

The Future of the American Negro  
Booker T. Washington

Brings you back to an articulate and heated debate of a century ago

Two great black intellectuals went head-to-head. Booker T. Washington, an ex-slave, had founded the Tuskegee Institute. His premise was that black Americans, who had been freed only a generation before, needed education and livelihoods more than they needed anything else. He had a very common sense approach. Nine out of the 10 million American blacks lived in the South, and 80 percent of them were on the land. Not only that, but the land had been poorly managed since the Civil War. W.E.B. Du Bois, born free in New England, had a less sanguine view of the situation.

Washington proposed to teach the blacks how to become good stewards of the land. He advocated above all that they become the owners of their own land. They needed to end the sharecropping and mortgaging which kept them indebted to the white man. They needed to learn trades. He pointed out the irony of the fact that white masters had done a good job of educating slaves in the manual arts, but as the slave generation was dying, young black men were not being trained to take their place. They were losing ground.

This is a practical book by a practical man. He had an unclouded view of the situation of his people. He speaks directly to the lack of education, the crime, the ignorance and the credulity. He also speaks to the good qualities of his people. He stresses their loyalty as employees, and even their loyalty to their black masters as they were away fighting for the Confederacy. It is a very illuminating view of a tumultuous period in American history, between reconstruction and the turn-of-the-century.

Washington's Tuskegee Institute turned out large numbers of teachers, whom he sent into the rural hinterlands of the American South to start schools for colored children. He is sympathetic to the budgetary problems of black and white alike. One would almost say to sympathetic; he accepts rather easily the fact that the white governments allocated the lion share of funding to white schools. Rather than agitate for more money, he enjoins the teachers he has sent forth to get the communities to raise money for their own schools and to extend schooling from the customary three months out of the year to seven or eight.

One of the strong impressions one gets from this reading is the amount of interest and investment that Northern abolitionists and sympathizers made in the reconstruction of the South. Washington got a lot of financial support, and was aided by a surprising number of northern schoolteachers. Specifically, the war had widowed a number of educated white women, many of whom found a calling in heading South for the great project of educating former slaves.

Washington had great hopes for the two races working successfully together. He was inclined not to notice racial discrimination unless it was thrust on him. In this he differs from the other towering black

intellectual of his age, W E B Du Bois. Du Bois could see the humanity in the white man, but he could also chronicle how unfair the system was, and how difficult it was to untangle the structural racism that pervaded society. Still, for all their differences, it is heartening to see the respect that these two men had for each other. You do not see it in this work by Washington, but you do in Du Bois, who wrote somewhat later.

Enjoy this book as a celebration of clear and articulate writing, a very good mirror of the exciting times in which the author lived, and a commentary on what has been the most important issue in American public life since Tocqueville first said as much in the 1830s, and up until the present.