CHAPTER 3

Booker T. Washington and the Psychology of “Black Survivalism”

We Wear the Mask

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream otherwise,  
We wear the mask!  

Paul Lawrence Dunbar

DIPLOMACY

In the broader sense, diplomacy means the thoughtful and careful consideration of words and ideas expressed to reduce the words and ideas to the level of being the least offensive, while they carry the force of what is desired to the maxim.

To be a diplomat, one has to be very careful in his expressions before indulging in them. He must think seriously and calculatingly so that his thoughts and words may have the desired effect without
arousing suspicion or inviting hostility. You must first be a very skillful thinker and psychologist to be a diplomat. A diplomat never reveals his true state of mind. He never reveals his hand in dealing with a situation. He always keeps a line of defense for whatever he says or does in reserve.

—Marcus Garvey

The impact and role of Washington’s contributions to racial uplift have been badly misunderstood, mostly because he operated in a fashion that is epitomized in Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask” poem and Marcus Garvey’s teachings on diplomacy. Unfortunately, as Harlan wrote, “Washington’s public image, which in time became a deception, was fixed in the minds of his generation by two highly publicized events, a speech and a book.” People during his era knew Washington by his Atlanta Cotton States Exposition Address given in 1895 and his magnum opus, *Up from Slavery*, published in 1901. In the mid-1950s, Frenchman Edmund Bartelemy likened Washington to an Uncle Tom, labeling *Up from Slavery* “a new *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, equally captivating, but more modern and truer.” This misperception gained currency by the 1960s, and black activists along with others assumed that Washington had been a sellout, a person willing to flush his own people down the drain for the betterment of whites. While nothing could have been further from the truth, most people have not taken time to study the subject sufficiently to learn otherwise. Only a few voices called out to the contrary. Washington’s associate, William H. Lewis, for one, declared that the “Tuskegeeian was trying to bring the wooden horse inside the walls of Troy,” showing that, during his era, Washington’s allies at least understood his psychology and strategy. Today, however, many people, especially college-educated African Americans, tend to identify more closely with the “radical” teachings of Du Bois. The writer’s experience has been that many of these same individuals stubbornly refuse to modify their misperception of Washington, even when the evidence clearly shows a man who does not conform to an “accommodationist” model.

This common perception of the Tuskegee springs partly from seeds he planted himself. By the time he finished his studies at Hampton Institute in 1875, Washington believed that the problems facing blacks mostly would be solved through a program leading to economic independence. “It should be our highest ambition,” he once declared, “to make the negro, first of all a property-holding, industrious, intelligent, virtuous citizen, and a Republican, or Democrat afterward.” These characteristics squared with late nineteenth- and