AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

In championing greater democracy for the U.S., leaders of the Progressive movement thought only in terms of the white race. African Americans were, for the most part, ignored by Progressive presidents and governors. President Wilson, with a strong southern heritage & many of the racist attitudes of the times, gave into the demands of southern Democrats & permitted the segregation of federal workers & buildings. The status of African Americans had declined steadily since the days of Reconstruction. With the Supreme Court’s “separate but equal” decision in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), racial segregation had been the rule in the South & in much of the North as well. Ironically & tragically, the Progressive era coincided with years when thousands of blacks were lynched by racist mobs. Progressives did nothing about segregation & lynching for two reasons: (1) They shared in the general prejudice of their times & (2) they considered other reforms such as lower tariffs to be more important than anti-lynching laws because such reforms benefitted everyone in American society, not just one group. African-American leaders strongly disagreed & took action on their own to alleviate conditions of poverty & discrimination.

TWO APPROACHES: BOOKER T. WASHINGTON & W.E.B. DU BOIS

Economic deprivation & exploitation was one problem; denial of civil rights was another. Which problem was primary was a difficult question that became the focus of a debate between two African-American leaders: Booker T. Washington & W.E.B. DuBois

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON'S STRESS ON ECONOMICS
- The most influential African American at the turn of the century was the head of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, Booker T. Washington
- In his Atlanta Exposition speech in 1895, he said that blacks' needs for education & economic progress were of foremost importance, and they should concentrate on learning industrial skills for better wages
- Only after getting a secure economic base, said Washington, could blacks hope to realize their other goal of political and social equality

W.E.B. DUBOIS' STRESS ON CIVIL RIGHTS
- Unlike Washington, who was born into slavery in the south, W.E.B. Du Bois was a northerner with a college education, who became a famous writer with his book, "The Souls of Black Folk" (1903), where he criticized Washington's approach & demanded equal rights for blacks
- Du Bois argued that political & social rights were a prerequisite for economic independence
- Washington's practical approach to economic advancement and Du Bois' militant demands for equal rights framed a debate in the black community that continued throughout much of the 20th century

URBAN MIGRATION
- At the close of the 19th century, 90% of African Americans lived in the South, but in the 1900s, this ratio steadily shifted toward the North
- The migration began between 1910 and 1930 when about 1 million people traveled north to seek jobs in the cities
- Motivating their decision to leave the South were:
  1. Deteriorating race relations
  2. Destruction of their cotton crops by the boll weevil
  3. Job opportunities in northern factories that opened up when white workers were drafted in WWI
- The Great Depression in the 1930s slowed migration, but WWII renewed it as between 1940 & 1970, 4 million African Americans went north
- Although many succeeded in improving their economic conditions, the newcomers to northern cities also faced racial discrimination

CIVIL RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS
- Increased racial discrimination during the Progressive era was one reason that civil rights organizations were founded in the early 1900s
  1. In 1905, W.E.B. Du Bois met with a group of black intellectuals in Niagara Falls, Canada, to discuss a program of protest & action aimed at securing equal rights for blacks. They and others who later joined the group became known as the "Niagara Movement"
  2. On Lincoln's birthday in 1908, Du Bois, other members of the Niagara Movement, & a group of white progressives founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Their mission was to abolish all forms of segregation & to increased educational opportunities for African-American children. By 1920, the NAACP was the nation’s largest civil rights organization, with over 100,000 members
  3. Another organization, the National Urban League, was formed in 1911 to help those migrating from the South to northern cities. The league's motto, "Not Alms But Opportunity," reflected its emphasis on self-reliance and economic advancement