

The Ideas behind the U.S. Civil Rights Movement

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was a prominent civil rights activist during the nineteen twenties and nineteen thirties. He was not only responsible for many changes in the conditions for black people in America, he was also responsible for changing the way they thought about themselves. Though DuBois believed that education and knowledge could help solve the race problem, racial prejudice in the United States was regularly expressed in violence. Laws kept blacks and whites separated, and race riots were common. Because of this DuBois came to believe that protest was essential to social change. Du Bois opposed racial prejudice in all of its varieties and took every opportunity to speak out against it.

Another prominent black leader at the time, Booker T. Washington, believed that the conditions for black people could be improved by hard work and economic gain, and he urged them not to fight back, but to concentrate their efforts on themselves. He believed that black people could “win” the respect of whites by focusing on improving their circumstances achieving material prosperity, and so eventually be accepted as full citizens of the United States.

In his famous book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903, DuBois attacked Washington’s philosophy. The two remained at odds for some years, with Washington representing the “conservative” point of view on race relations, and DuBois representing the “radical” view. In 1909 DuBois established an organization to oppose Washington, and though it did not last, it did lead to the creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which still exists today.

What we commonly think of as the Civil Rights movement began in 1948 when President Truman signed Executive Order 9981, declaring it “to be the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin.” The famous *Brown vs. The Board of Education* in 1954 paved the way for desegregating schools. Many landmark events followed, and many individuals became well known for their efforts that advanced the cause of civil rights in the United States. But in addition to legal battles, this advancement was rife with protest and violence.

YOUR ASSIGNMENT: On a separate sheet of paper, discuss how you think the ideas of W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington influenced the American Civil Rights movement.

