Booker T. Washington & W.E.B. DuBois
African-American “Progressives”

Booker T. Washington was born a slave in Virginia during the 1850’s and grew up in the segregated “Jim Crow” South of the late 1800’s. He founded a trade school for blacks in Alabama called Tuskegee Institute and was the first African-American to be invited to dinner at the White House (by Theodore Roosevelt). W.E.B. DuBois’ parents were immigrants from the West Indies and never experienced slavery. He grew up in Massachusetts, attended mostly white schools and became the first black to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University. He was one of the founders of the Niagara Movement and the NAACP, both civil rights organizations.

Both Washington and DuBois were significant leaders during the early 20th century who, like other “progressives”, wanted to influence change across the nation. Each worked very hard to improve the status of African-Americans in society. However, the two men disagreed sharply on how best to help African-Americans improve their situation at the turn of the century. As you read the words of these two famous men, underline or highlight phrases that illustrate their differing views.


To those of my race who believe they can better their condition in the north 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 buckets where you are.” Cast them down in making friends in every honorable way with the people of all races by whom you are surrounded. Cast them down in agriculture, in mechanical arts, in commerce, in domestic service and in the professions.

Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us currently live by the product of our hands. We must keep in mind that we shall prosper ... as we learn to dignify and glorify common labor and put our brains and skill to the common occupations of life. It is at the bottom of life we must begin and not the top. Also, we should not let our grievances with our white neighbors overshadow our opportunities.

To those of the white race who look to new immigrants for [increasing] the prosperity of the South, I would repeat what I say to my own race, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” ... Cast it down among those people who have, without strikes and protests, tilled your fields, cleared your forests, built your railroads and cities, brought forth treasures from the mines of the earth and helped make possible this magnificent progress in the South. Casting down your buckets among my people, helping them and encouraging them to an education of the head, hands and heart, you will find that they will buy your surplus land, make the fields blossom and run your factories. While doing this, you can be sure in the future, as in the past, that you and your families will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, thrifty and unresentful people that the world has seen. In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet as the hand in all things essential to our mutual economic progress.

The wisest among my race understand that the forced agitation for immediate 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 slow and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing. No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world can be long excluded. It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours in time, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared to exercise these privileges first. At this time, the opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera house.

There has been a determined effort in this country to stop the free expression of opinion among black men. Money has been distributed in considerable sums to influence the attitude of certain Negro papers and the principle of equal democratic government for ALL Americans is losing ground. The class distinction between blacks and whites is growing and not shrinking. Human brotherhood is spoken of today with a smile and a sneer. Efforts are being made to curtail the educational opportunities of the colored children. Much is being said about money making, but not enough is being said about efficient and self-sacrificing toil of the head, as well as of the hands. Is not intellectual and political equality something worth striving for as well as economic equality? The Niagara Movement proposes to achieve this end ... If we expect to gain our rights by acquiescence [giving in] than we are wrong. What must we do then? We must complain. Yes, plain, blunt complaining, ceaseless agitation, unfailing exposure of dishonesty and wrong – this is the ancient, unerring way to liberty. History teaches us this and we must follow it.

... The men of the Niagara Movement, after the toil of a year’s hard work turn towards the nation and again ask in the name of all Negroes the following basic rights without equivocation...

First. We should vote. With the unrestricted right to vote goes everything: freedom, manhood, the honor of our wives, the chastity of our daughters, the right to work, and the chance to rise. We listen to no man who would deny this basic right the 15th Amendment already gives us. We want full unrestricted manhood suffrage, and we want it now, henceforth and forever.

Second. We want discrimination in public accommodations to cease. Separation in railway and streetcars simply based on race and color is un-American, undemocratic and silly.

Third. We claim the right of free men to walk, talk and be with those who wish to be with us. No man has the right to choose another man’s friends. To attempt to do so is an impudent interference with the most fundamental human privilege.

Fourth. We want laws enforced against rich and poor and against white and black ... we want the Constitution of this country enforced. We want Congress to take charge of the elections to ensure justice and democracy can truly prevail. We want the 14th Amendment carried out to the letter and we want states that attempt to disenfranchise its rightful voters to end all voting restrictions on rightful citizens. We want the 15th Amendment enforced and no State allowed to base its franchise simply on color.

Fifth. We want our children educated ... and when we call for education, we mean real education. We believe in work, but work training is not necessarily education. Education is the development of the ideas of the mind. We want our children trained as intelligent human beings. We will fight any proposal to educate black boys and girls simply as servants and underlings or simply for the use of other people. Our children have the right to know, to think and to aspire without limit.

**FOR NOTEBOOK:** Both reformers wanted to improve the status of blacks in American society during the early 20th Century but had differing views on how to accomplish this goal. On a separate sheet of paper, copy question and answer the following:

1) How were the personal backgrounds of Washington and Du Bois different and what influence did this have on their differing views on how to best improve the lives of African-Americans?

2) Pick TWO quotes from both Washington & Du Bois (FOUR TOTAL). Label the quotes and briefly explain how each illustrates the philosophy of the speaker.

3) Which approach towards the goal of better treatment for African-Americans 100 years ago was best in your opinion? Why?