

# Walter E. Williams

Economist of Liberty

1936 – 2020

Beloved Teacher

Syndicated Columnist

Free Market Advocate

Defender of the Constitution



Contemporary Scholars: Lesson 1



# Walter E. Williams: Independent Thinker

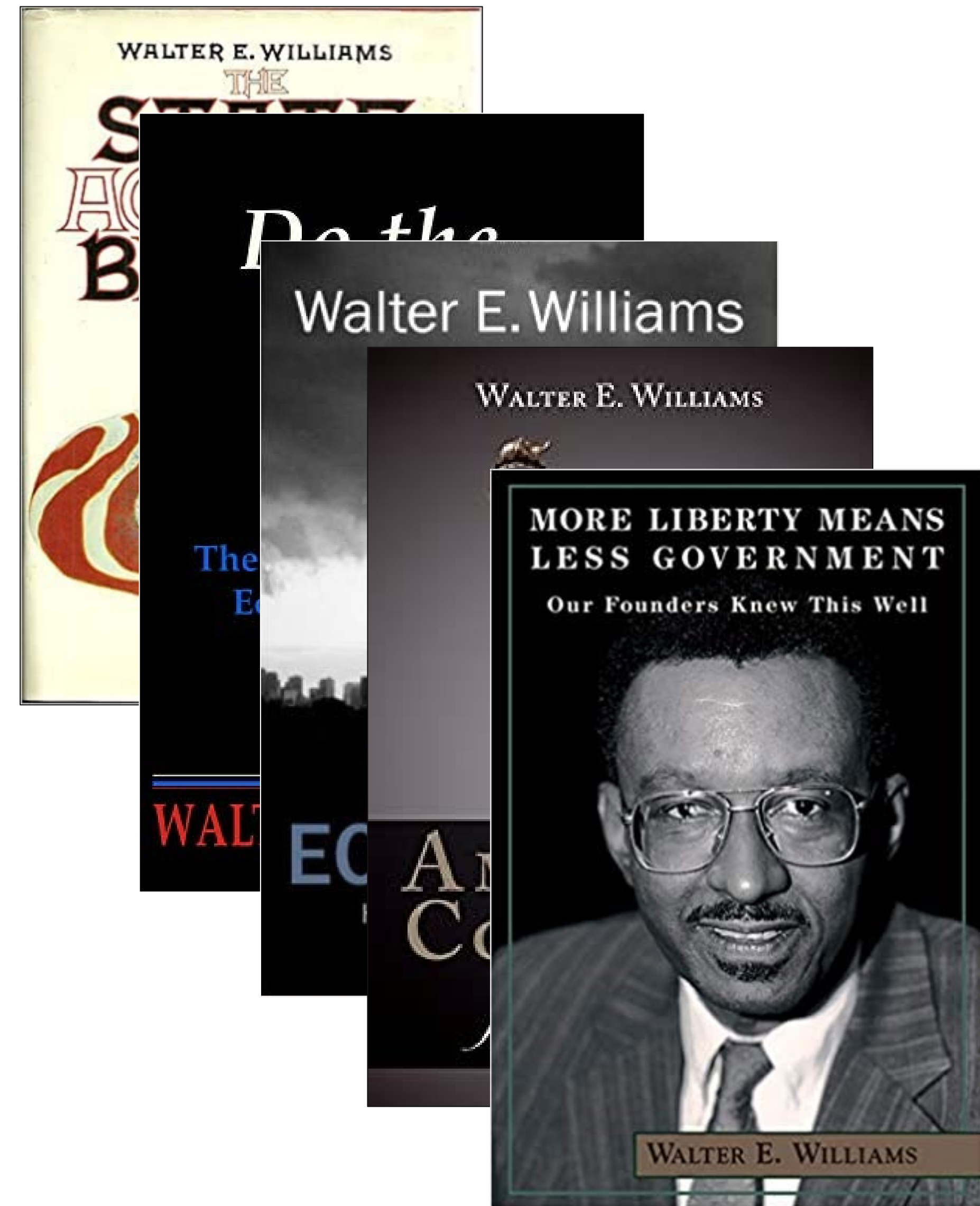
Where does wealth come from? What conditions create prosperity?

Why do so many government programs intended to help the poor fail to lift people out of poverty?

Why does racial inequality persist despite the enormous political victories of the Civil Rights movement?

If you've ever pondered questions like this, the provocative work of economist **Walter E. Williams** will help you find the answers.

Even if you don't agree with his conclusions, he will challenge your assumptions and help you think through modern society's most difficult problems.





# Walter E. Williams: Popular Economist

Williams was a *popular* economist in all senses of that word: he helped popularize economic theory by making it comprehensible and accessible to non-experts; his books, essays, and media appearances were enjoyed by a wide variety of audiences; and he defended his economic positions by explaining how they would help ordinary people – even when his ideas seemed **counterintuitive** or flew in the face of conventional wisdom.

Throughout his 40 years of writing and speaking – including a weekly op-ed column, the publication of 10 books, and countless media appearances – his work left an indelible impression on the public conversation around race, inequality, and the role of government.

*Walter Williams speaks to an audience at the Manhattan Institute in 1982.*





# Growing Up in Philadelphia

Walter Edward Williams (he often joked that the “E” stood for “Excellence”) was born and raised in Philadelphia. His father abandoned the family when Walter was very young, laying a heavy financial burden on his mother.

In 1947, when Walter was 10 years old, they moved to the Richard Allen housing projects – one of the city’s first public housing developments for working-class residents.

Williams later observed that while his family was relatively poor and lived in the projects, there was little violent crime in his community, and he and his sister Catherine were rare among their peers in not having two parents at home.

*Above, signage from the newly-built Richard Allen Homes in North Philadelphia; right, the homes as they appeared in the 1940s.*







# Growing Up in Philadelphia

His mother was the major influence on his development and early life. His mother told young Walter that though the family had a “beer pocketbook,” they had “champagne tastes.” She made sure Walter and his sister took full advantage of the city’s cultural offerings.

Weekend outings usually included a stop to the public library, followed by a visit to the Art Museum, the Franklin Institute, or the aquarium. In his 2010 memoir *Up from the Projects*, Williams recalled that decades later, in the 1980s, he repeated those visits with his own daughter, Devyn.

**Did your family have similar rituals growing up?**

**What were the cultural or educational opportunities that made a strong impression on you as a child?**



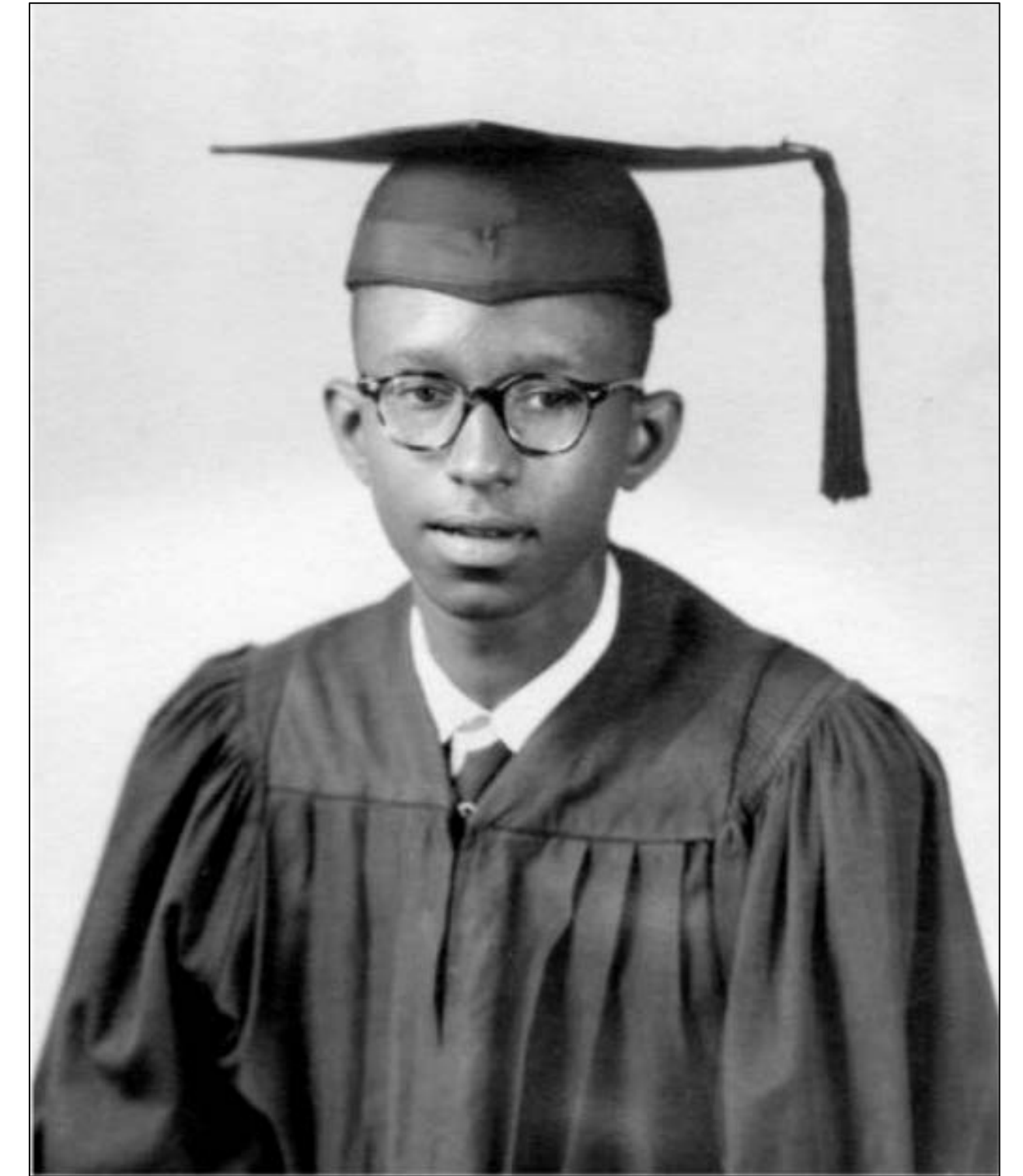
*Walter Williams's mother, Catherine, in the 1940s. From the documentary Suffer No Fools.*

# A Promising Underachiever

Williams attended public middle school and high school, where he demonstrated academic talent – but also a tendency to play the class clown. Walter’s teachers told his mother that once he got some of the “foolishness” out of him, he would go places.

Starting with odd jobs at U-Needa-Hat company when he was 13, work was a constant feature in Williams’s teenage years. The household budget was tight, and any spending money Walter wanted for himself had to be earned.

After a couple years, Williams lost his job at the hat shop because other employees reported him as underage – even though he enjoyed the job, wanted the money, and was never in danger. This was an early lesson in the unintended consequences of well-meaning workplace laws.



*Walter Williams upon graduating from Junior High in 1951.*

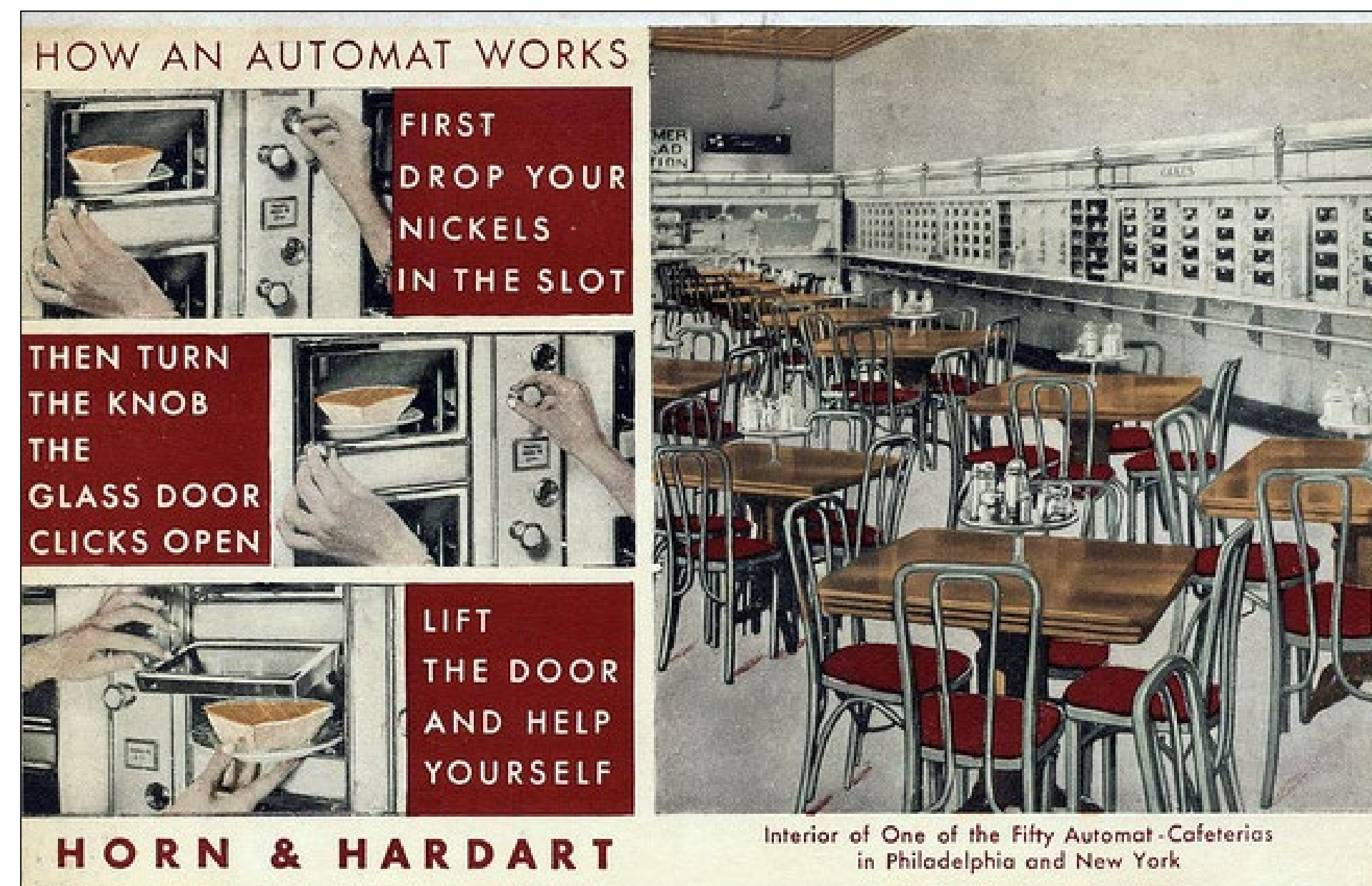




# Family Ties & Odd Jobs

Walter worked many jobs throughout his teenage years. In the 40s and 50s, with a booming economy and fewer labor regulations, it was quite easy for a young man of any race who wanted a job to find one, at least in major cities like Philadelphia.

Walter's favorite job was at Horn & Hardart, the wildly popular chain of **automats** – a predecessor to later fast-food restaurants – in which patrons bought prepared food from coin-operated windows rather than be waited on at their table.



*Postcard advertisement and explainer for the design of an automat. Horn & Hardart, 1939.*





# Family Ties & Odd Jobs

For Walter, the jobs were a path to pride and self-confidence. His extended family – aunts and uncles, grandparents, close friends – who supported him, his sister, and his mother were proud of his work ethic and celebrated when he graduated high school, an achievement few in his family had reached.

Especially proud was his beloved grandmother, Katherine Morgan. Daughter of a former slave, she had only an elementary school education and worked as a domestic servant most of her life.

In his later economic writing, Williams expressed dismay that young men like him – the great-grandson of an ex-slave – no longer had the same opportunities for upward mobility that he took for granted, even in an era when open racism was far more common.



*Philadelphia in the 1950s.*



# Family Ties & Odd Jobs

Williams's life was transformed when his mother remarried to her childhood friend, Thomas Burchett, who Walter called "Pops."

Pops became the father that Walter had never had. Lessons and wisdom from Pops shaped Williams's life and feature often in his later writings.

Around the same time that Pops became his stepfather, Walter took a job driving for Yellow Cab. In the 1950s, there will still few hurdles to getting hired as a taxi driver – no medallion or special municipal license was required.

But the most important result from Walter's days as a cab driver was that he met a woman who would become the most important person in his life: his future wife, Connie.



*Yellow Cab Company sign from the 1950s.*



## A Partner for Life

Like Walter, Connie Taylor grew up poor, and they complemented one another beautifully.

Bright and pugnacious, Walter never shied away from saying what he really believed, even when it was socially inappropriate. According to friends, it was Connie, more sociable and gregarious, who helped smooth Walter's rough edges. When Walter began his education in 1962, Connie worked full time to support them.

She was beloved by Walter's family and colleagues and was at his side throughout a career that began with their struggling to pay the bills, but eventually took them to state dinners at The White House.

Connie passed away in 2007, and Walter dedicated *Up from the Projects* to her memory.



*Connie, Pops, and Walter in the 1970s.*





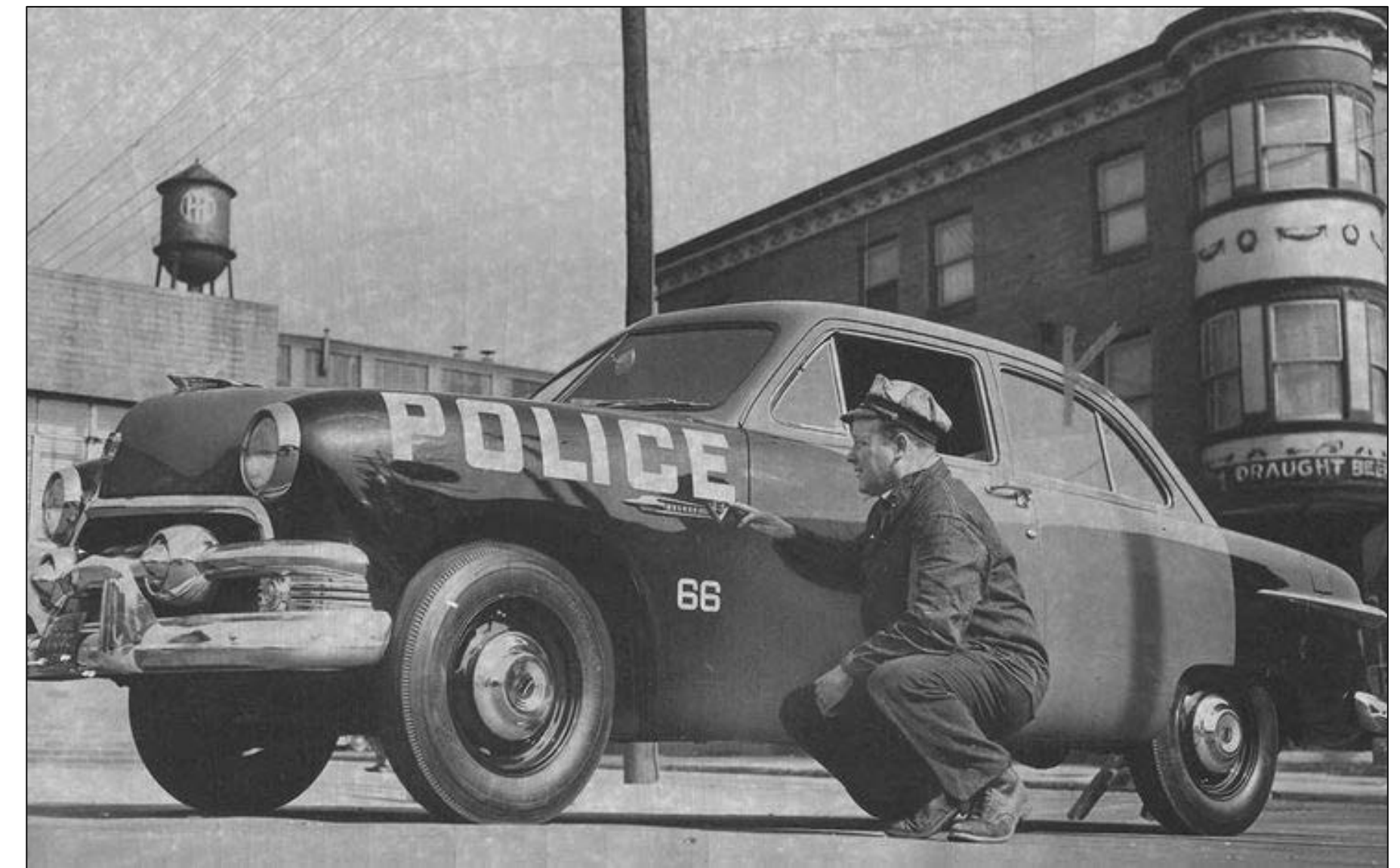
# The Long Arm (and Knee, and Fist) of the Law

In 1958, Williams had his first and most serious of several run-ins with the law. While driving a fare to the Reading Terminal train station, Williams was blocked by a police officer standing in the middle of a narrow, one-lane street. When the officer ignored his requests to move, Williams shouted: “As I taxpayer, I pay your salary to protect me, not annoy me.”

The officer yanked him from his cab and dragged him to a nearby police station. When the shocked Williams objected, the officer kned him in the groin and punched him in the chest.

He was charged with disorderly conduct, assault on a police officer, and resisting arrest. Fortunately, Williams had no record, and was only fined 100 dollars despite being found guilty of all but one charge.

It was an early lesson about state power for the future **libertarian**. He also now had an arrest record, which would lose him at least one job opportunity in later years.



Philadelphia police cruiser, 1951. [Source: The Philadelphia Inquirer.]





## “A Million-Dollar Experience”

In the 1950s, the U.S. government was still drafting able-bodied men into the Army. In August 1959, Williams was drafted, with orders to report for duty in Georgia.

He and Connie had to set whatever plans they had aside.

Pops, who had served as a tech sergeant in WWII, told Walter that being in the Army was “a million-dollar experience that you wouldn’t repeat for a million dollars.” In the coming years, Williams would find out just how right Pops was.

Williams later said: “Sometimes I don’t call it drafting. My labor services were **confiscated** by the United States government. I just had to put off everything I planned on doing to spend two years in the army.”



*Williams working on a truck on an Army base in Seoul, South Korea.*



# Facing “Jim Crow”

On the bus trip to Georgia, Williams had his first encounters with official segregation.

“There was discrimination in Philadelphia,” Williams later recalled. “But there weren’t the open signs saying colored waiting room, colored bathroom, colored water fountain. I was just in shock.”

Throughout Williams’s time in the Army, the Civil Rights movement was sweeping the South. Watching Whites attack sit-in protestors and police turn fire hoses on demonstrators, young Williams felt he must act in solidarity.



*“Department Store, Mobile, Alabama” Gordon Parks, 1956.*



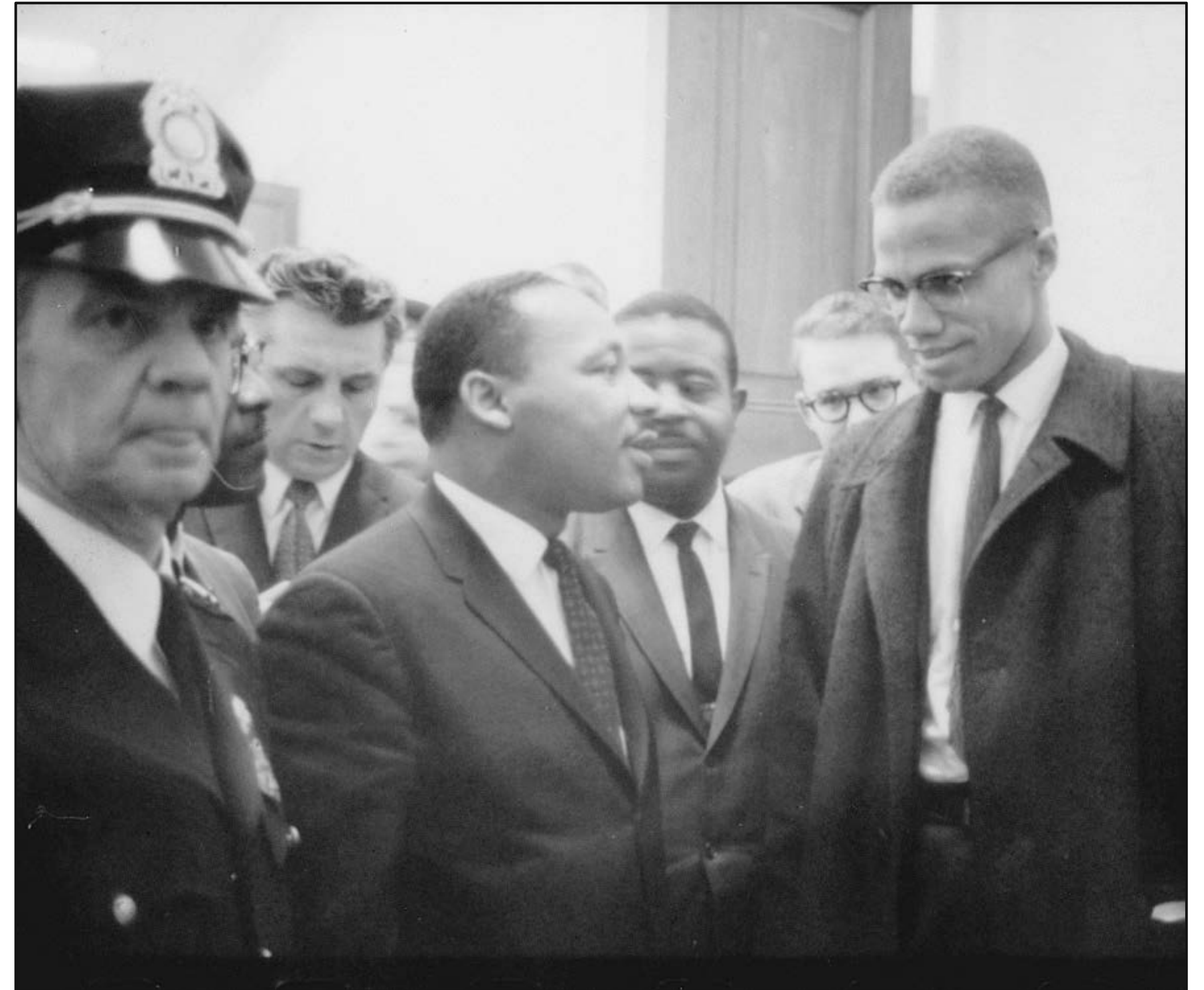


# Facing “Jim Crow”

But Williams preferred the militant approach of leaders like Malcolm X over the nonviolence of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

His confrontational attitude continued throughout his time in the Army. He wrote letters of protest to politicians and newspapers asking why he, a Black man, should be forced to serve in uniform for a country that did not respect his most basic rights.

And Williams wasn't shy about letting his commanding officers and fellow soldiers know what he believed, too.



*Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X during their only face-to-face meeting, at the Capitol in Washington, D.C. in 1964.*



# Resisting Racism & Discrimination

Williams entered the Army less than a decade after the Armed Forces were desegregated by President Harry S. Truman, but racism was still common on the base. Segregated social events and assumptions that Blacks were only suited for menial labor persisted.

Williams bucked these conventions throughout his Army career, earning threats not only from Whites, but from Black soldiers who saw him as a Northern interloper making trouble in a culture he didn't understand.

In one notable confrontation, he was ordered to paint a truck. Resentful of being given a task so far beneath his skills, he proceeded to paint the *entire* truck: wheels, windshield, everything. When a commanding officer finally stopped him, Williams mockingly feigned ignorance.



The Chicago Defender announces President Truman's decision to integrate the Armed Forces by Executive Order.



# All Enemies Foreign & Domestic

Williams framed his actions as a defense of the United States Constitution and his oath to defend it from “all enemies foreign and domestic.” Williams told one racist officer to his face that he considered him a domestic enemy of the values of the American founding.

Williams’s reverence for the Constitution and the guarantees of liberty enshrined in the Bill of Rights was a common theme in his later writings and presentations as an economist.

Eventually, Williams talked his way into a job as court recorder, a role better suited to his talents. There, he learned much about military law – which would come in handy later.







## South Korea

In 1960, two officers conspired to trap Williams by issuing him contradictory orders, and he was court martialed for failing to obey a direct command. Williams, serving as his own defense and drawing on his experience in court, was found “not guilty.”

In retaliation, Williams was ordered to serve the rest of his deployment in South Korea. This further upended his and Connie’s future plans. But despite the pain of separation, Williams learned much in Korea, studying karate and continuing his campaign of protesting, by word and deed, racism within the Armed Forces.

His light duties also gave him plenty of time to read and reflect on his future. He and Connie had married hastily right before he shipped off to Seoul. Now 24 years old, Williams was eager to get his life back on track.



*Williams with his karate instructors while stationed in Taegu, South Korea.*





# Going West: Los Angeles

In June 1961, Williams went into active reserves and returned home. At year's end, he and Connie moved to Los Angeles and began their new life. They practiced thrift and saved money carefully, sometimes traveling to multiple grocery stores in a single trip to take advantage of different sales.

Williams enrolled as a full-time student at California State College in 1962, originally studying sociology. But he switched majors to economics after reading the work of W.E.B. DuBois, who declared that understanding the economy was the path to Black liberation.

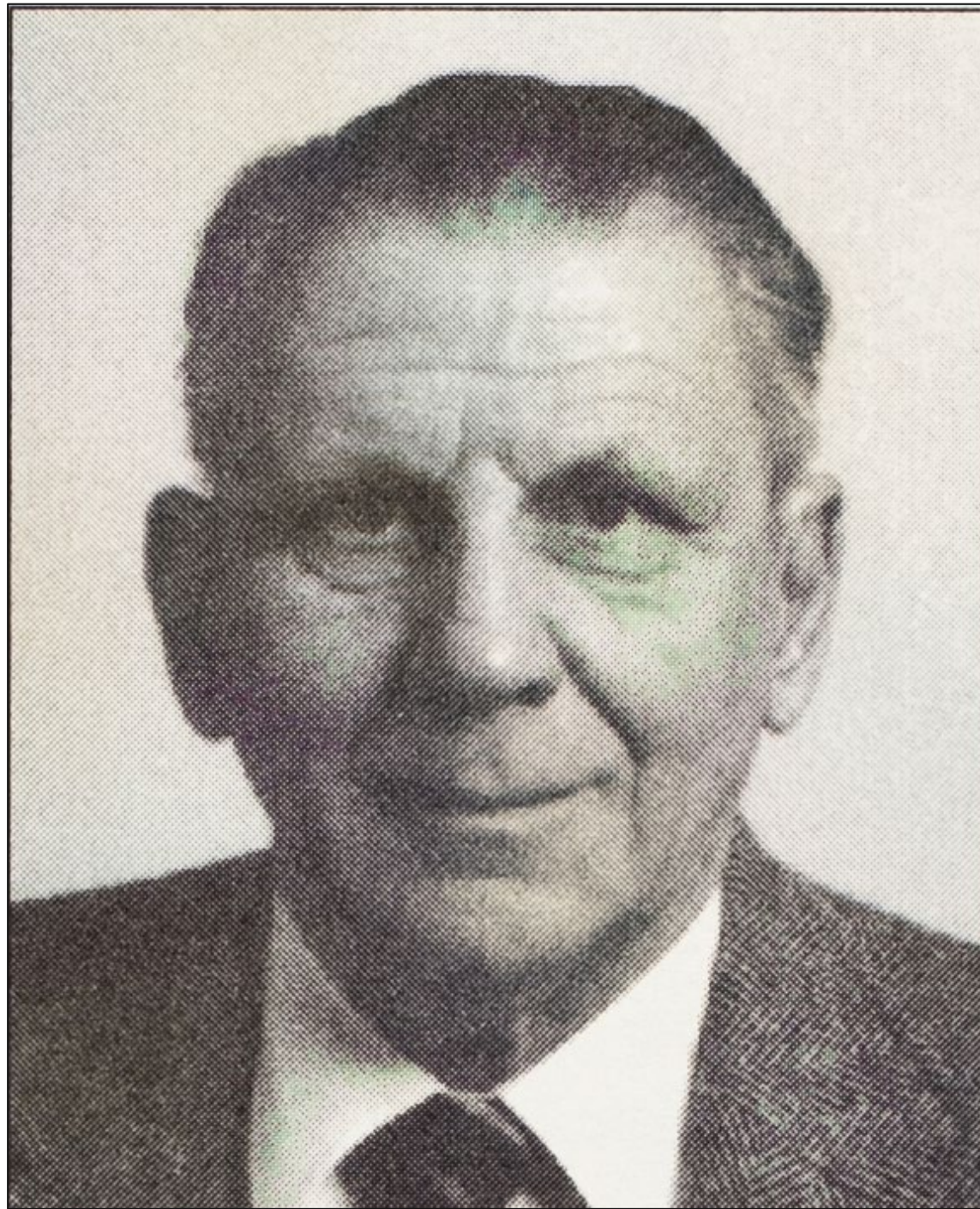
This opened Williams's eyes to the long history of Black entrepreneurship and prosperity—even in the face of slavery and segregation.



*The Angel's Flight cable car in Los Angeles, 1962, which Walter and Connie frequently used on trips back and forth from Grand Central Market.*



# Discovering Economics: California State College



*Cal State Economics professor Arthur J. Kirsch (1961-1979)*

Though he sometimes struggled academically – his fortunes in economics courses ranged from earning the top grade to scraping by with a “C” – Williams had found his calling.

Arthur Kirsch, his microeconomics professor, became Williams’s friend, advisor, and mentor, and was later a key influence in encouraging him pursue an economics PhD.

All the while, Walter and Connie both worked full-time. By the 1960s, Walter had reconciled (through Connie’s intervention) with his biological father, now a well-respected lather in Los Angeles. He got Walter a job in construction and taught him how to hang sheetrock.

Later, Walter secured a night job with the Los Angeles County Probation Office. This allowed him work through the evening, attend class early in the mornings, and then go home to sleep in the afternoons.





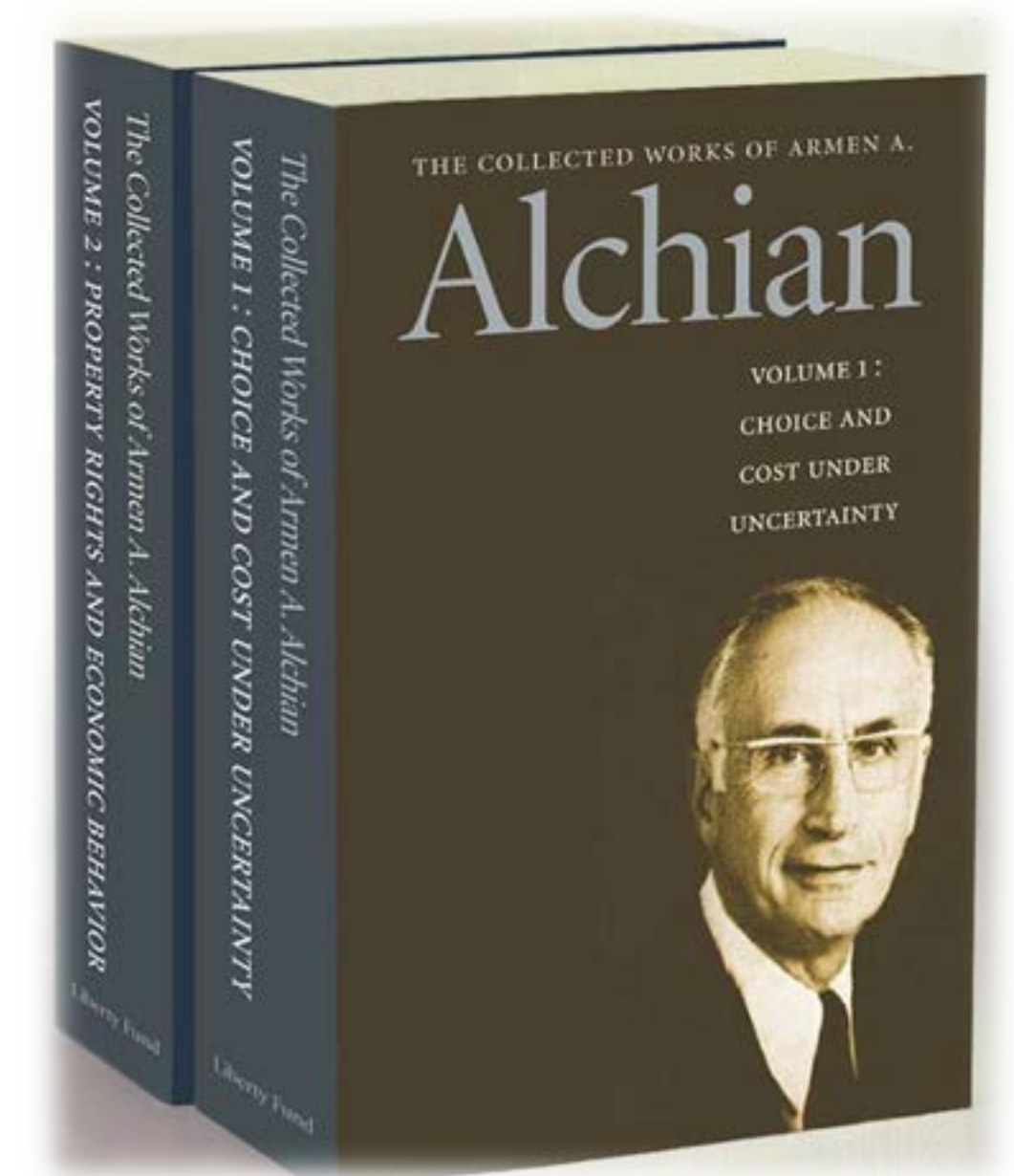
# Discovering Economics: UCLA

After earning his B.A. in 1965, Williams enrolled in the graduate program in the economics department at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA ). It was there that a professor challenged Williams's left-leaning beliefs, especially on labor policy, by asking Williams if he cared more about the *intentions* of a policy, or that policy's actual *outcomes*.

At UCLA, Williams studied with Armen Alchian and Jack Hirshleifer, major scholars of economic theory.

Williams later wrote that “while Professor Alchian knew much more about economics than I did, I could slam dunk a basketball, and he couldn't. Therefore, I wasn't afraid to say, as I sometimes did in class, ‘Professor Alchian, I think you're wrong about that.’”

Alchian loved to needle his students with provocative questions, and was delighted that Williams was unafraid to tackle the questions and needle him back.



Collected Works of Armen A. Alchian,  
Liberty Fund, Inc.; 2006

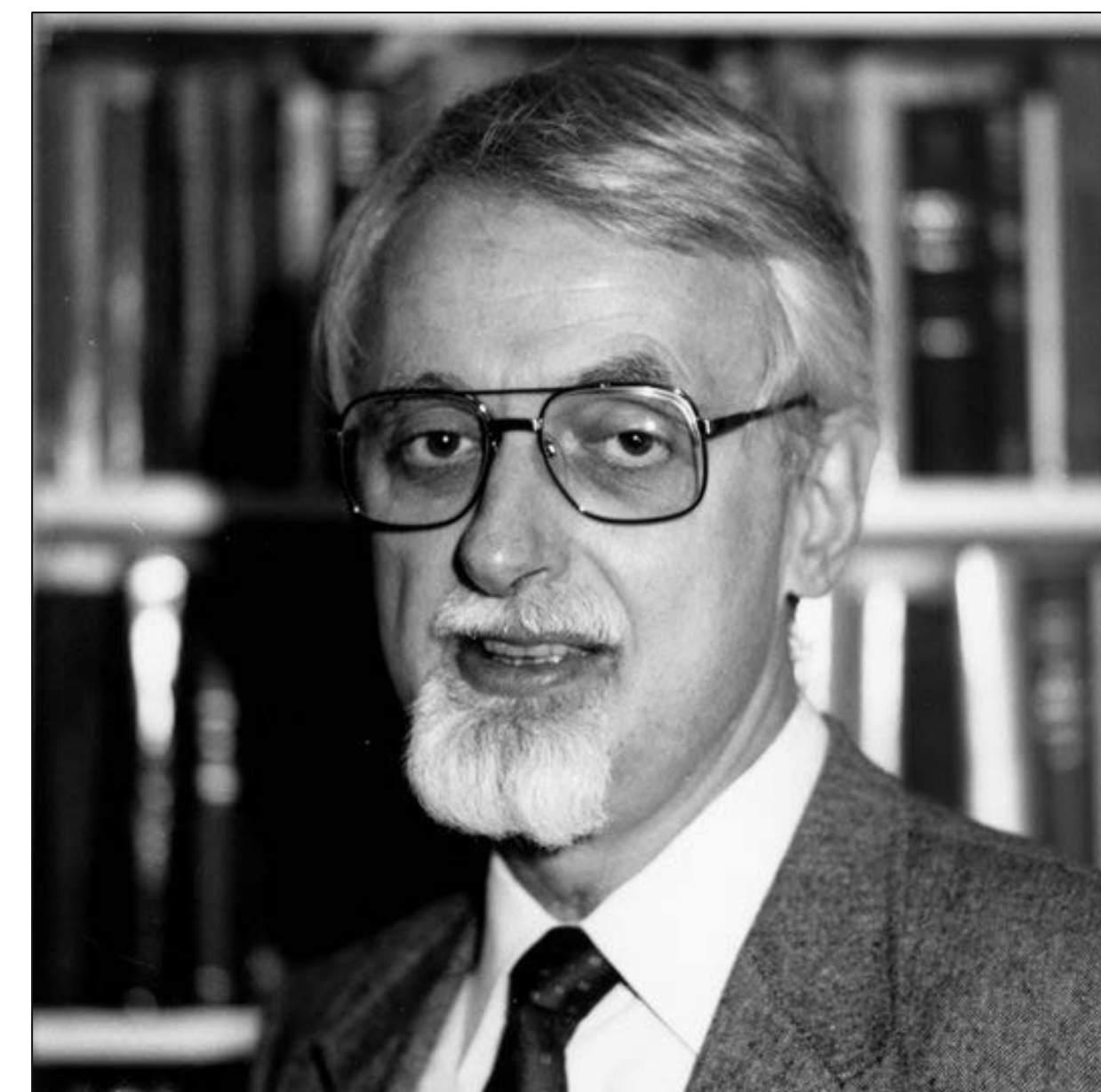




# Discovering Economics: UCLA

Williams's refusal to see anyone as his better and willingness to engage in lively philosophical arguments endeared him to his accomplished professors.

But he also received merciless criticism. Another professor with whom Williams became friends, Axel Leijonhufvud, declared an exam Williams wrote to be “among the worst” of the 16 exams Leijonhufvud had *flunked* in an economic theory class – in other words, the worst of the worst.



Axel Leijonhufvud in the 1980s.

But he also encouraged Williams, knowing that he was capable of better. Leijonhufvud, Alchian, and Hirshleifer took the time to coach Williams and work through unfamiliar material.

Williams later wrote that he was grateful for the unsparing intellectual atmosphere at UCLA, worrying that Black students in his position today would be denied honest assessments of their abilities “due to a teacher's misguided efforts to compensate for our history of being discriminated against or fear of intimidation by students and accusations of racism.”



# A Passion for Teaching

Looking back on his education at UCLA, Williams said: “I probably became a libertarian through exposure to tough-minded professors who encouraged me to think with my brain instead of my heart.” Sharing this same gift of tough-mindedness with students – teaching them *how* to think about economics, rather than *what* to think – became his passion.

Williams’s first teaching post was Temple University in his hometown of Philadelphia. He caused a stir there when he wrote and circulated a memo condemning what he saw as lowered standards for Black students from his White colleagues.

To Williams, there was no more damaging form of racism than condescension, even when motivated by ostensibly noble motives of fighting racial inequality.



*Williams in a 1975 Philadelphia Inquirer article about the controversy around his memo.*



# A Passion for Teaching

In the fall of 1980, Williams began teaching economics at George Mason University (GMU) in Fairfax, Virginia – 163 miles from his home in Pennsylvania. He decided the commute was worth the opportunity to teach in an economics department that was so closely aligned with his values – and where he would be “simply given teaching assignments and otherwise left alone” to work on his own projects or travel to nearby Washington, D.C. for any events or meetings that arose.





# A Passion for Teaching

Williams loved teaching, but he was scrupulous about not using his position as an educator to instill his own libertarian convictions in his students, and later deplored educators who used the lectern as an ideological pulpit.

Dr. Daniel J. Smith, who studied under Williams in GMU's PhD program, wrote in a tribute:

“While expecting clarity from students, he also demanded analytical rigor. More than once, he chided me for responses to classroom prompts he found deficient. His exam questions were so difficult, he openly posted them on his website, causing each new batch of graduate students to spend endless hours debating the questions with fellow students.

**Even to this day, I still get in debates with my former classmates about the correct answers to some of these questions ... Williams stressed that if we wanted to make the world a better place, we should really care about policy consequences, not intentions.”**

As he wrote in *Race and Economics*: “Compassionate policy requires dispassionate analysis.”



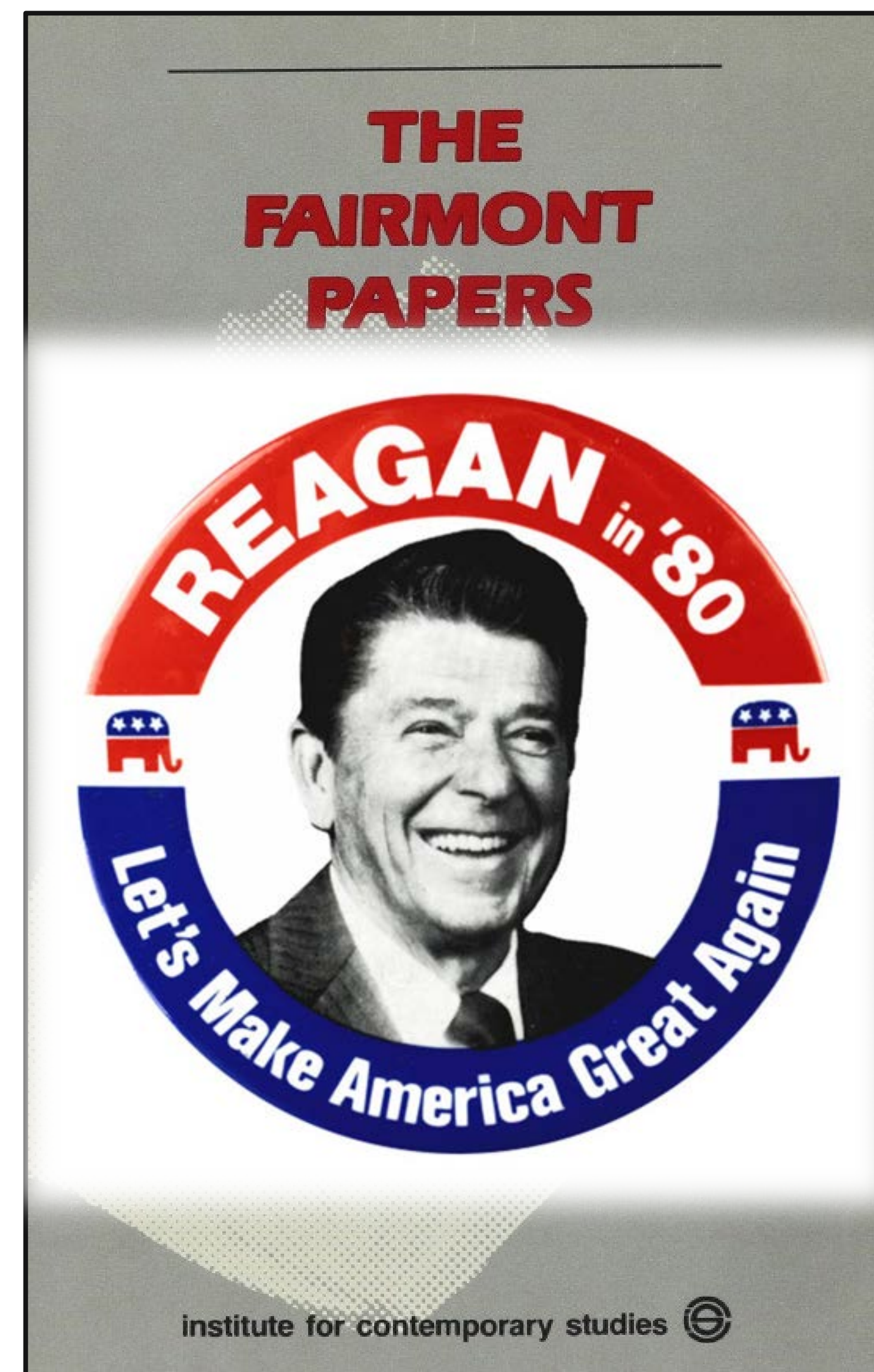


# Black Alternatives

By the 1980s, disillusionment with the social policies of the 1960s and 70s – and their unintended consequences – was widespread in America. Free market ideas were **ascendant**, and the crucial planks in President Ronald Reagan's small-government platform.

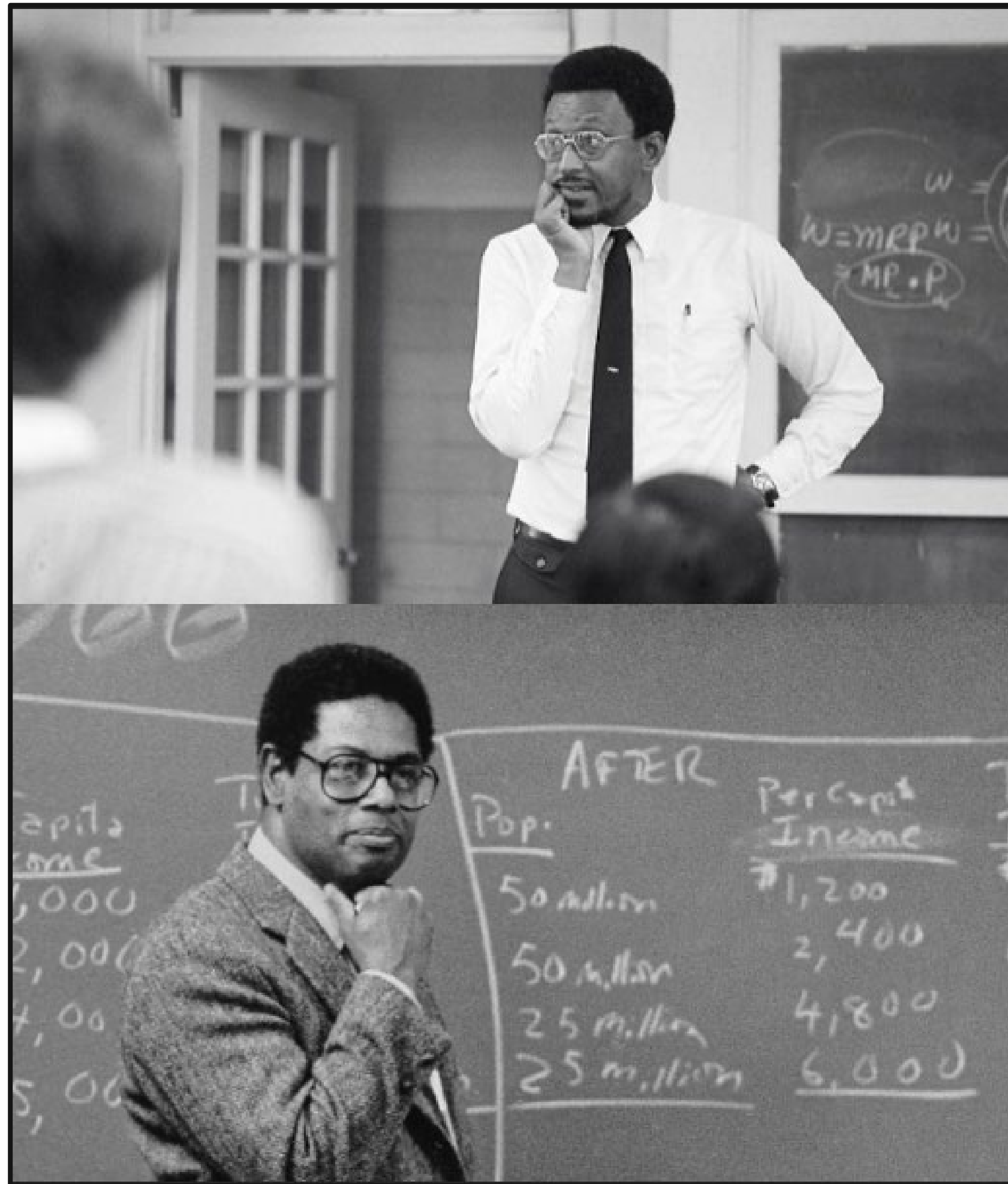
Walter Williams wrote and spoke in support of these policies, part of a rising tide of Black conservatives, libertarians, and other dissidents from the political **orthodoxy** of the Civil Rights era that included future Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas, journalist Tony Brown, and Williams's best friend and fellow economist Thomas Sowell.

These thinkers, along with other scholars and political figures, participated in the 1980 "Black Alternatives" conference, just a month after Reagan's election.





# Black Alternatives ... and a backlash



The arguments of Williams, Sowell, and other Fairmont panelists were dismissed by some mainstream Black leaders – and hit with scathing criticism by others.

NAACP executive director Benjamin Hooks called Black conservatives “a new breed of Uncle Tom [and] some of the biggest liars the world ever saw.” Carl Rowan, columnist and former official in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, compared Sowell to Norwegian Nazi collaborator Vidkun Quisling.

Both Sowell and Williams were accused of being lackeys of President Reagan, though neither ever worked for or received funding from his administration.

**Why were critiques from mainstream Black figures like Hooks and Rowan so vehement? What about Williams and Sowell’s arguments made them so angry?**



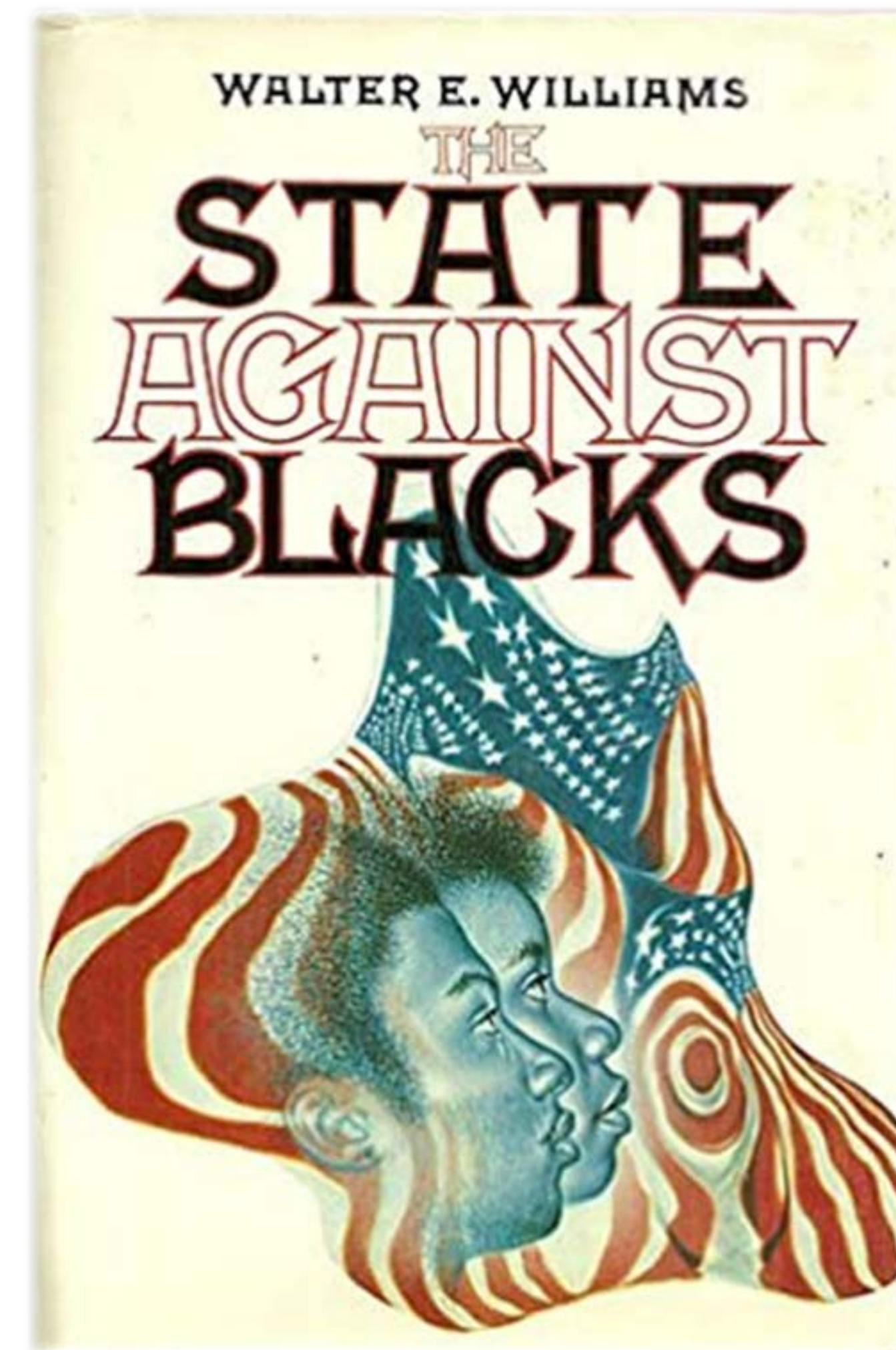
## *The State Against Blacks* (1982)

Williams's first book set up many of the libertarian themes that he would return to in his later work, particularly what he saw as the role of government in barring Black Americans from economic opportunity.

He didn't deny that racism and discrimination were real and helped exacerbate inequality. But he argued that a **plethora** of local, state, and federal regulations – from minimum wage laws to **byzantine** licensing practices for occupations like plumber and electrician – were the main culprits behind Black socioeconomic inequality.

What laws or regulations do you think are unnecessary, or even harmful to those they're intended to protect?

Why are such regulations in place? How might those who supported the laws defend their decision?





# Taking it to the Streets: “Good Intentions” (1985)

William’s first public television special introduced a wider audience to his belief that free market policies could alleviate poverty in America’s inner cities. Shooting on location in his old stomping grounds of North Philadelphia, the program critiqued laws that made it harder for businesses to hire young Black men, and the government monopoly on public education.

If possible, watch a brief clip of “Good Intentions” by clicking the image on the right.

What do you think accounts for the decline of public schools in Philadelphia from Williams’s youth in the 1950s to the 1980s?

What makes a successful school?  
What does it take to build one?





# Anti-Apartheid, Pro-Capitalism in South Africa

Throughout the 1980s, protests against **apartheid** in South Africa spread throughout the world. Williams travelled to the racially stratified republic several times, beginning in 1979, speaking in favor of *laissez-faire* capitalism to Afrikaner, British, Indian, and Black African audiences.



*Apartheid-era police assault Black demonstrators.*

Williams condemned apartheid but also criticized the socialism prescribed by the African National Congress, the party to which future president Nelson Mandela belonged throughout his political career.

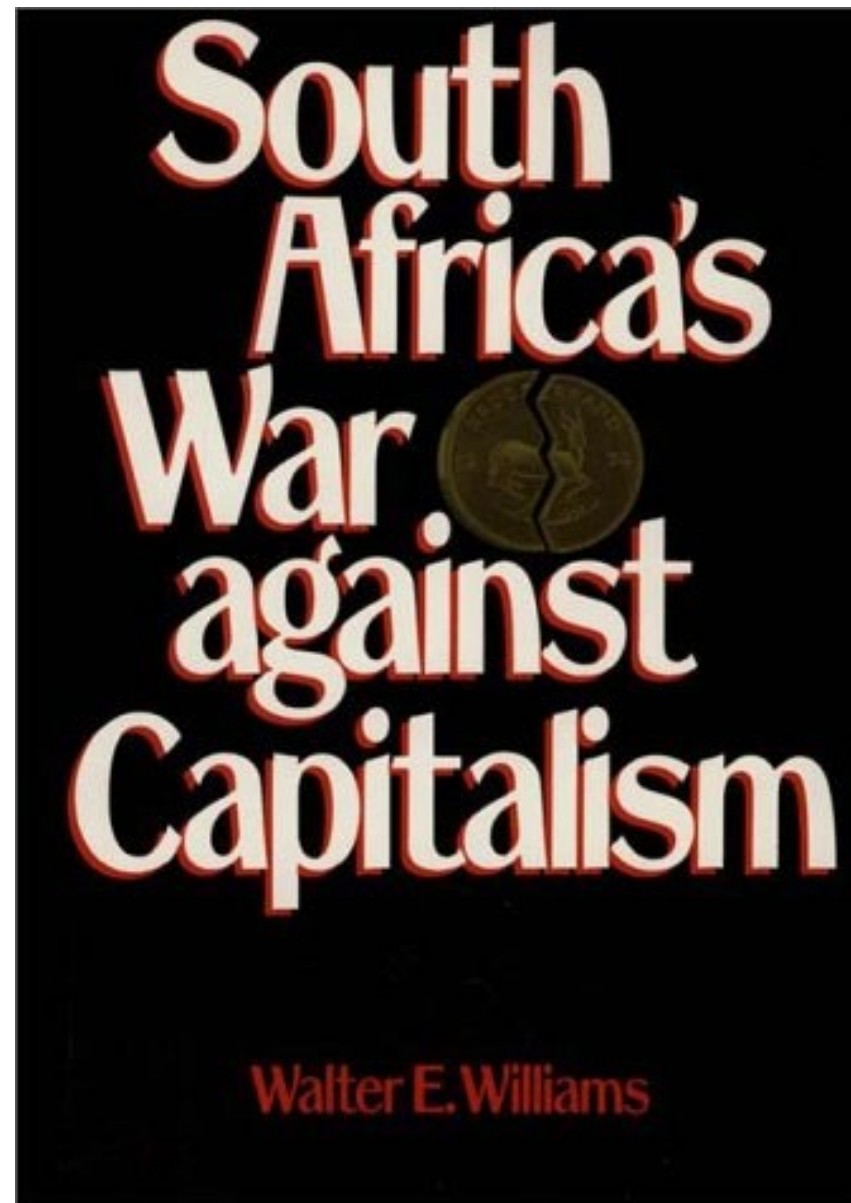
Williams argued that the very existence of, for instance, racist laws banning Blacks from certain professions showed that Blacks *would* be hired if employers weren't forbidden from doing so by law. He believed economic liberty would produce *less* discrimination and *more* opportunity.







# Anti-Apartheid, Pro-Capitalism in South Africa



William's book on apartheid was published in the U.S. in 1989 and in South Africa in 1990.

*The whole ugly history of apartheid has been an attack on free markets and the rights of individuals, and a glorification of centralized ... power.*

*In 1900 when South African Prime Minister Jan Christiaan Smuts said, "It is ordained that [Afrikaners], insignificant as we are, should be amongst the first people to begin the struggle against the new world tyranny of capitalism," he was recognizing that free markets ... have little respect for race. Therefore, South Africa declared war on capitalism.*

*Now—in order to promote tranquility, dignity for the individual, and prosperity for all—South Africa's people must strengthen its beleaguered market forces, and declare war against centralized government power.*

- Walter Williams, *South Africa's War against Capitalism*

**Why would many Black and Indian South Africans be eager to embrace socialist policies of wealth redistribution after ending apartheid? Have South Africa's economic policies since apartheid collapsed in the early 1990s helped to eliminate poverty?**



# “A Minority View”—Spreading the Message

Williams began writing his **syndicated** weekly column on race, economics, and public policy in 1981.

One of his first columns attacked how large citrus growers colluded with Congress to fix the price of oranges, and similar alliances between corporate lobbyists and government that Williams believed hurt consumers by keeping grocery prices high.

His final column, a typically skeptical take on government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially their disproportionate burden on ordinary working people who lost retail or service industry jobs, was published on December 9, 2020.

*Williams's column as it appeared in the Atlanta Daily World, April 23, 1981.*

## Georgians

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

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## A MINORITY VIEW

BY DR. WALTER E.  
WILLIAMS, Economist



### The Government Is Setting The Prices

BY WALTER E. WILLIAMS

What do you think of federal laws which mandate higher prices? What do you think President Reagan and his cabinet makers should do about such laws? What questions should you ask your congressmen about all of this the next time they come to town soliciting your votes and telling you they are doing a good job for you in Fat City? Well, I'm going to offer some recommendations guaranteed to make them wiggle.

Since everybody eats food, let's start with various government programs to raise the price of food. If you were watching television a month or so ago, you would have seen huge mountains of California oranges. They were not waiting there to be crated and shipped to your local supermarket; they were sitting and rotting. Why? Every week a bureaucracy known as the Navel Orange Administration Committee meets to restrain free trade in oranges. They set quotas which determine how many oranges can be sold at what price. If a farmer grows more than the quota, he must either let them rot or sell them to "by-product" factories for about \$10 per ton. Wouldn't you like to have a couple dozen for a dollar? One orange grower in California tried to do just that. The Navel Orange Administration Committee obtained a permanent federal injunction barring Jacques Giddens from ever violating the quota. If he does it again, he goes directly to jail.



# Fixture of the Conservative Media Circuit

Originally a guest on The Rush Limbaugh Show, the most popular talk radio program of the 1990s, Williams later became a regular fill-in host. From then on, Williams was a staple in conservative media, critiquing socialism, the welfare state, and the mendacity of politicians.

Williams never minced words when attacking the policies and, at times, the personal character of established Black leaders aligned with liberal causes and the Democratic Party, denouncing them as “poverty pimps.” This earned him many admirers – as well as critics.

His syndicated column often provoked heated responses from readers of local newspapers, both pro and con.

*Williams with Fox News host Mark Levin on the set of Life, Liberty, and Levin in 2018.*





# No Excuses

But despite his acerbic language, Williams's concern was the way in which seemingly well-intend policies hurt the very people they claimed to help. Above all, Williams wanted Americans to value their Constitution and its vision of limited government power.

Thomas Sowell said that his friend was “one of the few honest academics. And it's harder to be honest in academia than almost any other place – with the possible exception of politics.”

Looking back on his education, Williams wrote:

*Sometimes I sarcastically, perhaps **cynically**, say that I'm glad that I received virtually all of my education before it became fashionable for white people to like black people. By that I mean that I encountered back then a more honest assessment of my strengths and weaknesses. Professors didn't hesitate to criticize me –sometimes even to the point of saying, ‘That's nonsense, Williams.’*







# A Lifetime of Promoting Liberty

In December 2020, after teaching his final class at GMU, Walter Williams died on campus of a heart attack at age 84. His passing was met with an outpouring of grief and gratitude from Williams's family, friends, colleagues, students, and intellectual compatriots.

WALTER WILLIAMS

## Walter Williams, RIP

The free market economist and iconoclast died in December at the age of 84.

OPINION | COMMENTARY

## Walter Williams, R.I.P.

His research was rigorous, and he was one of the few economists who know how to engage with the public.

IN MEMORIAM

## The 'E' Stands for 'Excellence': Remembering Walter E. Williams

*A tribute to the great economist, who died W*

## 'A Great Loss for America': RIP Walter Williams

## Thomas Sowell: In the memory of my friend, Walter Williams

Thomas Sowell Creators Syndicate Dec 7, 2020 0

## Walter E. Williams, 84, Dies; Conservative Economist on Black Issues

Skeptical of antipoverty programs, he was a scholar who reached a wide public through a newspaper column and books, and as a fill-in for Rush Limbaugh.

## Walter Williams, RIP

The free market economist and iconoclast died in December at the age of 84.



# An Uncompromising Vision of Freedom

Williams's colleague at GMU, Donald J. Boudreaux, praised him as the "heart and soul" of the university's unique Department of Economics:

"He was one of [our] most courageous defenders of free markets, constitutionally limited government and individual responsibility ... The world will miss him as a tireless champion of American values."

In *Up from the Projects*, Williams concluded his own life story with the advice of his stepfather, Pops:

"A lot of life, he used to tell me, is luck and chance. You never know when the opportunity train will come along. He said that if and when it comes, don't be in the position of saying, 'Wait! Let me pack my bag.' Be packed and ready to hop on board."



*Williams during the filming of Suffer No Fools (2014), a documentary about his life and work.*







## Vocabulary

Ascendant  
Automat  
Byzantine  
Confiscate  
Counterintuitive  
Cynical  
Dissident  
Economics  
*Laissez-faire*  
Libertarian  
Orthodoxy  
Plethora  
Syndicated

