ROBERT J. NORRELL

Reply to Richard Valelly

Richard Vallely's generous review focuses heavily on Booker T. Washington's experience as a political actor, a role that prompts me to offer a few thoughts beyond my biography. Washington ascended to leadership of African Americans in 1895, soon after the death of Frederick Douglass, who had effectively made the claim for black citizenship to Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War and afterward was the powerful exponent of black political rights, even as they were largely lost in the thirty years after the war. What Washington said about voting rights became the chief measure of his success as race leader, and his handling of the issue has been the main basis on which his historical reputation has been based, mostly to his detriment. He has been condemned for selling out black political rights, for accepting disfranchisement to curry the favor of the white South.

And yet the decisions he made on the policies about black voting always reflected a shrewd understanding of his circumstances—the intensely racialized, increasingly hysterical environment of the turn of the twentieth-century South. Washington took positions with the long view in mind, and his decisions always had as their objective—though it was frequently hidden—the full enfranchisement of black people. But by the time he entered the national stage, he could not express his own faith in democratic rights—his certainty that blacks deserved them—because it was too dangerous.

The United States extended the right to vote to black freedmen, one of the few emancipation societies to do so. But very few white Southerners after the Civil War accepted that blacks should have the right of the franchise. Immediately terrorist groups formed to thwart black political rights, and when violence threatened to bring more federal intervention in southern states, whites turned to fraud and manipulation of electoral forms to minimize the impact of black votes. In the 1880s and 1890s, the political environment was so dangerous that most black political leaders grew pessimistic about the prospect of politics providing a viable means to improving their conditions in the United States. Virtually no black leader willingly accepted disfranchisement, but many acknowledged that the right to vote had become a dead letter—and a deadly undertaking in many places in the South.

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In the early 1890s, as he developed his distinctly materialist strategy for black uplift, Washington suggested that black economic success would eventually settle the question of black political rights happily. Economic success led to property ownership, which would result in black landlords and black moneylenders. The white man whose mortgage was held by a black would not prevent that black man from voting, Washington said, and therefore through commercial life the Negro would realize all his rights in the South. It was prophecy, not reality, an effort to buoy black spirits in an awful time, and the prediction did not necessarily come true, but Washington witnessed that black disfranchisement was a *fait accompli* and there was still hope for economic progress. When Henry Cabot Lodge in 1890 put forward a bill authorizing federal oversight of elections in the South to protect black voting rights, Washington's best white friend in Tuskegee said the Lodge "force" bill would humiliate and degrade all Southerners. When the Lodge bill was defeated in Congress, whites in the South felt freer to get blacks all the way out of politics. The disfranchising movements began across the South, with Mississippi leading the way in 1890 and every southern state entertaining measures to do the same throughout the early 1890s. Several southern states had already removed most blacks from the voter rolls with secret-ballot procedures that made it impossible for illiterate blacks to cast a ballot. The right to vote was effectively lost in most of the South by the time South Carolina became the second state to do it constitutionally in 1895.

At the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition, Washington conceded what virtually every white southerner presumed about blacks in politics—it had been a mistake to enfranchise them and the days of blacks' political activism were over. Reconstruction had been a misguided experiment that misled blacks to believe that a seat in Congress was more valuable than owning land or having a skill. Washington was in effect relinquishing what was already lost—independent black political power—in order to reduce white hostility. Still, the possibility of black political power provoked the worst race violence in the South. The Wilmington riot of 1898 resulted from white Democrats' determination to drive all blacks out of North Carolina's political process. Eight years later, the Atlanta riot was provoked by a race-charged election for governor of Georgia.

As disfranchisement rapidly gained momentum after the national defeat of the Populists, Washington tried to keep it from delivering the full measure of anti-black fallout that many southern whites wanted. He objected to South Carolina's 1895 disfranchising effort, not because he realistically thought he could stop it, but in the hope of preventing the separation of the school funds

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by race, which would effectively bring an end to black education. He understood that blacks were going to face even greater barriers on voting than already existed, but he engaged that battle in the hopes of saving black education. In 1898, he made an open plea to the Louisiana disfranchising convention, warning about a proposed grandfather clause that no southern state could enact laws that let an ignorant white man vote but denied the same right to an unlettered black man "without dwarfing for all times the morals of the white man." The plea made, he moved to defend black education, and once again the separation of school funds was kept out of the constitution. In 1899, Washington organized black efforts against a Populist-backed disfranchising law in Georgia, appealing to the anti-Populist whites, and the bill was defeated.

The tension about disfranchisement went up in late 1899 when an Indiana Republican congressman, Edgar D. Crumpacker, proposed legislation to enforce the punitive provisions of the Fourteenth Amendment. Southern states that had disfranchised blacks would have their congressional representation reduced proportionately with the decline in black voters. His name soon would be vilified in the South in the same angry tones as Senator Lodge's. The white South's response to "Crumpackerism" was a campaign for the repeal of the Fifteenth Amendment, which would end all federal authority over voting and allow southern states to disfranchise without fear of intervention. By 1900, some southern whites were advancing the repeal of the Fifteenth Amendment as the panacea for racial tensions. Washington avoided making public statements about either proposal, but he opposed them both. He was "very sure that it will be bad *for us* to have the United States recognize the right of any State to disfranchise a part of its citizenship for failure to live up to the requirements of the 14th and 15th amendments." In other words, the Crumpacker bill would remove the potential for constitutional pressure on southern states to give blacks the franchise. States would accept the punishment for disfranchisement—the loss of a seat or two in Congress—and then argue that the case for black voting rights was closed once and for all. Washington wanted to keep alive the promise of voting rights, hoping that the current movement for disfranchisement might be turned back, or if successful now, that it might eventually be reversed on the basis of Fourteenth or Fifteenth Amendment claims.

If Washington was sometimes a lion against disfranchisement, as he was in Louisiana in 1898 and in Georgia in 1899, he usually had to be a fox to fight it. He put together a network of supporters to challenge the Louisiana constitution in court with the understanding that his role would be kept secret to

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protect him from southern whites' condemnation. The Louisiana case began a kind of behind-the-scenes civil-rights activism that would characterize Washington's leadership for the next decade. When Alabama passed its disfranchising constitution, Washington organized secretly and funded half a dozen suits against the Alabama suffrage article, each of which failed because of judicial hostility to black voting rights.

Washington went so far as to find a paternalistic white Democrat for Theodore Roosevelt to appoint to a federal judgeship in the hope of sympathetic rulings on the Alabama suffrage law. Washington's political collaboration with Roosevelt, which he mainly used to thwart the lily-white Republicans, resulted in the celebrated White House dinner that sent the most influential southern politicians of the day—Ben Tillman, James K. Vardaman, and Tom Watson as well as the influential Thomas Dixon—into a fury against his supposed hypocrisy for minimizing publicly the importance of voting at the same time that he was working to get blacks and sympathetic whites appointed to federal positions. The apparent inconsistency was the basis of an attack at the same time from the black leaders William Monroe Trotter and W. E. B. Du Bois. Washington thus got in trouble trying to have it both ways—that is, coming up with a strategy for black uplift that emphasized the material and attempted to ease white hostility but that did not relinquish all black influence.

One reason this complex strategy did not work was that the right to vote is so privileged in the American system of values that men on opposite sides of the racial divide could essentially express the same anger and opposition to Washington because he tried to maintain some semblance of black political influence while advancing a mainly materialist strategy. The whites hated Washington for having political power when they thought no black man should have any, while the black intellectuals hated him for having power but not making it the be all and end all of his leadership.

Washington's influence with Roosevelt up to 1906 kept his opponents, black and white, in attack mode. The Trotter/Du Bois group adopted the Crumpacker plan to punish the white South as their panacea in 1904, and when Roosevelt, under Washington's influence, refused to endorse it, they turned against TR. Then in 1906, when Roosevelt dismissed black soldiers accused of a shootout in Brownsville, Texas, and Washington did not publicly condemn him though he had tried desperately to prevent TR from doing it, Washington lost much of his influence as both leader of the race and patronage chief for Roosevelt. Washington was ultimately supplanted as race leader not by Du Bois but Oswald Garrison Villard, primary founder of the NAACP. Villard and his family, the descendants of William Lloyd Garrison,

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had long been Tuskegee supporters, but Villard hated Roosevelt and was furious at Washington's loyalty to TR. When Washington would not capitulate to Villard's anti-TR views, Villard set about organizing a challenge to him that was based partly on the Trotter/Du Bois condemnations but was more a reflection of his own personal determination that Washington had to go.

In the end, policies over voting and political appointments were Washington's undoing. He tried to find a way to maintain some semblance of black political power in an age of virtually total white opposition to black influence, and it was in many ways a tragically heroic effort. But his efforts faltered on the tendency of Americans to reduce efforts for minority uplift to insistence on the right to vote. When he could not deliver that but tried to finesse the preservation of some measure of political influence, he brought down on himself an avalanche of opposition, black and white, that undermined his overall purpose. As a result, material strategies for black uplift lost legitimacy and took an inferior position in the thinking about how to make black conditions better. The same reductionist thought infected Washington's historical reputation, shaped mainly by Du Bois. Washington deserves to be reconsidered in a brighter light of historical context with a harder look at how Americans privilege the right to vote over, and sometimes at the expense of, other legitimate goals.

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