

Booker T. Washington On Citizenship (February 12, 1898)

In this speech, the prominent African-American educator and civil rights leader Booker T. Washington discussed the definition of freedom for African-Americans. His speech commemorated Abraham Lincoln Day. As you read it, consider what methods Washington proposed for securing civil rights for African-Americans. What methods did he argue should not be used? Why did he believe that only his program would result in lasting, complete independence and freedom for African-Americans? What familiar political or religious traditions did his philosophy draw upon? Contrast his approach with that of black leaders during the Reconstruction and with that of the black nationalist movement during the early twentieth century. Why would whites in both the North and the South have welcomed a reformer urging self-help and political moderation? What fate awaited those who argued for more radical or immediate remedies?

..AN ADDRESS..

-BY-

**Booker T. Washington, Prin.,
Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute,
TUSKEGEE, ALABAMA.**

**DELIVERED UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE
ARMSTRONG ASSOCIATION,**

Lincoln Day Exercises,

-AT THE-

**Madison Square Garden Concert Hall,
NEW YORK, N.Y.**

FEBRUARY 12, 1898.

Not long ago said an old colored man in Alabama to me: "I's done quit libin in de ashes; I's got my second freedom." That remark meant that, this old man, by economy, hard work and proper guidance, after twenty years of severe struggle, had freed himself from debt, had paid for fifty acres of land and built a comfortable house, was a tax-payer, that his two sons had been educated in academic and agricultural branches and that his daughter had received mental training in connection with sewing and cooking.

With a few limitations, here was an American Christian home the results of individual effort and philanthropy. This Negro had been given the chance to get upon his feet; that is all which any Negro in America asks for. What position in state, letters or commerce the offspring of this family is to occupy, must be left to the future and the capacity of the race. That race may have a new birth--a new freedom, in habits of thrift, economy and industrial development, I take to be the meaning of this meeting.

If this be true, I believe that the second birth, this new baptism of the race into the best methods of agriculture, mechanical and commercial life and respect for labor, will bring blessings not less than those given us by our Great Emancipator, whose birthday we celebrate.

Freedom from debt, comfortable homes, profitable employment, intelligence, bring a self-respect and confidence, without which no race can get on its feet. During the years of slavery we were shielded from competition. To-day, unless we prepare to compete with the outside world, we shall go to the wall as a race.

Despite the curse of slavery, during those dark and bitter days, God was preparing the way for the solution of the race problem, along the line of industrial training. The slave master who wanted a house built or a suit of clothes made, went to a Negro carpenter or tailor. Every large slave plantation was, in a limited sense, an industrial school. On these plantations, thousands were taught common farming, others carpentry, others brickmasonry, others sewing and cooking. Thus, at the beginning of our freedom, we found ourselves in possession of the common and skilled labor of the South. For twenty years after freedom, except in the case of Gen. Armstrong, our patron saint, whose name will go down in history linked with that of the immortal Lincoln, we overlooked what has been taking place on these plantations for more than two centuries. We were educated in the book, which was all right. But gradually those who learned to be skilled laborers during slavery, disappeared by death; then it was that we began to realize that we were training no colored youths to take their places. Then it was that another race from foreign lands began to take from us our birth-right--this legacy in the form of skilled labor, that was purchased by our forefathers at the price of 250 years in slavery. That we may hold our own in the industrial and business world, we must learn to put brains and skill into the common occupations about our doors, and we must learn to dignify common labor.

It is an easy matter to project the mental development of a race beyond its ability to supply the wants thereby increased.

In all parts of the country there should be a more vital and practical connection between the Negro's educated brain and his opportunity for earning his daily living. In the present condition of my race, that knowledge of chemistry will mean most which will make forty bushels of corn grow where only twenty bushels have grown; that knowledge of mathematics will be most helpful that will construct a three-room cottage to replace the one-room cabin; that literature most potent which will make the girl the thorough mistress of modern household economy. The race sees it, the race wants it; you must "push the button and we will do the rest." All this is not as an end, but as a means to the higher life. It is beyond our duty to set meets and bounds upon the aspirations and achievements of any race, but it is our duty to see that that foundation is fitly laid.

It is a hard thing to put much Christianity into a hungry man. There is one thing in which my race excels yours; when it comes to thinking you can excel us; in feeling we can excel you. I would not have my race change much in this respect, but I would have the man who likes to sing, shout and get happy in church on Sunday, taught to mix in during the week, with his religious zeal and fervor, habits of thrift, economy, and with land and a house of two or three rooms, a little bank account, just as the white man does.

Industrial development, coupled with religious and mental development, will bring a change in the civil and political status of the South. And this, if for no other reason, should enlist the active

aid and sympathy of every patriotic citizen in the North. Those who revere the name of Lincoln should see to it that we do not fail in the reaping of the full fruit of his life and martyrdom. In this matter let us take high ground. The Negro that has learned to respect a white man, is ten fold greater than a white man who hates a Negro. I propose that the Negro shall take his place upon the high and undisputed ground of usefulness and generosity, and that he invite the white man to step up and occupy this position with him. From this position I would have the Negro forgive the past and adjust himself to the present. From this position I would have him teach that no race can wrong another race without himself being dragged down. So long as my race is submerged in poverty and ignorance, so long, as with hooks of steel, will we drag down and retard the upward growth of the white man in the South. If the Negro's degradation tempts one to steal his ballot, remember that it is the one who commits the theft that is permanently injured. You owe it, not less to yourselves than to your white brethren in the South, that this load be lifted from their shoulders. Industrial training will help to do it. Strike a common interest in the affairs of life, and prejudice melts away.

A few weeks ago a black man of brains and skill, in Alabama, produced 261 bushels of sweet potatoes on a single acre of land; twice as much as any white man in that community had produced, and every one of the dozen white men who came to see how it was done, was ready to take off his hat to this black man. Not a bit of prejudice; against those 261 bushels of sweet potatoes.

It is along this line that we are to settle this problem, and along this line it is slowly but surely working itself out. But let us not be deceived. It is not settled yet. A recent close investigation teaches me that in the Black Belt of the South we have not more than touched the edges.

Says the Great Teacher, "I will draw all men unto Me." How? Not by force, not by law, not by superficial ornamentation. Following in the footsteps of the lowly Nazarene, we will continue, with your help, to work and wait till by the exercise of the higher virtues, by the products of our brains and hands, we shall make ourselves so important to the American people that they will accord us all the rights of manhood and citizenship by reason of our intrinsic worth.