

Booker T. Washington (1856-1915)

Speech to the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition

Atlanta, Georgia - October 18, 1895

One of the first African American speeches ever recorded in sound was one of great significance: Booker T. Washington's address at the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition. The fact that a black man was invited to speak to this all-white Southern audience was itself a historic event. Washington's words sparked a fundamental debate over race relations that burned for decades to follow: should black people concentrate on a gradual accumulation of skills and economic security or demand the full and immediate rights simply due them as American citizens? Booker T. Washington was one of the last major black leaders born in slavery. He epitomized the American ideal of a self-made man, escaping poverty through relentless work and pursuit of education, and achieving international fame. Washington founded the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in 1881. The black-run institution was designed to prove the worth of African Americans through self-improvement, education, moral uplift, and skilled labor. The students made the bricks for their new schools by hand.



Booker T. Washington ca. 1890. (LOC)

Washington became a national figure with his Atlanta speech. He urged African Americans to discard Reconstruction-era notions of social equality. Instead, he argued, most Southern blacks should pursue a modest, methodical program of self-improvement through service and labor. Washington beseeched whites to recognize how valuable this loyal and unresentful workforce could be. He climaxed the speech with a promise that many whites - uneasy about the threat that black ambitions posed to their supremacy - found appealing: whites and blacks could simultaneously live together and apart. "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."

The applause was described as thunderous, the scene extraordinary. Former slaveholders and Confederate officers gripped the hand of the man born in slavery. White women tossed flowers to him.¹

Historian David Levering Lewis counts Washington's Atlanta Exposition speech as "one of the most consequential pronouncements in American History."² Washington's message was printed in newspapers across the country; white politicians North and South embraced the speech and its author. So did most other black leaders - for a time. The 1895 Atlanta speech came at a time when black hopes for an equitable place in American society were being decimated by the white backlash against Reconstruction. Segregation laws multiplied across the South as lynchings and other racial violence increased. To many, Washington's message of modesty, rectitude, and service offered a soothing promise of social order and gradual change. Before long, though, other black leaders would assail Washington as an accommodationist and, ultimately, a traitor to the race.

Eleven years after he made the Atlanta speech, Washington recorded portions of it in a Columbia Phonograph Company studio. The recording date is known - December 5, 1906 - but the location is not. It is also unclear why Washington recorded the speech. Tim Brooks, a historian of recorded sound, speculates the cylinder may have been made for fund-raising or simply as a family heirloom. It is the only known recording of Washington's voice.³

The recording is only three minutes and twenty-nine seconds long and captures roughly a third of the speech. The maximum length of a cylinder recording was about four minutes. Washington abridges his speech by dropping the fifth paragraph. The recording ends after the sixth paragraph. It is possible that Washington continued the address on additional cylinders that have not survived or been located.

By the time he made the recording, Washington's Atlanta speech - and his enormous power as a black leader - had come under growing attack from other African Americans, most famously by W.E.B. Du Bois. He was criticized for accommodating white supremacy and using his authority as the de facto spokesman for black America to suppress his rivals. Still, Washington was an enormously influential figure in African American history and a powerful speaker at a time when black social activism was under fierce attack in the South.

[Listen to the speech](#)

Mr. President and Gentlemen of the Board of Directors and Citizens:

One-third of the population of the South is of the Negro race. No enterprise seeking the material, civil, or moral welfare of this section can disregard this element of our population and reach the highest success. I but convey to you, Mr. President and Directors, the sentiment of the masses of



my race when I say that in no way have the value and manhood of the American Negro been more fittingly and generously recognized than by the managers of this magnificent Exposition at every stage of its progress. It is a recognition that will do more to cement the friendship of the two races than any occurrence since the dawn of our freedom.

Not only this, but the opportunity here afforded will awaken among us a new era of industrial progress. Ignorant and inexperienced, it is not strange that in the first years of our new life we began at the top instead of the bottom; that a seat in Congress or the state legislature was more sought than real estate or industrial skill; that the political convention or stump speaking had more attraction than starting a dairy farm or a stockyard.

A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal, "Water, water; we die of thirst!" The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back, "Cast down your bucket where you are." A second time the signal, "Water, send us water!" went up from the distressed vessel, and was answered, "Cast down your bucket where you are." A third and fourth signal for water was answered, "Cast down your bucket where you are." The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket, and it came up full of fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River.

To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land 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 bucket where you are" - cast it down, making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom you are surrounded.

Cast it down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions. And in this connection it is well to bear in mind that whatever other sins the South may be called to bear, when it comes to business, pure and simple, it is in the South that the Negro is given a man's chance in the commercial world, and in nothing is this Exposition more eloquent than in emphasizing this chance. Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labor and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life, shall prosper in proportion as we learn to draw the line between the superficial and the substantial, the ornamental gewgaws of life and the useful. No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities.

"Cast down your bucket where you are!"

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 have said to my own race, "Cast down your bucket where you are." Cast it down among the eight millions of

Negroes whose habits you know, whose fidelity and love you have tested in days when to have proved treacherous meant the ruin of your firesides. Cast down your bucket among these people who have, without strikes and labor wars, tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builded your railroads and cities, and brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth, and helped to make possible this magnificent representation of the progress of the South. Casting down your bucket among my people, helping and encouraging them as you are doing on these grounds, and to education of head, hand, and heart, you will find that they will buy your surplus land, make blossom the waste places in your fields, 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, and unresentful people that the world has seen. As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past, in nursing your children, watching by the sick-bed of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, 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 defense of yours, interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one. 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.

There is no defense or security for any of us except in the highest intelligence and development of all. If anywhere there are efforts tending to curtail the fullest growth of the Negro, let these efforts be turned into stimulating, encouraging, and making him the most useful and intelligent citizen. Effort or means so invested will pay a thousand percent interest. These efforts will be twice blessed - blessing him that gives and him that takes.

There is no escape through law of man or God from the inevitable:

The laws of changeless justice
Bind oppressor with oppressed;
And close as sin and suffering joined
We march to fate abreast.

Nearly sixteen millions of hands will aid you in pulling the load upward, or they will pull against you the load downward. We shall constitute one-third and more of the ignorance and crime of the South, or one-third its intelligence and progress; we shall contribute one-third to the business and industrial prosperity of the South, or we shall prove a veritable body of death, stagnating, depressing, retarding every effort to advance the body politic.

Gentlemen of the Exposition, as we present to you our humble effort at an exhibition of our progress, you must not expect overmuch. Starting thirty years ago with ownership here and there in a few quilts and pumpkins and chickens (gathered from miscellaneous sources), remember the path that has led from these to the inventions and production of agricultural implements, buggies,



steam-engines, newspapers, books, statuary, carvings, paintings, the management of drug stores and banks, has not been trodden without contact with thorns and thistles.

While we take pride in what we exhibit as a result of our independent efforts, we do not for a moment forget that our part in this exhibition would fall far short of your expectations but for the constant help that has come to our educational life, not only from the Southern states, but especially from Northern philanthropists, who have made their gifts a constant stream of blessing and encouragement.

The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of 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 severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing. No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized. It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of these privileges. The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera-house.

In conclusion, may I repeat that nothing in thirty years has given us more hope and encouragement, and drawn us so near to you of the white race, as this opportunity offered by the Exposition; and here bending, as it were, over the altar that represents the results of the struggles of your race and mine, both starting practically empty-handed three decades ago, I pledge that in your effort to work out the great and intricate problem which God has laid at the doors of the South, you shall have at all times the patient, sympathetic help of my race; only let this be constantly in mind, that, while from representations in these buildings of the product of field, of forest, of mine, of factory, letters, and art much good will come, yet far above and beyond material benefits will be that higher good, that, let us pray God, will come, in a blotting out of sectional differences and racial animosities and suspicions, in a determination to administer absolute justice, in a willing obedience among all classes to the mandates of law.

This, coupled with our material prosperity, will bring into our beloved South a new heaven and a new earth.

1. Louis Harlan, Booker T. Washington, *The Making of a Black Leader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 220.
2. David Levering Lewis, W.E.B. Du Bois, *Biography of a Race* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), 174.
3. Tim Brooks, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 503.