From,
On the Shoulders of Giants: My Journey Through the Harlem Renaissance
By Kareem Abdul-Jabbar

The Changing of the Old Guard: Booker T. Washington vs. W. E. B. Du Bois

The architects of the Harlem Renaissance couldn't very well promote a New Negro unless they had an Old Negro they wanted to replace. For them, the Old Negro had outdated attitudes about who African-Americans were, what their goals should be, and how they should go about achieving those goals. In his essay "The New Negro," which became a quasi road map for much of the direction of the Harlem Renaissance, philosophy professor Alain Locke warned, "The Negro too, for his part, has idols of the tribe to smash."

The specific "idol" of the tribe they were intent on smashing was acclaimed African-American leader Booker T. Washington (1856–1915). For twenty years, author and educator Washington was the preeminent spokesperson for the African-American community. As such, his advice was sought by presidents and members of Congress concerning all things having to do with African-Americans. Since the death of abolitionist, feminist, and newspaper publisher Frederick Douglass in 1895, Washington was perhaps the most famous, and influential, black man in America. Yet, the Harlem Renaissance meant to build their New Negro on his ashes.

On the surface, Washington would appear to be the perfect model for the New Negro. Born into slavery in Virginia, he was freed when he was nine years old. At sixteen he attended college to become a teacher and nine years later became the first black head of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. His rise to prominence came as a result of his 1895 Atlanta Compromise address, given at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia. This is where he laid out to a mostly white audience his principal political philosophy regarding the advancement of black Americans: "I pledge that in your effort to work out the great and intricate problem which God has laid at the doors of the South, you shall have at all times the patient, sympathetic help of my race."

This avowed policy of "patient, sympathetic help" and the promise to endure "severe and constant struggle" included the acceptance of Jim Crow laws of segregation. Though Washington privately fought against segregation laws by funding legal challenges, publicly he amassed much financial and political support from wealthy whites to help fund schools for black children because of his nonthreatening political policies. His autobiography, *Up from Slavery* (1901), inspired many African-Americans to endure the struggle while at the same time made many whites more sympathetic to the black cause.

However sincere Washington's intentions and laudable his accomplishments, W. E. B. Du Bois saw an inherent danger in his policies and labeled him the Great Accommodator. Whereas Washington emphasized industrial and agricultural training for young blacks, Du Bois pushed for more classical, liberal arts education. Washington's approach was more vocational, based on his familiarity with rural Southern states. Du Bois thought that approach limiting, wanting instead to educate blacks into the white-collar professions. While Washington urged a passive conciliatory attitude toward whites, Du Bois advocated a more aggressive approach.

Clearly, each man's political philosophy was greatly influenced by his own geographical background. Washington grew up in the South, where nearly all blacks lived rural, agricultural lives. His plan to improve African-American lives focused on, taking into account their limited education, helping them gain vocational skills. Du Bois, however, believed the Great Migration had shifted the future of black culture to the cities and so focused his plan on making blacks both urban and urbane. Like himself.

Unlike Washington, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963) had not been born into slavery, nor even in the South. He was born in Massachusetts to a prominent black family, eventually graduating cum laude from Harvard University, where he later became only the second African-American to receive a Harvard Ph.D. Like Washington, Du Bois, too, was an educator, founding the first sociology department in the United States while teaching at Atlanta University. Before his participation in the Harlem Renaissance, he published several significant books, including *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), and *John Brown* (1909). *The Souls of Black Folk*, a collection of essays about African-American life in America, became particularly influential in establishing the philosophical basis for the Harlem Renaissance. In one of the book's essays, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," Du Bois details the damage done to black Americans because of Washington's policies and urges a bold new course: "Mr. Washington represents in Negro thought the old attitude of adjustment and submission. . . . Mr. Washington's programme practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races. . . . The black men of America have a duty to perform, a duty stern and delicate,—a forward movement to oppose a part of the work of their greatest leader."

In so adamantly opposing "their greatest leader" Washington, Du Bois became one of the men who replaced him—some historians claim the most important and influential one for the next twenty years. There could certainly be no disputing Du Bois's credentials as a leader. In 1905, he cofounded the Niagara Movement, a group of thirty-two African-Americans dedicated to advancing civil rights and ending racial discrimination. The group's name came from the place of their inaugural meeting, the Canadian side of the Niagara River. Together they condemned the submissive philosophy of Booker T. Washington and issued a Declaration of Principles: "Of the above grievances we do not hesitate to complain, and to complain loudly and insistently. To ignore, overlook, or apologize for these wrongs is to prove ourselves unworthy of freedom. Persistent manly agitation is the way to liberty, and toward this goal the Niagara Movement has started and asks the cooperation of all men of all races."

But in 1909, when a policy disagreement developed over whether to include whites in the group, Du Bois and others who thought whites should be included quit to form the National Asso-

ciation for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Because of his weekly columns for prominent African-American newspapers in New York, Chicago, and Pittsburgh, as well as for the white *San Francisco Chronicle*, Du Bois's views were now being read by blacks—and whites—across the entire country. Du Bois also became the editor in chief of the NAACP publication, *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, the circulation of which rose from one thousand in 1910 to one hundred thousand by 1920, making it one of the dominant black periodicals in the country. From the editor's chair of the *Crisis*, where he sat for twenty-five years, Du Bois articulated and promoted the ideals that formed the core of the Harlem Renaissance manifesto as well as published other prominent Renaissance writers such as Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer.

W. E. B. Du Bois gave the Harlem Renaissance two things it needed most to achieve international recognition: undeniable intellectual depth and a compelling evangelical voice. His book *The Souls of Black Folk* was especially instrumental both in focusing national attention of the plight of African-Americans as well as in "recruiting" many of the seminal writers and artists who followed the promise in his voice to Harlem. If men like this lived in Harlem, they reasoned, surely that was the place to go. Historian David Levering Lewis wrote in the first of his two Pulitzer Prize–winning biographies of Du Bois that the book was "one of those events epochally dividing history into a before and an after. Like fireworks going off in a cemetery, its 14 essays were sound and light enlivening the inert and despairing. It was an electrifying manifesto, mobilizing a people for bitter, prolonged struggle to win a place in history." In the book's introduction, Du Bois explains the main issue of identity for African-Americans: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

Though his tone is mild and moderate, the reaction was anything but. A Tennessee newspaper feared that "this book is dangerous for the negro to read, for it will only excite discontent and fill his imagination with things that do not exist, or things that should not bear upon his mind." The *New York Commercial Advertiser* wrote, "At a time when racial prejudice has suddenly taken on an aggravated form, when almost every day witnesses a new outburst in some unexpected quarter, a volume of this sort, written by a negro with unwavering faith in the inherent possibilities of his race, cannot be otherwise than wholesome and inspiring."

More important than the reaction of the press, was the effect *The Souls of Black Folk* had on young blacks around the country. Poet Langston Hughes said, "My earliest memories of written words were those of W. E. B. Du Bois and the Bible." Novelist Claude McKay confessed, "The book shook me like an earthquake." This was the reaction Du Bois sought in all of his writings, for he saw the primary function of art was to persuade the reader, saying, "Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists." He argued of the importance of using art to promote the cause of African-Americans. Pleased with the impact blues and jazz were having across the country, Du Bois deliberately set about promoting black writers to achieve the same impact, stating, "A renaissance of American Negro literature is due; the material about us in the strange, heart-rending race tangle is rich beyond dream and only we can tell the tale and sing the song from the heart."

One of Du Bois's most famous and controversial essays, "The Talented Tenth," published in *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of Today* (1903), advocated his belief that an elite group of educated blacks would lead the rest of the black population to a better life. This would occur because (1) these exceptional individuals would prove to white society how much blacks could accomplish when given equal educational op-

portunities, and (2) this accomplished 10 percent of the black population (amounting to about 1 million African-Americans) would provide a solid infrastructure to allow future generations easier access to these opportunities. Du Bois's essay explains his theory: "All men cannot go to college but some men must; every isolated group or nation must have its yeast, must have for the talented few centers of training. . . . The Talented Tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people. No others can do this work and Negro colleges must train men for it. The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men."

Some critics found this approach either impractical or too undemocratically elitist, the haughty belief of an Ivy League snob. But Du Bois was firm in his conviction that these men and women of color would be "an advanced guard" who would formulate and propagate a new ideology of racial assertiveness. For Du Bois, the Talented Tenth were the Great Black Hope.

Du Bois's efforts to unify both native Africans and descendants of the African diaspora into a global community fighting for a common cause earned him the nickname Father of Pan-Africanism. Eventually, his increasing radicalism brought him in conflict with other NAACP leaders until, in 1934, as the Harlem Renaissance was beginning to wind down, Du Bois quit the *Crisis* to return to teaching at Atlanta University. He remained active in politics, acting as a consultant to the U.S. delegation during the founding of the United Nations.

However, as his politics continued toward the left, his influence began to wane. He ran for U.S. Senate on the Labor Party ticket and lost. He was fired from his job as special research director at the NAACP. In 1961, when he was ninety-three, he joined the Communist Party. His increasing radicalism brought him under careful scrutiny from the U.S. government. Disappointed at being marginalized by both blacks and whites in America, Du Bois said, "I would have been hailed with approval if I had died at fifty. At seventy-five my death was practically requested." Then in 1962, the president of Ghana invited Du Bois to oversee the completion of the *Encyclopedia Africana*, but the United States refused to grant him and his wife new passports. As a result, the Du Boises renounced their U.S. citizenships and became citizens of Ghana. When he died the following year at age ninety-five, the United States sent no one to attend the state funeral Ghana provided in his honor. Du Bois once said, "I have been uplifted by the thought that what I have done will live long and justify my life." In 1992, nearly thirty years after his death, the United States issued a postage stamp featuring Du Bois's portrait.

The Shipping News: Marcus Garvey and the Back-to-Africa Movement

Not everyone in Harlem during the Renaissance was optimistic about the future of blacks in America. To some, especially those blue-collar workers who weren't part of the Talented Tenth, the New Negro was still just another black person dressed up to go to a party to which he was neither invited nor welcome. Even if he was eventually allowed into the big house, rather than being treated as a respected guest, he would be seen as a mere curiosity, like a precocious child who could recite all the state capitals. Being an Old or New Negro wasn't the problem, being a Negro in America was the problem. And the only practical solution to that problem was for blacks to leave America. So argued Jamaican immigrant Marcus Moziah Garvey (1887–1940), whose back-to-Africa movement based in the heart of Harlem contradicted the heart of the Harlem Renaissance, bringing him into bitter conflict with W. E. B. Du Bois and the rest of the Talented Tenth.

Garvey was not an enthusiast of the Harlem Renaissance, yet it was the renaissance atmosphere in Harlem that gave him the inspiration and platform to launch his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). His educational background kept him from being part of the Talented Tenth (he claimed to have a doctor of civil law degree from Birkbeck College in England, though it seems that he only audited classes there), but his charisma and drive made him a popular leader among much of the other "untalented" nine-tenths of African-Americans. One Harlem observer described the barrel-bodied Garvey as "a little sawed-off, hammered down black man, with determination written all over his face, and an engaging smile that caught you and compelled you to listen to his story."

Though Garvey founded the UNIA while on a visit to Jamaica, it was in Harlem that he established his headquarters and core followers. But Garvey found little support from African-American leaders. Booker T. Washington, who had at first expressed support, did little to help Garvey's cause, and Du Bois and the NAACP were openly antagonistic to him and his plan. Yet, Garvey was not deterred, and his detractors soon realized how much they had underestimated his determination.

Invited to address the congregation at Bethel A.M.E. Church, Garvey's passionate speech there had the two thousand Harlemites shouting back with enthusiastic support. Word quickly spread throughout the Harlem community among the average workaday blacks who didn't write poetry, play jazz, sing or dance, or who didn't wear a suit to work. And they liked what they heard when

Garvey shouted, "One God, One Aim, One Destiny!" Following the incorporation of the UNIA in New York in 1918, Garvey began publishing his own weekly newspaper, the *Negro World*, to compete with Du Bois's *Crisis* and Johnson's *Opportunity*. Because of his call for blacks to abandon their racist countries to return to Africa, the *Negro World* was banned throughout most of the British and French territories. Still, Garvey's popularity grew and his speeches in Harlem commonly drew crowds of five thousand. "I have no desire to take all black people back to Africa; there are blacks who are no good here and will likewise be no good there. . . . Our success educationally, industrially and politically is based upon the protection of a nation founded by ourselves. And the nation can be nowhere else but in Africa."

Garvey's rejection of black participation in World War I garnered considerable support among the less conservative civil rights organizations, including socialists, Marxists, and black nationalists. But it also brought him under the watchful eye of the federal government. When the State Department granted permission to Du Bois to go to Versailles, France, where the peace treaties ending the war were being signed, but refused Garvey's handpicked delegation, Garvey launched a vitriolic attack against Du Bois before a rally of five thousand Harlemites. The battle lines had been drawn, and for these two men and their divergent philosophies for black Americans, there would be no peace, no Versailles. In an article in the *Crisis* entitled "Lunatic or Traitor," Du Bois called Garvey "the most dangerous threat to the Negro race." Garvey responded by calling Du Bois "purely and simply a white man's nigger." Ridiculing what he considered to be a conservative stance by Du Bois and the NAACP, Garvey wondered, "How can a Negro be conservative? What has he to conserve?"

Garvey proved just how serious he was in his back-to-Africa rhetoric when he started the Black Star Line Steamship Corporation in 1919 with the intention of purchasing the ships that would transport blacks back to their African homelands. He quickly raised $200,000, mostly from the laborers desperate to improve their lot. One poor Panamanian investor who had already bought $125 in Black Star shares wrote to Garvey to express his hopefulness: "Now I am sending thirty-five dollars for seven more shares. You might think I have money, but the truth, as I have stated before, is that I have no money now. But if I'm to die of hunger it will be all right because I'm determined to do all that's in my power to better the conditions of my race."

While Du Bois had raised the hopes of the black middle and upper classes that through hard work and education they would soon earn their rightful place at the dinner table, Garvey raised the hopes of the hourly wage earner that there was a place where they would not have to endure the daily contempt and hopelessness heaped upon them by each passing white face. White NAACP board of directors member Mary White Ovington captured Garvey's dynamic allure when she said, "Garvey was the first Negro in the United States to capture the imagination of the masses. . . . The sweeper of the subway, the elevator boy eternally carrying fat office men and perky girls up and down a shaft, knew that when night came he might march with the African army and bear a wonderful banner to be raised some day in a distant and beautiful land."

But it was not to be. For Garvey's followers, the distant land would remain distant.

Garvey's famous quote, "Look for me in the whirlwind or the storm," became prophetic for his own troubles. Garvey's Black Star Line did indeed buy ships, but they were mostly in poor condition. One blew a boiler and had to be towed, and another sank. Mismanagement, corrupt crews, and infiltration by J. Edgar Hoover's Federal Bureau of Investigation, and even the possibility of sabotage by rivals or government agents, brought the collapse of Black Star in 1922, after only three years of operation. Though the all-black crews and captains had made trips to the West Indies, none had gone to Africa. Worse, the Liberian government, which had at first been supportive of the UNIA's plans to build schools, roads, and businesses as a first step for the resettlement of Garvey's

followers, withdrew its support in the 1920s under pressure from European business interests. Even in the United States, some of Garvey's supporters began to withdraw as he aligned himself with the KKK and other racist organizations to embrace separatism of the races. Defiantly, Garvey proclaimed that if one had to choose between the Klan and the "National Association for the Advancement of 'Certain' People, give me the Klan for their honesty of purpose toward the Negro." Du Bois and other black leaders responded with a "Garvey Must Go" campaign, which did much to undercut Garvey's credibility, if not among his loyal core, then among some of the sympathetic middle class that had previously given him financial support.

Finally, Garvey was convicted of mail fraud because his Black Star Line stock brochure featured a photo of a ship he did not own, though he was in negotiations to purchase it. Others were also charged, but only Garvey was found guilty. In 1925, he was sentenced to five years in Atlanta Federal Prison. Garvey's supporters launched a campaign to appeal to President Calvin Coolidge to commute the sentence, arguing that it was politically motivated. One of those supporters was Malcolm X's Baptist minister father, Earl Little. Years later, Malcolm X recalled his father's efforts on Garvey's behalf: "The image that made me proudest was his crusading and militant campaigning with the words of Marcus Garvey. . . . It was only me that he sometimes took with him to the Garvey UNIA meetings which he held quietly in different people's homes." After two years, President Coolidge commuted the sentence. Because Garvey was not a U.S. citizen and had been convicted of a felony, he was deported back to Jamaica. When he arrived in Kingston in 1927, a large crowd of supporters greeted him at the docks and then marched with him to his local UNIA headquarters.

The Harlem branch of the UNIA began in a bleak basement with Garvey, his wife Amy Jacques Garvey, and seventeen loyal members. A few years later, through sheer force of his vision, charisma, and willpower, he claimed 4 million members worldwide (though most authorities agree that number is greatly exaggerated). Although his affectations—gaudy uniforms, giving himself the title "Provisional President of Africa"—caused the Talented Tenth to ridicule him, there was no doubt he was a true folk hero to many of the rest of the black population. This was the man who, after all, had amassed one hundred thousand blacks to parade through Harlem under his distinctive UNIA flag. The NAACP couldn't claim such an accomplishment.

Although Garvey remained active in politics, he moved to England in 1935, where he spent the last five years of his life, dying at the age of fifty-three. The breadth and depth of his influence can be seen in the many buildings, schools, colleges, and highways that bear his name throughout Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and the United States. The red, black, and green flag he designed for the UNIA is now used as the Black Liberation Flag. Those who attended UNIA meetings include a wide variety of world-shakers, including Elijah Muhammad, founder of the Nation of Islam; Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh, who while a seaman in his youth had briefly lived in New York; and Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, who attended meetings while a student in New York and, in homage to Garvey, named Ghana's shipping company the Black Star Line.

In 1980, a bust of Garvey was presented at the Washington, D.C., Organization of American States' Hall of Heroes. His remains are kept in the Marcus Garvey National Shrine in Jamaica, where he is considered the "Father of Jamaican Independence" as well as Jamaica's first national hero. His face adorns the Jamaican half-dollar. Although Garvey did not endorse the Rastafarian movement, its followers in Jamaica believe Garvey to be a religious prophet, perhaps even the reincarnation of John the Baptist, which is why he is the topic of much reggae music.

Garvey did not see himself as part of the in-crowd that celebrated itself with the lofty term *Harlem Renaissance*, yet he certainly embodied the attributes that the Renaissance promoted. He was self-reliant, self-motivated, and a charismatic speaker who led what one historian called "the largest, most widespread, most powerful, and most influential movement among people of African descent