

Atlanta Exposition Speech (1895)

Booker T. Washington

Historical Background

The end of the institution of chattel slavery transformed the South, but was not inevitably linked to economic flourishing of either whites or blacks in the South. Indeed, during and after Reconstruction the American South was engulfed by a deep economic malaise. Around the end of the nineteenth century the South aimed to promote its economic development and overall “progress” through the 1895 “Cotton States and International Exposition” in Atlanta, Georgia. This exposition sought to portray the South as on the upswing, with technological and agricultural innovations poised to break the region out of its underdeveloped status. Organizers of the exposition particularly sought to impress on other American and foreign observers the progress on the South on race relations. To do so, Booker T. Washington, the newly prominent director of an all-black school devoted to industrial and technical training, was invited to speak on the topic of race relations at the exposition on September 18th, 1895.

Historical Significance

Compared to the 100 days of the exposition and hundreds of thousands of visitors attending thousands of exhibits, many newspapers called Booker T. Washington’s speech a sensation that “dwarfed” the rest. Speaking to a mixed audience, he called on whites and blacks in the South to “cast down your buckets where you are.” He used this metaphor to convey a different message to each group listening to his speech: a desire for blacks to engage in acts of self-improvement and uplift and for whites to look to them as workers to provide the missing ingredient for economic growth in the South. Washington summed up his appeal by arguing that whites should interlace black “industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one.” This message became renowned in its day for providing “a platform upon which blacks and whites can stand with full justice to each other” (*Atlanta Constitution*). Over time, however, many elements of the speech began to be seen with a more critical eye, especially by those within Washington’s own community. Many aspects of the speech were seen to be accommodationist – expressing a willingness to put up with certain unjust aspects of the segregation regime in exchange for rights of economic progress and opportunity. Noted scholar and intellectual W.E.B. Dubois would later coin the term “Atlanta Compromise” to describe Washington’s speech. Dubois heaped particular scorn on Washington’s notion that “the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly.” According to Dubois, race relations in the South would be placed upon a firm moral foundation only through political rights and social equality, not through remaining as separate as the five fingers of the hand.

Key Concepts and Learning Objectives

Concepts: rights; social rights; political rights; civil rights; economic development; progress; industrial education; Jim Crow laws; segregation; New South; “voluntary social segregation”

Learning objectives: On completion of this unit, students will be able to:

- Describe the central elements of Washington’s plan for economic development and improved race relations in the South;
- interpret and evaluate Washington’s metaphor: “cast down your buckets where you are”;
- define and describe “voluntary social segregation”;
- define and describe the difference between “civil rights, political rights, and social rights.”

Questions to Explore

Governor Bullock introduced Booker T. Washington’s speech with the words: “We have with us to-day a representative of Negro enterprise and Negro civilization.” What does it mean to be a representative of particular cultural or racial group? Is it possible to represent such groups as it is to represent a district, a city, or a state? Why or why not?

Many aspects of American society are still rather segregated by race, such as churches, neighborhoods and the like. Is there a substantial difference between this type of segregation and the type of segregation practiced in the past? If so, what is it? If not, why does it not generate the same type of response that legal segregation provoked during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s? Should it?

Washington’s speech strongly suggests that after the Thirteenth Amendment, economic advancement should have taken priority for the freedmen and women over and above political and social rights and equality. To what extent is it possible to attain economic prosperity without political rights? Is it possible to attain political equality without material wealth and prosperity? What do your answers to these questions imply about the political, social, and civil rights?

Booker T. Washington’s speech is notable for not calling on government action at any level (federal, state, or local) and instead calls on voluntary effort to achieve his goals. To what extent do you believe that deeply engrained problems like inequality and poverty can be alleviated without involving government of any kind? What is the best level of government to help solve problems, if any level of government is required? After answering this question in the abstract, defend your response with the example of a modern problem that can be solved (or at least addressed) in the manner that you propose.