



Personal Letters to Prominent Friends

from *A Man of Letters* by Thomas Sowell (Encounter Books, 2007)

This selection from the early 2000s captures Thomas Sowell in his startlingly productive 70s, still writing columns, books, and letters on a wide variety of topics, corresponding with conservative intellectual and fellow ex-Marxist Norm Podhoretz, libertarian economist and closest friend Walter Williams, and Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. These letters and the introductory remarks come from *A Man of Letters* (2007), an autobiography in letters and companion piece to his memoir, *A Personal Odyssey* (2001).

The terrorist attacks of September 11th left me in a state of shock. I sent e-mails to friends and family back east to make sure that they were all right. Among these was Norman Podhoretz, whose wife Midge Decter had sent me a copy of a recently published book of hers.

September 12, 2001

Dear Norman,

Midge's book got me through the day yesterday. The events themselves were too overwhelming for me to also subject myself to the inanities of the media, so I turned the TV off and sat in an easy chair, reading her book. So I can only hope that nobody said that we should offer bin Laden land for peace.

Today, as I read the various statements that have been made in Washington, I am disquieted by references to "justice" and "tragedy." It is as if they want to make this a legal case, with perhaps bin Laden ending up at the International Court of Justice in the Hague and getting so many hours of community service. As for Colin Powell's reference to "tragedy," the bubonic plague was a tragedy but Pearl Harbor was an outrage.

Maybe these are just semantic quibbles but I fear the official statements betray a mindset in Washington that is not good.

Thomas Sowell. Man of Letters (Kindle Locations 2511-2519). Kindle Edition.

It always amazes me how few people see a connection between "open space" policies that make large amounts of land off-limits to building and the fact that the remaining land rises in price, driving up housing prices. Nowhere is this carried to more extremes than in parts of California. I noted this in an e-mail to Walter Williams.

DATE: Thu, 30 May 2002

TO: Walter Williams

I have been riled up lately about the incessant expansion of "open space" and the skyrocketing land and housing prices it produces. A recent ad in a local paper listed a house in Palo Alto with 3 bedrooms and one bath, 1300 square feet, built in the 1920s, for an asking price of \$1,095,000. In any other part of the country, "asking prices" are usually the top price expected. In these parts, it is common for asking prices to be bid up higher. . . .

It really bums me up when huge burdens are put on families for very modest homes, all so that a relative handful of environmental cultists can feel puffed up about themselves.

It is not unheard of in parts of California for rent or mortgage payments to take half of people's income. Meanwhile, "open space" zealots like to picture themselves as trying to save the last few patches of greenery from being paved over-when in fact forests alone cover more American territory than all the cities and towns in the country combined, and over 90% of the land area of the United States is undeveloped.

Thomas Sowell. Man of Letters (Kindle Locations 2588-2596). Kindle Edition.



Clarence Thomas was one of the few people with whom I could share my enthusiasm for the work of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes.

Christmas 2003

Dear Clarence,

Recently I have been re-reading the Holmes-Laski Letters and the Holmes-Pollock Letters. Do you have either set? I find both to be full of Holmes' wisdom and insights. I skipped most of [Harold] Laski's letters this time around, partly because he has been shown to have been an inveterate liar, but perhaps also because I realize what a tragedy it was that so many future third-world leaders studied under Laski and later tried to apply his half-baked ideas in their own countries, using their own people as guinea pigs for testing the left-wing vision. Nowhere was this more catastrophic than in sub-Saharan Africa.

It has been fashionable to downplay the effect of any single individual on history but it could have made a huge difference to vast numbers of people in the third world if their future leaders had studied under Peter Bauer at the London School of Economics, instead of under Laski at the same institution. But Laski was there first and was a bigger name in his time. Despite Laski's erudition and basically decent instincts and above all his willingness to continue to write to Holmes in the latter's last days, after the good justice was no longer capable of replying-it seems to me that the world would have been a better place had Laski never been born.

The sad story of Holmes' resignation from the High Court in his nineties, at the request of the Chief Justice, speaking on behalf of his colleagues, reminds me to use what abilities I have left while I still have them to finish up the writings that remain unfinished in my computer.

Fortunately, I have my computer chess game to help me monitor any decline. A losing streak a while back, playing at my usual intermediate level, had me wondering. But, since then, I won four straight at the expert level, so I was able to relax. Perhaps I had been reading too many New York Times editorials before and that undermined my ability to think rationally. Incidentally, the recent passing of Bob Bartley reminded me that here too was one man who made a real difference by making the editorial page of the Wall Street Journal a counterweight to the nonsense pouring out of most of the elite media. Often, when reading the morning newspapers, I thought that going from the editorial page of the New York Times to the editorial page of the Wall Street Journal was like going from adolescence to adulthood.

As I expected, there was a note of dismay in my tax accountant's voice when I phoned him a few days ago and told him of the money I had received from the Bradley Foundation award. Since he seems to regard the minimization of taxes as the purpose of life, he did not congratulate me as others have, but at least he didn't say "You poor devil," which I suspect is what he felt. Every occupation seems to have its own myopic way of looking at the world.

Thomas Sowell. Man of Letters (Kindle Locations 2740-2746). Kindle Edition.

Discussion Questions

- Who do you stay in regular contact with? Do you save your letters and e-mails with friends, family, and colleagues? What might be interesting about revisiting that correspondence years later?
- Research more about Norman Podhoretz, Walter Williams, and Clarence Thomas. What is each of them known for? How did they come to form relationships with Thomas Sowell?
- Research more about one of the topics Sowell remarks on here – the September 11 terror attacks, the causes of rising home prices, Oliver Wendell Holmes, or any other topic mentioned. What did you find out? Why might these topics have interested Thomas Sowell and his friends?
- Write a letter to Thomas Sowell discussing your studies of his life and work. Include observations about current events and ask him questions about how his insights might apply to today's headlines.