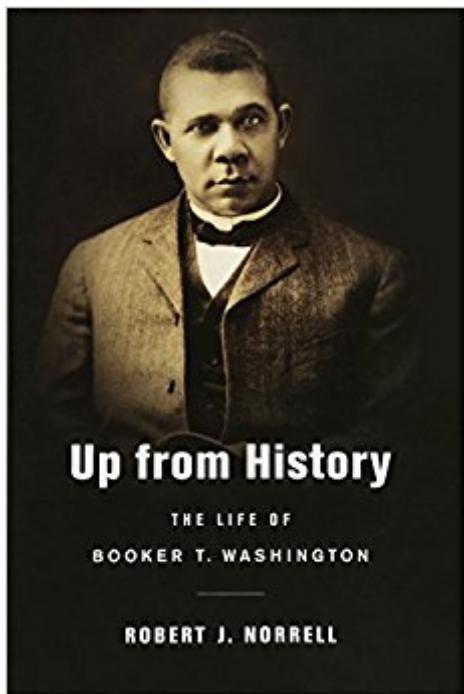


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# Up From History: The Life Of Booker T. Washington



## Synopsis

Since the 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr., has personified black leadership with his use of direct action protests against white authority. A century ago, in the era of Jim Crow, Booker T. Washington pursued a different strategy to lift his people. In this compelling biography, Norrell reveals how conditions in the segregated South led Washington to call for a less contentious path to freedom and equality. He urged black people to acquire economic independence and to develop the moral character that would ultimately gain them full citizenship. Although widely accepted as the most realistic way to integrate blacks into American life during his time, Washington's strategy has been disparaged since the 1960s. The first full-length biography of Booker T. in a generation, *Up from History* recreates the broad contexts in which Washington worked: He struggled against white bigots who hated his economic ambitions for blacks, African-American intellectuals like W. E. B. Du Bois who resented his huge influence, and such inconstant allies as Theodore Roosevelt. Norrell details the positive power of Washington's vision, one that invoked hope and optimism to overcome past exploitation and present discrimination. Indeed, his ideas have since inspired peoples across the Third World that there are many ways to struggle for equality and justice. *Up from History* reinstates this extraordinary historical figure to the pantheon of black leaders, illuminating not only his mission and achievement but also, poignantly, the man himself.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Norrell has provided us with a fascinating portrait of one of the most influential Americans of his age.

Rather than the charlatan, enigma, or Uncle Tom that previous biographers have depicted, Washington emerges as a gifted, creative, and flawed activist who struggled for racial uplift while perched precariously on the knife-edge of American racism. Up from History deserves a place beside the very best American biographies. (W. Fitzhugh Brundage, author of *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory*) By carefully and consistently assessing Washington within the context of his own extraordinarily difficult and dangerous time, Norrell not only explodes the still-prevalent civil-rights-era stereotype of Washington as a self-serving accommodationist, but he demonstrates how quickly and thoroughly we lose historical perspective when we begin to impose the expectations of the present without regard for the realities of the past. (James C. Cobb, Spalding Distinguished Professor of History, University of Georgia) Instead of viewing Booker T. Washington from the vantage point of the modern civil rights era, Robert J. Norrell has placed him squarely in the violent context of late nineteenth-century Alabama (and American) race relations. The result is a compelling new biography that should lead apologists and critics of Washington to see him in a new light. A first-rate read. (Dan Carter, Professor Emeritus, University of South Carolina) This well-written and forcefully argued book will be hotly debated in the profession. (Clarence E. Walker, Professor of History, UC Davis) A thoughtful biography that, perhaps, signals a new scholarly appreciation of a remarkable man. (Kirkus Reviews 2008-10-15) To the extent that Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) is remembered at all today, he is usually misremembered, which is a travesty... His unwillingness to practice protest politics, however, has earned him the scorn of many modern-day critics, who dismiss him as too meek in his dealings with whites... In *Up From History*, a compelling biography, Robert J. Norrell restores the Wizard of Tuskegee to his rightful place in the black pantheon... Many criticisms of Washington in more recent decades have echoed those of his contemporary black nemesis, W.E.B. Du Bois. Much has been made of this rivalry, but the relevant point is that the two men differed mainly in emphasis, not goals... Putting their differences into proper perspective is yet another way that *Up From History* serves as a useful corrective. (Jason L. Riley Wall Street Journal 2009-01-23) Few great Americans have been more cruelly treated by history than Booker Taliaferro Washington. He has been mocked, vilified and caricatured, yet by any reasonable measure his life was extraordinary... To see him as anything less than heroic borders on the incomprehensible... No, he wasn't the leader for 1940 or 1960 or today, but it is unfair to him, indeed it is unfair to history itself, to expect him to have been. Robert J. Norrell understands this and has written the story of his life as it actually was lived, not as we might wish it had been lived. *Up from History* is in all respects an exemplary book, scrupulously fair to its subject and thus to the reader as well. (Jonathan Yardley Washington Post Book World 2009-01-18) In the age of Obama,

Washington seems more than ever like a precursor: a beloved barrier-smasher, sensitive to the rigorous demands of being America's favorite black person. In short, Washington seems due for reappraisal, and in *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* the historian Robert J. Norrell aims to push him back up onto his pedestal--or, at any rate, to pick him up off the floor...Norrell reframes the picture of Washington by emphasizing the extent and ferocity of [white] hostility; he shows how Washington and his critics conspired to make the Tuskegee project seem less controversial, and less brave, than it really was. (Kelefa Sanneh New Yorker 2009-02-02)The much-misunderstood Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), the most prominent African American leader of his time, is brought back to life in riveting fashion. (Carlin Romano Philadelphia Inquirer 2009-01-23)It is hard to think of a historical figure more in need of biographical rescue. Yet Washington is an awkward challenge for the contemporary scholar. He is so thoroughly stigmatized as politically incorrect that rescuing him could seem a political act in itself, and even a balanced book could be dismissed as a polemic. But Robert J. Norrell, in his remarkable new biography, *Up from History*, gets around this problem the old-fashioned way: by scrupulously excavating the facts of his subject's life and then carefully situating him in his own era...Today the brilliance with which he achieved the near impossible is forgotten, while the unfair presumption of his racial capitulation is ubiquitous. *Up from History* will go far in correcting this. I thought I knew something of Washington's complexity before reading this book. And I had always been fascinated by Dr. Bledsoe in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, a darkly ironic sendup of Washington as a merciless pragmatist. But here we see the real man at his interminable labors: incessantly fund-raising for Tuskegee in the North, mapping out political strategy with liberal white philanthropists in Boston and New York, fighting with Northern black elites one day and with white nationalist Southerners the next, and then, back at Tuskegee, riding out on horseback in the early morning to micromanage the college's agricultural operations... Washington understood that his people also dwelled inside a crucible. Norrell's rich portrait makes clear that Washington never stopped seeing himself as the leader of his people. How to help them live in such circumstances? His informing idea was that responsibility--hard work, education, the moral life--brought a degree of freedom and independence even in oppression. The pursuit of excellence would bring blacks an economic currency in the larger world, and thus, ultimately, respect and equality. With more fearlessness than any '60s black nationalist, he saw black Americans as a free-standing people and asked them to compete openly with all others...Washington understood that the loss of good faith was the worst of all things, and when black America was at risk of this, he was the shepherd. *Up from History* gives back to America one of its greatest heroes. (Shelby Steele New York Times Book Review 2009-02-15)Robert J. Norrell's

Up from History rescues Washington from the most calumnious reputation in black history, revealing him as Race Man extraordinaire. (John McWhorter Forbes.com 2009-02-06)[Norrell's] book is timely, demonstrating how a man whose father was white and whose mother black, who rose from humble circumstances to achieve great prominence, can tumble to obscurity, his reasonable views drowned out by louder, more radical voices, voices no doubt strained with envy. (Barbara Bamberger Scott Curled Up with a Good Book 2009-02-13)A fine new biography. (John M. Taylor Washington Times 2009-02-22)

Robert J. Norrell is Professor of History and Bernadotte Schmitt Chair of Excellence at the University of Tennessee.

Americans need to read this book to learn about Booker T. Washington. Though the author takes a measured approach (possibly because the last major biographer treated Washington like a Clinton or Nixon), he almost certainly establishes Booker T. Washington as one of the greatest heroes of American History. Rather than the simple "Booker T. Washington thought this, on the other hand W.E.B. DuBois thought that" that you get in American History in both high school and college, this book tells the story of Booker T. Washington and analyzes his positions and stands. Many American will be surprised to learn (if they cared) that Washington supported numerous challenges to segregation, and bemoaned Justice Holmes' rulings and some of his friend President Roosevelt's actions. All of this while touring endlessly not just to raise money and the support of rich titans of industry, but as an inspirational speaker for Southern and Northern Blacks in what has been called one of the toughest chapters in America. Let Professor Norrell tell the story. All that to say, there is much more to be learned in this book. The book does read almost halfway between a scholarly analysis and a narrative history ala McCullough and Tuckman, but there is not a boring page.

Knowing little about Booker Washington, like most individuals in the US, I bought this book after seeing a very good play--Rag Times in which Booker is featured briefly. I enjoyed this book immensely. It is an excellent and insightful biography. It was an eye opener for me in terms of its historical context and the important constructive role played by Washington at an extremely difficult time for African Americans in the South. His leadership, experience and example afforded many others who came after him the opportunity to be more effective in gaining economic and political progress for African Americans. The author takes great pain, and gives convincing evidence, to provide a critique of the prior unfair treatment of Booker by most historians. Also, one gets a better

understanding of the racial attitudes of American Presidents, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson--the former supportive of Black progress, early in his administration, and the latter hostile to racial equality. The book further explains the munificence of great philanthropic Americans like Andrew Carnegie in helping Washington achieve his relentless efforts to improve the education of African Americans. After reading the book, one will walk away, I think, with greater appreciation for Booker Washington, his times and the extraordinary difficulties that African Americans had to overcome following their freedom from bondage.

This is a fantastically well-written biography of Booker Washington, at times, reading like big-selling biographies like John Adams. While it is a biography, Robert Norrell's objective (hence the title) seems to be a redeeming of Booker Washington from the very one-sided treatment he often gets (as a sell-out, a conservative, or naive). Unlike these depictions, Norrell depicts Washington as a man skillfully attempting to move a 'race' forward in a South that didn't take kindly to black success. We go from Washington's early years (covered well by Washington's TWO memoirs) to the building of Tuskegee to Washington's attempts to 'lead' the black race in public consciousness. Washington was a tireless fundraiser, enlisting the aid of many rich white industrialists, for his Tuskegee Institute, as he would later be a tireless champion of black uplift. Washington travelled across the country giving speeches extolling the virtues of hard work, economic self-determination, and racial harmony. He worked tirelessly to promote black (industrial and academic, contra popular belief) education and crusade against various Southern attempts at black disenfranchisement. He was the first black man to dine with the President (Theodore Roosevelt) and family (for which he paid dearly by arousing deep ire among white Southerners). Washington acquired enough political respect to aid in making several recommendations on political appointments (leading to a very public death threat made against Washington by a then-sitting US Senator). Perhaps because of Washington's success, he managed to anger both Southern whites who saw Washington as a threat, and Northern blacks, who often saw Washington as too meek. Norrell, in fact, spends a lot of time discussing the relationship between Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, which went from quite friendly and collegial to highly tense. Norrell dissects carefully the (what one must call) smear campaign waged by Du Bois and others (like Monroe Trotter) to depict Washington as a kind of sell-out who quested for personal power but did little for 'real' black progress. In truth, Norrell shows, Washington quite frequently took the same positions as Du Bois and other Northern blacks; he just did it in a very cautious and often behind-the-scenes way so as not to counterproductively alienate or demonize whites. To tell the truth, while I've always been a fan of Washington, this book caused

me to rethink my comfort with Washington, perhaps not in the way Norrell intended. In the end, as Norrell admits, Washington's almost-singular focus on agitating for black economic rights failed as much as it succeeded. Washington, it seems, took for granted that the American capitalism he believed blacks could use to gain economic freedom would be enough - that blacks who could prove their ability would not be discriminated against in hiring, that whites would not use law to make it exceedingly difficult for blacks to have a 'fair shake' in the market. But whites, time and again, did push back using law and market pressures to maintain their 'supremacy' in the market. And while Washington did not neglect the political, he time and again focused on economic freedoms as if the same tactics already used by whites to keep blacks out of the market would be used in the future. (Ironically, this also proved Washington's scepticism toward government solutions right, as whites invariably used POLITICAL power whenever blacks WERE gaining economic footholds by their own merits.) Long and short: this is an outstanding biography, both well-written and very thoughtful. It is easily one of the best books I've read this year, and one which helps give some nuance to a true American hero who deserves a rehearing.

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