Washington, Booker T(aliaferro)

(b. April 5, 1856, Franklin County, Va., U.S.--d. Nov. 14, 1915, Tuskegee, Ala.), educator and reformer, first president and principal developer of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute (now Tuskegee University), and the most influential spokesman for black Americans between 1895 and 1915.

He was born in a slave hut but, after emancipation, moved with his family to Malden, W.Va. Dire poverty ruled out regular schooling; at age nine he began working, first in a salt furnace and later in a coal mine. Determined to get an education, he enrolled at the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia (1872), working as a janitor to help pay expenses. He graduated in 1875 and returned to Malden, where for two years he taught children in a day school and adults at night. Following studies at Wayland Seminary, Washington, D.C. (1878-79), he joined the staff of Hampton.

In 1881 Washington was selected to head a newly established normal school for blacks at Tuskegee, an institution with two small, converted buildings, no equipment, and very little money. Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute became a monument to his life's work. At his death 34 years later, it had more than 100 well-equipped buildings, some 1,500 students, a faculty of nearly 200 teaching 38 trades and professions, and an endowment of approximately $2,000,000.

Washington believed that the best interests of black people in the post-Reconstruction era could be realized through education in the crafts and industrial skills and the cultivation of the virtues of patience, enterprise, and thrift. He urged his fellow blacks, most of whom were impoverished and illiterate farm labourers, to temporarily abandon their efforts to win full civil rights and political power and instead to cultivate their industrial and farming skills so as to attain economic security. Blacks would thus accept segregation and discrimination, but their eventual acquisition of wealth and culture would gradually win for them the respect and acceptance of the white community. This would break down the divisions between the two races and lead to equal citizenship for blacks in the end. In his epochal speech (Sept. 18, 1895) to a racially mixed audience at the Atlanta (Ga.) Exposition, Washington summed up his pragmatic approach in the famous phrase: "In all things that are purely social we can be separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."

These sentiments were called the Atlanta Compromise by such critics as the black intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, who deplored Washington's emphasis on vocational skills to the detriment of academic development and civil rights. And indeed, it is true that during the period of Washington's ascendancy as national spokesman of U.S. blacks his race was systematically excluded both from the franchise and from any effective participation in national political life, and rigid patterns of segregation and discrimination became institutionalized in the Southern states. Even Washington's visit to the White House in 1901 was greeted with a storm of protest as a "breach of racial etiquette."

Most blacks felt comfortable with Washington's approach, however, and his influence among whites was such that he became an unofficial arbiter determining which black individuals and institutions were deemed worthy to benefit from government patronage and white philanthropic support. He went on to receive honorary degrees from Harvard University (1896) and Dartmouth College (1901). Among his dozen books is his autobiography, Up from Slavery (1901), translated into many languages.

BIBLIOGRAPHY.