Booker T. Washington's 1895 Atlanta Exposition Speech (1908 recreation)

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Essay by Jacqueline M. Moore (guest post)*

Booker T. Washington

Booker T. Washington's 1895 Address to the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition is one of the most famous speeches in American history. The goal of the Atlanta Exposition was to showcase the economic progress of the South since the Civil War, to encourage international trade, and to attract investors to the region. Anxious to show there had been progress in race relations as well, the promoters invited Washington, who had a reputation as a conservative black leader, to speak at the opening ceremonies. Washington gave his address on September 18, 1895, before a predominantly white audience.

On the surface, Washington did not disappoint the Exposition's white promoters. Stressing the importance of hard work and gradual progress for blacks, he argued that they should "cast down their buckets" where they were in agriculture rather than try to go into politics, and to make friends with whites who could help them. Indeed some blacks later dubbed the speech "The Atlanta Compromise" believing that Washington had compromised their civil rights unnecessarily. But to Washington, this was a compromise that cut both ways. He asked whites to also "cast down their buckets" and hire black workers, rather than immigrants. He argued that by helping blacks, whites were helping themselves, as African Americans made up one third of the South's population and could do much to help with its economic growth. Conversely, if blacks failed, they would be a significant detriment to Southern progress. Thus when Washington said in the full speech "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," he really saw himself as striking a bargain with whites to get their economic support in exchange for not challenging segregation. Moreover he firmly believed that blacks would eventually gain political and social equality based on their economic achievements.

The response to the speech in 1895 was overwhelmingly positive, among both blacks and whites. Recent Harvard Ph.D. recipient W.E.B. Du Bois, then teaching at Wilberforce University, congratulated Washington in a telegram, calling his speech "a word fitly spoken." Washington was soon in high demand as a speaker and became one of the best known black men in America. He parlayed this success into fundraising efforts, raising millions of dollars for black education in the South and his industrial training school, Tuskegee Institute. White politicians began consulting Washington on "safe" appointees for traditionally black positions in the government, as a recommendation from the "Wizard of Tuskegee" was a guarantee to whites that the candidate would have similar conservative views. Washington's influence was such that in 1901, President Theodore Roosevelt invited him to dine at the White House, and he became a key advisor to Roosevelt on racial matters.

But despite these improvements, most whites never followed through on their half of the compromise. Black economic development at the turn of the twentieth century was mainly a result of self-help efforts in the black community rather than white investment. Moreover, Washington's assertion that socially they could remain as "separate as the fingers" came on the eve of the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) Supreme Court ruling that segregation was not unconstitutional. Following the "separate but equal" doctrine that *Plessy* laid out, the southern states passed a series of laws completing a system of total segregation of blacks and whites.

By the time Washington recorded this speech in 1908, his positions had not gone unchallenged within the black community. Du Bois, for example, began to argue that economic equality would not be possible without political rights and saw segregation as robbing blacks of any dignity Washington hoped them to gain through economic achievement. Even Washington began secretly funding lawsuits to challenge segregation and loss of voting rights. Nonetheless, he continued publicly to espouse the ideals of the Atlanta address, and it was not until after his death in 1915 that Du Bois's ideas became those of the majority.

Washington made this recording at a Columbia Phonograph studio on December 5, 1908 during a trip to New York City. It was a small pressing, intended for his private use to give as gifts, listed in the Columbia Acoustic Matrix Series as catalog number 14605. The recording was a single-sided disc, which could only hold about one-third (around 3:20) of the whole speech. What he chose to include was his introductory paragraph and the "cast down your bucket" metaphor, with an abbreviated version of its lesson to both blacks and whites. Ironically for such an important speech, Washington does not sound to the modern ear to be a particularly engaging speaker. He uses a somewhat monotonous pattern of rising and falling intonation and speaks in a highly enunciated fashion. This latter aspect may reflect the standard practice at the time, given the poor quality of recording technology, or it may be that he was at pains to prove how well-spoken African Americans could be to whites who assumed blacks to have inferior intellects.

This is the only known recording of Washington's voice, and has been misdated in many sources. The explanation for this misdating is that the copy in the National Archives is not an original disc, but a reel-to-reel recording of a later radio broadcast of the speech, and either the radio announcer or the donor mistakenly noted the date of the first recording as 1906. However, the "Columbia Master Book Discography" (eds. Tim Brooks and Brian Rust) clearly identifies it as being from 1908, a date further supported by the fact that Washington was in Tuskegee in December 1906, but was in New York in early December 1908, where he had access to a Columbia studio. In 1920, Columbia re-issued a limited number of records under its personal label by request of the Washington family and sold the remainders to Broome Special Phonograph Records, the first black-owned record label in the United States, which pasted its company label over the Columbia label and offered it to the public. The record in its original form is extremely rare.

Jacqueline M. Moore is Professor of History at Austin College in Sherman, Texas. She is the author of several books including "Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplift" (2003) and "Leading the Race: The Black Elite in the Nation's Capital 1880-1920" (1999) and is the co-editor of Rowman & Littlefield's African American History Series.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.