

Thomas Sowell

Maverick Intellect

b. June 30, 1930

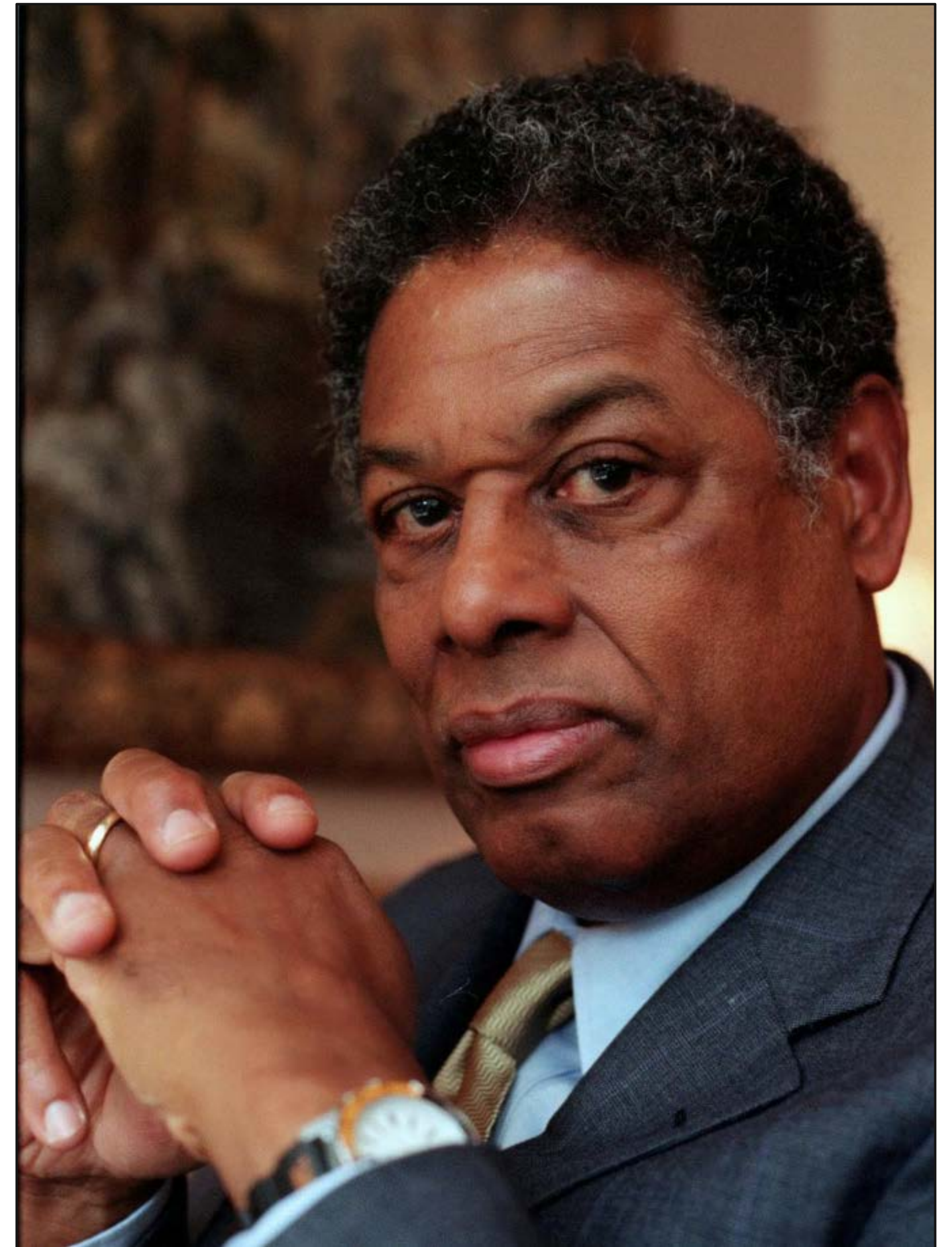
Prolific Author

School Choice Advocate

Free Market Economist

Dissident Social Theorist

Contemporary Scholars: Lesson 2



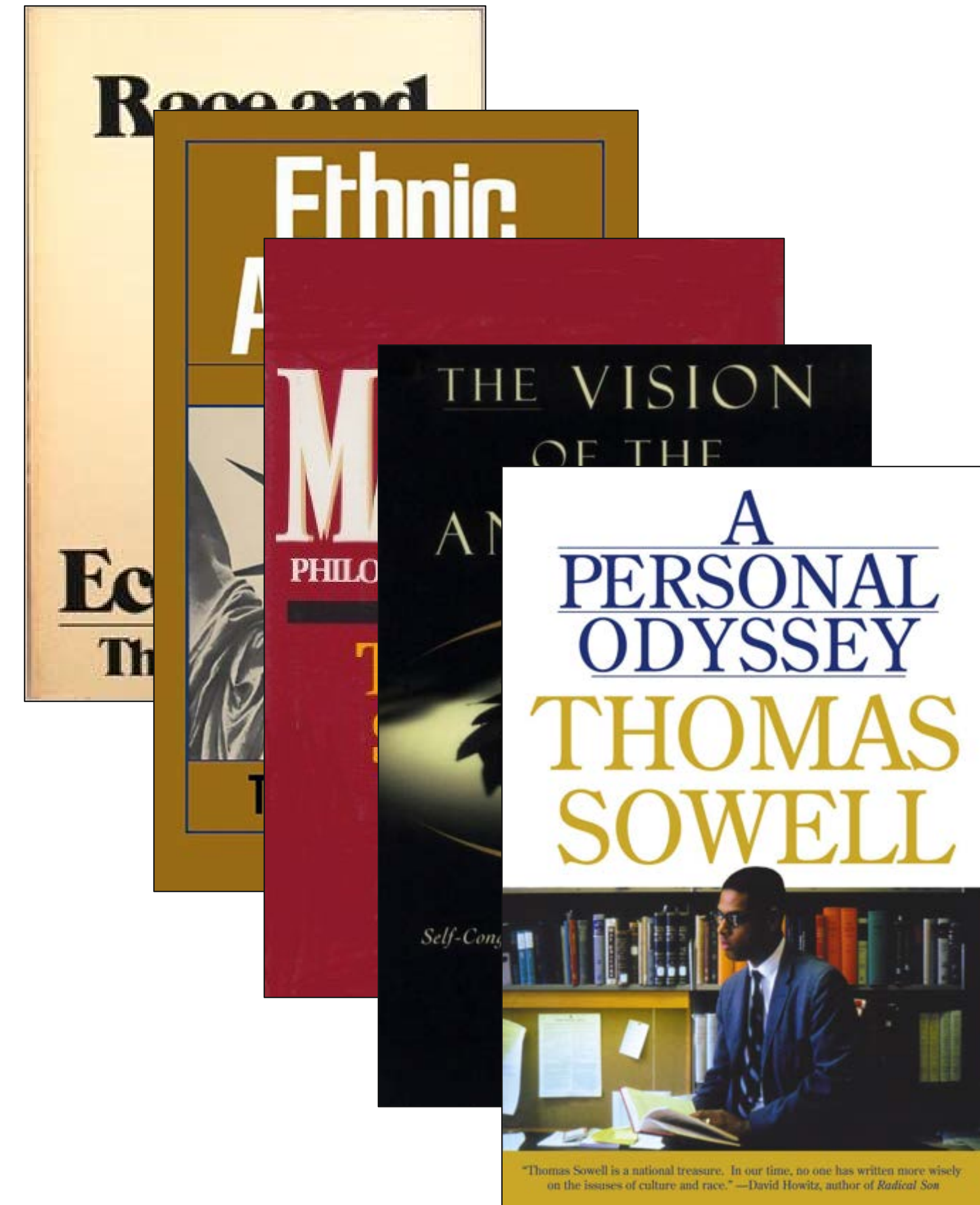
Thomas Sowell: Economist and Social Theorist

What does it mean to “solve” a social problem? Are such solutions even possible?

Why is the moral and political vision of the progressive Left so appealing? Why are so many intellectuals drawn to Marxism and socialism?

Why does America, and many other countries, seem afflicted by permanent ideological division?

If you’ve thought about – or even argued about – these questions, **Thomas Sowell** will help you think more deeply and critically about their answers, and about how our society and its leaders establish policies. Even if his work doesn’t change *what* you think, it will certainly change *how* you think.



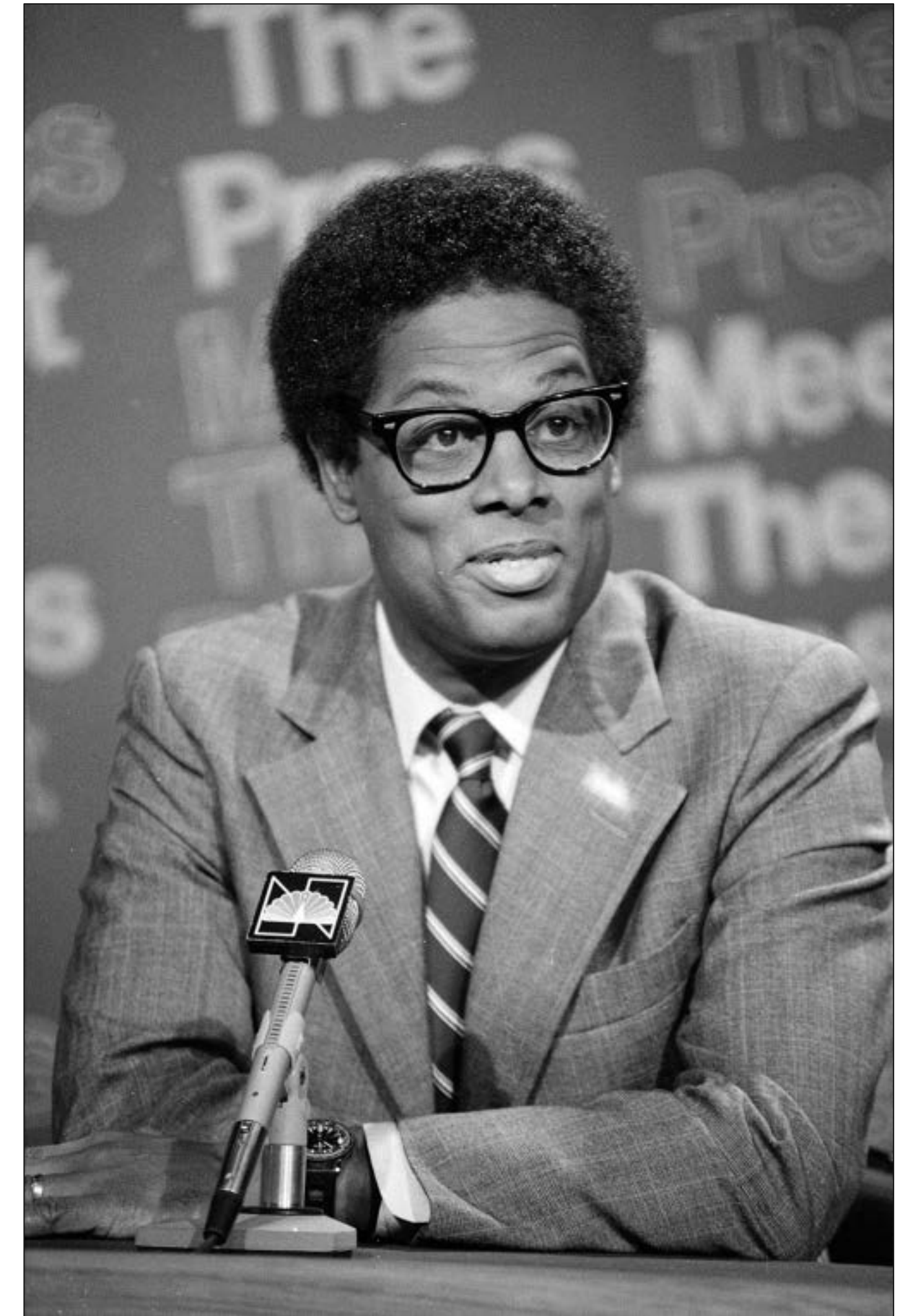


Thomas Sowell: Renaissance Man

Economist, cultural historian, social theorist, and unwavering critic of the welfare state and the distorted moral vision that has guided its expansion, Thomas Sowell is celebrated as one of America's greatest intellectuals for his **candor** and insistence on telling unpopular truths – and often assailed as an unfeeling sell-out.

Still productive at over 90 years of age, Sowell has written over 50 books, countless essays and articles, and 19 scholarly papers in economics. The **linguist** Steven Pinker called Sowell the most underrated writer, living or dead.

Sowell is known as a ruthless **empiricist**, judging social policies based on evidence of *results* rather than the moral vision of their *intentions*. But his ideas have also been shaped by his own life story, one that might surprise critics who accuse him of lacking sympathy for the poor.



Thomas Sowell in Washington, D.C. on NBC Television's Meet the Press, September 1981.

Early Life in North Carolina

Thomas Sowell was born outside Charlotte, North Carolina, on June 30, 1930. His father died before he was born, and his mother – a housemaid who already had four children – gave Thomas up for adoption to his great-aunt, who he grew up calling “Mama” or “Mom.” His biological mother died not longer after.

Sowell spent his first decade in a small, impoverished rural town. None of his relatives had attended school beyond the sixth grade, and the house he grew up in had neither electricity nor hot running water, typical for most Black Americans in that time and place.

Sowell was raised by “Mom” and her two grown daughters. He later wrote that his humble origins gave him deep respect for the common sense and practical wisdom of ordinary, uncredentialed people.



*Sharecropping family on their front porch in Wake County, North Carolina in 1939, by influential photojournalist **Dorothea Lange**.*



Early Life in North Carolina



*Migrant family in East North Carolina, on their way north to New Jersey, 1930s.
Library of Congress.*

Despite the lack of modern **amenities**, Sowell recalls his childhood as **idyllic**. The only child in an extended family of adults, he was doted on by many aunts, uncles, cousins, and family friends. He was also unaware of the realities of segregation.

In Sowell's all-Black community, white people "were almost hypothetical to me," he wrote later. As a child, he was never bothered by the white characters when reading the Sunday comics, "but I could not understand why some ... had yellow hair. I had never seen anybody with yellow hair, and I doubted that there were any such people."

When he finally left Charlotte, Sowell was shocked to discover most Americans were not Black.

Growing Up in Harlem

In 1940, when Sowell was 9 years old, he and his adoptive mother moved to New York City and settled in Harlem. They followed a path that many Black Americans had trod in the years between the world wars – the great **migration** from the rural, segregated South to the industrialized North, where jobs were more plentiful and racism less overt.

In the city, Sowell's world expanded rapidly, as did his appetite for knowledge.

What's the biggest change in life situation you've ever experienced? How did you adjust?

Historically, the Harlem neighborhood of Manhattan has long been a center of Black American life. What other people or events do you associate with Harlem?



Crowd gathered in Harlem on Easter Sunday, 1940, by the famous New York City street photographer Arthur "Weegee." Fellig.



Growing Up in Harlem

While he was a bright student, Sowell often fell into conflict with students and teachers. In grade school, fighting was a way of life, and it usually involved gangs.

Sowell recalled that “[at] one point, getting home for lunch safely became such an ordeal that a friend would lend me his jacket as a disguise, so that I could get away before anyone could spot me.”

Meanwhile, while he had warm relationships with some teachers, Sowell had no patience for petty disciplinary actions and never shied away from criticizing his teachers’ decisions – which many, of course, resented.



*Harlem youth gangs in a fist fight, 1948, by groundbreaking African American photographer and filmmaker **Gordon Parks**.*



The Value of Knowledge

An early model and mentor for Sowell was a friend of the family named Eddie Map, who was a few years older and came from a more affluent family. Map first introduced Sowell to the public library, which would become his favorite haunt throughout his youth in Harlem and central to his intellectual development – especially in periods where he was no longer able to attend school.

Following in Map's footsteps, in 1945 Sowell took the qualifying exam and earned admittance to the elite Stuyvesant High School for gifted students.

But not long after Sowell began his studies at Stuyvesant, poor health and financial problems forced him to drop out. Worse still, life at home had **deteriorated** into war.

New York Public Library Harlem Branch on West 124th St., early 20th century. Photographer unknown.



“Enemies Living Under the Same Roof”

As she became more paranoid and controlling, Sowell’s relationship with “Mom” spiraled into bitter conflict. At one point, Sowell’s “Mom” introduced him to his “cousin” Mary Frances. Sowell found her warm and charming but figured he would likely never see her again. But a half-century later he would dedicate his memoir, *A Personal Odyssey* (2000), to her.

Sowell discovered in time that Mary Frances was his *sister*, who had come to find him. “Mom” agreed to introduce them only if Mary kept up the fiction. Deceptions like this, combined with his great-aunt’s increasingly antagonistic behavior, pushed Sowell to flee home.



Sowell described their last fight, before he became an emancipated minor in his *Odyssey*. An argument became so intense “Mom” threatened him with a hammer. Sowell retorted that she “better not miss.”

“Afterwards,” he wrote, “she seemed to understand at last the reality of our relationship, that we were simply enemies living under the same roof.”

Harlem rooftops in 1948, by Gordon Parks.

A Nomadic Youth: New York

After this painful falling out with his adoptive mother, Sowell wound up in the Home for Homeless Boys in the Bronx. “It was now very clear to me that there was only one person in the world I could depend on. Myself.” These next years were formative for Sowell, though he was still far from the path that would lead him to Harvard and Stanford.

Sowell called 1949 “one of the worst years of my life.” Chronically unemployed and broke, he found part-time work at a machine shop and a Western Union office. “If nothing else, I learned how to look for a job – relentlessly.”

But as the new decade dawned, Sowell’s life began to turn around. He read voraciously, continuing his education, and, at the machine shop, was gifted his first camera – opening the door to a life-changing hobby.

Harlem on a rainy day in 1952, by Gordon Parks.



A Nomadic Youth: Washington, D.C.

In 1950, Sowell got a job as a clerk in Washington, where his sister, Mary Frances, and his brothers lived. That same year, the *Washington Star* published a letter to the editor by Sowell arguing that the District's public schools should be integrated – his first-ever publication.

But the city was still very Southern in those days, even if segregation was not as ruthlessly enforced as it was under “Jim Crow” in the Deep South. Sowell recalled:

“Washington increasingly got on my nerves. When I went downtown taking pictures, I found it a pain that I could not simply walk into a restaurant and get something to eat when I was hungry ... [W]hites could sit down and eat, but blacks could only eat standing up at the counter. I went hungry rather than subject myself to that.”

Pennsylvania Ave. NW, looking east towards the Capitol, downtown Washington, D.C., circa 1950s.



Marine Corps: Parris Island

In 1951, Sowell was drafted into the United States Marine Corps, and sent to Parris Island, South Carolina for boot camp. “Never in my life did race mean less than during those two months,” Sowell recalled, as the Drill Instructors worked to make *all* recruits miserable.

“Some people say the Marine Corps builds men,” Sowell wrote. “In reality, you had better be a man before you go in.” Basic training was grueling. Meanwhile, the Korean War was raging. Sowell would never see combat, but he had no way of knowing that at the time. Despite feeling the draft had derailed his life just as it was getting back on track, Sowell did develop his lifelong **avocation** in the Marines: photography.

In February 1952, the Corps sent Sowell and a handful of other marines to the Naval Air Base in Pensacola, Florida, for photography class.



Marine recruits fall in line off the train in Yemassee, South Carolina – last stop on the way to Parris Island, c. 1950s.



Marine Corps: A Passion for Pictures

Sowell learned the art and science of photography while juggling other responsibilities of Marine Corps life. In his two years of service, he also demonstrated near-expert sharpshooting skills, earning him a position as pistol instructor.

These opportunities – which may well have kept Sowell out of Korea, and out of danger – all came about because Sowell had listed photography as one of his hobbies on a Marine Corps questionnaire.

But as he had in school, Sowell ran into trouble with the authorities, often skirting the rules and regulations of military life. Of the 200 Marines in the photography school, only Sowell had any demerits – and he had 10 of them.

Sowell in the Marine Corps, 1951.



Marine Corps: Camp Lejune

Sowell's disdain for military discipline often created conflict with commanding officers and other Marines. "As elsewhere throughout my life," Sowell wrote, "I made enough enemies to get me in trouble and enough friends to get me out. Luck at crucial times also helped."

It was also an early glimpse into the functions of government bureaucracy. Once, when Sowell complained that his best photographs of Marine reservists would not be published, the public information officer snapped that the images – of men sweating uncomfortably and performing "menial chores" like picking up shell casings – did not fit the Marines' public relations image:

"We're not here to tell the truth. We are here to perpetuate the big lie. Now, the sooner you understand that, the better it will be for all of us."



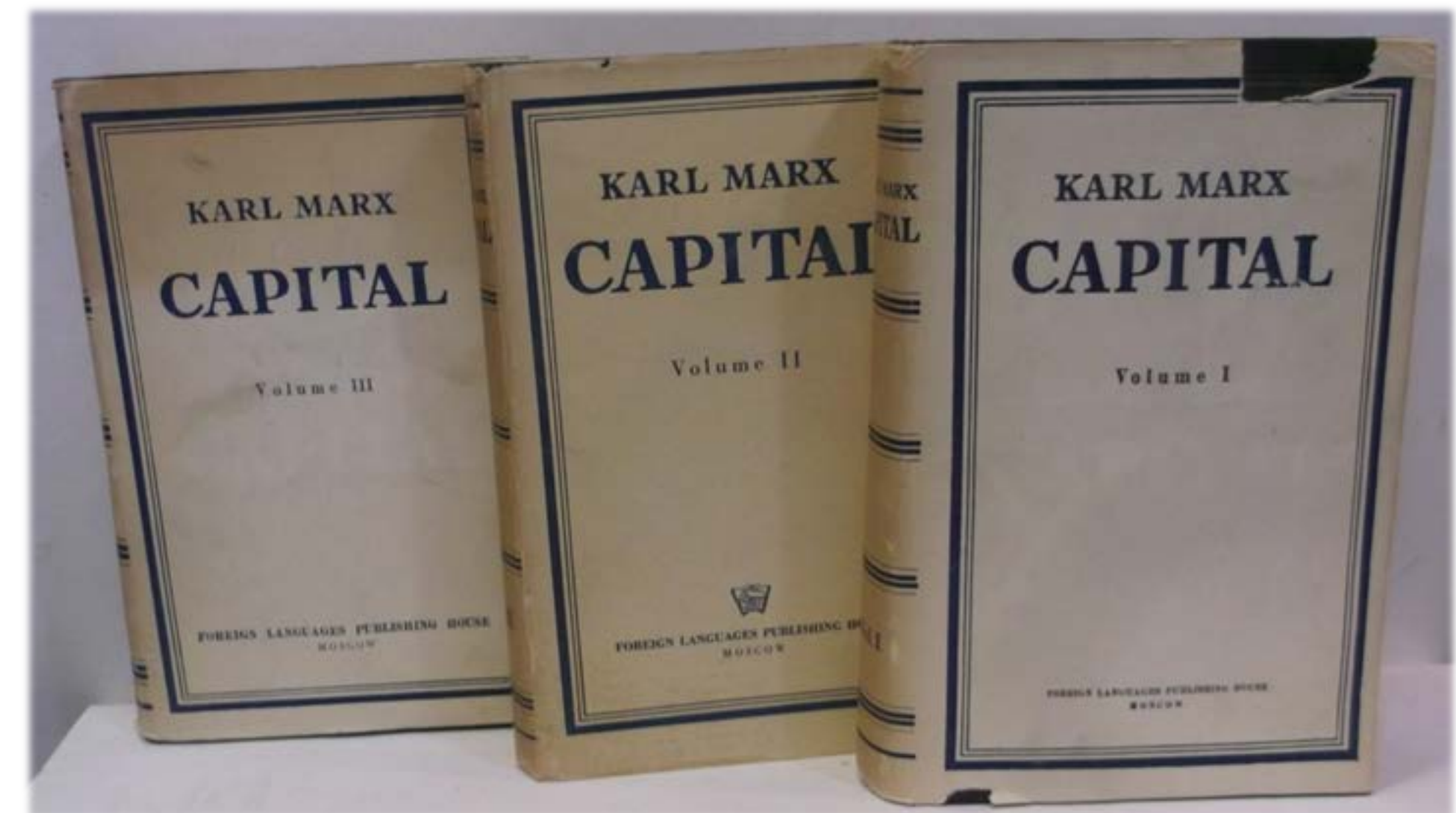
Harvard and Columbia

Sowell went back to Washington, D.C., after his discharge and did a stint in night school at Howard University. But his high test scores allowed him to transfer to Harvard. He would eventually graduate *magna cum laude* with a degree in economics.

Next, Sowell attended Columbia University to receive a master's in economics, studying under star professor and future Federal Reserve chairman Arthur Burns. Building on his work at Harvard, Sowell wrote his thesis on Karl Marx's theory of the business cycle. Determined not to be influenced by other scholars of Marx, his approach to the work was simply to "read right through the three volumes of *Capital* and make up my own mind."

Much later in life, when asked why he chose economics, Sowell answered: "It was my best subject, and it just made sense to me."

How do we choose our careers? What are the signs that you should devote parts of your life to a certain subject or type of work?



Sowell the Marxist

Like many young people before him, Sowell was drawn to socialism, beginning in his early 20s. The writings of Karl Marx were, in fact, Sowell's introduction to economics.

Sowell's **hardscrabble** life inclined him to Marx's worldview, with its emphasis on inequality and class conflict.

In *Marxism* (1985), Sowell wrote that Marx "took the overwhelming complexity of the real world and made the parts fall into place, in a way that was intellectually exhilarating."

As Jason L. Riley, columnist for the *Wall Street Journal* and author of *Maverick* (2021), a biography of Sowell and an overview of his major works, observed:



Thomas Sowell in the 1960s.

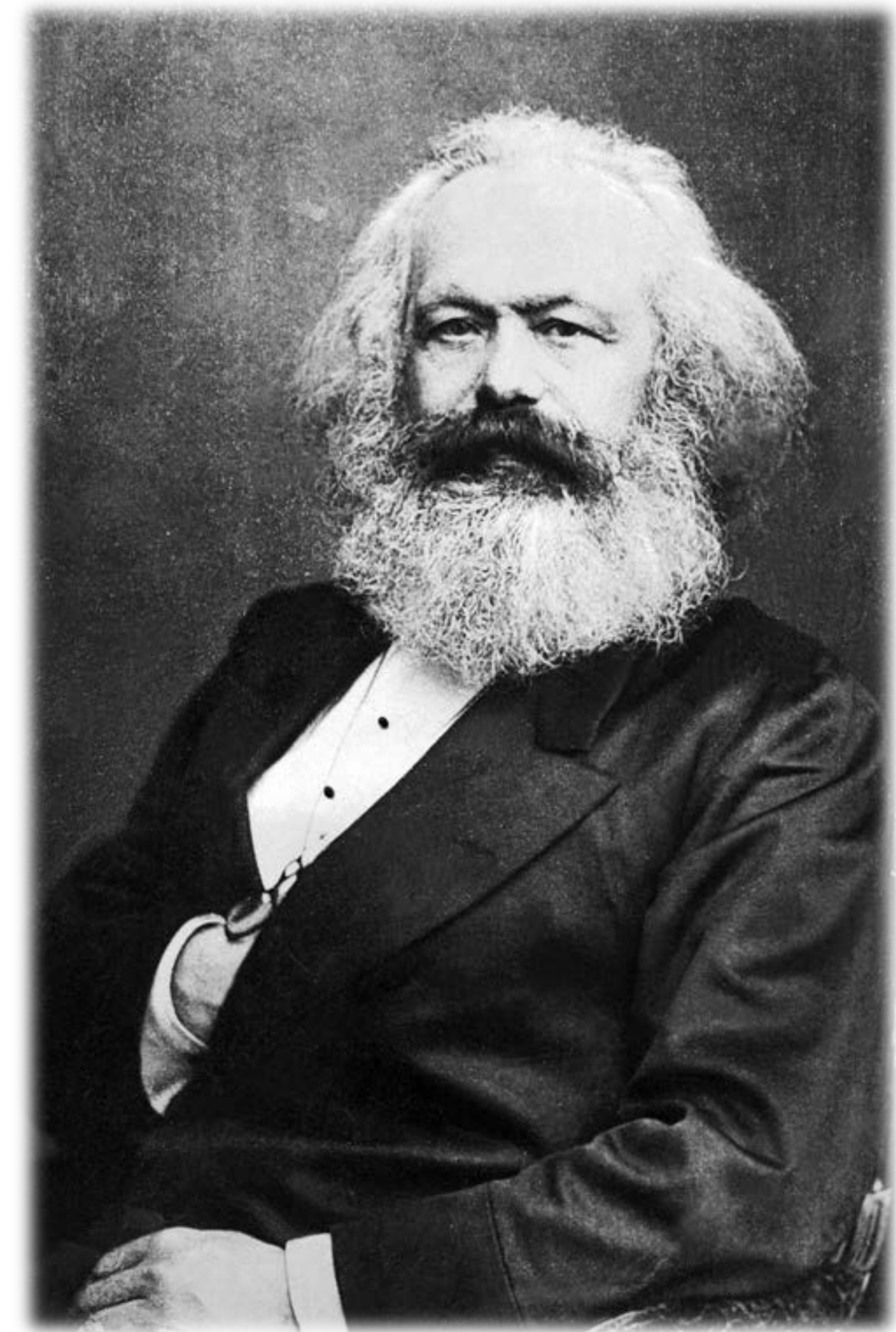


Sowell the Marxist

“It's not hard to contemplate why a black person born during the Great Depression in the Jim Crow South and then raised in urban ghettos might find the precepts of Marxism persuasive.

The cruel capitalists, the greedy bourgeoisie, the oppressed masses, the coming revolution that will finally relieve the struggling proletariat from despair – this outlook had a certain appeal to Sowell. ‘These ideas seemed to explain so much and they explained it in a way to which my grim experience made me very receptive,’ he later wrote.”

Sowell always believed in reading widely and deeply, so he read Marx's many critics, too. But they didn't dissuade him. Even later in his career, when he became totally disillusioned with Marxism and socialism, he continued to understand its emotional and intellectual appeal in ways that few conservatives or libertarians managed to grasp.



German sociologist Karl Marx, central theorist of communism and socialism, in 1875.

University of Chicago

Burns wrote Sowell a strong recommendation for a doctoral fellowship at the University of Chicago, where he began his PhD studies under future Nobel Prize winner George Stigler in 1960. Sowell's dissertation was an analysis of Say's law, "a classical economics principle holding that supplies of goods and services create their own demands."

Portions of this thesis were later published in scholarly journals and are recognized as major technical works on the topic. Despite intellectual disagreements, Chicago faculty supported Sowell's work and helped him secure funding and fellowships.



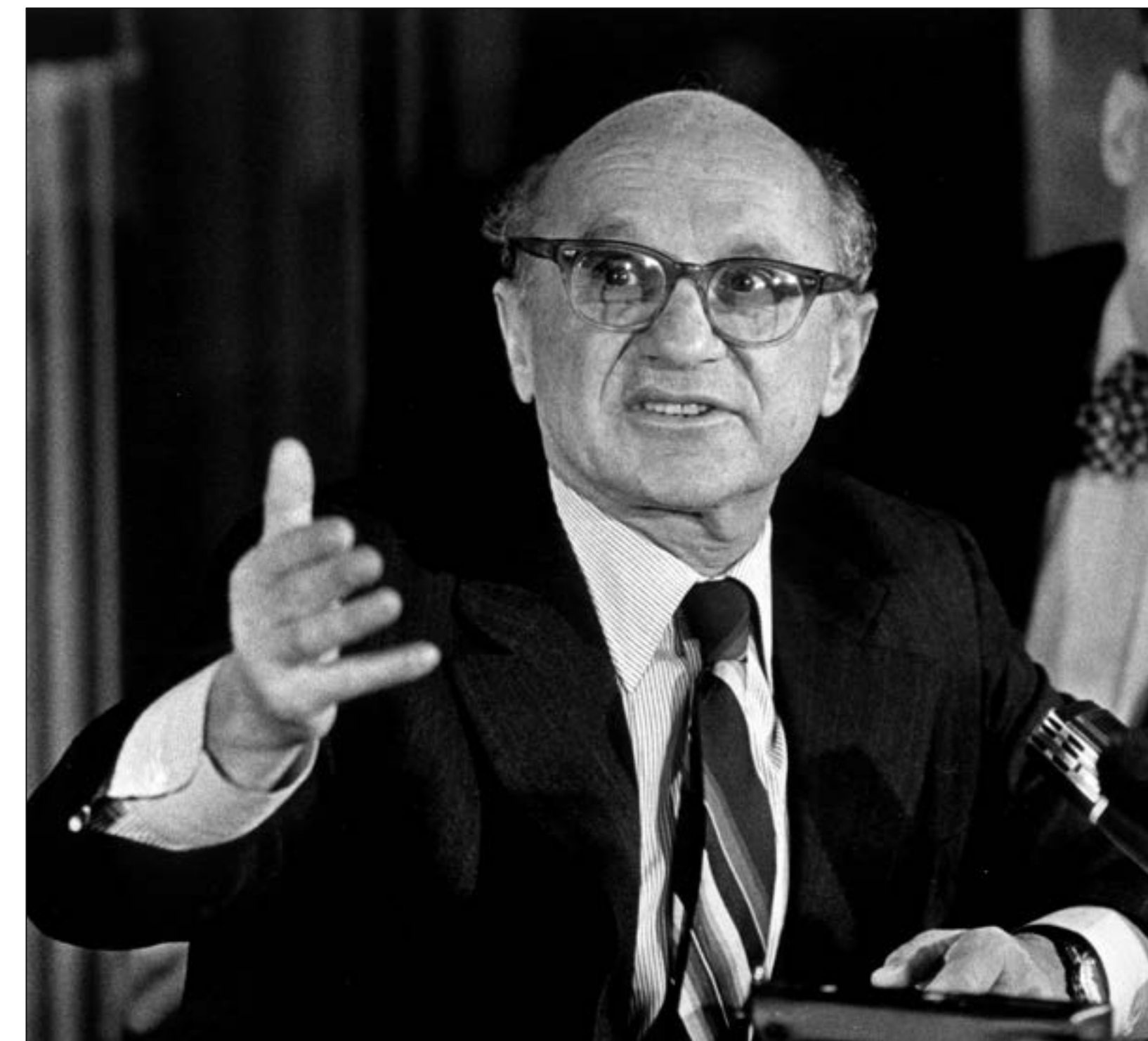


University of Chicago: Milton Friedman

Chicago's most famous professor at the time was Milton Friedman, future Nobel Prize winner and godfather of the classically-liberal school of economic thought later known as the "Chicago School." Friedman helped turn policy-makers away from ideas that drove government interventions into the economy like the "New Deal" of the 1930s.

Sowell took Friedman's price theory class and was impressed by his high standards for class conduct and student performance. Sowell was once irked to receive a "B" on an exam – only to discover that Friedman had awarded only two Bs, and *no* As!

Both Friedman and Stigler became Sowell's advocates, mentors, and eventual colleagues.



*Key figure of the "Chicago school" of economics, defender of free-market capitalism, and Sowell's early teacher and mentor, **Milton Friedman**, during his 1976 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences speech.*



Disillusionment at the Department of Labor

Sowell had been exposed to many defenses of capitalism – i.e. classically liberal, *laissez-faire* economics – at Chicago, including Friedrich von Hayek, whose essay “The Use of Knowledge in Society” would be a major influence on Sowell’s later work. But he remained a Marxist.

Then, in 1960, Sowell worked as an economist with the Department of Labor, studying the sugar industry in Puerto Rico, where the department had regularly increased the minimum wage. Sowell noticed that unemployment rose with each new minimum wage hike – as most economic theories would predict.

But his colleagues refused to second-guess the wisdom of minimum wage laws. After all, Sowell **wryly** observed later, creating and implementing these laws “employed a significant fraction of all the people who worked there.” Sowell’s enthusiasm for the kind of central planning required by socialism evaporated.



Sowell in the Sixties

One of Sowell's first major teaching positions while finishing his PhD was at Cornell University. He arrived just in time for the wave of student protests that swept the nation, spurred on by opposition to the Vietnam War and rage and despair among young people following the assassinations of Civil Rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



Armed student radicals at Cornell University, Spring 1969.

In 1969, armed student radicals seized a campus building and issued demands. Sowell scoffed at their arrogance and brushed off attempts to disrupt his classes or pressure him into supporting their cause.

This was another turning point for Sowell. He was disgusted by what he saw as the administration's spineless catering to vague demands from radicals, and the watering down of academic standards that accompanied the politicization of campus.

Finding a Home: The Hoover Institution

After quitting Cornell, Sowell held several teaching positions, including at UCLA, where he met his lifelong friend and intellectual compatriot, libertarian economist Walter E. Williams. But campus bureaucracy and declining academic standards were wearing on him.

Then, in 1980, with positive reactions to early drafts of *Knowledge and Decisions* circulating among likeminded economists, Sowell was offered a Senior Fellowship at the Hoover Institution, a conservative think-tank on Stanford University's campus. At Hoover, Sowell was free of teaching responsibilities, allowing him to dedicate all his time to research. He remains a Fellow there today.

"It would turn out to be the longest job I ever held and the most satisfying," Sowell wrote later. At age 50, he now began a new phase in his career.

The Hoover Institution Library and Archives, with its iconic tower, on the campus of Stanford University in California.





Knowledge and Decisions (1980)

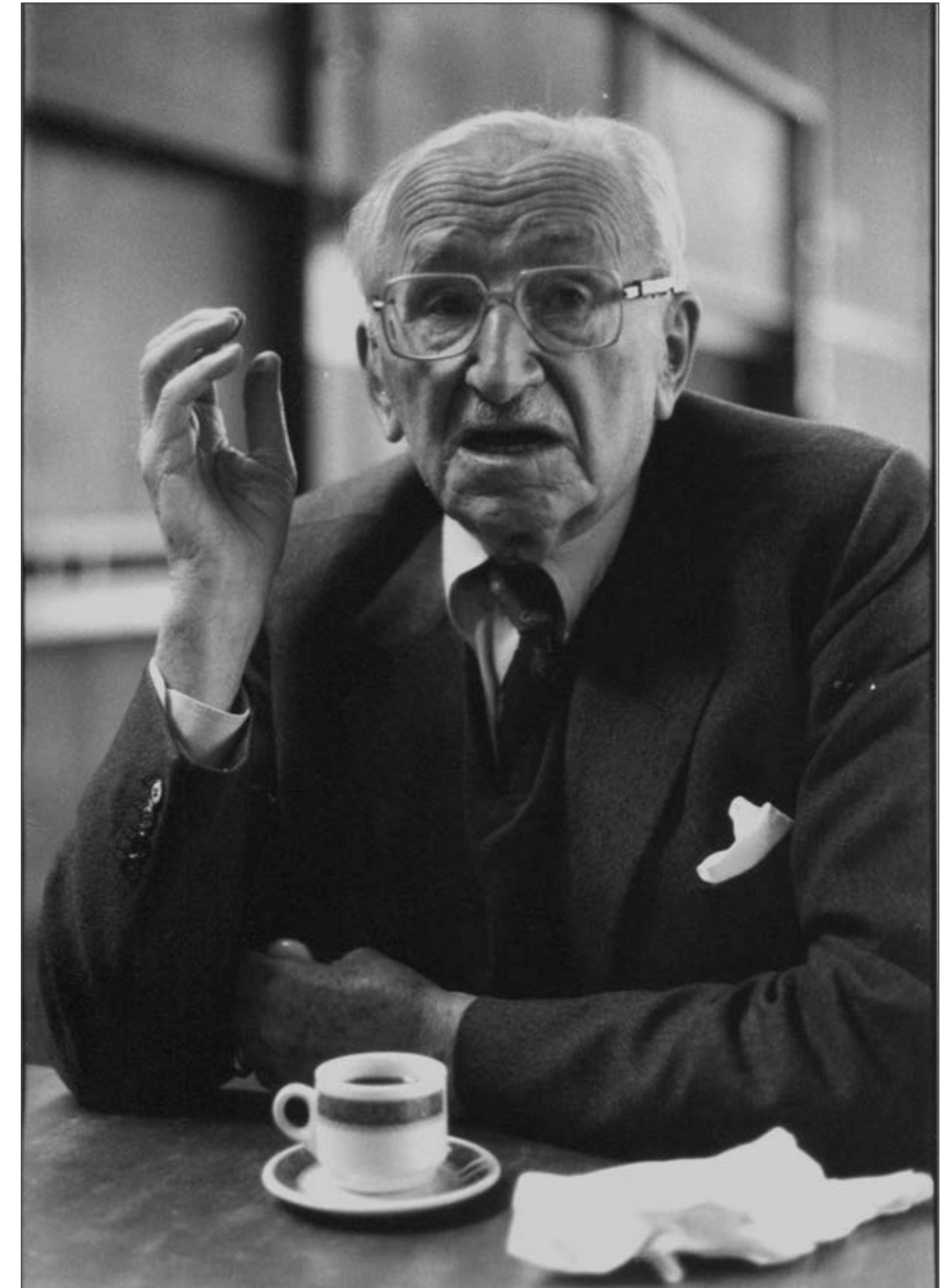
What is “common sense”? How do you get it?

What kinds of knowledge do you use in everyday life that you *didn't* learn in school or training?

In this influential book, Sowell argued that ordinary people have first-hand, practical knowledge they use to make effective decisions about their lives and money. The free market allows this knowledge to benefit the whole society organically, without interventions from bureaucrats or social managers.

Sowell built much of his analysis on the work of influential Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek – who praised Sowell’s book for expanding his ideas into new areas and for its “highly concrete and realistic” treatment of modern economic problems.

*Friedrich Hayek, Austrian economist and author of
The Road to Serfdom (1944.*



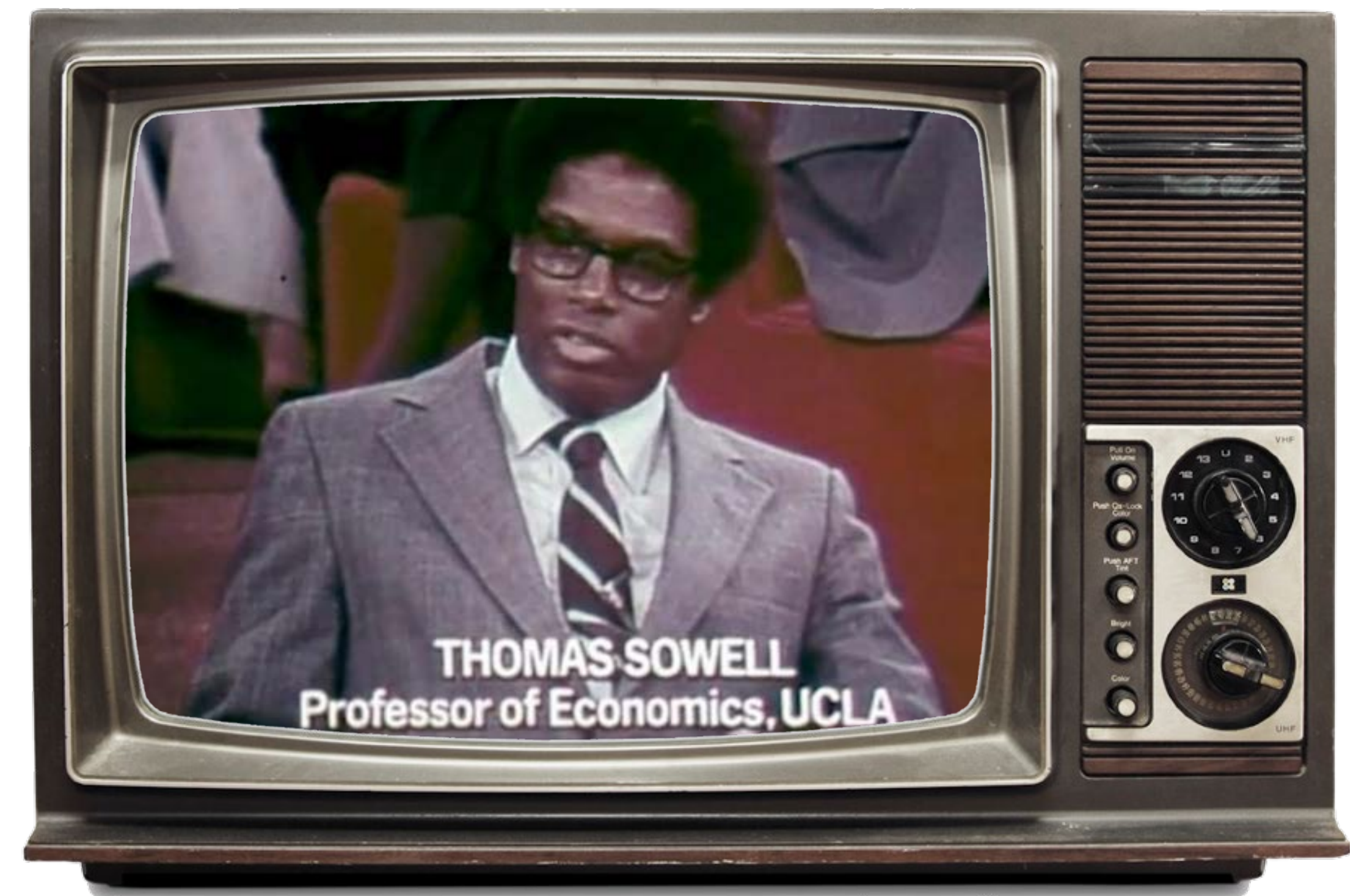
Clash of Worldviews: *Free to Choose* (1980)

The wider public was first exposed to Sowell in a film series Milton Friedman created for PBS, *Free to Choose*, which critiqued the popular economic ideas that underpinned welfare and “anti-poverty” programs. In roundtable discussions moderated by Friedman, Sowell took on intellectual adversaries like Pennsylvania Secretary of Welfare Helen Bohen O’Bannon and socialist political scientist Frances Fox Piven, alongside Friedman and friends like Water E. Williams.

If possible, watch a brief clip from *Free to Choose* by clicking the image on the right.

How do people decide what to spend money on? What causes them to make good (or bad) financial choices? Could the government make better ones for them?

Sowell argues that “comparing anything to perfection ... settles nothing.” What do you think he means by this?





Black Alternatives

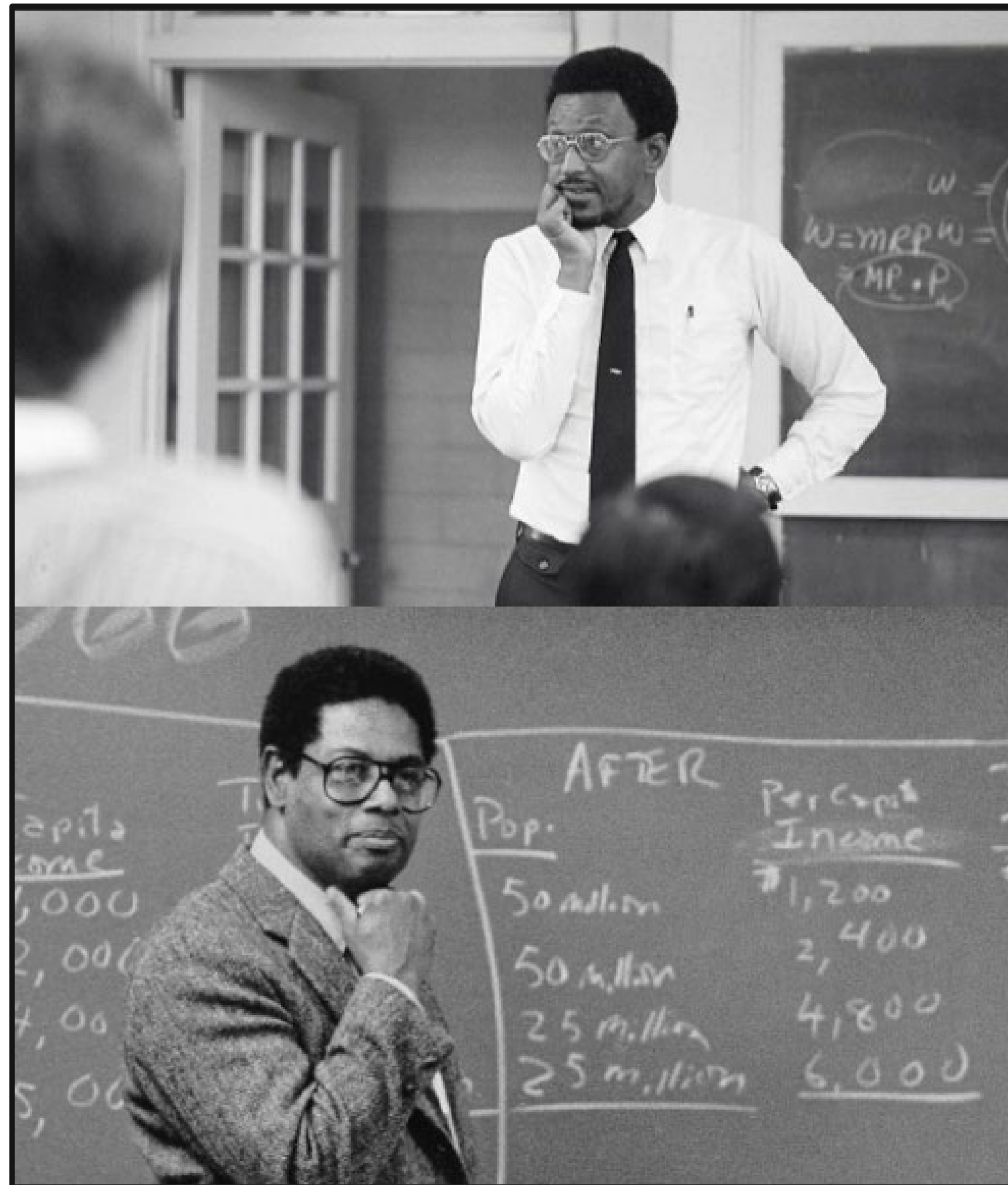
By 1980, disillusionment with the welfare programs of the 1960s – and their unintended consequences – was widespread in America. Politicians turned to people like Friedman for alternatives, epitomized by President-elect Ronald Reagan's opposition to "big government."

Thomas Sowell organized "Black Alternatives," a conference at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, to bring together conservatives, libertarians, and others who believed that the policies advocated for Black progress after the passages of the major Civil Rights laws had failed and often made problems worse.

Future Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas, journalist Tony Brown, and Sowell's best friend and fellow economist Walter Williams attended.



Black Alternatives... and a backlash



Walter Williams and Thomas Sowell, like-minded economists who became life-long friends and intellectual allies after meeting at UCLA in 1969.

The arguments of Sowell, Williams, and other Fairmont panelists were dismissed or attacked by most mainstream Black leaders. But Sowell regarded the conference's achievement as bringing "together blacks who debated their differing viewpoints in an atmosphere wholly free of rancor, of attempts to be blacker-than-thou, and without any charges of 'selling out.'"

In 2020, in honor of Sowell's 90th birthday, Williams wrote that his friend "cares about people. He believes that compassionate policy requires dispassionate analysis. He takes seriously the admonition given to physicians, 'primum non nocere' (first, do no harm)."

What does "first, do no harm" mean in the context of social policy? How does this view often differ from that of other intellectuals and policy makers?

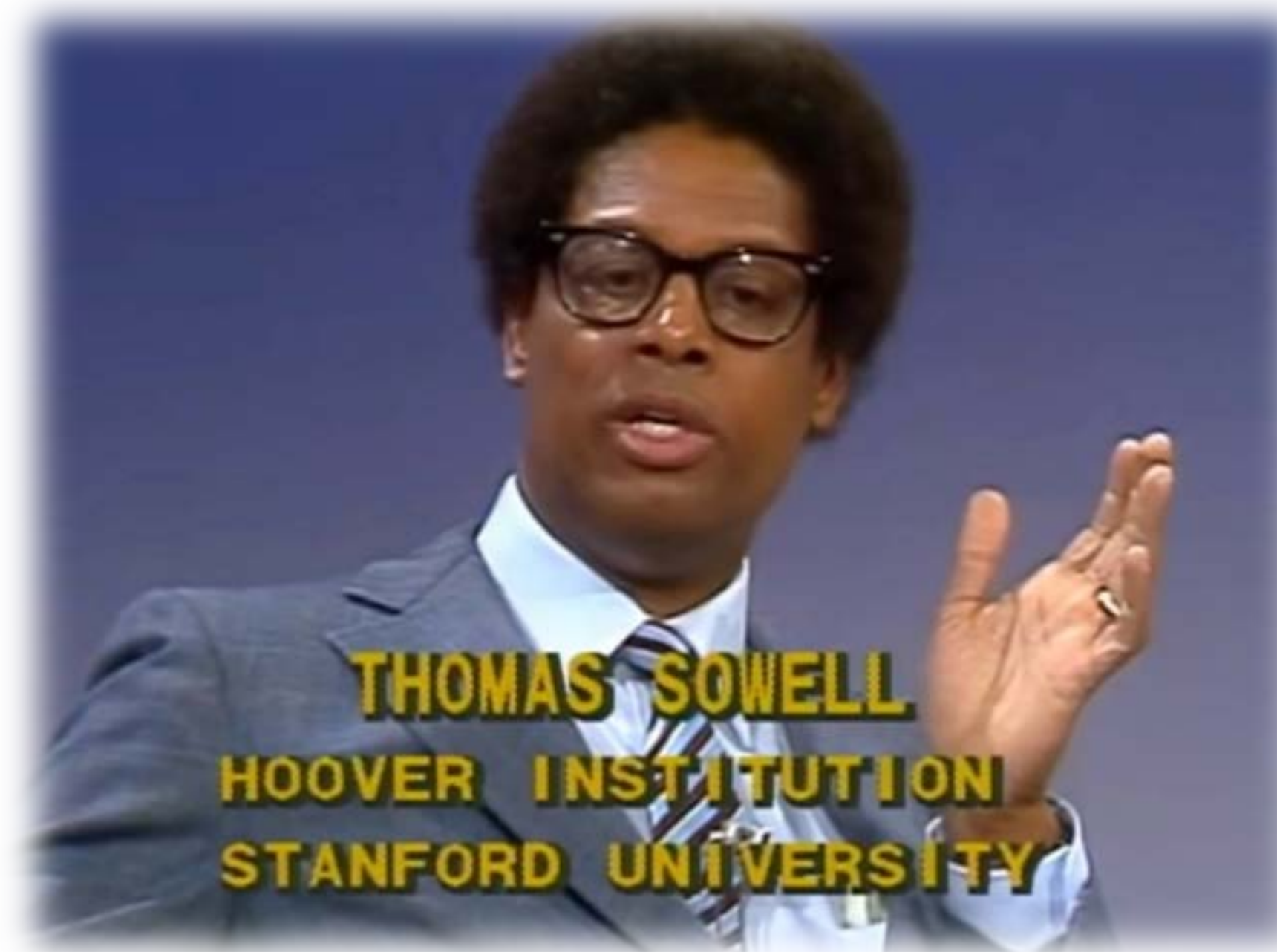
“Blacker Than Thou”

Two provocative essays Sowell published in *Washington Post* in February 1981 argued that established Black leaders were out of touch with the common people, and so adopted the racial equivalent of a “holier-than-thou” attitude to compensate:

“Black ‘leadership’ in general does not depend on expressing the opinions of blacks but on having access to whites – in the media, in politics and in philanthropy. Whites who have a limited time to give to the problems of blacks need a few familiar blacks they can turn to. The civil rights organizations provide that convenience.”

Sowell’s accusations of hypocrisy and colorism against Black elites especially struck a nerve. He pointed out that some of Black America’s self-appointed defenders, most of whom advocated policies Sowell thought made life worse for the Black working-class in which he was raised, came from affluent, well-educated families and had even belonged to exclusive social clubs that were closed to Black Americans with darker complexions.

Sowell on “Firing Line” with William F. Buckley, Jr. in 1983





“Blacker Than Thou”

In his collected correspondence, *A Man of Letters* (2008), Sowell wrote:

“These two columns sparked the bitterest attacks on me before or since. An entire page of a later issue of the *Washington Post* – which is not a tabloid – was devoted exclusively to denunciations of me ... This was due, I believe, not only to what I had said, or even that I had revealed the dirty little secret of internal color discrimination among blacks in a white newspaper, but that I did so in a Washington paper.

Had I said the same things in Los Angeles or Denver, critics could have simply denied the facts and called me a liar. But too many blacks in Washington [knew] the truth of the damaging charge of internal color discrimination for critics to do anything other than vent their anger and frustration.”

Thomas Sowell

Blacker Than Thou

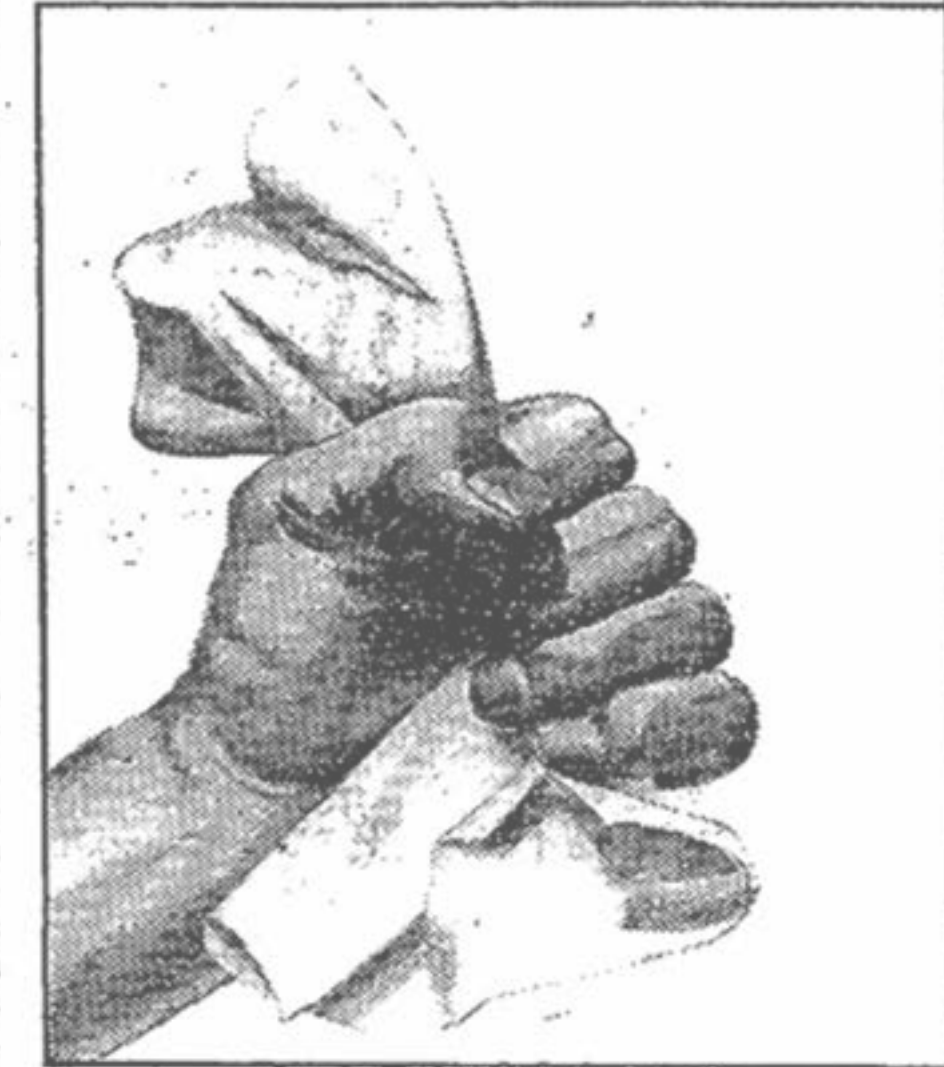
Most white people are unaware of the internal social history of blacks and what it means in the struggle for black leadership today. Throughout the Western Hemisphere, those blacks whose ancestors somehow became free during the era of slavery had a head start in economic and social development. So too did those who worked as house servants or in a few other special roles among slaves, for they absorbed more of the dominant culture than did field hands. The descendants of both special groups have historically been overrepresented among black leaders and among more prosperous blacks generally. Their descendants have also typically been lighter in complexion than other blacks, for their ancestors' closer association with whites took many forms.

Why is this history important today? Because the traditional light-skinned elite have found themselves increasingly challenged by rising members of the black masses. Generations of snobbishness by the lighter-skinned elite have left a legacy of hostility within the black community, which makes current issues difficult to resolve—or even discuss rationally—on their merits. Moreover, some members of the old elite have in recent times become converts to blackness—and, like other converts, are often the most extreme. Just as religious converts sometimes become holier-than-thou, so these converts become blacker-than-thou.

Many of the giants of the black civil rights movement have been of this sort. W. E. B. DuBois, who helped found the NAACP, epitomized the militant black leader who was not only distant from but snobbish toward the people in whose name he spoke. DuBois grew up among educated whites in Massachusetts, and he and his white friends looked down on Irish working-class people. As a young man, DuBois had his first experience living among blacks, and he did not condescend to speak to the people in the barbershop where he had his hair cut. In his heyday as a civil rights leader, DuBois lived at 409 Edgecombe Avenue in New York—then a stately apartment building with uniformed doormen and a separate (and by no means equal) entrance for the servants and delivery people through the basement.

No small part of the historic clash between the followers of DuBois and those of Booker T. Washington was that DuBois' followers were elite

“Much of the black elite's demand for removing racial barriers was a demand that they be allowed to join the white elite and escape the black masses.”



By Francis Brennan

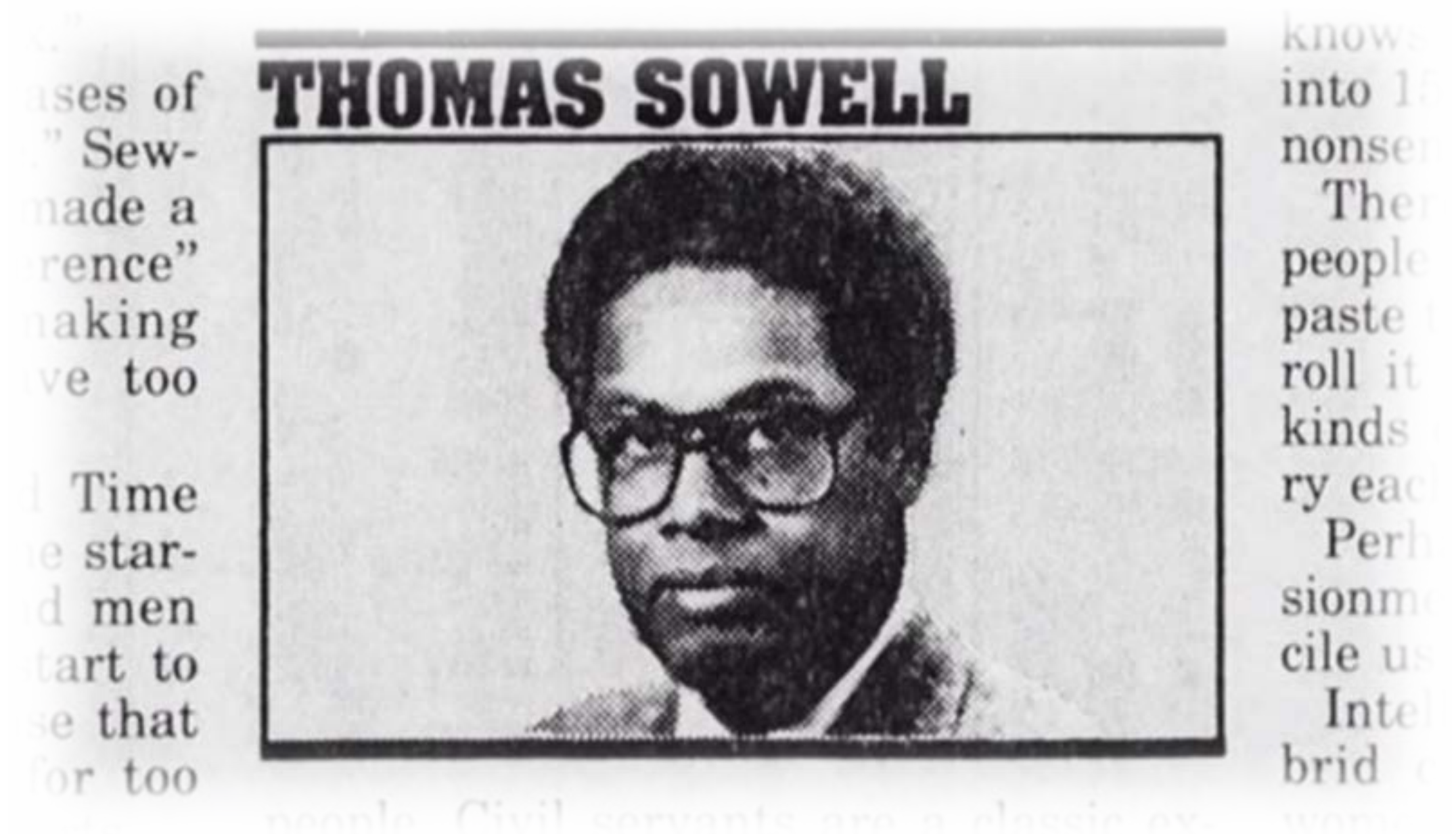
descendants of “free persons of color” and Booker T. Washington was “up from slavery.” Despite much caricaturing of their political positions in recent years, their substantive differences on the issues of their times were small and almost trivial. Their agendas were the same, even when their priorities were different. Many other leaders in other groups have cooperated despite much larger political differences.

In our own time, Andrew Young has thundered from the left on all sorts of issues, and always from a militant stance of being blacker-than-thou. He is a descendant of the privileged elite of New Orleans

The writer, a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, is a member of President Reagan's Economic Policy Advisory Board.

Speaking Plainly

Sowell was undeterred by this backlash. In the 1990s, he began writing his weekly column, which he would continue for a quarter century. Unpretentious and plain spoken, he earned devoted readers throughout the country with his bracing, evidence-based approach to controversial issues around race, inequality, and education.



Throughout his career, a consistent target of Sowell's scorn was the self-importance of American intellectuals. He especially resented the way that academics, policy "experts," and politicians under their sway advanced policies that made them look enlightened and benevolent – regardless of whether their policies succeeded or (more often) failed.

Think about a time when an "expert" explained an unfamiliar concept to you. Did you understand them? Could they have conveyed the same information in simpler language?

Why do many intellectuals and academics often seem to write in a wordy, elaborate style?

A Conflict of Visions (1987 / 2007)



A Conflict of Visions is the personal favorite of Sowell's among his own books. A revised edition of the 1987 original was published in 2007.

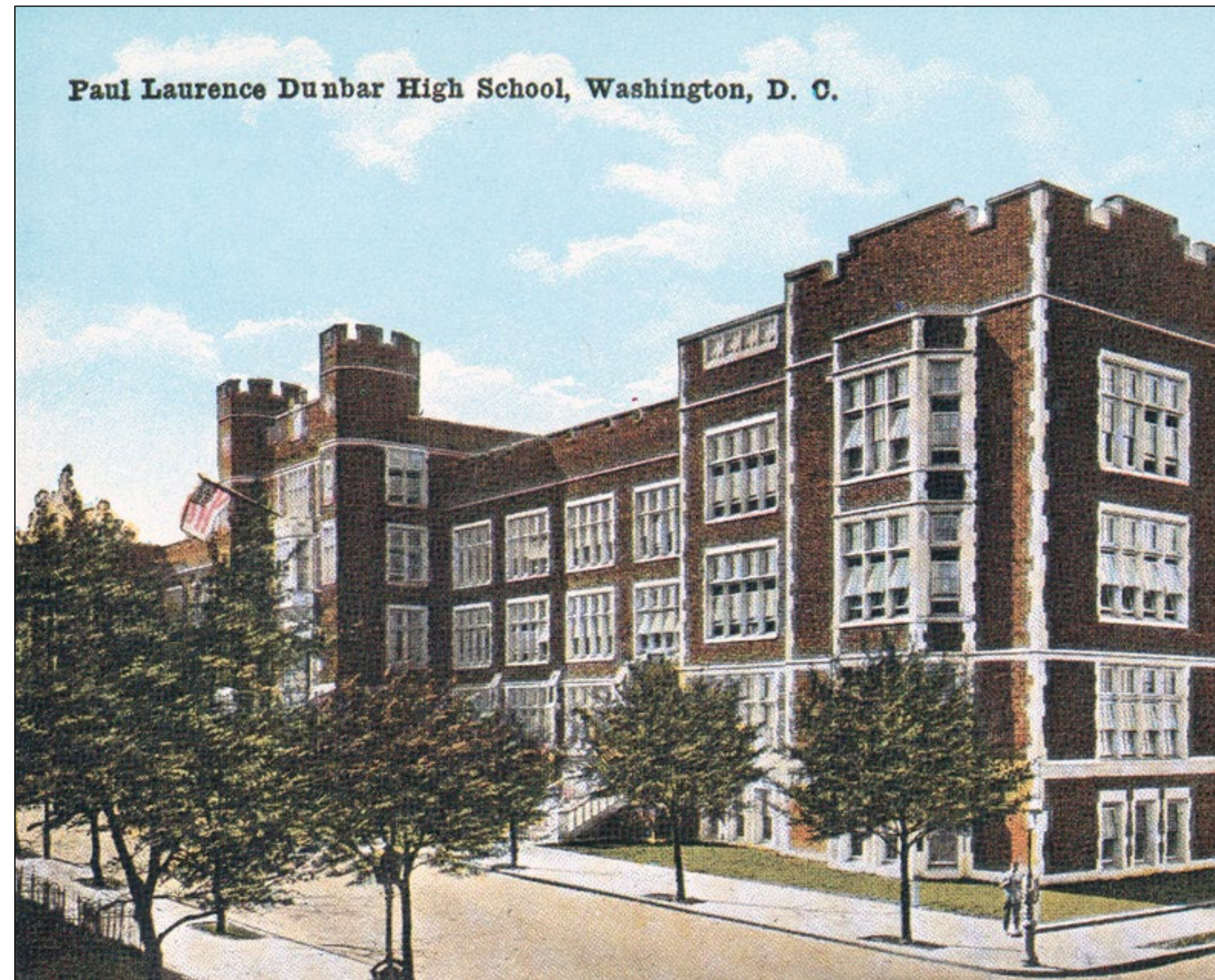
In the 1980s, Sowell sought to explain the enduring power of ideas that, in his eyes, had been refuted. *A Conflict of Visions* seeks to explain why ideological battles over very different issues often divide the public in the same way – the cause of political **polarization**.

Sowell sees this conflict rooted in the divide between two fundamentally different visions of human nature: one *unconstrained*, seeing people as essentially good, even perfectible; the other *constrained*, seeing people as selfish, with limited ability to improve themselves:

“While believers in the *unconstrained* vision seek the special causes of war, poverty, and crime, believers in the *constrained* vision seek the special causes of peace, wealth, or a law-abiding society.” Sowell returned to this conflict often in subsequent books.

Which controversies today seem to be driven by an intractable “conflict of visions”? Among influential public figures you know, which vision seems to be more popular?

Case Study: Dunbar High School



Historic Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C., built in 1916, took outstanding Black students from anywhere in the city. It was demolished in 1977.

Given how crucial Sowell's education was to his success, he often wrote about education policy and declining public school standards. A favorite case study of his on this subject was Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C.

In Dunbar, he saw the decline of Black education in **microcosm**, and lamented the disappearance of its legacy from public memory. Before 1950, Dunbar was home the city's most promising Black students, who consistently outperformed many of their white peers. Graduates went on to Harvard and Amherst.

After 1950, Dunbar stopped recruiting gifted students and switched to general admissions. In 1974, Sowell wrote about its plight:

Case Study: Dunbar High School

“Dunbar High School provides no instant formulas for use by “practical” planners. Its example suggests that instant formulas by “practical” planners may not be the way to quality education.

What is needed, above all, is a sense of purpose, a faith in what can be achieved, and an appreciation of the hard work required to achieve it ... it is not necessary to find ideal people or an ideal setting, but it does require a dedicated nucleus of people in a setting where their dedication can be effectual.”

Sowell has written on education reform throughout his career, advocating voucher programs and charter schools – including his book *Charter Schools and Their Enemies* (2020).



Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C., at New Jersey Avenue & N St. NW, built in 1977 to replace the original. It was demolished and replaced in 2014.

Work on Late-Talking Children



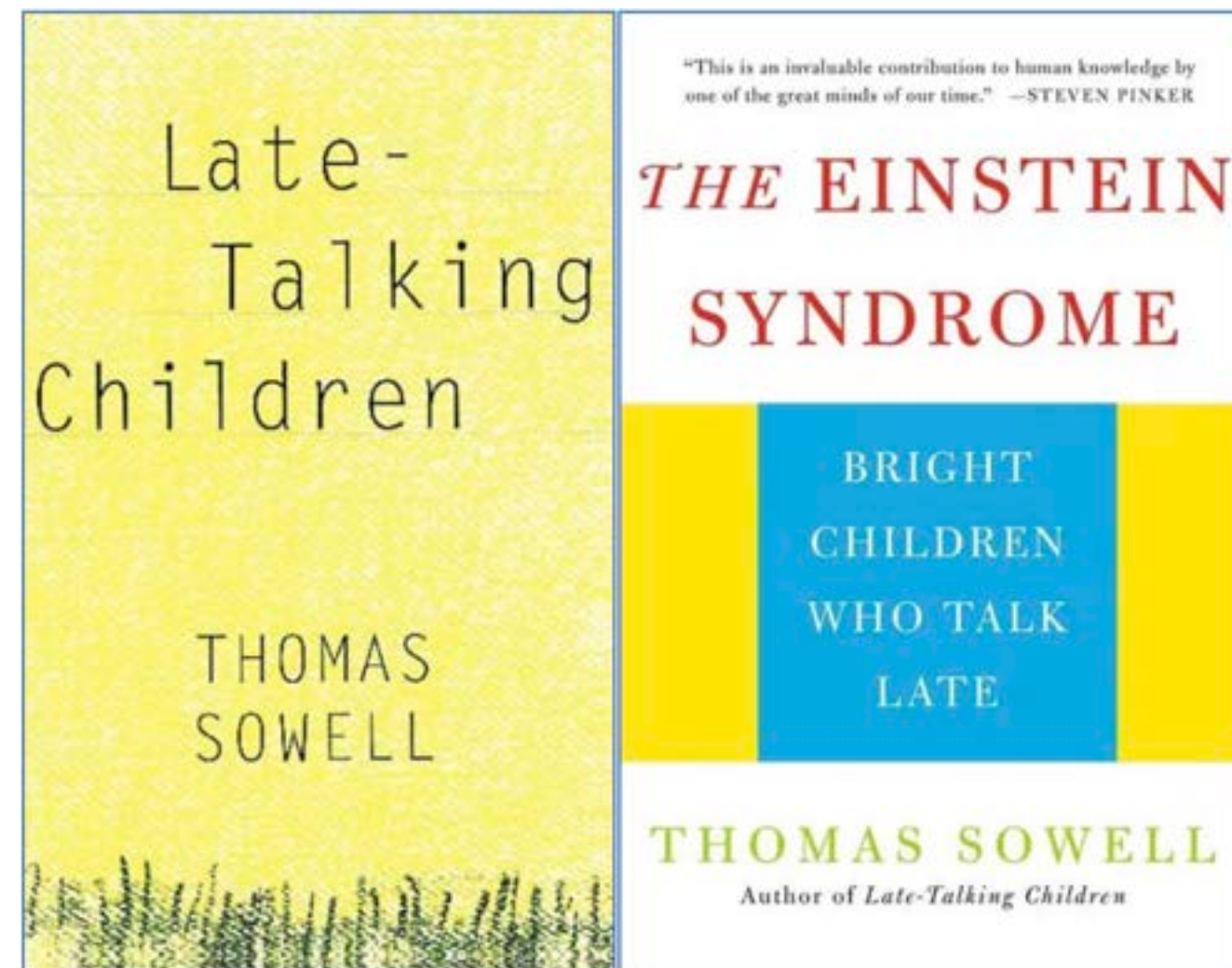
Sowell's own photograph of his son, John, as a child in the late 1960s.

In 1968, Sowell's son, John, almost 4 years old, still could not talk. As John's peers began speaking in full sentences, Sowell became alarmed. Doctors told Sowell that they could find nothing wrong with his son.

Some doctors and even family members speculated that John was developmentally disabled, but Sowell doubted this. In many ways, his son was precocious, able to disable child safety locks and remember the exact placement of pieces on a chess board at only a year old.

When John slowly began talking, around age 5, it became "clear that he had learned many things, without being about to tell anybody that he knew them." This personal experience would, over the course of decades, lead Sowell to make groundbreaking contributions to a field far outside his formal training: child development.

Work on Late-Talking Children



Thomas Sowell's two books on the development of late-talking children, Late-Talking Children (1998) and The Einstein Syndrome (2002).

Once he began talking, John Sowell demonstrated remarkably advanced math skills, grew up into a normal young man, and eventually graduated from Stanford.

His father wrote about this experience in a column in 1993 and was met with a **deluge** of letters from parents who had similar experiences with their children. Frustrated at his inability to find scholarship to help answer these parents' questions, Sowell established a network in which these parents could at least correspond with one another about their observations.

Sowell also connected with the few child development experts working on the topic. Drawing on his own research, anecdotes from other parents, and the scant existing scholarship, he produced the first major study of late-talking children. On the foundation of that research, he wrote two books that finally gave parents the answers they needed.



Picture This: Sowell the Photographer

Sowell continues to be a serious photographer, continuing the passion he first discovered as a young man in Harlem.

In his 2016 “Farewell” column, Sowell explained his decision to stop writing regular op-eds at age 86:

“During a stay in Yosemite National Park last May, taking photos with a couple of my buddies, there were four consecutive days without seeing a newspaper or a television news program – and it felt wonderful. With the political news being so awful this year, it felt especially wonderful. This made me decide to spend less time following politics and more time on my photography...”



Thomas Sowell taking photographs on the north rim of the Grand Canyon in Arizona, 2009. Photo by Stephen Camarata.

Picture This: Sowell the Photographer



Look back through the images in this presentation, from both famous photographers and unknown creators.

Which are the most attention-grabbing?

What's compelling about them? What elements make for a good photograph?

What might be attractive about photography to a rigorous, analytical mind like Sowell's?



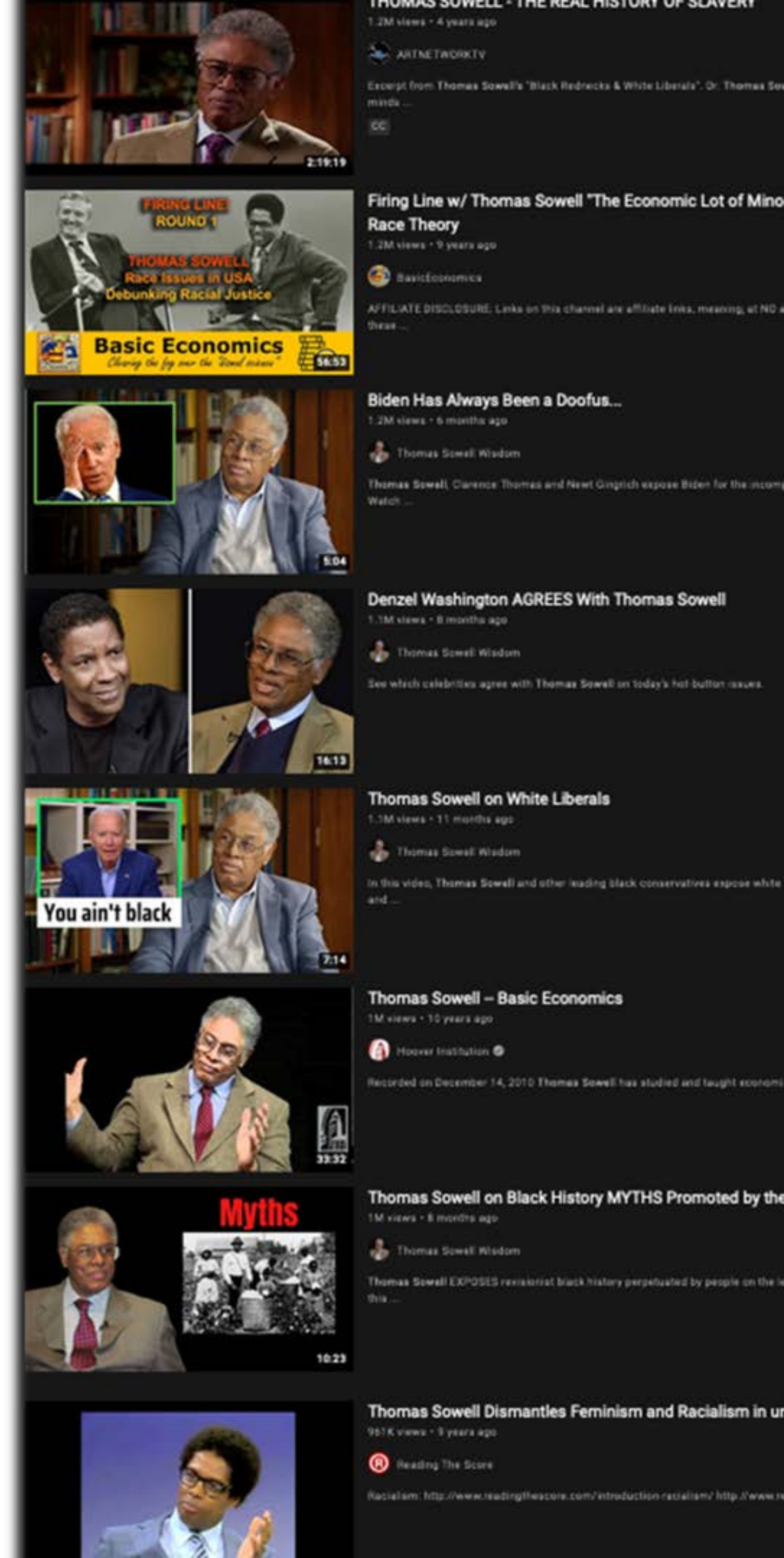
Next Generation Discovers Sowell

Sowell, born when silent films could still make box office, perhaps seems an unlikely candidate for internet celebrity.

But through YouTube and other platforms, his thought has been rediscovered by Millennial and Gen Z audiences who find Sowell's **acerbic** takes on the “anointed” and the failures of the welfare state a refreshing alternative to the ideas they’re exposed to at school and in the media.

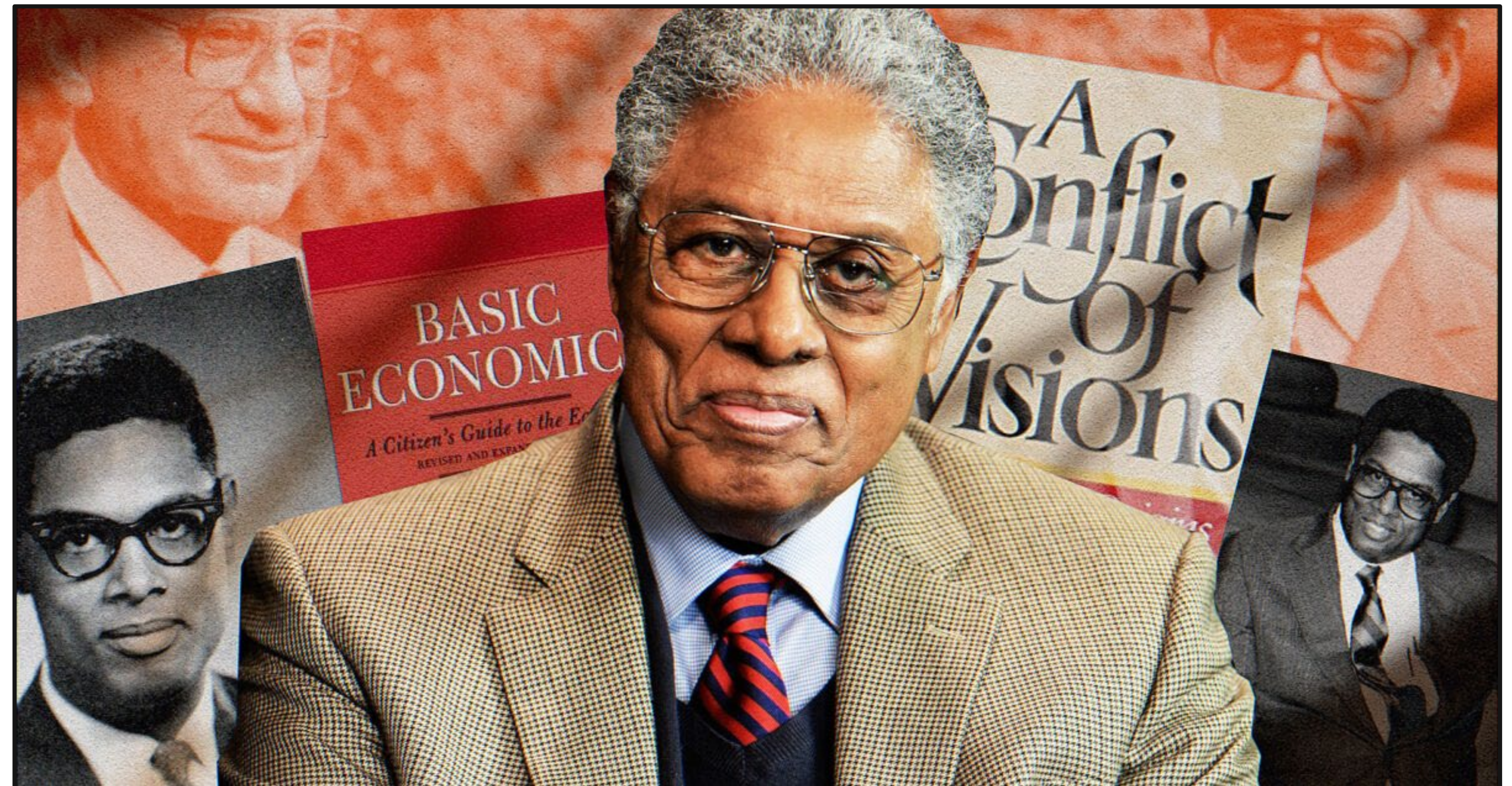
His regular conversations with the Hoover Institution's Peter Robinson on *Uncommon Knowledge*, archival interviews from shows like *Firing Line* and *Tony Brown's Journal*, and fan-made supercuts of Sowell's clearest explanations and greatest quips have made his work enormously popular with a new generation of conservatives, libertarians, dissident liberals, and free-thinkers of all stripes.

YouTube search results from many official and fan-made outlets for Sowell's 50 years of interviews and talks.



Vocabulary

acerbic
amenities
avocation
candor
deluge
deteriorate
empiricist
hardscrabble
idyllic
linguist
microcosm
migration
polarization
wry





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