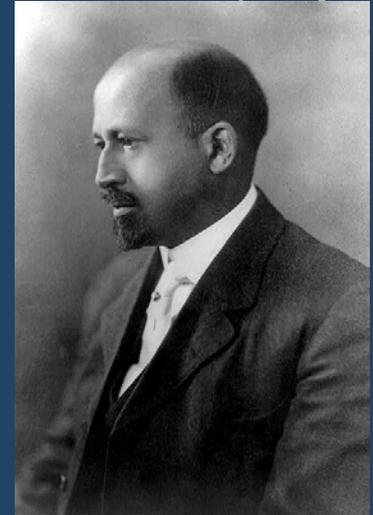


W. E. B. Du Bois
Letter to
Oswald Garrison Villard
24 March 1905

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ca. 1925

Atlanta, Ga., March 24, 1905

(confidential.)

My dear Mr. Villard: In reply to your letter of the 13th inst, I am going to burden you with considerable matter. I do this reluctantly because it seems like imposing on a busy man. At the same time I want to say frankly that I have been sorry to feel in your two letters a note of impatience and disbelief which seems to me unfortunate and calling for a clear, even, if long, statement.

In the *Voice of the Negro* for January, I made the charge that \$3000 of hush money had been used to subsidize the Negro press in five leading cities. The bases upon which that charge was made were in part as follows:

The offer of \$3000 to the editor of the Chicago *Conservator* on 2 separate occasions to change its editorial policy, and the final ousting of the editor by the board of management, and the installing of an editor with the required policy; with the understanding that financial benefit would result. (Exhibit A. [excerpts from letters])* The statement of the former editor of the Washington *Record* that he was given to understand that the *Record* received \$40 a month from the outside to maintain its policy. (Exhibit B. [excerpts from letter])

The statement of one of the assistant editors of the Washington *Colored American* that it was worth to them \$500 a year to maintain its policy. (Exhibit C. [an editor's statement as recounted to Du Bois]) There is similar testimony in regard to papers in other cities particularly the *Freeman* of Indianapolis, the *Age* of New York and the *Citizen* of Boston. All these papers follow the same editorial policy, print the same syndicated news, praise the same persons and attack the same persons. Besides the more definite testimony there is a mass (Exhibit D [five facts or widely held opinions]) of corrob[or]ative circumstantial evidence, and all this leads me to estimate that \$3000 is certainly the lowest possible estimate of the sums given these 6 papers in the year 1904; I firmly believe that the real sum expended was nearer \$5000 and perhaps more than that.

The object of this distribution of money and other factors was, I believe, to stop the attacks being made on the policy of Mr. B. T. Washington. The reason for this belief is as follows:

1. The fact that these papers praise all that Mr. Washington does with suspicious unanimity.
2. The existence of a literary bureau at Tuskegee under Mr. Washington's private secretary, Emmett Scott. (cf. Exhibit B and F. No. 2.)
3. The sending out of syndicated matter from the bureau to appear simultaneously in the above mentioned papers and several others. This appears often in the form of editorials. (Exhibit E. [an editorial that appeared in three of the newspapers, and a copy of an "open letter" to Booker T. Washington published in one newspaper])
4. The change of policy toward Mr. Washington of such papers as the *Age*, which formerly bitterly opposed his policy.
- 4.¹ The creation of new papers and buying up of old papers by Mr. Washington's friends or former employees. (Exhibit F. [background on the creation and editorial stance of the Boston *Citizen*, and on a paper's statements that led to a libel suit and a cross suit])

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* Access the full texts of this letter and of Exhibits A-M in the online collection, *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, from the University of Illinois Press, at <http://www.historycooperative.org/btw/Vol.8/html/229.html>.

¹ Error in numbering in Du Bois original. [UPI note]

5. The rewarding of favorable newspapers by Mr. Washington. (Exhibit G. [copy of a letter from Booker T. Washington to the editor of a supportive newspaper, published by the paper])

6. The abuse and warning of enemies through the syndicated papers, sending out of cartoons, etc. (Exhibit H. [an editorial criticizing an anti-Washington speech, and the critic's published reply; summary of Washington's unsuccessful attempt to influence the *Voice of the Negro*; excerpt from an editorial criticizing Washington's attempts to influence black newspapers' editorial policies; an account of Washington's purchase of a pro-Washington editorial cartoon and its subsequent re-publication in several newspapers])

7. The use of political patronage to reward and punish.

Finally I was not the first to make this charge. It was common property among colored people, spoken and laughed about and repeatedly charged in the newspapers. (Exhibit J. [excerpts from editorials in two black newspapers repeating the charges of "a strong odor of corruption" in Washington's attempts to influence black newspapers])

What now ought to be the attitude of thinking Negroes toward this situation, assuming the facts alleged to be substantially true? Two things seem certain:

1. There was some time ago a strong opposition to Mr. Washington's policy developed among Negroes. In many cases this opposition became violent and abusive and in one case even riotous.

2. Since that time by the methods above described and also as the result of conference and statements by Mr. Washington, this opposition has been partially stopped.

Now personally I strongly oppose Mr. Washington's positions: those positions have been considerably modified for the better since the time of my first public dissent from them; but they are still in my mind dangerous and unsatisfactory in many particulars.

At the same time I have been very sorry to see the extremes to which criticism has gone. I anticipated this mud-slinging in my book and deprecated it, although I knew it would come. My rule of criticism has been, (a) to impute no bad motives (b) to make no purely personal attack. This has I think been adhered to in every single public utterance of mine on the subject hitherto. And when others have not adhered to it I have not hesitated to criticize them.

Moreover most of the criticism of Mr. Washington by Negro papers has not been violent. The *Conservator* was insistent but courteous; the *Record* under Cromwell was always moderate and saw things both to praise and condemn; The *Freeman* and *American* were open to the highest bidder on either side; the *Guardian* was at times violent although more moderate now than formerly, and has gained in standing as it has become less bitter. All this was a good sign. The air was clearing itself, the demand of the people known, and a healthy democratic out-come of the controversy seemed possible. It seemed at one time indeed possible that even the *Guardian* would see the situation in a better light. Then gradually a change came in. Criticism suddenly stopped in many quarters and fulsome adulation succeeded. Violent attacks on all opposers were printed in a certain set of papers. National organizations of Negroes were "captured" by indefensible methods. (Exhibit K. [account of Washington's machinations to win the election of his preferred candidate as president of the Afro-American Council])

It thus became clearer and clearer to me and to others that the methods of Mr. Washington and his friends to stop violent attack had become a policy for wholesale hushing of all criticism and the crushing out of men who dared to criticize in any way. I felt it time to speak at least a word of warning.

I could not however make this warning as definite as I would have liked for three reasons.

1st. I did not want to drag Atlanta University into the controversy since the proceeding was altogether of my own initiative.

2nd. I did not want to ask those who privately gave me information to do so publicly. They are poor men and if, for instance, Mr. Cromwell, a teacher in the Washington Colored schools, were to testify as to the facts in public he might lose his position.

3rd. I uttered the warning to a Negro audience and it was addressed particularly to them; so far as possible I want to keep the internal struggles of the race in its own ranks. Our dirty linen ought not be exhibited too much in public.

For this latter reason many of my friends do not agree with me in the policy of speaking out. Kelly Miller, A. H. Grimke and others have repeatedly expressed to me that they are perfectly satisfied that Mr. Washington is furnishing money to Negro newspapers in return for their [the newspapers']² support. But they say: What are you going to do about it? He has the support of the nation, he has the political patronage of the administration, he has apparently unlimited cash, he has the ear of the white press and he is following exactly the methods of that press; and moreover his attitude on the race question is changing for the better. These are powerful

² Brackets in Du Bois original. [UPI note]

arguments, but they do not satisfy me. I am however, constrained by such representations to take up the matter cautiously and to see what warnings and aroused conscience in the race will do toward stopping this shameful condition of affairs.

On the other hand when I am convinced that the time has come, that bribery is still going on and gag law manifest, and political bossism saddled on a people advised to let politics alone, I will speak again in no uncertain words and I will prove every statement I make.

I regret to say that honest endeavors on my part in the past to understand and cooperate with Mr. Washington have not been successful. 'I recognize as clearly as anyone the necessity of race unity against a common enemy — but it must be unity against the enemy and veiled surrender to them.' My attitude is not actuated by my sympathy with Mr. Trotter, editor of the Guardian. There was once a rumor that I was acting jointly with him. My reply to that was made in a letter to George F. Peabody, which I venture to enclose as Exhibit L [copy of letter clarifying Du Bois's position toward a black leader jailed in the aftermath of a talk delivered by Washington in 1905 in a black church in Boston]. I went into conference last winter with Mr. Washington and his friends. Mr. Washington selected the personnel of the conference and it did not altogether please me but I attended and urged such of my friends as were invited to come also. In that conference I did not beat around the bush but told Mr. Washington plainly and frankly the causes of our differences of opinion with him.

Mr. Washington replied in a very satisfactory speech and his friends asked me to draw up a plan of a central committee of 12. This I did. The resulting committee which I helped select was good save in two cases where I was overruled by Mr. Washington and his friend. I was taken ill during the summer and the meeting of the committee was postponed; finally the committee was organized at a meeting to which I was not invited, and of which I knew nothing till 2 weeks afterward. Whether this was by accident or design I do not know. At any rate the committee was so organized as to put the whole power virtually in the hands of an executive committee and the appointment of that committee was left to Mr. Washington. Upon hearing this some two weeks after, I resigned my membership. I could not conscientiously deliver my freedom of thought and action into the hands of Mr. Washington and his special abettors like Fortune.

I am still uncertain as to how Mr. Washington himself ought to be judged in the bribery matter. I especially condemn the bribe-takers and despise men like Fortune, Cooper, Alexander, Manly and Knox who are selling their papers. If they agree with Mr. Washington and he wishes to help them, the contributions ought to be open and above board; and if the contrary is the case and it is, to my unwavering belief, in 3 or 4 of the above instances, these men are scamps. Mr. Washington probably would defend himself by saying that he is unifying the Negro press, that his contributions are investments not bribes, and that the Tuskegee press bureau is a sort of Associated Negro Press. The reply to this is that the transactions do not appear to be thus honorable, that the character of the matter sent out is fulsome in praise of every deed of Mr. Washington's and abusive toward every critic, and that the men who are conducting the enterprises are not the better type of Negroes but in many cases the worst, as in the case of Fortune, Cooper, Knox and Thompson. (Exhibit M. [commentary by Du Bois and others on the character of the four men])

In the trying situation in which we Negroes find ourselves today we especially need the aid and countenance of men like you. This may look to outsiders as a petty squabble of thoughtless self-seekers. It is in fact the life and death struggle of nine million men. It is easy of course to dismiss my contentions as the results of petty jealousy or short-sighted criticism — but the ease of the charge does not prove its truth. I know something of the Negro race and its condition and dangers, and while I am sure, and am glad to say, that Mr. Washington has done and is doing much to help the Negro, I just as firmly believe that he represents today in much of his work and policy the greatest of the hindering forces in the line of our true development and uplift. I beg to remain

Very respectfully yours,

W. E. B. Du Bois

Exhibits A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, [no I] J, K, L, M.

Please return.

Nota Bene. No attempt is made in the following exhibits to present all the evidence obtainable — I am simply giving typical examples of the sort of proof upon which I rely.

W. E. B. D.