Three Visions for African Americans

In the early years of the 20th century, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey developed competing visions for the future of African Americans.

Civil War Reconstruction failed to assure the full rights of citizens to the freed slaves. By the 1890s, Ku Klux Klan terrorism, lynchings, racial-segregation laws, and voting restrictions made a mockery of the rights guaranteed by the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, which were passed after the Civil War.

The problem for African Americans in the early years of the 20th century was how to respond to a white society that for the most part did not want to treat black people as equals. Three black visionaries offered different solutions to the problem.

Booker T. Washington argued for African Americans to first improve themselves through education, industrial training, and business ownership. Equal rights would naturally come later, he believed. W. E. B. Du Bois agreed that self-improvement was a good idea, but that it should not happen at the expense of giving up immediate full citizenship rights. Another visionary, Marcus Garvey, believed black Americans would never be accepted as equals in the United States. He pushed for them to develop their own separate communities or even emigrate back to Africa.

Booker T. Washington

Booker T. Washington was born a slave in Virginia in 1856. Early on in his life, he developed a thirst for reading and learning. After attending a elementary school for African-American children, Washington walked 500 miles to enroll in Hampton Institute, one of the few black high schools in the South.

Working as a janitor to pay his tuition, Washington soon became the favorite pupil of Hampton's white founder, General Samuel Chapman Armstrong. Armstrong, a former Union officer, had developed a highly structured curriculum, stressing discipline, moral character, and training for practical trades.

Following his graduation from Hampton, for a few years Washington taught elementary school in his hometown. In 1880, General Armstrong invited him to return to teach at Hampton. A year later, Armstrong nominated Washington to head a new school in Tuskegee, Alabama, for the training of black teachers, farmers, and skilled workers.

Washington designed, developed, and guided the Tuskegee Institute. It became a powerhouse of African-American education and political influence in the United States. He used the Hampton Institute, with its emphasis on agricultural and industrial training, as his model.

Washington argued that African Americans must concentrate on educating themselves, learning useful trades, and investing in their own businesses. Hard work, economic progress, and merit, he believed, would prove to whites the value of blacks to the American economy.

Washington believed that his vision for black people would eventually lead to equal political and civil rights. In the meantime, he advised blacks to put aside immediate demands for voting and ending racial segregation.

In his famous address to the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, Washington accepted the reality of racial segregation. He insisted, however, that African Americans be included in the economic progress of the South.

Washington declared to an all-white audience, "In all things social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." Washington went on to express his confidence that, "No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized [shut out]."

White Americans viewed Washington's vision as the key to racial peace in the nation. With the aid of white philanthropists such as Andrew Carnegie, Washington's Tuskegee Institute and its philosophy of economics first and equal rights later thrived.

Recognized by whites as the spokesman for his people, Washington soon became the most powerful black leader in the United States. He had a say in political appointments and which African-American colleges and charities would get funding from white philanthropists. He controlled a number of newspapers that attacked anyone who questioned his vision.

Washington considered himself a bridge between the races. But other black leaders criticized him for tolerating racial segregation at a time of increasing anti-black violence and discrimination.

Washington did publicly speak out against the evils of segregation, lynching, and discrimination in voting. He also secretly participated in lawsuits involving voter registration tests, exclusion of blacks from juries, and unequal railroad facilities.

By the time Booker T. Washington died in 1915, segregation laws and racial discrimination were firmly established throughout the South and in many other parts of the United States. This persistent racism blocked the advancement of African Americans.

W. E. B. Du Bois

W. E. B. Du Bois was born in Massachusetts in 1868. He attended racially integrated elementary and high schools and went off to Fiske College in Tennessee at age 16 on a scholarship. Du Bois completed his formal education at Harvard with a Ph.D. in history.

Du Bois briefly taught at a college in Ohio before he became the director of a major study on the social conditions of blacks in Philadelphia. He concluded from his research that white discrimination was the main reason that kept African Americans from good-paying jobs.

In 1897, two years after Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Address," Du Bois wrote, "We want to be Americans, full-fledged Americans, with all the rights of American citizens." He envisioned the creation of an elite group of educated black leaders, "The Talented Tenth," who would lead African Americans in securing equal rights and higher economic standards.

Du Bois attacked Washington's acceptance of racial segregation, arguing that this only encouraged whites to deny African Americans the right to vote and to undermine black pride and progress. Du Bois also criticized Washington's Tuskegee approach as an attempt "to educate black boys and girls simply as servants and underlings."

Lynchings and riots against blacks led to the formation in 1909 of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization with a mainly black membership. Except for Du Bois who became the editor of the organization's journal, *The Crisis*, the founding board of directors consisted of white civil rights leaders.

The NAACP used publicity, protests, lawsuits, and the editorial pages of *The Crisis* to attack racial segregation, discrimination, and the lynching of blacks. Booker T. Washington rejected this confrontational approach, but by the time of his death in 1915 his Tuskegee vision had lost influence among many African Americans.

By World War I, Du Bois had become the leading black figure in the United States. But he became disillusioned after the war when white Americans continued to deny black Americans equal political and civil rights. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Du Bois increasingly advocated socialist solutions to the nation's economic problems. He also questioned the NAACP's goal of a racially integrated society. This led to his resignation as editor of *The Crisis* in 1934.

Du Bois grew increasingly critical of U. S. capitalism and foreign policy. He praised the accomplishments of communism in the Soviet Union. In 1961, he joined the U.S. Communist Party. Shortly afterward, he left the county, renounced his American citizenship, and became a citizen of Ghana in Africa. He died there at age 95 in 1963.

Du Bois never took part in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, which secured many of the rights that he had fought for during his lifetime.

Marcus Garvey

Marcus Garvey, the third major black visionary in the early part of the 20th century, was born in Jamaica in 1887. He founded his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1914.

UNIA stressed racial pride and self-improvement, much like the views of Booker T. Washington whom Garvey admired. Garvey, however, had greater international ambitions, including the development of worldwide black-owned industries and shipping lines. He also called for the end of white colonial rule in Africa.

At the invitation of Washington, Garvey traveled to the United States in 1916. He soon established his UNIA in New York City, opened a restaurant, and started a newspaper. In 1919, he formed the Black Star Line, the first black-owned shipping company in the United States.

The publicity over the Black Star Line caused great excitement among black Americans, many of whom bought stock in it. Garvey organized huge parades to promote this and other UNIA projects. He often appeared in a colorful uniform, wearing a plumed hat.

In 1920, over 20,000 people attended Garvey's first UNIA convention in New York. The convention produced a "Declaration of Negro Rights," which denounced lynchings, segregated public transportation, job discrimination, and inferior black public schools. The document also demanded "Africa for the Africans." Without actually consulting any African people, the convention proclaimed Garvey the "Provisional President of Africa."

Garvey believed that white society would never accept black Americans as equals. Therefore, he called for the separate self-development of African Americans within the United States.

The UNIA set up many small black-owned businesses such as restaurants, groceries, a publishing house, and even a toy company that made black dolls. Garvey's goal was to create a separate economy and society run for and by African Americans.

Ultimately, Garvey argued, all black people in the world should return to their homeland in Africa, which should be free of white colonial rule. Garvey had grand plans for settling black Americans in Liberia, the only country in Africa governed by Africans. But, Garvey's UNIA lacked the necessary funds and few blacks in the United States indicated any interest in going "back to Africa."

A poor economy and the near-bankruptcy of the Black Star Line caused Garvey to seek more dues-paying members for the UNIA. He launched a recruitment campaign in the South, which he had ignored because of strong white resistance.

In a bizarre twist, Garvey met with a leader of the Ku Klux Klan in Atlanta in 1922. Garvey declared that the goal of the UNIA and KKK was the same: completely separate

black and white societies. Garvey even praised racial segregation laws, explaining that they were good for building black businesses. Little came of this recruitment effort. Criticism from his followers grew.

In 1922, the U.S. government arrested Garvey for mail fraud for his attempts to sell more stock in the failing Black Star Line. At his trial, the evidence showed that Garvey was a poor businessman, but the facts were less clear about outright fraud. The jury convicted him anyway, and he was sentenced to prison.

In 1927, President Calvin Coolidge commuted his sentence, and he was released. The government immediately deported him to Jamaica.

His vision for black separatism and "back to Africa" never caught on with most African Americans, and he and his spectacular movement soon faded away. Garvey died in 1940, an almost forgotten man.

U.S. History Name_____

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Three Visions for African Americans

1. Compare the three visions for African Americans:

Booker T. Washington	W.E.B. Du Bois	Marcus Garvey

2. Considering the state of race relations in the United States in the early years of the 20th century, what do you think was the best way for black people to improve their lives as American citizens? Why?