## “Cast Down Your Bucket Where You Are”: Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Compromise Speech

### by Booker T. Washington

In 1895, Booker T. Washington gave what later came to be known as the Atlanta Compromise speech before the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. His address was one of the most important and influential speeches in American history, guiding African-American resistance to white discrimination and establishing Washington as one of the leading black spokesmen in America. Washington’s speech stressed accommodation rather than resistance to the racist order under which Southern African Americans lived. In 1903, Washington recorded this portion of his famous speech, the only surviving recording of his voice.

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**Booker T. Washington:** Mr. President and gentlemen of the Board of Directors and citizens. One third of the population of the South is of the 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 must convey to you, Mr. President and Directors, and Secretaries and 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 that 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 opportunities 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 of some teaching had more attraction than starting a dairy farm or a stockyard.

A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a 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!” went up from the distressed vessel. And was answered: “Cast down your bucket where you are.” A third and fourth signal for water 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 preservating 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, making friends in every manly way of the people of all races, by whom you are surrounded.

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 have said to my own race: “Cast down your bucket where you are.” Cast it down among the eight millions of Negroes whose habits you know, whose fidelity and love you have tested in days when to have proved treacherous meant the ruin of your fireside. Cast down your bucket among these people who have without strikes and labor wars tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builded your railroads and cities, brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth, just to make possible this magnificent representation of the progress of the South.

Source: Oral history courtesy of the [Michigan State University Voice Library.](http://vvl.lib.msu.edu/index.cfm)