

Famous Speeches: Booker T. Washington on Atlanta Compromise

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Photo of Booker T. Washington. Photo: Library of Congress/Benjamin Johnston

The following address was given by African-American leader Booker T. Washington on Sept. 18, 1895, at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia. He gave the speech to a predominantly white audience, calling on southern blacks to work for whites in the South, while asking that they be given due process of law and basic education. The address, known as the Atlanta Compromise, has been recognized as one of the most influential speeches in American history.

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

One-third of the population of the South is of the Negro race. No effort that supports the welfare and success of the South can ignore this element of our population. I but convey to you, Mr. President and Directors, the sentiment that many people of my race share. 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. This recognition will do more to cement the friendship of the two races than any occurrence since the dawn of our freedom. Not only this, but the idea that this 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 at the bottom. Being elected to office was more important than land or factory skills. Making speeches got more attention than starting a dairy farm or planting fields of crops.

A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the lost ship came this message, "Water, water; we die of thirst!" The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back, "Cast down your bucket where you are." A second, third and fourth cry of, "Water, water; send us water!" was sent. Each time it was answered, "Cast down your bucket where you are." Finally, the captain of the lost ship cast down his bucket. It came up full of fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River.

To those of my race who want to improve their lives in a foreign land, become friendly with the Southern white man. He is your next-door neighbor. I would say: "Cast down your bucket where you are." Cast it down in making friends with those who surround you.

Cast it down in agriculture, mechanics, business and serving households. It must be remembered that whatever other sins the South may have committed, when it comes to business, it is the South that will give the Negro his best chance. This Exposition is an example of this chance. We have made a great leap from slavery to freedom. However, our greatest danger is that we may overlook the fact that most of us live by the production of our hands. We must still respect common labor, and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life. 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 at the top. Do not let your complaints be more important than our opportunities.

Today the white race looks to the incoming people of foreign birth and language to help the South. To you, I repeat what I say to my own race, "Cast down your bucket where you are." Cast it down among the 8 million Negroes whose habits you know. Their faith and love you have tested in days of trouble that meant the ruin of your firesides. Cast down your bucket among these people. Without strikes and labor wars, they have tilled your fields and cleared your forests. They have built your railroads and cities. They have brought up treasures from your mines. They helped make possible this wonderful showplace of southern progress. Casting down your bucket among my people has helped and encouraged them. You will find that they will buy your surplus land. They will make blossom the waste places in your fields. They will work in your factories. You can be sure in the future, as in the past, that you and your families will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding people. We have proved our loyalty to you in the past. We nursed your children. We have watched by the sick-bed of your mothers and fathers and often followed them with tears in our eyes to their graves. We shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach. We are ready to lay down our lives in defense of yours. We can weave our lives 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. However, we can also be as part of one hand on all things needed for mutual progress.

There is safety and security when there is education and development of all. We must encourage the fullest growth of the Negro. We must make him the most useful and intelligent citizen. These efforts will increase value a thousand percent. These efforts will be twice blessed - blessing him that gives and him that takes.

The past joins the oppressor with oppressed. As close as sin and suffering, we march together into the future. Nearly 16 million hands will aid you in pulling the load upward. If they are against you, they will pull the load downward. We shall be one-third of the ignorance and crime of the South, or one-third its intelligence and progress. We shall add one-third to the business and wealth of the South, or we will surely become a body of death, rotting and depressing progress.

Gentlemen of the Exposition, you must not expect too much. Our freedom began thirty years ago. We started here and there with a few quilts, pumpkins and chickens. However, this path has led to inventions of agricultural tools, carriages and steam-engines. We produce newspapers, books, statuary, carving and paintings. We manage drug stores and banks.

We take pride in what we have created. However, we do not for a moment forget that our part in this exhibition would fall far short were it not for our educational life that comes from the southern states. The gifts from the wealthy in the northern states have also been a constant stream of blessing and encouragement.

We know and understand that social equality will come to us as a result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing. No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world can be ignored or set apart. It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is more important that we be prepared for these privileges. The chance to earn a dollar in a factory is worth much more than the chance to spend a dollar in an opera house. In conclusion, may I repeat that nothing in 30 years has given us more hope and encouragement, and drawn us so near to you of the white race, as this opportunity offered by the Exposition. It represents the results of the struggles of your race and mine. Knowing we both started practically empty-handed three decades ago, I pledge that in your effort to work out the great problem which God has laid at the doors of the South, you shall have at all times the patient, sympathetic help of my race; only let this be constantly in mind, that, much good will come from the displays in these buildings of the product of field, of forest, of mine, of factory, letters and art. However, far above and beyond material benefits will be that higher good, that, let us pray God, will come, in ending sectional differences and racial anger and suspicions, and seeking justice in a willing obedience to the mandates of law. This, coupled with our material prosperity, will bring into our beloved South a new heaven and a new earth.

Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the speech BEST explains how Washington thinks black Americans can help the South?
- (A) 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.
 - (B) We have made a great leap from slavery to freedom. However, our greatest danger is that we may overlook the fact that most of us live by the production of our hands.
 - (C) You will find that they will buy your surplus land. They will make blossom the waste places in your fields. They will work in your factories.
 - (D) Our freedom began thirty years ago. We started here and there with a few quilts, pumpkins and chickens. However, this path has led to inventions of agricultural tools, carriages and steam-engines.
- 2 Which of the last four paragraphs suggests that the fates of black and white Southerners are closely related?
- 3 Which answer choice BEST explains the speaker's purpose in this speech?
- (A) to pressure black Southerners into working for low wages
 - (B) to encourage white Southerners to trust and employ black workers
 - (C) to explain the history of cooperation between black and white Southerners
 - (D) to increase Northerners' investment in industry in the South
- 4 Based on information in the speech, Washington would MOST likely agree with which statement?
- (A) Black and white Southerners will benefit from helping each other.
 - (B) White Southerners have shown they are not to be trusted.
 - (C) Black Southerners have worked hard, and now deserve the government's help.
 - (D) Foreign labor is a threat to both black and white Americans in the South.