

Booker T. Washington & W.E.B. Du Bois

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. With slavery and Reconstruction in the past and the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments in place, African Americans still faced immense discrimination. The Jim Crow laws in the South perpetuated segregation as African Americans fought for economic and social equality. Against this backdrop, two prominent African-American leaders emerged. They offered divergent philosophies on how to approach political, social and economic progress. Booker T. Washington laid out a conservative vision. He believed black people should accept some discrimination. In exchange, they could enjoy economic opportunity and gradually earn civil rights over time. W.E.B. Du Bois, on the other hand, was far more radical. He rebutted Washington's philosophy directly in his writing, suggesting that anything short of full civil rights would leave black people as second-class citizens. Although direct debate between Washington and Du Bois never took place, these two perspectives encapsulate two competing ideologies of the time.

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2. Booker T. Washington was born into slavery on a Virginia plantation in 1856. After emancipation, he excelled in school despite working as a servant throughout his childhood. After attending and teaching at Hampton Institute in Virginia, he went on to co-found and run Tuskegee Institute in Alabama — a school focused on technical education for black people. He became a national figure after an 1895 speech at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. In this speech, Washington preached the importance of self-help, patience and compromise when it came to civil rights. He encouraged technical education in industrial and agricultural trades and urged African Americans to accept segregation in exchange for economic opportunity.

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Washington believed this approach would gradually lead white people to fully accept black people as citizens. Through hard work and accumulation of wealth, black people would earn their position in society. For now though, they should set aside their quest for full civil rights and remain separate. Washington had plenty of black supporters and was lauded by white people from both the North and the South for his conciliatory position.

3. Read the following passage from Booker T. Washington's 1895 speech at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta:

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"In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress... Cast down your bucket where you are... Cast it down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions. And in this connection it is well to bear in mind that whatever other sins the South may be called to bear, when it comes to business, pure and simple, it is in the South that the Negro is given a man's chance in the commercial world... 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 dignify and glorify common labour, and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life... No race can prosper till it learns that 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. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities."

4. W.E.B. Du Bois was born in 1868 in Massachusetts. Unlike Washington, Du Bois was born free. After attending top New England schools and Fisk University, he became the first African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard. While teaching at Atlanta University, Du Bois became a leading advocate for African Americans through his academic work. In 1903, he published *The Souls of Black Folk*, which includes pointed criticism of Washington's philosophical approach to equality. Du Bois found Washington to be too accommodationist. He asserted that giving up political power, civil rights and higher education only perpetuates oppression and continues Jim Crow. Du Bois believed Washington was too forgiving and too quick to free white people of the burden of helping to achieve equality. Du Bois believed that, if Washington had his way, black people would remain second class citizens indefinitely.

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Du Bois's vision was more radical, favoring direct political action and full civil rights. He laid out specific demands: voting rights, civic equality and access to education for black children. Du Bois believed a highly educated group he called "The Talented Tenth" would lead and inspire African Americans in the fight for civil rights and had no interest in the compromises Washington offered.

5. Read the following passage from *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois:

“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,— and concentrate all their energies on industrial education, and accumulation of wealth, and the conciliation of the South. This policy has been courageously and insistently advocated for over fifteen years, and has been triumphant for perhaps ten years. As a result of this tender of the palm-branch, what has been the return? In these years there have occurred:

1. The disfranchisement of the Negro.
2. The legal creation of a distinct status of civil inferiority for the Negro.
3. The steady withdrawal of aid from institutions for the higher training of the Negro.

These movements are not, to be sure, direct results of Mr. Washington's teachings; but his propaganda has, without a shadow of doubt, helped their speedier accomplishment. The question then comes: Is it possible, and probable, that nine millions of men can make effective progress in economic lines if they are deprived of political rights, made a servile caste, and allowed only the most meagre chance for developing their exceptional men? If history and reason give any distinct answer to these questions, it is an emphatic NO.”

6. In response to the same set of questions, Washington and Du Bois had very different philosophies. How much of this divergence can be attributed to each man's upbringing and life experience? Washington, born a slave in the South, offered a pragmatic and conservative ideology. His insistence that African Americans appreciate the opportunities they have is likely a direct reflection of his ascent from a slave to a successful, self-made educator and public figure. Du Bois, born free in the North, offered an idealistic and radical ideology. His stubbornness and sense of possibility is likely a result of his more progressive upbringing and access to elite education. As the 20th century continued, Du Bois's philosophy flowed directly into the civil rights movement. All the while, the disagreement between accommodationist thought and calls for radical change has persisted.

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