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Booker T. Washington

Today we're going to talk about Booker T. Washington...in just a minute.

Booker Taliaferro Washington was born enslaved in Virginia in 1856. He and his family were emancipated at the end of the Civil War, when he was 9. Washington attended the Hampton Institute, a school for formerly enslaved people, and returned there to teach after graduating. In 1881, Washington cofounded and became the principal of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, a role he would hold for the rest of his life.

In the post-Reconstruction era, Jim Crow laws perpetuated segregation, and Black Americans faced immense discrimination when it came to economic and social equality. Washington became a national figure in 1895 after delivering a speech in Atlanta that laid out his vision for progress. He thought Black people should be patient and accept the rules of segregation. In exchange, they could enjoy economic opportunities and gradually earn civil rights over time. He also emphasized the importance of industrial and agricultural training.

Washington gained many supporters, both Black and White, as well as detractors—notably W.E.B. Du Bois, who rebutted Washington's philosophy directly in his writing and advocated for full civil rights immediately.

How do you think Washington's life experiences influenced his philosophy on civil rights?