
Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Compromise: An Integration of Blacks and Whites

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ABSTRACT

Booker T. Washington, a prolific writer and a prominent leader of the abolitionist movement in the United States of America, delivered his famous speech Atlanta Compromise in 1895. This is significant speech as it is considered to be a defining moment in the exposition of the racial relations during the post-Reconstruction period in the United States. Being a dominant figure as an educator and Black leader, Washington proposes the philosophy of racial empowerment through acquisition of industrial education, vocational training and economic self-reliance. He encourages the African Americans to concentrate on gradual advances through patience, hard work and perseverance instead of demanding an immediate political and social equality. He believes that such an approach would minimize the tensions between the Blacks and Whites and would evidently develop a cooperation which would ultimately lead to racial harmony. This research paper aims at critically evaluating the philosophy of Washington with its long term implications and the attitude and response of the Black and White Americans towards his ideas. It also analyses the opposition that Washington has faced from his contemporaries like W. E. B. Du Bois. The Atlanta Compromise also reveals the complications involved in Black leadership in a society which is deeply segregated with a balance between pragmatism and an obsession for racial equality and integration.

Key words: Atlanta Compromise, Booker T. Washington, Blacks, whites, cooperation, integration

Introduction

The famous *Atlanta Compromise* speech of Booker T. Washington was delivered at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, on 18 September 1895. This speech is considered as a significant and widely discussed address in the African American history. This address is considered to be the core statement of Washington's ideals on racial relationship, "We shall constitute one-third and more of the ignorance and crime of the South, or one-third of its intelligence and progress." and it has established a strategic framework for the progress of the Black community during the Post-Reconstruction era in America. He puts emphasis on economic independence, vocational training and a gradual acquisition of civil rights which are realistic response to the social, economic and political scenario of the Jim Crow South, where the African Americans were facing the severity of

racial discrimination, economic inequalities and political recognition. The core message of the speech revolves around the idea that the African Americans should concentrate deeply on acquiring vocational skills and industrial education to make them self-sufficient before fighting for civil and political rights:

“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 labor.”

This will provide the community an identity which will help them in securing proper place in the country. The famous metaphor “casting down your bucket where you are,” which Washington used in this address reveals his belief that the Blacks and the Whites could work together for mutual prosperity by means of cooperation in economic sector with an aim of achieving complete racial equality and stability. He suggested the Black Americans to “dignify and glorify common labor” and the Whites should provide them an opportunity to be a part of the industrial growth and make them economically sound. This speech was highly appreciated by several Whites as it appeared to maintain the White supremacy without any confrontational way to achieve civil rights and equality status, rather focusing on economic development. Moreover, it also encourages the Blacks to be patient and build an economically independent environment which will eventually lead to a society based on equality:

“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 result of severe and constant struggle rather than artificial forcing.”

However, other African American leaders like Du Bois criticized this speech as a compromise as Washington’s strategy diminished the vigour of the movement against political and social instability with an exchange for economic stability. Hence, Du Bois labeled this famous speech as *Atlanta Compromise* for the fear that it will leave the African Americans as second-class citizens in the United States. The *Atlanta Compromise* is regarded as a turning point as it provides a broader scope to debate over the way that Black Americans should adopt to fight segregation systemic racism which is prominent in the American life during late 19th and the early part of the 20th century. His emphasis on the Black-White integration in terms of economic cooperation and his advice for a gradual acquisition of civil rights earn him the tag of an accommodationist and often bears an ideological difference with the militant approach to racial equality. In analyzing the historical context of the speech, we find that it is significant for its reception among both the Blacks and Whites. Although Washington advocates for cooperative endeavours for economic independence, his critics argue that it encouraged racial hierarchy. The *Atlanta Compromise* throws light on the complexities involved in racial relationships during that time, the effective strategy for Black Americans on the face of severe racial hostilities and the ideas of Washington about integration, race and equality.

Literature Review:

The *Atlanta Compromise* has been significant for scholarly debate as several scholars have approached it from different angles. Normally, all the discussions are based on important themes like African American identity, integration of Blacks and Whites and the impact of such integration on racial relationships on a long-term basis. Critics are of diversified opinion about the political character of Washington. Some say that the practical approach of Washington is essential for the smooth progress of the African Americans in the United States whereas others opine that his accommodationist approach is a betrayal of the political aspirations of the Blacks. Louis R. Harlan (1972) states that the life and career of Washington is set in the context of Post-Reconstruction America where his emphasis on economic independence through vocational training has proved to be the best way to develop a racial relationship during the time of utter segregation and widespread political inequalities. He suggests that the *Atlanta Compromise* speech is intended to diversify the hostile approach of the Jim Crow South by avoiding a direct confrontation with the Whites and concentrating on the economic progress of the Blacks. Jacqueline M. Moore (2003) offers a subtle analysis of the educational philosophy of Washington by suggesting that Washington’s idea of industrial education is deeply rooted in his belief that economic independence will eventually lead to a better social and political relationship. His establishment of the Tuskegee Institute is a proof of his philosophy that the Blacks should acquire industrial training which was highly required in the South at that time. However, she finds the limitations of the approach of Washington as he fails to address the concerns related to the community immediately. W.E.B. Du Bois (1903), the most influential critic of

Washington refers to the speech as a compromise with the Whites and thus accepting the status of second class citizenship in America. He criticizes the vocational training and economic independence of Washington as being too narrow as it ignored the necessity of higher education and political agitation. Du Bois opines that the strategy of Washington has risked the movement against segregation and inequalities that the African American wanted to uproot. Robert J. Norrell (2009) defends Washington by arguing that his gradualism approach is not an acceptance of the White supremacy, rather it is an essential adjustment to the political realities prevalent at that time. Norrell asserts that as there was severe racism in the South, any violent means might have caused a huge loss to the Black community and Washington thought it to be right to acquire economic independence which will bring the community to stand equally with the Whites.

On the other hand, several critics have also adverse opinion about the approach of Washington. William H. Watkins (2001) suggests that Washington's emphasis on vocational training and industrial education is a part of the White-dominated agenda that will control the direction of education for the Black community by not allowing them higher education which will make them trained and not educated. Watkins also hints at the cordial relationship of Washington with Northern philanthropists who consider vocational training as a means keep the African Americans as a subdued labour class rather than integrated and educated citizens. David Levering Lewis (2000) argues that although the approach of Washington has been initially successful in gathering funds for Black institutions and protecting the economic interests of the community, it delays the agitation against social and political inequalities. Lewis finds that the deference of Washington to the White power is a strategic miscalculation that leads to the reinforcement of the Jim Crow laws. However, Mia Bay (2000) has been more sympathetic towards the *Atlanta Compromise* by telling that Washington's emphasis on economic progress is nothing but a rational response to the severe racism of the South. She argues that Washington's speech has led to a larger intellectual tradition for the Blacks and this has made them capable of fighting against the hostilities of the Whites. Patricia Sullivan (2009) discusses about the long-term implications of the speech on the civil rights movement. Although the approach of gradualism is highly criticized by the people, Sullivan defends him by telling that the idea of economic independence has set the ground for the success of the movement. Modern day critic, Ibram X. Kendi (2016), while reevaluating the legacy of Washington, says that he is one among the long tradition of Black leaders who are forced to make very difficult compromises on the face of the supremacy of the Whites. Kendi argues that the speech might appear as an accommodation if we consider present day standards but if we go back to the real time, we will find that this speech has led the revolution with a proper strategy.

Development of Thought:

Booker T. Washington's *Atlanta Compromise* is considered to be one of the finest speeches delivered on racial progress during the Post-Reconstruction America. His emphasis on economic independence, gradual progress of the movement and vocational training reflects his approach in developing the condition of the African Americans on the face of the imposed limitations of the Jim Crow South. In order to understand the speech, the historical context of the time is to be taken into consideration. After the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 by Abraham Lincoln, the African Americans faced severe racial violence in the South. The Jim Crow laws in 1865 reinforced the White supremacy on the face of an institutionalized racial segregation. In such a situation the approach of Washington was to avoid direct and violent confrontation with the Whites, rather to adopt a slow and steady method by making the Blacks economically sound. His intention is to make the Whites dependent on the Blacks for vocational and industrial skills for which he advocated for vocational training and established the Tuskegee Institute. He wanted to make the Blacks indispensable for the economy of the South through acquisition of practical skills. His life experiences, through challenges and limitations, taught him that education and vocational training could bring the Blacks their identity and make them respectable in the South. He believes that economic independence of the Blacks would eventually grant them greater respect and civil rights and they will be able to use the privileges granted to them:

“It is important and right that all privileges of law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercises of these privileges.”

The speech was delivered at such a time when the Southern states enacted the laws to disenfranchise the Black voters and segregate the public life. His proposal of focusing on vocational training in useful fields suggests creating a strong economic foundation for the Blacks. Hence, he motivated the African Americans to make the best use of their current situations and opportunities by telling “cast down their buckets where they are.” The core idea of *Atlanta Compromise* is the need of patience and the approach of non-confrontation with the Whites. He

believes that in order to achieve racial integration, the Blacks need to become entrepreneurs, agriculturally self-sufficient and must emerge as a skilled work-force. His intention is not to close the movement but a gradual advancement with a strong economic background.

His approach is taken differently within and outside the Black community. Some Southern White leaders have praised Washington for his moderate and non-confronting strategy by viewing this strategy as a way to avoid racial conflict and maintain peace. Even Northern leaders have found this strategy to be a pragmatic solution to the problems of the African Americans by ensuring their dignity of labour. On the other hand, his strategy is sharply criticized by his contemporary radical activists like Du Bois. He has directly challenged the approach of Washington by accusing him as too much conceding to the White supremacy and weakening the force of the revolution for political and civil rights. He has also argued that the acquisition of vocational training would always keep the Blacks in the labour class and would never allow them to grow which would reinforce the social hierarchy and would never dismantle it. Instead, Du Bois has advocated for higher education and equal political engagement to bring racial equality. Some other leaders have feared that the approach of Washington might set back the agitation as it will make the Blacks self-contented with limited progress in their economic standard. Some others are of the opinion that this approach is highly intentional amounting to a passive acceptance of the racial inequalities. In spite of several criticisms, Washington's speech remained as an influential episode in the movement against racial inequalities. He was famous in several aspects- fund raising, building national network and the establishment of Tuskegee Institute devoted for vocational training. He played a major role in the integration between the Blacks and the Whites. His fund raisings helped Black schools and businesses to grow.

Critical Analysis:

The famous speech of Washington *Atlanta Compromise* was delivered at such a time when the race relations and the Black leadership were in a critical juncture. Although the speech reveals Washington's philosophy of vocational training, education, economic independence and gradual advancement of the movement, it also reflects the complications involved in the African American's struggle for equality and justice during the Post-Reconstruction era. This critical analysis exposes the strengths and weaknesses of the speech on various grounds and its impact on the Black leaders of future generation. If we analyze the pragmatic approach of Washington and the idealistic approach of Du Bois, who happens to be the greatest critic of the speech, we will find a distinct difference in the ideologies. Washington realized that the violence on the African Americans was severe because they were poor, unskilled and uneducated. He felt that the severity of the oppression and inequality could be minimized only by providing vocational training to the Blacks and making them economically independent. It might make the movement slower but it would bring a complete success at the end. However, the idealism of Du Bois states that the philosophy of Washington will make the African Americans subservient by restricting them only for menial works which would ultimately establish the White superiority. He has laid a choice between economic uplifting of the Blacks and a broader struggle for equal civil and political rights. Another important aspect of analysis is the emphasis of Washington on industrial education. He believed that industrial education and vocational training could make the African Americans self-reliant with an alignment to the economy of the South which is more dependent on agriculture and industry. He wanted to empower them within the community for which he founded the Tuskegee Institute which became a model for Black education believing in hard work for self-improvement. Here, some critics argued that the emphasis on vocational training has limited the scope of education in various other fields and thus did not help the community to excel in any other field. It would simply help the African Americans work in the fields or in the industries.

In 1895, Du Bois coined the term "Atlanta Compromise" to describe the Atlanta Exposition speech delivered by Booker T. Washington. The compromise or cooperation, as desired by Washington, between the Black and the White in the South is considered as an essential strategy to save the community from utter treachery of the Jim Crow laws. The philosophy of economic independence is a calculated approach that will foster goodwill between the races securing stability in the relationship. This might reduce the rampant racial violence as it would be established on a mutual cooperation and dependency. However, the accommodationist stance of Washington is often criticized as legitimization of the existing oppressive system. The apprehension of becoming second-class citizens in America and the gradual and slow advancement of the movement might undermine the agenda of civil and political rights. Another aspect of the speech is Black leadership and racial relationship in America. Although the approach of Washington seems to limit the aspirations of the African American community, it paves the way for the emergence of several Black leaders in the future. The integration of Blacks and Whites would

bring enormous opportunities for the community. So, he says:

“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.”

The ideological differences between Washington and Du Bois invited several discussions on the validity of Washington’s philosophy in bringing complete and amicable compromise between the Whites and Blacks by improving racial relationship.

Conclusion:

The *Atlanta Compromise* speech of Booker T. Washington is considered as a defining stage in the creation of Black leadership and navigating the struggle in a broader aspect in America. The speech presents a strategic response to the Jim Crow laws during the Post-Reconstruction South where the African Americans faced sever racial oppressions, political disenfranchisement and segregation. Washington tried to subdue the hostile relationship between the Blacks and Whites by propagating the advantages of economic self-reliance, vocational training and a gradual advancement in the struggle to achieve civil and political rights. He believes that the African Americans could gain respect and social recognition from the Whites by means of their economic capabilities. The community could secure a place among the Whites only by hard work, self-improvement and creating dependency. His idea of non-confrontation would lead to a better racial relationship and peace. However, the apprehension that it might make the community a labour class and might be treated as second class citizens could not be ruled out. Washington’s accommodationist approach can be considered as a tool to gather funds for the education and vocational training of the Black community. This is quite evident in the establishment of the Tuskegee Institute where the African Americans were provided with vocational and industrial training in order to be self-sufficient. This could only be possible with the cooperation of the Whites as the Black community was considered to be poor and oppressed class at that time. Violence and confrontation might have led to severe loss in property and person and Washington always wanted to avoid this. Another key aspect of this speech is creation of Black leadership in the future which cannot be ignored. Washington understood that the Black leaders might not be effective and successful without the support of the Whites. He feels that there must be integration between the Blacks and the Whites for a complete acquisition of racial, civil and political rights. Hence, we can conclude with the view that although the *Atlanta Compromise* speech was severely criticized by contemporary philosophers and leaders, it has focused on the necessity of Black and White integration in achieving complete freedom for the African Americans.

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