

## Booker T. Washington Written Primary Source Activity

### The Atlanta Exposition Speech

Booker T. Washington's most famous speech was given at the Cotton States and International Exposition on September 18, 1895 in Atlanta, Georgia, and was delivered to a mostly white audience. The Exposition had been organized to showcase agricultural and technological progress in the American South and to encourage trade with other regions and different countries. Lasting for one hundred days, the Exposition was visited by nearly 800,000 people.

*A. Note: In the following passage, Washington is attempting to persuade the audience to hire African American workers rather than recent immigrants from Europe.*

...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, and unresentful people that the world has seen. As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past, in nursing your children, watching by the sick-bed of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defense of yours, interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life 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, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.

1. According to Washington, what will make African American workers a better option than “foreigners”?

2. What does Washington mean when he says, “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”?

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B. There is no defense or security for any of us except in the highest intelligence and development of all. If anywhere there are efforts tending to curtail (*limit*) the fullest growth of the Negro, let these efforts be turned into stimulating, encouraging, and making him the most useful and intelligent citizen. Effort or means so invested will pay a thousand per cent interest. These efforts will be twice blessed—blessing him that gives and him that takes. There is no escape through law of man or God from the inevitable (*unavoidable*): The laws of changeless justice bind Oppressor with oppressed; And close as sin and suffering joined We march to fate abreast...Nearly sixteen millions of hands will aid you in pulling the load upward, or they will pull against you the load downward. We shall constitute one-third and more of the ignorance and crime of the South, or one-third [of] its intelligence and progress; we shall contribute one-third to the business and industrial prosperity of the South, or we shall prove a veritable body of death, stagnating, depressing, retarding every effort to advance the body politic.

1. In this passage, Washington subtly offers both a promise and a threat. What, according to Washington, are the two possible scenarios for the future of the South?

C. The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing. No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized. It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of these privileges. The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera-house.

1. Why does Washington think it's important to be patient in obtaining rights? What does he see as the best path to obtaining "all privileges of the law"?

2. What does Washington mean by the statement, "The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera-house"?

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3. Black leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois faulted Washington for being too willing to accept gradual progress in achieving civil rights and equality; Du Bois also believed that blacks should pursue academics rather than vocational training. Du Bois referred to the thoughts put forth in the Atlanta Exposition Speech as the “Atlanta Compromise”. Why do you think Du Bois criticized the idea of a compromise? Do you think Washington would have accepted this description of the content of his speech? What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of Washington’s ideas?