“Atlanta Compromise Speech”
Booker T. Washington
(1895)

On September 18, 1895 Booker T. Washington gave an address to the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition which became known as the “Atlanta Compromise Speech.” The address appears below.

Mr. President, Gentlemen of the Board of Directors, and Citizens:

One-third of the population of the South is of Negro race. No enterprise seeking the material, civil, or moral welfare of this section can disregard this element of our population and reach the highest success. I but convey to you, Mr. President and Directors, the sentiment of the masses of my race, when I say that in no way have the value and manhood of the American Negro been more fittingly and generously recognized, than by the managers of this magnificent Exposition at every stage of its progress. It is a recognition which will do more to cement the friendship of the two races than any occurrence since the dawn of our freedom.

Not only this, but the opportunity here afforded will awaken among us a new era of industrial progress. Ignorant and inexperienced, it is not strange that in the first years of our new life we began at the top instead of the bottom; that a seat in Congress or the State Legislature was more sought than real estate or industrial skill; that the political convention or stump speaking had more attractions than starting a dairy farm or truck garden. A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen the signal: “Water, water, we die of thirst.” The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” A second time the signal, “Water, send us water,” ran up from the distressed vessel and was answered, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction cast down his bucket and it came up full of fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River. To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land, or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man who is their next door neighbor, I would say, cast down your bucket where you are, cast it down in making friends, in every manly way, of the people of all races by whom you are surrounded. Cast it down in agriculture, in mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions. And in this connection it is well to bear in mind that, whatever other sins the South may be called upon to bear, when it comes to business pure and simple it is in the South that the Negro is given a man’s chance in the commercial world; and in nothing is this Exposition more eloquent than in emphasizing this chance. 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 draw the line between superficial and the substantial,
the ornamental gewgaws of life and the useful. No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin and not the top. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities.

To those of the white race who look to the incoming of those of foreign birth and strange tongue and habits for the prosperity of the South, were I permitted, I would repeat what I say to my own race, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” Cast it down among the 8,000,000 Negroes whose habits you know, whose loyalty and love you have tested in days when to have proved treacherous meant the ruin of your firesides. Cast it down among those people who have, without strikes and labor wars, tilled your fields, cleared your forests, built your railroads and cities, and brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth and helped make possible this magnificent representation of the progress of the South. Casting down your bucket among my people, helping and encouraging as you are doing on these grounds, and with education of head, hand, and heart, you will find that they will buy your surplus land, make blossom the waste places in your fields, and run your factories. While doing this you can be sure in the future, as you have been 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. As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past, in nursing your children, watching by the sick beds of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defense of yours; interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one. In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.

There is no defense or security for any of us except in the highest intelligence and development of all. If anywhere there are efforts tending to curtail the fullest growth of the Negro, let these efforts be turned into simulating, encouraging and making him the most useful and intelligent citizen. Effort or means so invested will pay a thousand per cent interest. These efforts will be twice blessed—“blessing him that gives and him that takes.”

There is no escape, through law of man or God, from the inevitable:

The laws of changeless justice bind
Oppressor with oppressed,
And close as sin and suffering joined We march to fate abreast.

Nearly sixteen millions of hands will aid you pulling the load upwards, or they will pull against you the load downwards. We shall constitute one-third and much more of the ignorance and crime of the South, or one-third of its intelligence and progress; we shall contribute one-third to the business and industrial prosperity of the South, or we shall prove a veritable body of death, stagnating, depressing, retarding every effort to advance the body politic. Gentlemen of the Exposition: As we present to you our humble effort at an exhibition of our progress, you must
not expect over much; starting thirty years ago with ownership here and there in a few quilts and
pumpkins and chickens (gathered from miscellaneous sources) remember, the path that has led
us from these to the invention and production of agricultural implements, buggies, steam
engines, newspapers, books, statuary, carvings, paintings, the management of drug stores and
banks, has not been trodden without contact with thorns and thistles. While we take pride in what
we exhibit as a result of our independent efforts, we do not for a moment forget that our part in
this exhibit would fall far short of your expectations but for the constant help that has come to
our educational life, not only from the Southern States, but especially from Northern
philanthropists who have made their gifts a constant stream of blessing and encouragement.

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 the result of severe and constant struggle, rather than of artificial forcing. No race that has
anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized. It is important
and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared
for the exercise of these privileges. The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth
infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera house.

In conclusion, may I repeat, that nothing in thirty years has given us more hope and
encouragement and drawn us so near to you of the white race as the opportunity offered by this
Exposition; here bending, as it were, over the altar that represents the results of the struggles of
your race and mine, both starting practically empty-handed three decades ago, I pledge that, in
your effort to work out the great and intricate problem which God has laid at the doors of the
South, you shall have at all times the patient, sympathetic help of my race. Only let this be
constantly in mind, that while, from representations in these buildings of the products of field, of
forest, of mine, of factory, letter and art, much good will come—yet, far above and beyond
material benefit, will be that higher good, that let us pray God will come, in a blotting out of
sectional differences and racial animosities and suspicions, and in a determination, even in the
remotest corner, to administer absolute justice; in a willing obedience among all classes to the
mandates of law, and a spirit that will tolerate nothing but the highest equity in the enforcement
of law. This, then, coupled with material prosperity, will bring into our beloved South new
heaven and new earth.

- See more at: http://www.blackpast.org/1895-booker-t-washington-atlanta-compromise-
speech#sthash.GKfJPQ3w.dpuf