

Selected Excerpts from
Washington and DuBois: Two Opinions, One Goal
By Lee Eric Shackelford

Excerpt 1, pages 10 -11.

WASHINGTON: But I will not boast of my own accomplishments. "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ!" I will testify only to the philosophy of our work at Tuskegee and the fruits it bore.

DU BOIS: Ah, well, yes, but, in all fairness ... if you allow me to speak first, we may be able to conclude this debate very quickly.

WASHINGTON: Why do you say that?

DU BOIS: Because I outlived you by nearly a half century. Have you forgotten already? I lived to see the results of your teaching and example.

[Washington is thrown by this for a moment, horrified by the possible truth to be revealed. But he squares his broad shoulders, steely-eyed.]

WASHINGTON: I am not afraid of anything you may reveal. I learned early on, the lesson of the trees and the grass. When the storm winds come, the grass that bends is what survives. The stiff, unmoving tree, no matter how mighty, is what breaks. No, sir, I have always had to be the grass and not the tree.

Excerpt 2, pages 12 -13.

DU BOIS: Because the struggle for civil rights in America had become more than anyone could bear! This is what I am hoping you will understand. That march was to be glorious, yes, and it probably was! A triumph for our race and all who love us. But why was it necessary? Nearly fifty years after your death, and Black Americans are marching in the street to demand equal rights? Why, a hundred years after the end of the slavery, were Black men and women still not free? Why?

WASHINGTON: Are you saying you blame me for this?

DU BOIS: In plain and simple terms, YES!

[Washington moves toward Du Bois, a reflex. Du Bois has a reflex of his own: he backs away. Perhaps even behind his chair.]

WASHINGTON: *[with deadly calm]* Perhaps you can explain that in terms sufficiently "plain and simple" that even I can understand them.

DU BOIS: I have not resorted to sarcasm and neither should you. I am relating my experience of decades, watching in horror as the civil rights promised to American Negroes were eroded, denied, or stripped away --

[to the audience]

-- and I want the judges of history to remember this --

[to Washington]

-- all because the leader of America's nation of freed slaves, Booker T. Washington, refused to fight for those rights!

WASHINGTON: That is a gross over-simplification of --

DU BOIS: It is not. You always taught that the Black man must EARN the White man's respect. Did you not? And I say the Black man must CLAIM the respect to which he is already entitled.

WASHINGTON: Respect is not a gift! It must be earned! You are yourself a splendid example --

[to the audience]

-- allow me to illustrate this --

Excerpt 3, pages 14.

WASHINGTON: *[to audience]* And this has been the core, the root, of my work at Tuskegee and elsewhere: to teach as many people as possible how to do something the world needs -- basic things, essential things. And to be the very best at whatever work they've set their hand to. We began with freed slaves and the sons and daughters of slaves who did not even know how to keep their own bodies clean, or how to sit at a table to eat a meal. And we taught them how to read and write, to perform useful calculations of math, and opened their eyes to the worlds of history and science and literature! And those first students, those first graduating classes, they BUILT that school with their own hands! Literally raised the timbers and laid the bricks -- bricks they made themselves from the red Alabama clay! They planted the trees and raised food for all our tables. And they learned excellence in essential trades: to be the very best at caring for the clothes everyone needs. Maintaining the houses in which everyone lives. Harvesting crops and dairy products and cotton the world needs! They learned trades that sustained them for the rest of their lives! And in so doing earned the RESPECT of the entire world.

DU BOIS: I have never said that your Tuskegee cotton-pickers should not have worked and studied to make better lives for themselves.

WASHINGTON: No?

DU BOIS: No! Only that they should also have the right to VOTE! To be treated fairly in a court of law! To walk the same streets and ride in the same railway cars as White people!