

ADDRESS BY JACKSON DAVIS

Associate Director, General Education Board

On the occasion of the unveiling of the
bust of Booker T. Washington in the Hall
of Fame at New York University
May 23, 1946

We meet today to celebrate the recognition by the nation of the place of Booker T. Washington in the Hall of Fame. Booker Washington has long held a secure place among the great men of America. Few men have had such a dramatic range of experience as was encompassed in his life. He was born a slave in the poorest circumstances on a farm in Franklin County, Virginia. He died the head of a great school which he had established, a pioneer in rural education, the interpreter, and spokesman of millions of American Negroes in their striving for a better life. He was known internationally, recognized by presidents and crowned heads, by captains of industry and finance, the hero of the people; and yet he was a modest citizen of Macon County, Alabama, a neighbor and friend to black and white alike.

His book UP FROM SLAVERY, recounts the story of his life with a moving simplicity, forgetful of self, which has made it one of the books that the world will not let die. It has been translated into many foreign languages and continues to have a wide circulation. It has inspired thousands of disadvantaged persons, handicapped by birth or circumstance, to realize a larger life. This story has been of particular significance to the peoples of the world who have only recently come into contact with the standards of life prevailing in the more advanced countries of the western world, and who, like Booker Washington, are eager to learn the techniques and disciplines and the democratic ideals that open the door of opportunity to young people and give them a chance of development in proportion to their natural ability and character. This book is an epic story which will be prized as long as men are moved by great human achievement.

Dr. Wallace Buttrick, the first executive officer of the General Education Board and a long friend of Dr. Washington, tells this story of the announcement of Dr. Washington's death:

"On the morning of November 15, 1915, I entered the breakfast room of the Hongkong Hotel in China. Opening the morning paper, the first thing to attract my attention on the front page was the announcement of the death on the day before of the distinguished educator, orator, and public man, Dr. Booker T. Washington.

"My immediate emotion was of grief and sorrow because I should never again on earth look into the face of one of the dearest friends of my life. Very soon I thought and said to my companions, Dr. William H. Welch and Dr. Simon Flexner, 'are there ten men in America whose death would be featured on the first page of the leading journal of the Far East, half around the world?' As I recall, nothing was said in the paper of his being a Negro. They make little account of such things there. He was simply one of the world's great men, one of the very limited number of men who make enduring contributions to human progress, one of the world's immortals, a man who had inspired and led his fellowmen to higher things."

But it wasn't the world's acclaim, the newspaper front page, or the dramatic range and contrast of achievement that gave Booker Washington his first claim to a place among those great lives that we cherish. There was a quality

of simplicity and sincerity that gave him the common touch of the truly great. It could be said of him, as he once said of Dr. Dillard, one of his southern friends, that he had seen him among all sorts of people - the rich and the poor, the great and the lowly; that he was always the same - a christian, a gentleman, whose charm and simplicity made the President of the United States or the farm laborer feel equally at home in his presence. His engaging simplicity and forthrightness disarmed opposition and opened doors that had been closed to members of his race. There was nothing sectional, nothing racial, nothing narrow in his outlook or his sympathy. These things had no more place in his life than they had in the life of Abraham Lincoln or of Robert E. Lee. In the midst of misunderstandings he saw beyond the petty bickerings and irritations of the moment. He emphasized the common interests of a great humanity and had no time to waste on the divisive interests that set one group against another. In a world weary of war and still torn by conflicts of group or race or class, when so much organized opinion is marshaled to promote the special interests of one group over another, it is refreshing to hear the words of Booker Washington; "No man, white or black, from North or South, shall drag me down so low as to make me hate him."

Like ourselves, Dr. Washington lived in a troubled time. His childhood came during the hard poverty of the Civil War and his young manhood in the bitter period of Reconstruction. This dishevelled-looking boy who presented himself for entrance at Hampton Institute raised many questions. He had walked half-way across Virginia, and then worked to get money for his railroad fare the rest of the way, but the New England teacher who asked him to sweet out a classroom recognized the character and spirit behind this external appearance. He made his way in the school, and his gifts, his personal magnetism, his readiness of speech, offered him a career in politics and in other fields. Instead, he answered a call from the Black Belt of Alabama to take charge of a school, and from that time there was no question of his purpose. His life was spent in the upbuilding of the South. He shared life in the poor areas of the South with his black and white neighbors, and he never lost touch with them. He never lent himself to any movement that would reflect on or demean these people. He loved them; he understood them, and they trusted him. His Atlanta address sounded a new and constructive note. It was a signal to the South and to the whole nation to forsake counsels of sectionalism and distrust, to recognize their common interests, to trust one another, to help one another with the tasks at hand. In this attitude he spoke for the loyalty and devotion of the colored people, for their love of home and neighbors, for their pride and sense of responsibility in maintaining the best in character and achievement that they knew. If Hampton Institute had blazed the trail in adapting education to the needs of the people and using the work and experiences of life as a means of acquiring skill, intelligence, and responsibility as well as the means of an improved standard of life, it remained for Booker Washington to expound these practices to the public and to embody them in the program of Tuskegee Institute. We often forget how strange these ideas sounded at a time when people thought of education wholly in terms of books and the classical tradition was strong in all our higher institutions.

With apt stories and contagious humor he derided the notion that white people and Negroes must think of each other as a problem. He was wary of theories and general talk, and he knew the value of dealing with simple, concrete things. He was at his best in conducting the Farmers Conference at Tuskegee. He had an uncanny ability to distinguish between the men who had a story of achievement to tell and those who merely wanted to talk. From the man who as a laborer or share-cropper had saved his money, bought a small farm and built a home, he would bring out the story of his successful struggle with a timely word of counsel about providing for his family and working with his neighbors to improve the school and the church. To another who said: "Mr. Washington, I would like to talk about race

relations in my county", he said: "That is a mighty big subject. How much land do you own in that county?" "I don't own any", the man replied. Then Booker Washington said: "You go back and buy a piece of land, no matter if it is only an acre. Then come back next year and tell us about it." In this way he set forth with simplicity and earnestness the opportunity of rural life, the way of good farming and economic independence. He summed it up in this statement: "We shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify labor and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life."

This is no temporary philosophy. Booker Washington's life and teachings have a timeless quality. How accurately he has stated both the conditions and the ideals before us in this troubled time when he said: "There is no defense or security for any of us except in the highest intelligence and development of all."