

INTRODUCTION

DURING THE PERIOD OF this volume Booker T. Washington continued to rise in prestige and power as the black spokesman without equal in America. Washington's paradox, although he seldom admitted it publicly or privately, was that his fortunes continued to rise while those of the race he represented declined. Washington believed, however, that his life did not represent an exception to the black experience; rather, it was a model that others could follow. His public optimism about the advancement of the race was partly an attempt to convince himself, and the world, that racial harmony was possible in America. In the tradition of American boosterism, Washington advertised and promoted Tuskegee Institute as the example of what blacks were capable of doing on their own. He always tried to look on the bright side, even when reports of the most virulent racism reached him. Washington heeded the advice of his friend Timothy Thomas Fortune, who cautioned him in 1899: "Others may get discouraged, but you can't without inviting disaster."

Washington's racial philosophy remained consistent with the formula of his Atlanta Compromise of 1895. His public utterances were always sanguine and conventional. For this reason many of his speeches are repetitive. He often used the same speech, slightly modified to fit the particular audience, many times in the course of his arduous speaking schedule. In 1913 Washington compared his speeches with the sermons of a minister. "I sometimes change my text," he wrote, "but usually preach the same sermon." Even when forced to deal with an emotional question such as lynching, Washington minimized the evil and turned his response into clichés and stock phrases by stressing that lynching would cease when all blacks had secured an education and a bank account.