

# Books, Arts & Manners

## A Strong Foundation

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**I**N 1899, as Americans looked forward to a new century of progress, Booker T. Washington published *The Future of the American Negro*. A reporter asked him whether that future would include a black man as president. "I should hope so," Washington responded. He did not expect to see it in his lifetime: Blacks could not vote in the South, Jim Crow laws enforced rigid segregation, and lynching was rampant. Even so, Washington envisioned a day when blacks would achieve political equality—and he believed he had a role to play in making it come about. "One generation lays the foundation for succeeding generations," he wrote. By laying that foundation, Booker T. Washington helped make the election of Barack Obama possible.

That's not to say he would have entirely approved. Washington was a rock-ribbed Republican, and arguably America's first black conservative. Obama's brand of politics would have disappointed him deeply. On Election Night last November, it was John McCain—not Obama—who invoked Washington's name. Liberals, it turns out, don't have much use for Washington. Yet he has much to teach, especially as we enter the Age of Obama.

Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) possesses one of the best-known names in the history of black America. He was president of the renowned Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, an influential advocate for civil rights, and the most admired

black man of his generation. For most of the 20th century, however, certain black leaders and academic liberals rejected his vision of racial advancement. Its emphasis on self-help, faith in entrepreneurship, and abject refusal to embrace victimhood seemed to demand as much from blacks as from whites. For these later figures, Washington was simply too conservative—the "Great Accommodator," in the words of his sneering rival, W. E. B. Du Bois. If Washington wasn't quite knocked out of black America's pantheon of heroes, he was certainly relegated to its second tier, as a man whose ideas were irrelevant.

Yet Washington's brand of conservatism never vanished completely—and the election of Barack Obama as president may make his ideas more relevant than ever. For years, of course, the standard view was that white racism was the primary reason for black misfortune. That's an increasingly difficult case to make now, when the main afflictions of black America are the breakdown of two-parent families, crime, drugs, lousy public schools, and unprecedented dependency on the whims of government bureaucrats—conditions that also drag down the white underclass. The time may have come to revive Booker T. Washington as an inspirational figure.

Washington demonstrated how it was possible to prosper during the worst of times. He was born a slave in Virginia, to a nameless white father and a mother who was a cook. Shortly after the Civil War, he went to work as a child laborer in a salt works. His sharp mind greatly impressed the wife of his employer, who taught him to read and opened the door to what would become his first great opportunity.

Washington's hunger for learning led him on a 500-mile trek to the Hampton Institute, a school that allowed blacks to work for their education. There, he came under the influence of the school's founder, Samuel Chapman Armstrong, a former Union officer who had commanded black troops at Petersburg during the Civil War. Armstrong tried to instill the habits of hard work and good character in his students and admonished them to "live down prejudice." Under his mentorship, Washington excelled at school.

In 1881, when Armstrong received an inquiry from a white man founding a school for blacks in Alabama, he recommended his star student.

Washington became the first president of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, originally founded as a teachers' college. Under Washington, the school trained students in the liberal arts and industrial labor. They learned to respect knowledge and hard work as requirements for becoming good teachers, craftsmen, and civic leaders. Washington's first class had only 30 students, but the school grew quickly and earned a national reputation for excellence. Above all, it was grounded in a philosophy of self-improvement. Rather than rely on white contractors to design the school and build it, Washington had students do the work. Through a shrewd combination of diplomacy, persistence, and charisma, he persuaded both blacks and whites to support the institution. His supporters included some of the wealthiest men in the United States: Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and Julius Rosenwald (CEO of Sears Roebuck). By the turn of the century, Tuskegee was enrolling 1,000 students, all of them black. Tuskegee had more students than the two leading white institutions in the state—the University of Alabama and Auburn—combined.

When Frederick Douglass died in 1895, Washington immediately succeeded him as black America's most prominent figure—a role in which he would continue until his own death two decades later. The two men had much in common. Like Douglass, Washington urged blacks to put their trust in the bourgeois virtues embraced by other Americans. "Each day," Washington wrote, "convinces me that the salvation of the negro in this country will be in his cultivation of habits of thrift, economy, honesty, the acquiring of education, Christian character, property and industrial skill." He stressed property ownership as a means to enhance "mental discipline, mental grasp and control." Tuskegee's requirement that students learn highly paid industrial skills fostered these goals of self-help and capitalist uplift.

Just as Douglass told his life story in an autobiography, Booker T. Washington

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March 23, 2009

authored *Up from Slavery* (1901)—a book that inspired generations of black Americans with his personal account of success. The message was clear: The self-made success of a Douglass or Washington was real, not theoretical. Both men had risen from slavery. If they could do it, others could lift themselves up as well.

Washington's reputation suffered because his conservative values clashed with demands for instant justice. For years after his death, liberal historians and black leaders rejected his methods as either outmoded or ineffective. For these critics, the true heir of Douglass was W. E. B. Du Bois, a onetime admirer of Washington who turned to attacking Washington's emphasis on self-help in

often taught to think of Washington as an "Uncle Tom." The self-exiled Du Bois becomes a hero of racial authenticity while Washington, the promoter of education and builder of business, transforms into a kind of villain—or at least the dupe of a racist white America.

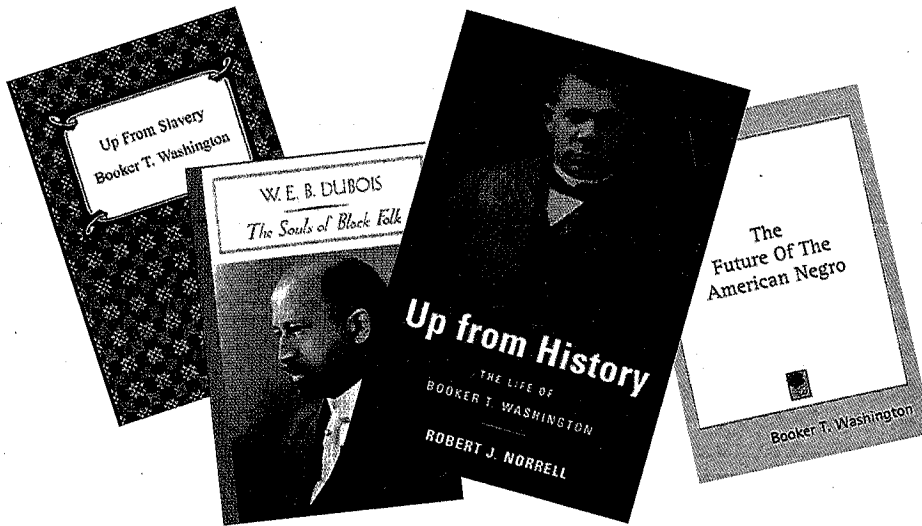
This gross caricature is now coming under a fierce assault led by Robert J. Norrell of the University of Tennessee. In his magisterial *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Belknap, 528 pp., \$35), Norrell explodes the most common myths about Washington. He documents in great detail Washington's efforts to encourage and fund court challenges to segregation laws and disfranchisement. Washington spoke out publicly against these injustices, often at great risk to his

Democrats raged when Theodore Roosevelt invited Washington, the leading black Republican, to dinner at the White House. The simple act of dining together violated the "unwritten rule" of white supremacists: Interracial dining implied "social equality" and "amalgamation," and—if left unchecked—"miscegenation." Heflin publicly said that "no great harm would have been done" if someone had tossed a bomb into the room. For the rest of Washington's life, southern Democrats denounced him for this single act of exchanging food across the table. His real crime, beyond violating the "unwritten rule," was leading blacks to vote Republican—when and where they could—and getting black Republicans appointed to patronage positions. Norrell rightly concludes that Washington's struggle to "sustain blacks' morale at a terrible time must be counted among the heroic efforts in American history." Indeed, if today's GOP seeks greater minority support, it might start by adding Washington (and Douglass) to their annual Lincoln Day celebrations.

Norrell also debunks the picture of Washington as an "Uncle Tom" who submitted to white oppression. In a hostile environment, Washington repeatedly spoke out against lynching, disfranchisement, and segregation. He also successfully demanded that blacks receive *some* school funding when there was a movement to eliminate it.

On lynching, Washington published letters in newspapers denouncing the barbarism of white-on-black violence. In one letter, he cited the horrific statistics and then described how one man "was publicly burned in open daylight in the presence of women and children, after oil had been poured upon his body, at Greenville, Tex., and reports state that a thousand people witnessed the spectacle in the open square of the town. One other victim was eighty years of age. How long can our Christian civilization stand this?"

Even so, Washington continued to emphasize self-improvement—a strategy that paid off. Economic historians have documented the progress of black farmers, workers, and business owners—progress made possible because "conservative" courts upheld the right to work against the lily-white unionism of the time. In his 1977 book *Competition and Coercion*, Robert Higgs showed that the percentage of black farmers in the



books such as *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois eventually abandoned the United States, became a Communist, and died as a citizen of Ghana—a series of facts that may heighten his appeal among academic leftists. They argued that Washington had sacrificed black political equality on the altar of free-market greed and submission to white authority. Capitalism, many of them claimed, was the source of racism rather than its solution. C. Vann Woodward, a prominent historian of the South, charged Washington with shortchanging the interests of blacks by singlemindedly pushing "free enterprise, competition, and *laissez faire*" and failing to speak out against the "caste system and the barbarities of the mob." Louis R. Harlan, Washington's biographer, criticized his subject's "mealy-mouthed moderation in the face of racial injustice." Today, students are

own life, far more than his critics have acknowledged. Norrell's scholarship vindicates the efforts of Lee H. Walker, a retired business executive who has promoted Washingtonian values through several books of his own, including *The Conscience of Conservative Blacks* (2005), *Booker T. Washington: A Re-Examination* (2008), and *Rediscovering Black Conservatism* (forthcoming, 2009). But Norrell's *Up from History* is the tour de force that ought to spark a rethinking of Washington's significance in his time and ours.

One of the most important contributions of Norrell's book is to show how the leading racists of the day, such as Rep. J. Thomas Heflin (D., Ala.) and Sen. Benjamin "Pitchfork" Tillman (D., S.C.), feared and denounced Washington's strategy to educate blacks and equip them with economic skills. In 1901, southern

South who were landowners increased from virtually zero in 1865 to 25 percent by 1910. In the 1867–1910 period, black income in the South grew faster than white income. Nationwide, the number of black businesses skyrocketed from 4,000 to 50,000. Washington played a key role in nurturing these enterprises by creating the National Negro Business League in 1900. During the same period, blacks created a vast network of fraternal societies that used mutual aid to provide health insurance and other services.

Despite the scars left by slavery, the black family not only survived but became stronger. Herbert Gutman found that typically 80 percent of black families had a husband present—a far cry from the current situation. Washington’s longing for an intact family—something slavery denied him—made him appreciate the institution all the more. In *Up from Slavery*, he regretted that his work took “so much of the time away from my family, where, of all places in the world, I delight to be.” When others said that black families could not survive and prosper, Washington’s message was “Yes, we can.”

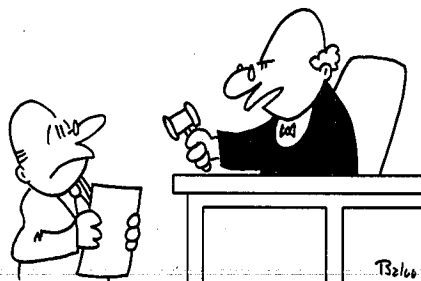
As Norrell describes, gains in education provide perhaps the clearest vindication of Washington’s efforts. He had no small role in the spectacular increase in the literacy rate for blacks in the South from 5 percent in 1865 to 70 percent in 1910. Although white politicians in the South shunted blacks into inferior schools, Washington was instrumental in providing them with alternatives in the private sector. It was largely because of his influence, for example, that Julius Rosenwald financed the building of 5,500 black schools throughout the South (known as the “Rosenwald schools”).

That these gains occurred despite the loss of political rights and amidst a horrific wave of lynchings makes them all the more heroic. No person was more important in making them happen than Booker T. Washington. The continued rise of the black middle class was on the foundation laid by Washingtonian strategies. Between 1940 and 1960, the proportion of black men in middle-class jobs increased from one out of ten to one out of four. Indeed, without Washington, it is hard to imagine the rise of the black middle class that ultimately created the civil-rights movement. Blacks in the old middle class provided the major leadership of

the movement and had the necessary economic clout to make it successful. They did not depend on government jobs, because there were few open to blacks. The successes of the civil-rights movement were built upon the efforts of figures such as Arthur G. Gaston of Birmingham, perhaps the richest black man in America during the 1950s and 1960s. He helped finance the Montgomery Boycott and repeatedly bailed Martin Luther King Jr. and his allies out of jail. For Gaston, Washington was an inspiration. He carried a well-thumbed copy of *Up from Slavery* and stressed the importance of black business investment and “green power.”

If President Obama were to study Washington as intently as Gaston did, he might find a kindred soul—a man far more like himself than Abraham Lincoln, whom he tries so vigorously to emulate. Like Obama, Washington came from mixed parentage, grew up in modest circumstances, and never knew his father. Both were raised almost entirely by women who had a tremendous influence on their work ethic and life goals. Each overcame early disadvantages by obtaining an education through grit, determination, and some measure of luck. From an early age, both were comfortable in the presence of powerful whites. As he grew to manhood, Washington anticipated Obama’s remarkable ability to reassure whites and forge cross-racial alliances. This description (by a fellow organizer) of a young Obama as community organizer could easily apply to Washington as he created Tuskegee: “Personality-wise, Barack did not like direct confrontation. . . . He was a very nice young man, very polite. . . . But challenging power was not an issue for him. Lack of civility was.”

Each man sought the end goals of interracial reconciliation. In predicting that a black man would occupy the presidency,



“Don’t get all Constitutiony on me, counselor.”

Washington, like Obama, showed himself to be a man of profound “hope.” Blacks as a whole revered Washington to the same degree as they now do Obama. In 1908, a neutral observer wrote that nearly all good black homes had Washington’s picture “over the fireplace with a little framed motto expressing his gospel of work and service.”

During his campaign, Obama gained publicity and credibility by stressing Washingtonian themes such as “personal responsibility,” much to the applause of his audiences. In one speech, he declared that government action will not “make a difference—at least not enough of a difference—if we also don’t at the same time seize more responsibility in our own lives.”

Despite this rhetoric, Obama’s worldview is profoundly different from that of Washington. Washington repeatedly emphasized that thrift was the basis of advancement. “You cannot plant a tree in air,” he wrote, “and have it live.” The secret of success was to shun excessive debt, delay gratification, and “learn the saving habit; until we learn to save every nickel.” Washington rejected the philosophy that people could spend their way to success. While Obama believes that government can create jobs simply through spending, Washington put his trust in the resourcefulness of ordinary individuals to accomplish this goal. He had, he said, “little patience with any man, white or black, with education, who goes through the country whining and crying because nobody will give him a job of work. A man with education should be able to create a job for himself, but in doing so he may have to begin at the very bottom.” Progress ultimately rested on a solid foundation of hard work, thrift, and production. Excessive debt, especially without the means to repay it, only created a trap leading to more debt and regress. It is doubtful that Washington could have imagined the endless bailouts of our own day. They certainly would have appalled him.

In the end, it’s not just black Americans who would benefit from rediscovering Washington—but all Americans, no matter what their race. In the 21st century, the United States will prosper or stagnate to the degree it accepts or rejects Washington’s principles of individual creativity, self-help, and voluntary cooperation.

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