

CONSTITUTION 101

Module 13: Voting Rights in America

13.4 Primary Source

W.E.B. DU BOIS, *THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK* (1903)

View the case on the National Constitution Center's website [here](#).

SUMMARY

Born and raised in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, the Fisk-, Harvard-, and Berlin-educated historian, sociologist, economist, and man of letters, W.E.B. Du Bois was the country's preeminent Black scholar and intellectual, and one of the nation's most prominent of any background. Du Bois was simultaneously a political activist who mounted an aggressive, and often bitter, challenge, to the then-reigning "spokesman for the race," Booker T. Washington, who had called upon blacks to accept Jim Crow segregation and disenfranchisement, and to prove themselves through hard work, self-cultivation, and self-help, whereupon their achievements would ultimately be recognized, and full citizenship freely granted. Du Bois, by contrast, called for immediate political and legal action and activism to win recognition of the constitutional rights and guarantees of full civic membership and inclusion promised by the 13th (1865), 14th (1868), and 15th Amendments (1870), not least, in the last, of the purportedly guaranteed right to vote. Du Bois's vision of the political and legal strategy for immediate action, institutionalized in his role in founding, first, the Niagara Movement, and, then, in 1908, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), underwrote the emerging civil rights vision, which charted a political and legal path for a movement committed to winning equal citizenship and full civic membership without regard to race, and to equal justice under law.

Excerpt

Booker T. Washington has become an important leader within the African American community; his agenda focuses on economic education and empowerment for African Americans; however, he also calls for peace with white Southerners and a turn away from a focus on civil and political rights for African Americans; with this agenda, he has won support from white Southerners and white Northerners; and he has largely silenced his critics in the African American community. Easily the most striking thing in the history of the American Negro since 1876 is the ascendancy of Mr. Booker T. Washington.... Mr. Washington came, with a simple definite programme, at the psychological moment when the nation was a little ashamed of having bestowed so much sentiment on Negroes, and was concentrating its energies on Dollars.... His programme of industrial education, conciliation of the South, and submission and silence as to civil and political rights ... startled and won the applause of the South, it interested and won the admiration of the North; and after a confused murmur of protest, it silenced if it did not convert the Negroes themselves....

NATIONAL CONSTITUTION CENTER

★ constitutioncenter.org ★

CONSTITUTION 101

Module 13: Voting Rights in America

13.4 Primary Source

Washington embraces the social separation of the races, but cooperation in economic progress; this is known as the “Atlanta Compromise.” “In all things purely social we can be as separate as the five fingers, and yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.” This “Atlanta Compromise” is by all odds the most notable thing in Mr. Washington’s career....

Washington endorses adjustment and submission to white Southerners; he focuses almost exclusively on work and money; he largely accepts the racial inferiority of African Americans. Mr. Washington represents in Negro thought the old attitude of adjustment and submission; but adjustment at such a peculiar time as to make his programme unique. This is an age of unusual economic development, and Mr. Washington’s programme naturally takes an economic cast, becoming a gospel of Work and Money to such an extent as apparently almost completely to overshadow the higher aims of life. Moreover, this is an age when the more advanced races are coming in closer contact with the less developed races, and the race-feeling is therefore intensified; and Mr. Washington’s programme practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races....

The African American community faces pervasive prejudice; in the past, we have fought back against this oppression, demanding equal citizenship; Washington preaches submission; history teaches us that we must demand more than land and houses; we must fight for our rights as citizens. Mr. Washington withdraws many of the high demands of Negroes as men and American citizens. In other periods of intensified prejudice all the Negro’s tendency to self-assertion has been called forth; at this period a policy of submission is advocated. In the history of nearly all other races and peoples the doctrine preached at such crises has been that manly self-respect is worth more than lands and houses, and that a people who voluntarily surrender such respect, or cease striving for it, are not worth civilizing....

Washington says that we should give up political power, our civil rights, and access to higher education. Mr. Washington distinctly asks that black people give up, at least for the present, three things, -

First, political power,

Second, insistence on civil rights,

Third, higher education of Negro youth....

Washington is wrong; we must demand the right to vote, equal protection of our civil rights, and an education for our youth that matches each student’s ability. [Another] class of Negroes who cannot agree with Mr. Washington ... feel in conscience bound to ask of this nation three things:

CONSTITUTION 101

Module 13: Voting Rights in America

13.4 Primary Source

1. The right to vote.
2. Civic equality.
3. The education of youth according to ability....

Washington places the blame and the burden of the African American community on African Americans themselves and not on the nation as a whole; this is a serious mistake. [O]n the whole the distinct impression left by Mr. Washington's propaganda is, first, that the South is justified in its present attitude toward the Negro because of the Negro's degradation; secondly, that the prime cause of the Negro's failure to rise more quickly is his wrong education in the past; and thirdly, that his future depends primarily on his own efforts. Each of these propositions is a dangerous half-truth. The supplementary truths must never be lost sight of: first, slavery and race-prejudice are potent if not sufficient causes of the Negro's position; second, industrial and common school training were necessarily slow in planting....; and, third, while it is a great truth to say that the Negro must strive and strive mightily to help himself, it is equally true that unless his striving be not simply seconded, but rather aroused and encouraged, by the initiative of the richer and wiser enviroing group, he cannot hope for great success.... His doctrine has tended to make the whites, North and South, shift the burdens of the Negro problem to the Negro's shoulders and stand aside as critical and rather pessimistic spectators; when in fact the burden belongs to the nation, and the hands of none of us are clean if we bend not our energies to righting these great wrongs.

***Bold sentences give the big idea of the excerpt and are not a part of the primary source.**