
Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Compromise" Speech 18 September 1895

African American Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) increased his fame in 1895 after delivering the following speech commonly referred to as the "Atlanta Compromise." A former slave who was committed to the education of African Americans, Washington worked as a teacher and principal at schools such as the Tuskegee Institute. Believing that Reconstruction failed by offering African Americans too much too soon, he stressed industrial education to his pupils; similarly, he felt that African Americans should become productive citizens and property owners before pursuing careers in politics. Washington expressed these beliefs in the following address he delivered at an exposition held in Atlanta, Georgia, where he was asked to speak by Southern leaders in an attempt to show the North the progress they had made in terms of racial relations. His speech received a positive reaction from the press and primarily white crowd with many African Americans accepting his beliefs as well. Delivered in an era of deep racial prejudice, this speech has been seen as accepting the principle of "separate but equal" that the U.S. Supreme Court would articulate the next year. —Renata Fengler

Bibliography: Samuel R. Spencer, Jr., *Booker T. Washington and the Negro's Place in American Life* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1955), 14, 48–52, 102–105.

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

[1] 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 which will do more to cement the friendship of the two races than any occurrence since the dawn of our freedom.

[2] 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 attractions [than] starting a dairy farm or truck garden.

[3] A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen the signal: "Water, water, we die of thirst." The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back, "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 in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded.

[4] Cast it down in agriculture, in 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 upon to bear, that 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.

[5] 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... 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 the top. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities.

[6] 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 say to my own race. "Cast down your bucket where you are." Cast it down among the 8,000,000 Negroes whose habits you know, whose loyalty and love you have tested in days when to have proved treacherous [meant] the ruin of your firesides.

[7] Cast it down 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 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 [the] 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.

[8] While doing this you can be sure in the future, as you have been 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 proven 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.

[9] 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 per cent interest. These efforts will be twice blessed—"Blessing him that gives and him that takes."

[10] Nearly sixteen millions of hands will aid you [in] pulling the load upwards, or they will pull against you the load downwards. We shall constitute one third and much more of the ignorance and crime of the South or one third [of] 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.

[11] 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... 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.

Discussion Questions:

1. What was Washington urging African Americans to do? What was he urging white Americans to do?
2. What statements in this address made this speech appropriate for a white audience? Explain.
3. What were Washington's long-term goals for African Americans?

SOURCE: B.T. Washington, *Atlanta Exposition Speech* (Sept. 18. 1895). Retrieved January 5, 2006 from the Library of Congress' *African American Odyssey* database on the World Wide Web: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aahtml/exhibit/aopart6.html#0605>>. Paragraph numbers have been added.

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