

# The Liberty Tradition Among Black Americans

BY BURTON FOLSOM, JR.



“Slavery and free institutions can never live peaceably together,” Frederick Douglass observed. “Liberty . . . must either overthrow slavery, or be itself overthrown by slavery.”

Douglass, black America’s most renowned spokesman, made this argument during the Civil War. But what about after the war? Was it proper for the government afterward to intervene and assist blacks in overcoming centuries of bondage? Many black leaders today promote affirmative action, which gives racial preferences in hiring to black Americans. But that was not the thinking of Douglass and other black leaders, such as Booker T. Washington, after the Civil War.

Douglass, for example, in a major speech given in April 1865, expressed a desire for liberty alone. When the war ended, some whites and blacks wanted freed slaves to have special land grants or extensive federal aid. Douglass, a former slave himself, favored the later Civil Rights Bill of 1875, but shunned special privileges. “Everybody has asked the question . . . , ‘What shall we do with the Negro?’ I have had but one answer from the beginning. Do nothing with us!”

Douglass used the metaphor of an apple tree to drive his point home. “If the apples will not remain on the tree of their own strength, . . . let them fall! . . . And if the Negro cannot stand on his own legs, let him fall also. All I ask is, give him a chance to stand on his own legs! Let him alone! . . . [Y]our interference is doing him a positive injury.”

Finally, Douglass concluded, “If the Negro cannot live by the line of eternal justice, . . . the fault will not be yours. . . . If you will only untie his hands, and give him a chance, I think he will live.”

Douglass knew much about rising and falling on his own merits. A fugitive slave, he fled northward and joined the antislavery movement in Massachusetts in 1841. He wrote an autobiography and edited the *North Star*, a newspaper promoting freedom for all

blacks. Douglass was tall with a mass of hair, penetrating eyes, and a firm chin. Stubborn and principled, he was a captivating orator and spoke all over the United States before and after the Civil War. He was even appointed U.S. minister to Haiti in 1889.

Douglass was especially comfortable speaking before audiences committed to freedom of opportunity for blacks. Not surprisingly, therefore, he came to Michigan in the middle of the Civil War to speak at Hillsdale College, founded in 1844 as only the second integrated college in the nation. The college was somewhat depleted because most of the male students had enlisted in the Union army, which would ultimately win the war and secure the freedom that Douglass had been promoting for over 20 years.

When Douglass died in 1895, Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, became the most prominent spokesman for black Americans. Like Douglass, Washington was born into slavery, and also like Douglass, he became a forceful writer and orator. In fact, Washington researched and published a biography of Douglass to promote their mutual ideas.

For example, Washington shared Douglass’s belief that equal opportunity, not special privileges, was the recipe for success for blacks. Two years after Douglass’s death, Washington also made the pilgrimage to Hillsdale College and spoke to the students about promoting in the black community “efficiency and ability, especially in practical living.”

He elaborated on this idea in his 1901 book *Up From Slavery*. “I believe,” Washington insisted, “that my race will succeed in proportion as it learns to do a common thing in an uncommon manner; learns to do a thing so thoroughly that no one can improve upon

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what it has done; learns to make its services of indispensable value.”

What about discrimination—say, when a white employer uses his freedom to refuse to hire a black or to force him into segregated facilities? In such cases Washington sometimes argued for direct action. In 1894 he endorsed the blacks who boycotted newly segregated streetcars in Atlanta. In 1899 and 1900 he publicly opposed efforts by the states of Georgia and Louisiana to disfranchise blacks. Washington insisted, “I do not favor the Negro’s giving up anything which is fundamental and which has been guaranteed to him by the Constitution.”

More often than not, however, Washington thought that trying to use the force of government to advance the black cause was not as effective as improving the race over time and making blacks indispensable to the American economy. He observed, “No man who continues to add something to the material, intellectual, and moral well-being of the place in which he lives is long left without proper reward. This is a great human law which cannot be permanently nullified.” Put another way, Washington declared, “An inch of progress is worth more than a yard of complaint.”

Thus when white racists used their freedom to discriminate against blacks, blacks needed to use their freedom to build factories, invent products, and grow crops to make themselves indispensable to economic progress in America. To Washington, that meant two courses of action.

### **National Negro Business League**

First, he founded the National Negro Business League to bring together hundreds of black businessmen and inventors to share ideas and promote economic development. After some initial reluctance, Washington even used this forum to champion black businesswomen, such as hair-care entrepreneur Madam C. J. Walker, the first black female millionaire.

Second, Washington promoted more education for blacks. Education to Washington, especially industrial education that stressed manual labor as well as literary skill, was the means to producing future entre-

preneurs, inventors, and teachers that would expand the foundation of black achievement and make racial progress inevitable.

Tuskegee Institute was Washington’s main focus, but he encouraged the various black schools and colleges that sprang up all around the nation. While only one black college existed before the Civil War, an average of more than one each year was created in the decades after the war.

What was the result of the emphasis on liberty, self-help, and education stressed by Douglass and Washington? Some black leaders, such as W. E. B. DuBois, criticized the slow and uneven progress, but in truth, black advancement was visible and compelling. Black literacy rates (age 10 and over) went from 20 percent in 1870 to 84 percent by 1930. That meant that in 1930—in sharp contrast to 1870—any honestly administered literacy test for voting would disfranchise almost as many whites as blacks.

During these 60 years black inventors came forth with dozens of major inventions: lubricating systems for train engines, ventilator screens to protect passengers on those trains, the traffic light, and hundreds of uses for the lowly peanut.

These advances slowly helped break down the stereotypes of blacks as illiterate and unskilled. Some of the evidence for change in attitude was symbolic. For example, Booker T. Washington, who had been the first black invited to the White House, became the first black to be honored on an American coin in 1946. The next year major league baseball was integrated; 12 years later all major league teams were integrated, and it was accomplished Booker T. Washington-style without government interference or mandates.

As black Americans increasingly showed themselves to be educated and contributing parts of the American economy, racist arguments broke down and public support for integration and voting rights began to increase. Change was not always steady or peaceful, but it did come. Douglass and Washington were its forerunners. Douglass said it best 140 years ago: “All I ask is, give him [the black American] a chance to stand on his own legs.”

