



## Letter from Army Reservist Walter E. Williams to President John F. Kennedy, 1963

Walter E. Williams  
2225 So Harvard Blvd.  
Los Angeles 18, Calif  
May 29th 1963

The President  
Washington, D.C.

Dear Sir:

Through no choosing of my own, I am presently a member in Company "C" 3rd Battalion, 30th Infantry, U.S. Army Reserves, located at 5525 Vineland Avenue, North Hollywood, California. I find it necessary to consult you as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces in pursuit of a satisfactory answer to my problem which is: I, as an American Negro, in view of disfranchisement, in view of injustice, in view of the humiliation and frustration that I suffer because my skin is black, in view of the discrimination that break and crush the spirit of men, and in view of this Administration's apparent tolerance of these evils – I want to know the nature of my obligation to Armed Forces of America relative to my Caucasian counterpart.

In other words, I well understand my obligation as well as the white soldier's; but, he, in return, receives or better stated has the potential to receive any and all benefits of democracy while I get little. Even more irritating is that this white soldier may have a father who was a Nazi and murdered many Americans in World War II. But this soldier whose loyalty is yet to be tested already enjoys more fruits of democracy that I or any other Negro have yet to appreciate, even though the Negro has proven his loyalty in at least five major wars.

My question to you is: Should Negroes be relieved of their service obligation or continue defending and dying for empty promises of freedom and equality . . . . . should young Negroes answer the draft call? Should Negroes continue support through tax funds that are not equitably distributed? Or should we, as the great founders of our country, disobey that which is wrong and that which supports wrong. Should we perpetuate this injustice by pacifist movements. Or should we demand human rights as our Founding Fathers did at the risk of being called extremists. At the risk of any name that might be applied against me, I contend that we relieve ourselves of oppression in a manner that is in keeping with the great heritage of our nation.

In closing I admit that this problem is a difficult and trying one, but I cannot in honesty to my country and to my people accept "second class" citizenship for [any] American.

Respectfully yours,

Walter E Williams

*From Williams's personal collection, reproduced in Up from the Projects: An Autobiography by Walter E. Williams. Hoover Institution Press. Stanford University; Stanford, CA: 2010.*

### Discussion Questions

- Have you ever tried to contact someone as powerful as the President, or written a letter in protest of some kind? What prompted you to do this? What kind of reply did you get?
- What does Williams mean when he says he's willing to risk being branded an "extremist"? Why does he invoke the Founding Fathers of the United States to back up his arguments?
- Today, how would you answer young Williams's question, "Should Negroes be relieved of their service obligation or continue defending and dying..." in service to the United States? What about in 1963? What has changed in American society since then? What remains the same?
- Research more about this letter. Did Williams get a reply? What did that reply say?