

Handout 5.1B

Booker T. Washington - The Atlanta Compromise Speech (1895)

Plain English Summary

This speech was given to a largely white audience at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. Washington was invited to speak in part to appeal to Northerners attending the meeting and to show racial progress in the South.

1 Booker T. Washington told the crowd a story to illustrate his beliefs about how newly freed slaves
should seek a better life for themselves. There was a ship lost at sea for many days. The crew grew
3 thirsty but there was no drinking water on the ship. When the crew of the lost ship spotted a passing
ship, they asked the people on the passing ship to send them water to drink. The friendly passing ship
5 told them four times to put their buckets into the water. When the lost ship finally did put their
buckets into the water they pulled up fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the river.

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Booker T. Washington told the crowd that, like the lost ship, those of his race should seek help and
11 friendship from their neighbors, including their white neighbors.

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Washington said that freed slaves should remain in the South and work, using their hands in farming,
15 mechanics, commerce, household help, and other “common” professions. He asserted that these
occupations were important and that freed slaves should dignify and glorify their labors to prosper.
17 They should use the opportunities given them with dignity, working together for shared progress.

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Washington told the crowd that people of different races could remain separate socially but work
together economically.

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