

TUSKEGEE'S WIZARD OF OZ:
BOOKER T. WASHINGTON AND TEACHING HISTORY

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Books under review in this essay:

Louis R. Harlan, Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856-1901
Vol. I (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 379 pages,
Illustrations.

Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915,
Vol. II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 548 pages,
Illustrations.

Over the past five years of teaching American history and Black history, I have been struck by the pervasive influence of Booker T. Washington in the minds of students (black or white) despite the fact that very little critical classroom time had been spent on the man, his thought, or his actions. Like many young scholars who came of age in the sixties, I received the standard (and still widely taught) view of Booker T. Washington. Briefly stated, it is that Washington was the proponent of accommodation--the belief that Afro-Americans must work hard, save their money, and improve themselves morally. Then Blacks would find respect from the "best whites" in the South and eventually discrimination would dissipate. Most important in the accommodationist belief was that Black people should refrain from overt political activity, or risk alienating potential white allies.

Obviously we were aware of the Compromise of 1877 that rolled back the gains freedpeople had won during Reconstruction. Likewise we learned in depth (at least in Afro-American history courses) of the rise of Jim Crow in the South, the intimidations and restrictions at the polls, and the horrific rise in lynchings. Just as obviously, questions arose in our minds: How could Blacks take this? Was there no fighting back? What good was Washington's policy of accommodation in a situation such as this? To these questions and others we were treated to that grand historical resolution: The opposition stance of W.E.B. DuBois and the subsequent emergence of the NAACP. DuBois was cast as the opposite of Washington, a fierce and determined agitator for full civil rights for Blacks. Where Washington wanted to go slowly and to gradually uplift the Afro-Americans, DuBois pressed for the immediate inclusion of Blacks as full citizens under law. The NAACP, that progressive amalgam of white liberals, socialists, and philanthropists, was seen as the first (and chief) organization for the legal and political rights of Blacks.

For many students now and then, there could be no denying that in the debate between Washington and DuBois, the hero was DuBois. Especially during the sixties, as Blacks were fighting for civil rights and subsequently for Black power, teachers were eager to teach and accept this dichotomy in the service of "relevance" or usable history.

But as the heated passion of the sixties cooled into the doldrums of the early seventies, a new interpretation of Washington emerged. Its author was Louis R. Harlan of the University of Maryland, who had gained access to all of the Washington papers and who was preparing them for publication.¹ In 1972, Harlan published the first volume of Booker T. Washington's life.

It was clear from the beginning that this would be an ambitious project, perhaps the definitive treatment of the man. There was also the anticipation

that many questions would be laid to rest, chief among them whether Washington was really an ardent accommodationist or whether he was putting on a mask. The anticipation was well rewarded as Harlan immediately exploded the traditional notions of Washington.

Those who try to understand Washington in ideological terms, as the realistic black philosopher of the age of Jim Crow, or as the intellectual opposite of W.E.B. DuBois, miss the essential character of the man. He was not an intellectual, but a man of action. Ideas he cared little for. Power was his game and he used ideas simply as instruments to gain power. Washington's mind as revealed in formal public utterance was a bag of cliches. His psyche, on the other hand, was a kaleidoscope of infinitely changing patterns.²

Thus, Harlan's sensitive and judicious, yet forthright examination of Washington's life went in a direction unanticipated by students of the "great debate" school. By intensively focusing on the inner motivations of a man just up from slavery and nourished on the Calvinistic Puritan work ethic, who went forth to uplift and provide respect and work for his people, Louis Harlan placed Booker T. Washington on a psychoanalyst's couch. Such a venture was and continues to be risky business for any historian dealing with well-known historical figures. Witness the mixed results of psychohistorical interpretations of Richard Nixon or Joseph McCarthy. Yet Harlan maintained his balance, aided by his careful adherence to the collected papers, his keen eye for the social milieu of Washington's times, and his accessible writing style.

In Harlan's depiction, Booker T. Washington becomes a very complex figure, a man whose motivations, spurred by a thirst for power, eluded even his sharpest critics and closest associates. His almost single-minded devotion to the uplifting of his people led him to pandering to the worst stereotypes of his day: anti-immigrant jokes, a strain of anti-semitism, and put-downs of the labor movement. Moreover, he had a particular fondness for the upper class capitalist entrepreneurs, arising in all likelihood from confusion in the work ethic of the former slave. Although his panting after the rich also served to gain much needed funds for Tuskegee Institute, it seems clear that he enjoyed their company.

In most of his public behavior, Washington adopted and eventually became the very accommodating, soft-spoken Black that he advocated in his statements to the Black masses. Indeed, he became the best living example of Accommodationism. But Harlan has stripped away the public facade and shown us the innerman. What he found, what he shows us, was a man driven by a concern for power. Washington adopted a different stance or mask with every group before which he appeared. Skillful in oratory, he could make tight fisted philanthropists laugh at his self-deprecating jokes as they loosened their purse strings. Or he could arouse Black church audiences to feverish appreciation with sermonettes on how they should behave in a hostile southern environment. Thus at the end of Volume I we have a picture of Booker T. Washington, comfortably ensconced as the chief power broker for Black Americans. Describing Washington sitting in the White House and dining with President Theodore Roosevelt, Harlan tells us that the moment was of great importance; "The culmination of his struggle up from slavery . . . the dinner at the White House was the final accolade . . . By white men's indirect rule he was 'the king of a captive people.'"³

The first volume was well received. The critical reviews were numerous, and Harlan was firmly established as the definitive biographer of Booker T. Washington. In the ensuing years, however, something curious happened within

the historical profession. Harlan's assessment became the "Accepted View"⁴ in the mainstream historical establishment, but, ironically, increasingly peripheral to the interests of Black historians. In the classroom, history teachers attempted to show the complexity of Washington but they continued to present the classical Washington-DuBois dichotomy. If for nothing else, Harlan's penetrating view of Washington surely would have cast doubts on such an opposition, particularly in the areas of education and the social conditions of Black people in the post-Reconstruction era.

For Black historians Washington took on the mantle of an economic nationalist. Reflecting the views of those Black political activists who called for community control of schools and economic resources, some Black historians tended to downplay Washington's "Uncle Tom" approach to political matters and play up his concern for educating and uplifting the masses, particularly in the area of work.⁵ Others focused on the unique ability of DuBois to understand how American capitalist racism conflated yet maintained the categories of race and class.

Both approaches were curiously shortsighted and overly dependent on Harlan's sturdy biography. Major factors forming the historical context of Washington's times were not addressed: Populism, the labor movement, and Progressivism, and their relation to Blacks. Moreover, the significance of the emergence of corporate capitalism as an ideological and socio-economic force was missing from analysis and discussion of Washington (or any other prominent Black figures for that matter). In sum, the first volume of Harlan's biography became an indirect reinforcement of Rayford Logan's famous description of the period in question as "the Nadir of the Negro."

For some skeptical and discerning historians, the task became to understand the relationship of Booker T. Washington to the Progressive Movement. In this view Washington's accommodationism was a compromise, an attempt to gradually create a willing and obedient work force to aid industrialization in the hope that in doing so Blacks would thereby be found worthy of full citizenship rights.⁶ The question still remained, however, as to the relevance of Washington's hegemonic message even up to the present. This generation demands a closer examination of Washington's political motivations and maneuvers as well as a more studied look at his educational and social philosophy motivations and maneuvers and a more studied look at his educational and social philosophy for Afro-Americans.

Partial answers to the remaining questions have now been provided by Louis Harlan's second and final volume of his biography of Booker T. Washington. Picking up where we last saw Washington (the White House Dinner of 1901), Harlan guides us through Washington's remaining fourteen years as he makes use of his authority as political power broker for Black people. One is still amazed at the immense power that Washington commanded (hinted at broadly in the first volume) and nonplussed at the continued adherence to an increasingly archaic policy of accommodationism. But the real reward of this volume is the true unveiling of Washington the man.

Never have the warts and the venality of a Black leader been so prominently displayed. Washington was ruthless in his maintenance of power: Spying on his opposition, sabotaging them at every juncture, placing obstacles in the path of their personal ambitions and advancement whenever he could. The bottom line was that Washington was a leader who saw every move by others, black or white, as a personal attack on himself and he responded in like fashion. Given his strong ties to both conservative and liberal philanthropists, three presidential administrations, newspaper editors, and scholars, Washington had the means to rule in just about any way he wished. And rule he did.

However, his Achilles heel was the very same accommodating posture that he urged on the Black masses and in which he wrapped himself. As Blacks slipped deeper and deeper into the abyss of poverty, degradation, and ultimately invisibility in white minds, Washington continued to urge the path of work (manual labor for most, intellectual for a few), thrift, and moral uplift. His opposition raised their voices in increasing anger, demanding political rights and fair play for Black people according to the American ideals embedded in the Constitution. Led by Monroe Trotter, W.E.B. DuBois, and J. Max Barber, among others, dissenters organized movements and held secret and open meetings. All to no avail. Washington infiltrated and dismembered every attempt that he perceived would diminish his influence.

Simultaneously, however, Washington's accommodationist stance came to be taken for granted by presidential administrations, white philanthropists, and moderate conservatives. While deploring the methods and harangues of extreme racists (such as James K. Vardaman, Benjamin Tillman, and Thomas Dixon, Jr.), most whites took comfort in knowing that Washington could control angry Blacks and uplift a downtrodden people. Meanwhile, they conveniently forgot about the plight of Blacks, if they were ever aware of it.

It was only when Washington remained silent after the unjust imprisonment of the Black infantrymen in the Brownville incident that faith in Washington began to wane among the Black masses. Stern questions arose; no answers came forth. For Washington personally, the total collapse of his credibility may have come with the assault on him while in New York City in 1911. Supposedly calling on an influential benefactor near the rough Tenderloin district, Washington was said to have been wandering the streets, "peeping in a keyhole," and speaking uncharacteristically to some of the residents. Eventually Washington was attacked by a white man, who beat Washington down the street. Washington was arrested and, although eventually released, a long trial ensued that threatened to damage his image as a Black leader. More painfully, it forced Washington to confront the cruel realities of being black in America. Even though he still maintained his accommodating stance throughout the trial, it seemed to wear thin.⁷ Late in his life Washington tentatively, albeit cautiously began to speak out for an end to segregation and for the granting of civil rights to Blacks.

As we close the volume, at Washington's death, we are reminded by Harlan that Booker T. Washington was the last Black leader born in slavery. His death ended an era for Blacks and began the long uphill struggle for civil rights. New leaders of immense intellectual fortitude and perseverance would arise, forging a new agenda and in many ways challenging cherished ideological assumptions.

And yet in retrospect, we can still feel the pervasive influence of Booker T. Washington. Despite the passionate anger and intellect of DuBois or Malcolm X, we have seen the masses of Blacks gravitate towards Martin Luther King or Jesse Jackson. When Martin Luther King eloquently stated "I have a Dream" or Jesse Jackson exhorts young black youth to say I am somebody, they are drawing from a deep legacy bequeathed by Booker T. Washington. In their messages, King and Jackson are telling the masses to earn moral self-respect, stay in school, and get a job. And like Washington during the days of rapid industrialization, these leaders are/were purposefully vague about how Blacks can achieve what they tell them to dream. It can be argued that King was an exception to the degree that at the end of his life he was talking about the need for profound social change.⁸

Malcolm X and W.E.B. DuBois were also influenced by Washington. Malcolm particularly when minister and spokesman for the Nation of Islam, was relentless

in arguing for the need for Blacks to attain self respect, work, and thrift. Upon his departure, however, he became more like DuBois, utilizing his sharp mind to analyze and demand changes in the system which was oppressing Blacks. Here, then, we can see the unification of the dream and the agenda.

Harlan's biography, now complete, can help us to see the thread of the legacy that the Wizard's progress has left. For history teachers and scholars the task is to enable our students to understand the necessity of seeing Afro-Americans plight and place in the totality of American history. The false dichotomies of Washington vs. DuBois must be replaced with an understanding of the social and economic forces that gave rise to a Booker T. Washington, to an understanding not only of the positive but of the devastatingly negative implications of his hegemonic reign. Finally, we must not see Booker T. Washington as a "great" leader, but as a leader who, however good his intentions or pervasive his hegemony, was unable to lead his people out of the nadir.

It is clear, as is argued by Albert Memmi or Frantz Fanon, or even many contemporary feminists, that dreams are important to oppressed peoples. Black literature abounds with such notions. People must nurture visions of what can be, foster the visions of a history that never has been. If these "visions of power" provide an amalgam and serve as a mobilizing force, then they are deeply liberatory.⁹ It is only when the visions become murky, when they prevent the emergence of an achievable agenda and thereby hide the forces of oppression, that they become false ideology. This is the question--false ideology or vision of power--that future biographers of Black leaders must confront.

NOTES

I am exceedingly grateful to the thoughtful criticism and fruitful suggestions of Ronald Butchart and Steven Soiffer in preparing this piece.

¹Thus far, we have Louis R. Harlan and Raymond Smock, eds., The Booker T. Washington Papers, Vol. I-II (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972-).

²Harlan, BTW: The Making of a Black Leader, Preface viii.

³Harlan, BTW: The Making of a Black Leader, 324.

⁴This term "Accepted View" belongs to C. Vann Woodward. For a discussion of how such a view comes about, see his very thoughtful "The Strange Career of A Historical Controversy" in American Counterpoint: Slavery and Racism in the North/South Dialogue (New York, 1971, Oxford reprint, 1983), 234-6.

⁵For a discussion of Economic nationalism and Washington's place in it, see John Bracey, August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick (eds.), Black Nationalism in America (Chicago: 1972), Introduction.

⁶Such a view took a while to be seen. A full discussion that is perceptive and insightful is William Toll's The Resurgence of Race (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), Chapter II. Marxist historians, of course, have by implication pressed this viewpoint for a number of years. Arising from studies in Reconstruction, this line of thought has clearly connected the social and economic oppression of Blacks with the ideological, thus providing clues and implications for the Washington years. For a discussion and analysis of some of those works, see Harold Woodman's "Sequel to Slavery," Journal of Southern History (November, 1978); also Woodman, "The Economic and Social History of Blacks in Post-Emancipation South," Trends in History, III (Fall, 1982), 37-55.

⁷The entirety of this incident is related in Chapter 16. While Harlan is to be commended on his, as usual, clear and even handed recounting, disturbing questions about the character of Washington nonetheless remain. While we may never know for certain the historical truth of the matter, an examination of possible psychological reasons for Washington's change of stories or even lying may be in order.

⁸For an excellent discussion, see David L. Lewis, King: A Critical Biography (Chicago: 1971). See also Setphen B. Oates's recent biography, Let the Trumpet Sound (New York: 1983).

⁹See Steven Soiffer "Visions of Power" (Forthcoming). I am indebted to Soiffer for clarification of certain ideas in this section.