

The history of racial reconciliation in America is inextricably tied up with education. From the earliest days after the end of slavery, seeking an education was a vital path for black Americans to gain prosperity and establish themselves as the equals of white Americans. However, in recent years, trends within academia have begun to work in the opposite direction, slowing, stopping, and in some cases reversing the gains made. Viewed through the lens of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of an America where people "will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character,"<sup>1</sup> academia has made massive net gains since 1865, but has begun to tear down and even resent its own success.

One of the earliest and most significant figures in the history of American racial education is Booker T. Washington. Washington, a freed slave, wrote in his autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, about his attempts to educate himself, as well as his efforts in establishing the Tuskegee Institute, which he referred to as his "lifework."<sup>2</sup> The Institute taught freedmen to be teachers, in an effort to expand access to education across the South. Under Washington's leadership, Tuskegee Institute graduates went on to found thousands of community schools, and, he writes, by "exhibiting a degree of common sense and self-control, [caused] better relations to

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<sup>1</sup> "Read Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' Speech in Its Entirety," NPR (NPR, January 16, 2023), <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>.

<sup>2</sup> Booker Washington, *Up From Slavery*, (Charlottesville: Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia, 2000), 49.

exist between the races, and [caused] the Southern man to learn to believe in the value of educating the men and women of my race.”<sup>3</sup>

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Another great example in the history of racial education came in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century successes of Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C. Founded in 1870 as an all-black public school, Dunbar quickly established itself as an academic powerhouse, sending many graduates to colleges around the country, where some would become the first black students to earn their doctorates.<sup>4</sup> Graduates of Dunbar also include Dr. Charles R. Drew, who pioneered the use of blood plasma transfusions, Benjamin O. Davis, the first black American to become a general in the U.S. Army, and Wesley Brown, the first black graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, education has provided a primary route for black Americans to climb the socioeconomic ladder.

Since near the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, new theories of education, social organization, and race relations have become the dominant ideas pushed in higher education, and increasingly in primary and secondary education, as well. The most well-known of these is Critical Race Theory, which may be broadly defined as the view that any disparate outcomes by race

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>4</sup> NPR Staff, “In Nation's First Black Public High School, A Blueprint For Reform,” NPR (NPR, July 29, 2013), <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/08/22/206622688/the-legacy-of-dunbar-high-school>. <sup>5</sup> Dr. Thomas Sowell, “Dunbar High School after 100 Years, by Dr. Thomas Sowell,” Creators Syndicate, October 4, 2016, <https://www.creators.com/read/thomas-sowell/10/16/dunbar-high-school-after-100-years>.

<sup>5</sup> Sean Salai, “Report: More Universities Holding Segregated Graduation Events,” The Washington Times (The Washington Times, April 18, 2022), <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/apr/18/more-universitiesholdingsegregated-graduation-ev/>.

necessarily imply a racial power imbalance and active discrimination. In addition to leading to blatant segregation, such as the phenomenon of graduation ceremonies being held for members of particular races,<sup>5</sup> these new theories have coincided with widespread stagnation in educational achievement.<sup>6</sup> Put simply, this new academia openly advocates for segregation, while harming

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the very education that could actually improve the lives of those black Americans it claims to support.

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The history of racial education in America is clear. When education is viewed simply as education – when it is seen as a way for students to learn life skills, citizenship, and to prove their ability – it is an unrivaled way to lift up those in poverty, including black Americans. On the other hand, when education is viewed as a means to an ideological end, such as the absolute enforced equality of outcome demanded by Critical Race Theory today, it must be considered at best a useless waste of effort, and at worst an active obstacle to the vision of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., that we all be judged by the content of our character.

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<sup>6</sup> Jill Barshay, “National Test Scores Reveal a Decade of Educational Stagnation,” The Hechinger Report, March 30, 2020, <https://hechingerreport.org/national-test-scores-reveal-a-decade-of-educational-stagnation/>.

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