Booker T. Washington's Racial Compromise?

I first read *Up from Slavery* ten years ago and was quickly surprised that it wasn't required reading for every educator, that is, until I read the critics. In his autobiography, Booker Taliaferro Washington (1856-1915) leaves us an equal bounty of moral wisdom and caution that all began with his dream to learn. Education and merit are central to his story. He writes, "There was never a time in my youth, no matter how dark and discouraging the days might be, when one resolve did not continually remain with me, and that was a determination to secure an education at any cost."

His ideals are clear and simple, perhaps too simple. At the turn of the century, critics like W.E.B. Du Bois question his limited narrative and his intentions because Washington refrains from describing the common horrors of slavery and demands the black man help himself. Did he withhold parts of his life, did he settle for less, so that his message of compromise would be received by a greater audience?

It's a valid question. In Chapter Two, Washington depicts select moments from boyhood, leading moments that beg for a hopeful conclusion, and like any good storyteller, Washington delivers. Once the slaves were freed after the Civil War, Washington, his mom, and siblings walked from Franklin County, Virginia, to the salt mines of Malden, West Virginia, to join his stepdad who had found work there. In a rough shanty town of whites and blacks, Washington envied the one young "colored" boy who read the evening papers aloud to his neighbors. Within a few weeks, Washington taught himself to read the alphabet. Within a few months, the "colored" people had found their first teacher, a "Negro" boy from Ohio who was a Civil War veteran. The families all agreed to board him as pay, and he taught children and adults alike. Washington

relates, “it was a whole race trying to go to school.” The oldest “Negroes” were determined to read the Bible before they died, and every class, even Sunday school, was full of eager learners of every age. Unfortunately, Washington was not one of them.

Our empathy is stirred further. Washington’s stepdad found him to be more valuable as a worker and would not release him from his shifts. For months, while he worked at the head of the mine, Washington watched black children walk to and from school. Eventually, he was able to secure lessons at night and eagerly devoured all he could. As time passed and he continued to press his stepfather, Washington finally won. He was allowed to work early, go to day school, work two more hours late afternoon before returning home—all at the age of eleven.

We understand his life was hard. It’s undeniable, but Washington’s message is one of self-determination and self-help, not one of criticism of the South and certainly not one that calls for reparations or retaliation. Carla Willard writes, “He did not argue the unimaginable; rather, his story ‘summed up’ lives with the dispassionate prose of journalism.”* Dispassionate. Willard further claims he intentionally wrote in fragments to avoid social and political conflicts with his readers. Du Bois called it a “partial history,” a cleaned-up version. He would say it is missing a critical element—a call for help from the Southern white who created the system in the first place. Since Washington saw his own white father and his mother as equal victims of the slave system, Du Bois wonders who then can be held responsible. Why does Washington not fault *anyone* for racial injustice? Can no one make this right? Du Bois’ need for justice, even blame, is clear. Washington’s words lack reality, and his critics cry that his words bring stagnation instead of progress.

Yet Washington still touted education. In later chapters, Washington worked as a salt packer, coal miner, and house

servant, always attending school in the off hours. By 1872 at the age of sixteen, he traveled for a month to reach Hampton, Virginia, to attend a teacher school for African Americans. He served as the school janitor to support himself and graduated in three years with a certificate to teach in a trade school. The desire to learn was his work ethic. His work ethic was his desire to learn.

As Washington saw his dream to educate others come to fruition, he taught at a local school in Hampton then in a program for Native Americans before agreeing to train African Americans at an agricultural and mechanical school in Alabama, the Tuskegee Institute. He writes humbly and fluently of his years there in leadership, even as his national influence grew, yet he never addresses ongoing racism nor cries for equality.

Washington indeed might have sought reconciliation between white and black, but that would be a misnomer. He sought progress. His call was truly to his own race alone to educate themselves and to work hard to improve mind and character. It's a conciliatory message, not true reconciliation. He knowingly stopped short and won a greater audience for that strategy. He did not want to offend, though his critics say he compromised himself by avoiding a stronger message.

Does that make Washington a lesser advocate for racial equality, a less successful one? I don't think so. His push for education for African Americans was immensely fruitful. It was a massive step forward. But the truth is, even Washington was limited by his times. If we read his autobiography, we know. He admits he was seen as successful *for a black man*. Yes, there it is. A phrase I'm sure he heard after every public appearance. The habits of lifetimes, of slavery, had not moved. Until the day came when he was simply seen as a man, Washington was able to say,

> *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 draw the line between the superficial and the substantial, the ornamental gewgaws of life and the useful.*

*Willard, Carla. "Timing Impossible Subjects: The Marketing Style of Booker T. Washington." *American Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (2001): 624-69.

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