Later he broke with the "moral suasion" abolitionists to become more politically active in pressing for emancipation. DuBois was a Northerner descended from antebellum "free persons of color" and educated at Harvard. He had different priorities for the blacks for whom he was working. Washington was a former slave from the Virginia Piedmont, a teacher with missionary zeal to lift the former slaves out of poverty and unemployment through education.

Booker T. Washington was passionately devoted to the upward progress of the other members of his race, but he would come to be accused by other black leaders of being too passive and submissive *vis à vis* his white contemporaries. After all, the Southern

blacks of the 1890s were suffering a more severe separation from white society than they had endured under slavery. Their equality in political life and public accommodations was granted by law, but they were intimidated from enjoying those civil liberties. Certainly, said DuBois and others, the times demand a more belligerent posture on the part of post-Reconstruction blacks.



But Washington saw things differently. His background included the development of skills working with the owners of a small tobacco farm. Later his work as a houseboy taught him the value of personal cleanliness and the rewards of labor. The education he received at the Hampton (Virginia) Institute with its emphasis on vocational training as well as the three Rs was the touchstone for his career as an educator. He saw the freedman, cut loose from his former provision, as helpless and hopeless without an education and without the skills to make his way in the economy. Many members of his

race saw education much differently. For them "book learning" was a way to escape from the need to do hard work to support oneself. As Washington observes in his autobiography, *Up From Slavery* (first published by Doubleday in 1901, now available from Viking Penguin):

At Hampton I not only learned that it was not a disgrace to labour, but learned to love labour, not alone for its financial value, but for labour's own sake and for the independence and self-reliance which the ability to do something which the world wants done brings.

After his graduation from the Hampton Institute Washington returned to West Virginia to teach for a time in his home town, but was soon brought back to

Hampton as an instructor. Later he was recommended to a group in the Black Belt of Alabama wishing to found a similar institute for the training of teachers and the industrial education of blacks. Under his directorship the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute was built from scratch (the students literally making the bricks for the first buildings) as an effort worthy of the support of Northern philanthropists.

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When the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition was opened on September 18, 1895, Frederick Douglass had been dead for a few months, leaving a leadership vacuum on the national scene. Who would help the former slaves in the wake of emancipation? Tuskegee Institute was invited to participate along with Hampton in displays of "Negro" craftsmanship, and Washington was asked to give one of the opening addresses. Working as he did in the deep South and wishing to maintain a stance that would be the most helpful, Washington (who had already earned a reputation as an accomplished orator) found that his brief speech suddenly earned him national recognition among whites as the new spokesperson for a comfortable way to deal with the race problem in America: "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."

Ever after, the speech would be hailed or castigated as "the Atlanta compromise."

The now-prominent Washington's contacts with the White House, with Northern industrialists and philanthropists, and with Southern moderates led to the development of "the Tuskegee Machine" through which he could recommend blacks to serve in various capacities. This machine was in high gear when DuBois and others met in 1905 to form the organization which later became the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Washington was vilified by these other black leaders for being too accommodating and standing in the way of political and social progress for America's blacks. He died in 1915 at age 59.

A National Park Service Monument has been created at the Burroughs plantation (in reality a small tobacco farm) where Booker was born in 1856. Situated 22 miles south of Roanoke, Virginia, the 200-acre complex features reconstructed farm buildings, hiking trails and demonstrations of pre-Civil War farm life. The monument honors the educator, orator and controversial public figure who devoted his life to helping black Americans live beyond the economic slavery that held them down long after emancipation.

A forgotten aspect of his legacy is that he tried to convince the nation, at the outset of massive European immigration at the end of the last century, to allow its former slaves to participate in the new industrial economy because they were not

those of foreign birth and strange tongue and habits... [but rather] people who have, without strikes and labour wars, tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builded your railroads and cities, and brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth... ■

John Stuart Mill on the Welfare State

"Society can feed the necessitous, if it takes their multiplication under control; or (if destitute of all moral feeling for the wretched offspring) it can leave the last to their own discretion, abandoning the first to their own care. But it cannot with impunity take the feeding upon itself, and leave the multiplying free."

— John Stuart Mill, 1848, *Principles of Political Economy*

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Competition Between Blacks and Immigrants

by Jacquelyne Johnson Jackson

Economic competition between blacks and immigrants in the United States is not new. In an early example, the artisans in Philadelphia between 1790 and 1820 were mostly black, but they were largely displaced by whites. In the words of W.E.B. DuBois, this phenomenon was due to "the sharp competition of the foreigners and the demand for new sorts of skilled labor of which the Negro was ignorant, and was not allowed to learn."¹ The heavy influx of European immigrants between 1830 and 1860 also displaced many black workers.²

Booker T. Washington, the most prominent black leader of his era, questioned the preference for foreign workers in the southern labor market. Speaking before the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1895, he said:

*To those of the white race who look to the incoming of those of foreign birth and strange tongue and habits for the prosperity of the South, were I permitted I would repeat what I say to my own race, 'Cast down your bucket where you are.' Cast it down among the eight millions of Negroes whose habits you know... As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past ... so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defence of yours, interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one.*³

Despite Washington's plea, shortly after the turn of the century, seven southern states organized "immigration bureaus" to try to meet the South's labor needs with whites and to accelerate the Negro exodus to the North.⁴ But the "Great Migration" of blacks

from the South between 1916 and 1935 and their increasing employment in northern industries was in part a consequence of the drop in immigration during World War I and the tighter restrictions on both immigration and the use of temporary "nonimmigrant" workers after World War I.

But two decades of heavy immigration beginning in the 1960s, much of it by unskilled and uneducated workers, has given Washington's concern a new timeliness. A critical but at times neglected issue in the debates on immigration reform of the past decade and a half is the impact of legal and illegal immigration on the socioeconomic conditions of native blacks and other minorities, particularly those in the secondary, or low-skilled, labor market.

While blacks are affected in many ways, deserving special attention are: (1) the impact of legal and illegal immigrants on blacks in low-wage jobs in the secondary labor market, (2) the attitudes of blacks toward immigration reform before passage of the immigration act, (3) the voting positions of black congressmembers on the immigration reform and control bills of 1984 and 1986, and (4) the likely impact of the act on blacks living in areas with high concentrations of recent immigrants and refugees.

Job Displacement and Wage Depression

Anecdotal data, labor market statistics and simple observation show a pronounced trend during the past two decades of immigrant and refugee workers replacing many native black unskilled, semi-skilled and supervisory workers in such businesses as hotels, restaurants, fast food outlets, light manufacturing firms, construction firms and taxicab companies in metropolitan areas with heavy concentrations of recent immigrants and refugees. Indications of these trends