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Recognizing the True Greatness of Booker T. Washington

Robert J. Norrell. *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009. 508 pp. 54 illustrations.

At the end of this magnificent biography, at page 441, Robert Norrell writes, “Though largely overlooked, his effort to sustain blacks’ morale at a terrible time must be counted among the most heroic efforts in American history. Booker T. Washington told his people that they would survive the dark present and, as far as possible, he showed them how to do so.” By the time you read these poignant sentences you will realize that they form a masterpiece of understatement. Booker T. Washington certainly did sustain the hopes of African Americans during years of crisis and he gave them guidance about how to act in dark times. But there is much more. The full story of Booker T. Washington’s life and accomplishments are breathtaking.

To appreciate the real Washington, not the caricature left to us by W. E. B. Du Bois, C. Vann Woodward, and Louis Harlan, Norrell adopts the simple but powerful technique of always standing over Washington’s shoulder—and informing that stance with his own deep knowledge of Tuskegee. Norrell gets the reader to see the local, regional, and national evidence of African American progress—and of threats to such progress—as *Washington himself* saw them. In this way, Norrell permits Washington to rise up from history.

Hard, relentless work is among this biography’s most dominant motifs. Despite untreated hypertension, advancing heart disease, and (most likely) diabetes, Washington worked and traveled according to a punishing schedule that staggers the mind. Think of the president of your own college, university, or alma mater. Think of how hard she or he works and how much she or he travels to raise money. *Then double that*. Doing that will get you close to Washington’s level.

A second deep theme of this book is the cruel irony of Washington’s conventional historical reputation, which has devalued his accomplishments. Thanks to his prolific and talented enemies within a northern and

much better-educated black elite, principally W. E. B. Du Bois and William Monroe Trotter, Washington has come down to us today as someone who gave the green light to black disenfranchisement and who advocated nothing more demanding educationally than “industrial” education for blacks.

The Tuskegee Institute was and is far more interesting and vital than that. Through careful description of growing enrollment and the development of the capital plant, and by offering regular comparison with the other institutions of higher education in the South, Norrell traces how the Tuskegee Institute became one of the leading educational institutions in the South during Washington’s tenure. It soon attracted an international student body from Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia—and developed a mission and presence in Liberia. It provided a very rich mix of vocational education, teacher training, liberal arts, and agricultural science and extension service, thanks to the presence of George Washington Carver. Eventually the Institute became the publisher of an essential annual compendium of basic statistics about African Americans, *The Negro Year Book*, compiled and edited by a University of Chicago sociologist whom Washington recruited to Tuskegee, Monroe N. Work. The *Negro Year Book* was also established to document lynching—something that no central agency elsewhere did.

Norrell offers, as well, an original and pathbreaking discussion of Washington’s largely unknown struggle to block black disenfranchisement. Black disenfranchisement fundamentally preoccupied Washington because he instantly saw, as soon as the process began (to recall, it began in Florida in 1889 and in Mississippi in 1890), that disenfranchisement spelled doom for public education for black Southerners. Conventional wisdom has it that Washington *promoted* disenfranchisement with his so-called Atlanta Compromise speech of 1895 (which is the name that Du Bois devised for the speech). Washington developed in fact a grand strategy of hidden resistance to black disenfranchisement—patronage appointments to federal jobs in the Deep South, via his alliance with President Theodore Roosevelt, coupled with far-reaching litigation challenges to disenfranchisement and peonage.

An odd but vital pattern in American political development changed Washington’s life—and eventually, we see, the fate of his reputation. Presidential assassination or death-in-office long had an intricate link with the prospects of black political incorporation. From the First Reconstruction through the Second Reconstruction, three presidents—Garfield, McKinley, and Kennedy—were assassinated, and two died in office, Harding and Franklin D. Roosevelt. In the aftermath of four out of five of these crises, the successor president

(and previous vice president) worked to build black political support so that he could succeed in the next election.

Chester Arthur strongly promoted black political incorporation and allied himself with both the Virginia Readjusters and the brief renaissance of a biracial Tennessee Republicanism (which, incidentally, featured a symbolic vote for a then two-term African American representative for speaker of the Tennessee House). Harry Truman reached out repeatedly to African American leaders and voters, desegregated the armed forces, and developed the outlines of what became the 1957 Civil Rights Act. Lyndon B. Johnson pushed for the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Until I read Norrell's book, I had thought that there were only three instances of the pattern, and that both Theodore Roosevelt and Calvin Coolidge were exceptions. Coolidge may well be (I haven't researched the matter). But reading Norrell, it becomes possible to see that Theodore Roosevelt strongly conformed to the pattern (until he knew that he would not run for reelection). Theodore Roosevelt is thus another case.

Booker T. Washington shrewdly saw that McKinley's assassination was actually a major political opportunity. He gambled that he might yet figure out how to stop the still-uncertain process of black disenfranchisement. *We*—in retrospect—may think that black disenfranchisement was unstoppable. Booker T. Washington lived it, and he thought that he might somehow find a way to halt it in its tracks. His ally would be the new president, Theodore Roosevelt.

As for Roosevelt, he needed to help himself politically. Washington could help him inside the Republican Party—he could guarantee the votes of the southern delegations to the nominating conventions. Alliance with Washington could help at the polls in the Border States, such as Maryland, and with big-city votes. So the accidental president made common cause with Washington.

The great symbol of this alliance is Booker T. Washington's famous 1901 dinner at the White House, which was discovered by a reporter viewing the White House register and then publicized. Norrell, to be sure, treats Theodore Roosevelt's invitation to Booker T. Washington to dine with him at the White House—the first such invitation in American history—as quixotic and impulsive. But clearly they were doing the work of a partnership. They dined together, doing something that had never been done before, because they meant to address the rising (but still somewhat indeterminate) effort to fully reestablish white supremacy in the United States.

However, as Norrell carefully shows, the meeting boomeranged on Washington and Roosevelt once it was sensationalized. This is also part of a

significant pattern in American political development. *Dred Scott* was, after all, the result of a litigation strategy that backfired. So was *Plessy*. The 1890 Federal Elections Bill boomeranged on those who fought for it. So too the White House dinner between the president and Booker T. Washington—which was a first—had perverse effects: it became an effective rallying cry for white supremacy, a symbol of what might happen if the white nationalist program did not succeed.

Still, the enormous outcry after the dinner did not deter Washington and Roosevelt. They stuck together and instituted a plan for protecting—and gradually expanding—appointments of African Americans to federal positions and to the diplomatic corps. They did not meet much success, except symbolically. But they did hold the line against segregation of the federal civil service. Once Roosevelt retired from the White House, his successor, William Howard Taft, scrapped the policy of keeping national service integrated—and Taft's successor, Woodrow Wilson, then actively developed a policy of thorough segregation all across the federal agencies.

Meanwhile, two litigation strategies were under way, both invisibly devised and backed by Washington. Washington prevailed upon President Roosevelt to appoint a former Democratic governor of Alabama and a delegate to the Alabama disfranchising constitutional convention of 1901, Thomas Goode Jones, to the United States Court for the Northern and Middle Districts of Alabama. Washington expected Judge Jones to be an ally in legally reversing disenfranchisement—and in fact he was to the extent that Jones certified one of the five lawsuits that Washington supported and bankrolled to the U.S. Supreme Court, preempting its appeal to an obviously hostile Alabama Supreme Court. Judge Jones also engineered a Secret Service investigation of labor peonage in two Alabama counties and succeeded in declaring the state's contract labor law unconstitutional.

In short, Washington moved on several fronts, carefully leveraging a relationship with the president of the United States. He hit the wall, however, in late summer 1906 with the Brownsville, Texas, incident. Local whites who were incensed by the presence of black infantrymen at Fort Brown seized on a tavern shootout to claim that black soldiers off-duty were responsible for the death of a white bartender and the wounding of a local police officer. The commanders at Fort Brown insisted that all of the black garrison was in camp at the time of the shootout and therefore could not be responsible for the events in town. But an inspector general from South Carolina issued a report attributing the crime to some black soldiers who could not be discovered due to a conspiracy of silence among the black infantrymen. The president

thereupon discharged 167 black veterans without honor on the ground that they had collectively obstructed the Army's inquiry.

Norrell describes Roosevelt's action as impulsive—but I am inclined to see it more politically. Had he still needed Washington, because he was running for reelection in 1908, Roosevelt might not have done as he did. That Booker T. Washington could still be a valuable political ally seems to have been recognized, moreover, by Senator Joseph Foraker (R-Ohio). Foraker, who had designs on the presidency, publicly challenged and strongly criticized the president's decision and promoted a congressional investigation (which, in the end, came down for the president).

By 1906, Washington's battle to stop disenfranchisement was lost. The litigation strategy had failed in the Supreme Court. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes handed down a decision in *Giles v. Harris* (1903) candidly recognizing that black disenfranchisement in Alabama was a public conspiracy but stating that the Court could do nothing against such a process.

A little over a month after the Brownsville affair, white mobs in Atlanta, incensed by false newspaper reports of white-on-black sexual attacks, assaulted blacks in downtown Atlanta and sought to invade and shoot up black neighborhoods in the city. White assaults—many of them met and turned back by armed black men—lasted for several days.

In the aftermath of the riot, Du Bois wrote a famous poem, "The Litany of Atlanta," plainly implying that the riot demonstrated the hollowness of Washington's leadership. Indeed, by then Washington had become the object of a grim struggle among northern black and white liberals to oust him from his informal status as the leader of the national cross-racial alliance to protect black interests. These facts are not well known, but the Niagara Movement, and later the establishment of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, were initially driven by fierce hostility to Washington and were meant initially as organizations that would push Washington aside.

But the anti-Washington forces did much more than seize leadership of the quest to protect black rights and interests from Washington. They also succeeded in framing—until now—all subsequent discussion of Washington's efforts and of the meaning of his life.

One realizes—and this is among the connotations of this book's subtle title—that Washington's actual accomplishments have been hidden by nothing less than successful obscurantism. It was perpetrated first by Du Bois, who did it willfully and invidiously. Adopting Du Bois's view, C. Vann Woodward recycled it in *Origins of the New South*—and it was later fully elaborated by

Washington's first major biographer, Louis Harlan. Together they built up the idea of Booker-the-status-seeking-sellout.

A large part of the problem is the 1895 Atlanta Exposition address, during which Booker T. Washington actually did seem to offer a grand bargain of accommodation, as if he were saying, "Give us work, and we won't bother you about voting." But this gets to one of the really remarkable strengths of this book, which is to avoid doing what Washington's detractors did—rip it out of the context of Washington's life and thought and then retrospectively assign it a grand causal significance. Instead, Norrell sees the 1895 speech in the full context of all of Washington's actions, and of his prolific writings and surviving speeches. Washington wrote three autobiographies—one of which, *Up From Slavery* (1901)—was an international bestseller. He wrote a biography of Frederick Douglass (1906). He wrote *The Future of the American Negro* (1900), edited *Tuskegee and Its People: Their Ideals and Achievement* (1905), and wrote *The Story of the Negro: The Rise of the Race from Slavery* (1909). And this is just a small sampling of his full published output.

Washington's social, political, and economic thought can hardly be summed up in a sentence or two. But to the extent that it can be summarized, it was all about black and white Americans rising up from their history. Washington developed a "counter-narrative," as it were, of the past, present, and future of American race relations. It primarily emphasized growing material interdependence and prosperity, fraternity, moral enlightenment, and mutual support for biracial educational, scientific, agricultural, and industrial progress. But Washington never actually swapped civic status and political incorporation for those other benefits. Instead, he saw *all* facets of black incorporation as significant. He had a fully developed social, economic, and educational agenda *as well as* a political and constitutional agenda. He was in fact the first black political and social philosopher to broaden the discussion of black incorporation in such a systematic and pragmatic way.

So why has this Booker T. Washington been invisible to us for so long? What are the origins of the obscurantism that has until now blocked a truer and nontendentious understanding? The obscurantism originated, or so reading Norrell suggests (though he himself does not explicitly argue), in the scapegoating to which Washington's liberal enemies fell prey. Washington carved out enormous political influence—and vigorously used the influence that he had—during terrible events. The scapegoating came, then, from the question that occurred to everyone who watched the dispossession of black Southerners with horror: How could this happen? *Why wasn't Booker T. Washington stopping it?*

Reading between the lines in Norrell, one sees that eventually a large body of liberal opinion at the time concluded that somehow Washington was actually a significant cause of all these events. He consorted with the richest, most powerful men in America, after all—Andrew Carnegie, Julius Rosenwald, William McKinley, and Theodore Roosevelt. Couldn't he use his influence with them? He must have cared more about keeping them on his side. Also, Washington passionately believed in material uplift for blacks. This got twisted into the suspicion that evidently black rights were somehow less important. Then too, there were his constant efforts to showcase instances of interracial cooperation, to appeal to the better side of his white listeners on his virtually countless speaking tours. He was a confluence-seeking accommodationist, then. White and black intellectuals and journalists in the North also despaired of Washington's iron determination to keep silent and wait until his public reactions to the many crises could be heard and yet not endanger Tuskegee or the many "little Tuskegees" all over the Deep South. So somehow he must have been at peace with all of these horrors.

Because terrible public reversals occurred on his watch, Washington took (and has taken) a lot of the blame for them. This is the political origin of the mythical Washington. But the truth was, and is, far different. Norrell does not argue this counterfactual, but one wonders whether other awful events might have occurred *without* Booker T. Washington: more lynchings and riots (if that were possible); some pattern of systematic assault on black businesses, churches, black-owned farms, and educational institutions; and repeal of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

One of the shocks administered by Norrell's book is its portrayal of an exterminationist edge to white supremacist thought. White supremacists, and their rationalizers in departments of sociology or statistics at white-controlled universities in the North and South, were not consciously and overtly genocidal. But in their monstrous reveries about the final collapse and dying off of black America, they came very close to embracing genocide.

Norrell deftly takes one deep into the mind-boggling horrors of the period: the lynching of Sam Hose, during which his extremities and genitals were hacked off, and his knuckles sent to an Atlanta grocery store for sale; the Wilmington, North Carolina, race riot (which Norrell rightly calls a pogrom); the Atlanta race riot of 1906; the rise of a toxic rhetoric of race hatred preached by James K. Vardaman of Mississippi, Jeff Davis of Arkansas, Ben Tillman of South Carolina, and Tom Heflin of Alabama; and the glorification of Klan violence and a blood-soaked Lost Cause by Thomas Dixon, the best-selling author. Just a short distance from Tuskegee, Congressman Heflin openly called

for Washington's assassination—and in fact Washington was the object of at least two assassination conspiracies and eventually required a full-time guard of Pinkerton detectives. Despite his great fortitude and mental and psychic stamina, Washington must have worried more than once that the Tuskegee Institute would literally be sacked and burned to the ground.

But Washington never flinched and never gave up until his body literally gave up and shut down in the fall of 1915, killing him in late middle age. Until then, Washington wrote and spoke almost without rest. Periodically the strain of his labors forced him onto ocean liners and a much-deserved fortnight or more of nothing but sleep and introspection as he crossed the Atlantic and then returned. Otherwise he worked nonstop. He sustained black morale so much that probably thousands named their sons after him, and tens of thousands kept his portrait prominently displayed in their homes. He ceaselessly sought to shape white public opinion. He, more than any other single individual, saved as much as could be saved for black education in the South from the vortex of disenfranchisement.

So go to your library now and get this book. It is long—indeed, it has to be—but Norrell writes clearly and limpidly. He enlivens the book with fifty-four quite rare and evocative photographs and illustrations. The story is by turns inspiring, moving, sometimes terrifying, often excruciatingly painful, and always monumental. You will soon sense that you are in the presence of greatness—in the presence of a great man and in the presence of a great historian. Reading Norrell will significantly change how you think about Booker T. Washington, American race relations, American political development—and about the previously unknown connections among them. This is among the most effective and important American political biographies that you will ever read.

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