Booker T. Washington, April 1856 – November 1915

- One of the last generation of black American leaders to be born a slave.
- Samuel Armstrong, founder of Hampton Agricultural Institute (where Washington studied) and before a Freedmen’s Bureau agent and commander of black troops during the Civil War, was Washington’s mentor and role-model. Armstrong believed education for blacks would enable them to achieve the same social level as whites.
- Between 1890 to 1915 Washington was the dominant leader in the African-American community.
- Armstrong recommended Washington to take charge of the Tuskegee Industrial Institute in Alabama – a new black vocational school – in 1888. He taught believing these would give them a more beneficial to blacks and strong economic foundation.
- The institute grew in size and student body rapidly after 14 years it was receiving about $80,000 annually. After 30 years it grew from 3 wooden cabins to 60 buildings of classrooms and dormitories (all but four built by the students as training).
- Institute became a model for industrial education.
- Washington believed blacks should accept segregation, stop demanding equal rights and lead a separate life to reduce racial conflict.
- He gave two speeches of renown: in the spring of 1895 he spoke on industrial education at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee which threw him into national prominence. Secondly in September 1895 at the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition it was the first time a black man spoke publicly on the same platform as whites and to a white audience, it was dubbed the ‘Atlanta Compromise’ speech – he said ‘in all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress’.
- He garnered a lot criticism from Northern blacks and was labelled an ‘accommodationist’. In later life he advised presidents and members of Congress on black appointments.
- With T. Thomas Fortune he founded the National Negro Business League to help black businesses in 1900. Secretly he supported anti-segregation law-suits.
- Recent studies such as Robert Francis Engs’s Educating the disfranchised and disinherited (1999) blame Armstrong for Washington’s failings as a civil rights leaders and for ‘mis-educating’ a generation of African Americans.