



WHO IS BOOKER T. WASHINGTON?

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There have been many influential black leaders since the Civil War. They include Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois and, of course, Martin Luther King. But none had more influence in their time than Booker T. Washington did in his.

Known by his admirers as the “Modern Moses,” his role in helping blacks establish themselves after their liberation from slavery is a testament to the man and to America.

Booker T. Washington was born into slavery in 1856. He did not know the day or month of his birth, who his father was, or his last name. As a child, he was known only as Booker. He chose the name Washington. He was nine years old when a Union soldier arrived on the plantation and announced that all slaves were free. The initial reaction to this announcement, Washington recalled, was elation and then...shock.

Yes, the Civil War was over; they were free. But free to do what?

The freed slaves, through no fault of their own, were simply unprepared for freedom. They needed to learn not only basic academic skills—reading, writing and arithmetic—but basic life skills like hygiene: how and why to bathe and brush their teeth. The cause to which Washington dedicated his life was education. *Practical* education.

His journey began in 1872, seven years after the Civil War ended. He traveled 500 miles, most of it on foot, to a small Virginia school dedicated to the education of freed blacks, the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute.

Forced to spend all his meager funds on the grueling journey, he arrived only with the clothes on his back. The headmistress viewed his suitability as a student with open skepticism, but he wouldn't budge. She finally gave him a chance to prove his worth in the form of a broom and a cleaning assignment. He passed her test and earned admission. He graduated with top honors.

Several years later, he was invited to begin what would become his life's work, heading the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. When he arrived, he assumed he'd walk onto a campus. But there was no campus—only a few shacks and a chicken coop. The school had almost no money. But it did have 30 eager students. And for Booker T. Washington, that was enough. Under his leadership, they got to work. Every building, every desk, was built by the students themselves—brick by brick, piece by piece. This tied in perfectly with Washington's philosophy of a practical education: students at Tuskegee, in addition to academic studies, had to master a trade.

He believed this led not only to racial uplift *among* blacks but to respect *for* blacks. His graduates would go out into the world with sought-after skills. They would be useful to their neighbors and become invaluable members of their communities.

“The individual who can do something that the world wants done,” Washington said, “will, in the end, make his way regardless of race.”

Washington distilled his philosophy into what became one of the most important speeches of the late 19th century, an address he delivered at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895. His theme was that blacks needed time to develop educationally and economically. Whites, Washington suggested, should help them in every way possible. This would be in the best interests of both races.

He also emphasized that blacks needed to recognize that social equality would not come swiftly. It could not be forced through political action alone. The civil rights the Constitution promised would evolve naturally from black achievement.

As he put it: “No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized.”

When he ended his speech, the large audience, a mix of blacks and whites, broke out in loud and sustained cheering. W.E.B. Du Bois, a leading black intellectual, captured the sentiment. He wrote in the black newspaper, the *New York Age*, that Washington’s speech “might be the basis of a real settlement between whites and blacks in the South.”

Sadly, it was not to be. In the ensuing years, southern whites put up more obstacles to black progress, not less. Among others, Du Bois became increasingly impatient. A speech he had celebrated, he now belittled as “the Atlanta Compromise.”

So which opinion was correct? Du Bois’s initial praise, or his later criticism?

Washington himself remained resolute. He was first, last, and always a pragmatist. He believed gradual improvements—improvements that blacks would earn through education, entrepreneurship, and personal responsibility—were the keys to black empowerment and ending racism.

It wasn’t fair. But it was reality.

Today, in an America that is open to and accepting of all races, Washington’s prescription for black success is more relevant than ever.

That made him a great leader—and a prophet.

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