

John Hope: A Critique of the Atlanta Compromise (1896)

Many younger African American activists criticized Washington's accommodationist strategy and advocated a more comprehensive effort to gain civil rights and social equality for all blacks. In a speech to the Colored Debating Society, John Hope (1868-1936), a young professor at Roger Williams University in Nashville, Tennessee, rejected Washington's emphasis on vocational education and called for more militant efforts to improve the status and opportunities of African Americans. Hope was the son of a white father and black mother. He graduated from Brown University in Rhode Island and later would become president of Morehouse College and Atlanta University, the first graduate university for blacks.

From Ridgely Torrence, *The Story of John Hope* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), pp. 114-115.

If we are not striving for equality, in heaven's name for what are we living? I regard it as cowardly and dishonest for any of our colored men to tell white people or colored people that we are not struggling for equality. If money, education, and honesty will not bring to me as much privilege, as much equality as they bring to any American citizens, then they are to me a curse, and not a blessing. God forbid that we should get the implements with which to fashion our freedom, and then be too lazy or pusillanimous to fashion it. Let us not fool ourselves nor be fooled by others. If we cannot do what other freemen do, then we are not free. Yes, my friends, I want equality. Nothing less. I want all that my God-given powers will enable me to get, then why not equality? Now, catch your breath, for I am going to use an adjective: I am going to say we demand social equality. In this republic we shall be less than freemen, if we have a whit less than that which thrift, education, and honor afford other freemen. If equality, political, economic, and social, is the boon of other men in this great country of ours, then equality, political, economic, and social, is what we demand. Why build a wall to keep me out? I am no wild beast, nor am I an unclean thing.

Rise, Brothers! Come let us possess this land. Never say: "Let well enough alone!" Cease to console yourselves with adages that numb the moral sense. Be discontented. Be dissatisfied. "Sweat and grunt" under present conditions. Be as restless as the tempestuous billows on the boundless sea. Let your discontent break mountain-high against the wall of prejudice, and swamp it to the very foundation. Then we shall not have to plead for justice nor on bended knee crave for mercy; for we shall be men. Then and not until then will liberty in its highest sense be the boast of our Republic.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How would Booker T. Washington have responded to Hope's arguments?
2. In what ways does Hope suggest that the lack of social equality would impede the progress of African Americans?
3. If you were a black person living at the turn of the century, whose arguments, Hope's or Washington's, would you find more appealing? Why?