

**“Tuskegee’s ‘Civilizing’ Mission: Booker T. Washington, the Tuskegee Institute, and
Imperialism”**
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In 1909, Booker T. Washington, the principal of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, wrote about the impact of the African diaspora on African Americans in his work *The Story of the Negro: The Rise of the Race from Slavery*. He said:

“I have rarely met in America anyone of my race who did not, in one way or another, show a deep interest in everything connected with Africa. The millions of [African Americans] are almost as much interested in the future of Liberia, as they are in their own country. There is always a peculiar and scarcely definable bond that binds one Black man to another Black man, whether in Africa, Jamaica, Haiti, or the United States.”¹

At the turn of the twentieth century, the United States entered the world stage of imperialism, acquiring new territories throughout Latin America and the Pacific. This wave of imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century coincided with increased violence and disenfranchisement of African Americans in the Jim Crow American South. As a result, new strategies were devised by African Americans on how to combat Jim Crow and navigate the troubled landscape. With limited avenues for upward mobility, Booker T. Washington believed the best solution was to seek upward economic mobility through practical education that included agriculture, handicrafts, and teaching.

The Southern economy centered around agriculture also lacked qualified teachers and those two majors, agricultural and teacher training, were the backbone of the Tuskegee Institute’s curriculum. Examining the situation of colonial peoples’ that were affected by imperialism, Booker T. Washington believed that practical education was also a solution for them. Washington offered a controversial solution compared to his contemporaries, like W.E.B. Du Bois, who believed in immediate civil rights and higher education. Washington’s strategy was tangible, a

¹ Booker T. Washington, *The Story of the Negro: The Rise of the Race from Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 20.

strategy that was of the time, and one that he believed would benefit Black people affected by Jim Crow at home and imperialism abroad. Today, I'll be talking about two case studies highlighting this imperialist tendency; Liberia, a quasi-colony but one impacted by U.S. imperialism, and Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory. I argue that by working in the gray areas created by U.S. imperialism, Washington and Tuskegee officials could take advantage of the opportunities created by the emerging imperial structure to build Pan-African connections.

In recent years, many scholars have started looking at the work of Booker T. Washington and the Tuskegee Institute and their relationship to imperialism through Pan-Africanism rather than simply as being the right arm of imperialism's civilizing mission or accommodating imperialist designs. Frank Guridy, for instance, has argued a similar point, albeit from the standpoint of Afro-Cubans.² Broadening the scope of Pan-Africanism allows for a deeper understanding of how Pan-African connections are built and how U.S. imperialism has influenced these connections. This also helps expand our understanding of Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee work, which has long been portrayed as an accommodationist. Looking at letters, government documents, and the writings of other Pan-Africanist scholars like W.E.B. Du Bois, Edward Wilmot Blyden, and James Aggrey, helps to better understand Washington's position globally and the solutions he offered.

Three years before the Berlin Conference in 1884, which carved up Africa among European colonial powers, the Tuskegee Normal & Agricultural Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama, was founded. Booker T. Washington was born into slavery. After emancipation, when he was of age, he attended the Hampton Institute, where he developed his belief in the virtues of practical

² Andrew Barnes, *Global Christianity and the Black Atlantic: Tuskegee, Colonialism, and the Shaping of African Industrial Education* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017); Frank Guridy, *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Nemata Blyden, *African Americans and Africa: A New History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

education. This experience led to him becoming Tuskegee's first principal. Roughly a decade later, in 1895, three years before the War of 1898, Washington delivered his famous Atlanta Exposition Address, where he called for African Americans to focus on achieving economic independence and practical education, forgoing the immediate push for civil rights. Washington told the Atlanta audience:

“Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labour [sic], and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life... In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.”³

Supporters of Washington viewed his message as a practical solution to maneuvering through the racial climate of the South. Critics saw it as acquiescing to white rule and giving up.

Washington's position as a leader made him influential in the Republican Party. This “Tuskegee model,” Washington believed, was not just a path for African Americans to advance but for all Black people globally. As the U.S. entered the stage of imperialism, Washington used his influence and the Tuskegee model in efforts to assist Black colonial peoples, often working within the gray areas created by imperialism.

The place we first see this is Liberia. The American Colonization Society founded Liberia in 1816 to solve the “Black problem.” In 1847, the Americo-Liberian government declared its independence 1847 from the American Colonization Society. Over the subsequent years, Britain and France continued encroaching upon Liberian territory, inciting conflict with native Liberians. During President Theodore Roosevelt's presidency, Roosevelt took a new approach to foreign policy. For instance, the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine asserted the United States' right to exercise its international police power and intervene in the

³ Louis R. Harlan, ed., *The Booker T. Washington Papers, Vol. 3* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 584-585.

affairs of nations threatened by economic and political instability. While it would primarily be used to justify intervention throughout Latin America, Roosevelt ultimately decided that Liberia fell under the umbrella of America's protectorate. However, it would take the efforts of Booker T. Washington to persuade the U.S. government to make Liberia a priority. Amidst the constant threat of European encroachment over previous decades, U.S. Ambassador to Liberia Ernest Lyon wrote to Booker T. Washington in 1907 regarding the French and British threats against Liberia's frontier. Lyon urged the Tuskegee principal to use his political connections to find solutions to the matter.⁴ With significant influence among Black Republicans, Washington told Lyon that he would bring the matter to President Theodore Roosevelt's attention.⁵ Roosevelt admired the Tuskegee principal, even invited him to the White House in 1901, becoming the first African American to do so. Washington called for a "closer relationship between the United States and Liberia," which he believed should be given equal attention as Latin America.⁶ Roosevelt however was hesitant to get too involved. According to a meeting with Washington's secretary and member of the Liberian Commission Emmett J. Scott, Roosevelt did not want to go to "war with Britain over the Liberian question." Instead, Roosevelt committed "moral support" while facilitating a "square deal" between Britain, France, and Liberia by mediating a temporary easing of tensions.⁷

Efforts to assist Liberia included accepting Liberian students to attend Tuskegee while simultaneously sending Tuskegee officials to Liberia to survey the educational landscape. Scholarship funds for Liberian students were primarily furnished by wealthy white organizations with the mission to educate Africans and African Americans under the Tuskegee model. For

⁴ Louis R. Harlan, ed., *Booker T. Washington Papers, Vol. 9* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 332-333.

⁵ Harlan, *Booker T. Washington Papers, Vol. 9*, 336-337.

⁶ "The Liberian Envoys Commissioners from Black Republic Cordially Received by President Roosevelt and Secretary Taft," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), June 20, 1908, 4.

⁷ Emmett J. Scott to Booker T. Washington, 1901/1902, Part I, Box 17 Reel 15, Archives, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

instance, the Phelps-Stokes Fund was the primary sponsor of Liberian students. Based on reports and letters, Its founders believed that Tuskegee, more than any other institution, was most concerned about the “welfare of Black people” and offered the best possible solution.⁸ In fact, the first international student to attend Tuskegee came from Liberia.⁹ We also see the first instance of Washington mentioning the construction of a Tuskegee-like school in Liberia.¹⁰

Calling on the Roosevelt Corollary and President William Howard Taft’s foreign policy strategy of Dollar Diplomacy, Washington using his political influence and connections, was able to help establish the Liberian Commission, which settled Liberia’s territorial disputes and secured loans. After Washington’s death in 1915, Robert Moton, Washington’s successor, and Tuskegee’s supporters in the United States and Liberia continued to carry out Washington’s vision. For Moton and Liberian President Charles King, technical education offered a practical solution to solving the issues Black people faced. American foreign policy aims shifted under Woodrow Wilson and during the 1920s under Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge. These administrations withdrew the federal government from the realm of international economic activity, unlike the policies of Dollar Diplomacy that Washington had favored as a solution for Liberia. The State and Commerce departments worked vigorously to protect economic interests abroad and to expand the frontiers of American foreign trade and investments, which included Liberia and its most valuable resource: rubber.¹¹

Seeking to end the British monopoly on rubber, U.S. officials and Harvey Firestone, founder of the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, saw Liberia as an untapped resource and one that could sustain the United States’ demand for rubber. Firestone, like his rubber magnate

⁸ Phelps-Stokes Fund, *Phelps-Stokes Reports on Education in Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 38.

⁹ Tuskegee Student Records (1892-1895), TUA, file number 547.

¹⁰ Louis R. Harlan, ed., *Booker T. Washington Papers, Vol. 10* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 186.

¹¹ Arthur Link, *American Epoch: A History of the United States Since the 1890’s* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 285.

consortium of Thomas Edison and Henry, were concerned about America's dependence on foreign rubber sources for its industrial enterprises. In 1921, Harding, along with Secretary of State Charles Evan Hughes and Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, promoted the idea that connecting the globe through trade had the potential to pave the path to peace.¹² Since the foreign economic policy of the 1920s promoted private enterprises rather than direct government loans, Firestone saw an opportunity. While Henry Ford was focused on establishing a rubber empire in Brazil, Harvey Firestone looked to Liberia.¹³ With the entry of Firestone into Liberia, the development of a "Tuskegee in Liberia" seemed to be a possibility, bringing to life an almost two-decades-old vision. Several prominent Black leaders, including W.E.B. Du Bois believed in Firestone and Tuskegee's potential to elevate the status of all Liberians through economic development.

Even W.E.B. Du Bois was confident that Firestone had the potential to achieve "one of the greatest and far reaching reforms in the relations between white industrial countries like America and black, partly developed countries like Liberia." He noted that the problem of Liberia had been that it was purposefully underdeveloped to make it susceptible to white imperialism. According to Du Bois, it was necessary to "put colored men [from the United States] in authority to train them."¹⁴ Once trained, they would turn the reins over to those educated Liberians. Those men who sought to train Liberians were to be Tuskegee-educated men. In an essay in the *New Republic*, Du Bois shared his thoughts with the public at large. "White capital in America" had the potential in Liberia "to do a fine and unusual job in

¹² Emily Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy, 1900-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 95.

¹³ Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010).

¹⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, "Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Firestone Tire and Rubber Company," October 26, 1925, *W.E.B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312)*, *Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries*.

imperialism,” he wrote, if Firestone “can allow in Liberia decent and increasing wages: they can yield to the Liberian government satisfactory revenue. This is what Liberia and black America hope.”¹⁵

In 1929, upon the urging of Tuskegee officials and various Black leaders, along with the financial backing of the Firestone Company and the Phelps-Stokes Fund, the Booker T. Washington Agricultural and Industrial Institute (BWI?) was established in Kakata, about 45 miles from Liberia’s capital.¹⁶ The school was established in the name and likeness of Booker T. Washington.¹⁷ The institute hoped to strengthen ties between the Americo-Liberian and native Liberian populations with the establishment of the school. The curriculum was based on the Hampton-Tuskegee model of education. However, almost immediately, the Firestone Company established a Jim Crow-like pipeline by keeping Liberians from management positions while relegating them to menial labor jobs and exerting more control over BWI’s curriculum, and replacing its Black administrators with white missionaries. Nevertheless, Tuskegee officials remained actively engaged in Liberian matters, fighting on Liberia’s behalf.

Another instance of Tuskegee and U.S. imperialism can be found in regard to Puerto Rico. U.S. interests in Puerto Rico were both economic and strategic. Taking a page from U.S. Native American policy, part of the United States’ civilizing mission was educational as U.S. officials replaced Spanish instruction with English¹⁸. U.S. officials appointed more “favorable individuals,” those that were Protestant, white, and supported U.S. intervention, to positions within the Department of Education. Realizing that the educational infrastructure of the island

¹⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Liberia and Rubber,” *The New Republic*, Vol. 44, no. 572, November 18, 1925, 329.

¹⁶ A. Babs Fafunwa, and J.U. Aisiku, *Education in Africa: A Comparative Survey* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1982), 166.

¹⁷ “The Republic of Liberia in 1929-1930”, *The African World*, 1929/1930, 113.

¹⁸ During American military rule (1898-1900), the United States took control of the Puerto Rican school system. As Clif Stratton in *Education for Empire: American Schools, Race, and Paths of Good Citizenship* has pointed out, the United States used education to “Americanize” Puerto Ricans. Textbooks and instruction bombarded students with patriotism and expounded the virtues of democracy and American “superiority.”

was in bad shape, it provided an opportunity for U.S. officials to shape it as they saw fit because at the time, there were few qualified teachers, school facilities were inadequate, and according to the 1899 Census, only 9% of school-age children attended school regularly.¹⁹ In an 1899 interview, Washington responded that he could “not see why [Puerto Ricans] should not be educated into being good American citizens.”²⁰ Washington’s solution, as he stated in a letter to the editor of the *Christian Register* on August 18, 1898, was that “industrial education for the young men and women was a matter of the first importance.” According to Washington, “industrial education would do for them what it has done for Black people in the South.”²¹

Washington and the Department of Education contended that the most practical choice for Afro-Puerto Ricans was to send them to the United States for schooling. This new educational improvement initiative by the Department of Education allowed marginalized classes in Puerto Rico to elevate their standing by becoming teachers. Teachers used their positions to advance within the new colonial structure, often engaging in political strategies by forming unions such as Andrés Torado Sánchez, a 1907 Tuskegee graduate.²² The U.S. colonial system pushed for a more skilled labor force over creating a cadre of intellectuals and vocational education became popular among Black Puerto Ricans.²³ One of the vocational schools chosen for Afro-Puerto Ricans was the Tuskegee Institute.

Beginning in 1901, Afro-Puerto Ricans were funneled into these schools largely because of Jim Crow segregation of U.S. schools. Many prospective students were keen on the idea of vocational education and Washington’s vision. Taking advantage of the imperial structure,

¹⁹ Joseph Sanger, Henry Gannett, and Walter Willcox, *Report on the Census of Porto Rico, 1899* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1900), 243.

²⁰ Louis R. Harlan, ed., *Booker T. Washington Papers, Vol. 5* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 277.

²¹ Louis R. Harlan, ed., *Booker T. Washington Papers, Vol. 4* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 455.

²² Booker T. Washington Papers, Tuskegee Records (Library of Congress. Manuscript Division), Catalog 1906–1907.

²³ José-Manuel Navarro, *Creating Tropical Yankees: Social Science Textbooks and U.S. Ideological Control in Puerto Rico, 1898-1908* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 198-199.

Tuskegee became a source of upward mobility. Looking at letters from prospective students and teachers from Puerto Rico helps us see that connection. In a letter from one of the students, Lino Rivera, he explains that, “after having heard of your Tuskegee’s instruction, he asked the Tuskegee principal of the likelihood of enrolling at Tuskegee.”²⁴ In that same letter, Rivera refers to his state of poverty. This condition afflicted more than half of the population at that time. Rivera is just one of a number of students that wrote similar letters over their expressed interest in Tuskegee.²⁵

Over the years, as more students from Puerto Rico attended Tuskegee, both Afro-Puerto Ricans and African Americans formed networks that began to challenge imperialism and racist structures. Through the creation of alumni associations, multicultural clubs, and cooperation between American and foreign-born students, Afro-Puerto Ricans were given the opportunity to circumnavigate social hierarchies and create new individual and collective identities within the channels of U.S. imperialism.²⁶ By 1920, progress in Puerto Rican educational reform began to surface as Tuskegee alumni became part of the emerging Puerto Rican intelligentsia. They helped define and consolidate a nationalistic and anti-imperial culture in this space. Through their efforts, successful pressure was placed on the Puerto Rican legislature to pass a series of education reforms and appropriations. Students returned to a restructured Department of Education and a new educational philosophy guided by Puerto Rican intellectuals. The work of Afro-Puerto Rican alumni illustrates how Tuskegee served as a vehicle for upward mobility, economic advancement, and social equality. The process was complex. Class, culture, and

²⁴ Lino Rivera to Booker T. Washington, Dec. 18, 1910, Part III, Box 910 Reel 685, Archives, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁵ Department of Education to Booker T. Washington, Jan. 31, 1911, Part III, Box 911 Reel 685, Archives, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Miguel Lorenzo to Booker T. Washington, Apr. 18, 1911, Part III, Box 910 Reel 685, Archives, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁶ Tomas Monte Rivera to Members of the Executive Council, May 4, 1909, Part III, Student File Box 909 Reel 684, Archives, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

demographics created a diverse space. Afro-Puerto Ricans learned, taught, and bargained for cultural and political mobility. They were not merely victims of American aggression but adopted their Tuskegee education into a usable mechanism that fit their needs.

Tuskegee's involvement in American imperialism provides us with a number of insights into both American imperialism and Pan-Africanism as well as the connection between the two. As American imperialist aims shifted, Washington and Tuskegee officials adapted by using their influence in the efforts to improve the standings of Black people. These two case studies help expand how groups affected by U.S. imperialism worked to secure better futures for themselves. It also helps expand the scope of Pan-Africanism, as it relates to U.S. imperialism, and expands our outlook on Booker T. Washington. Furthermore, the aim is to continue to expand the dialogue surrounding Tuskegee, Pan-Africanism, and U.S. imperialism.