

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

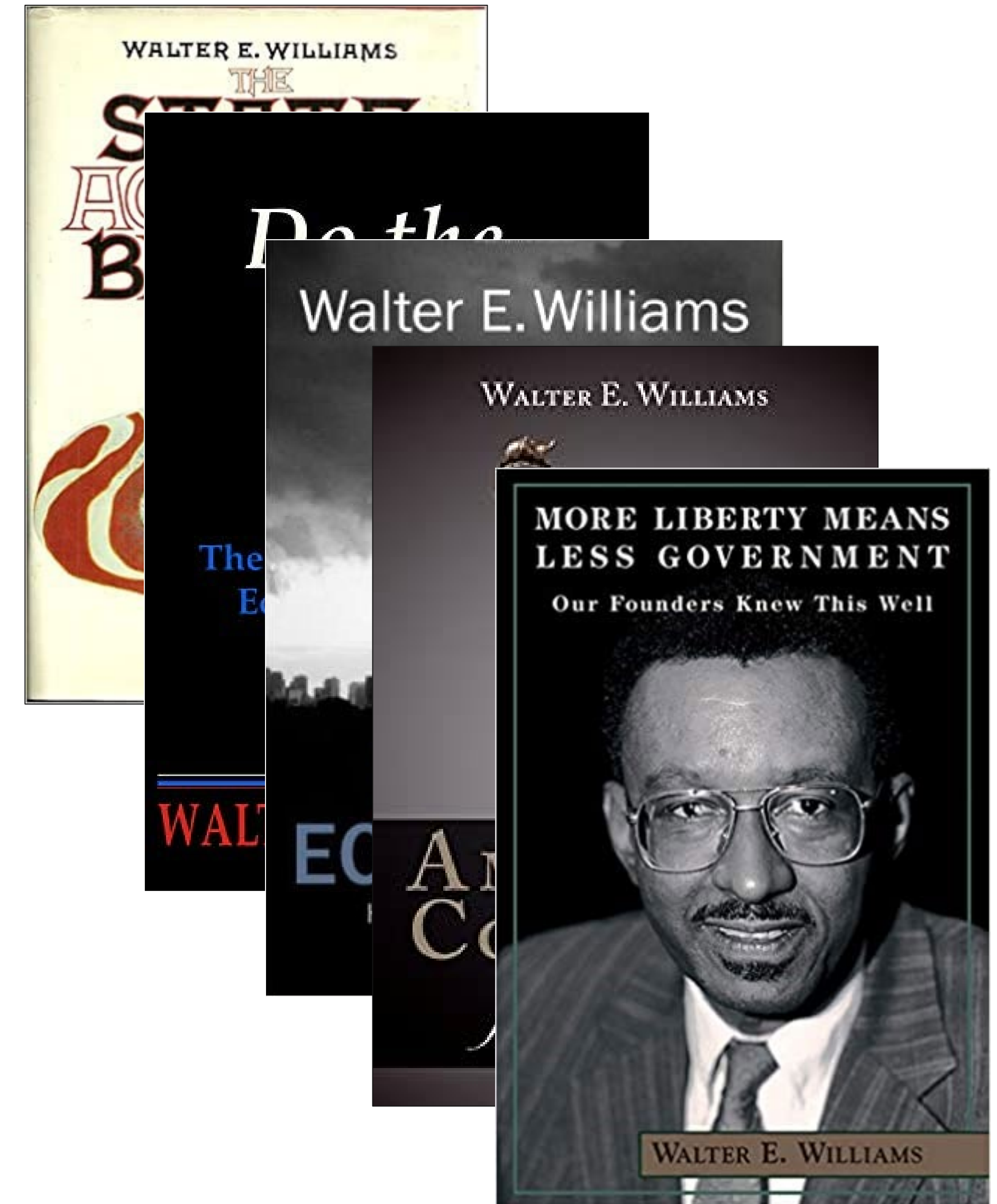
Where does wealth come from?
What conditions create prosperity?

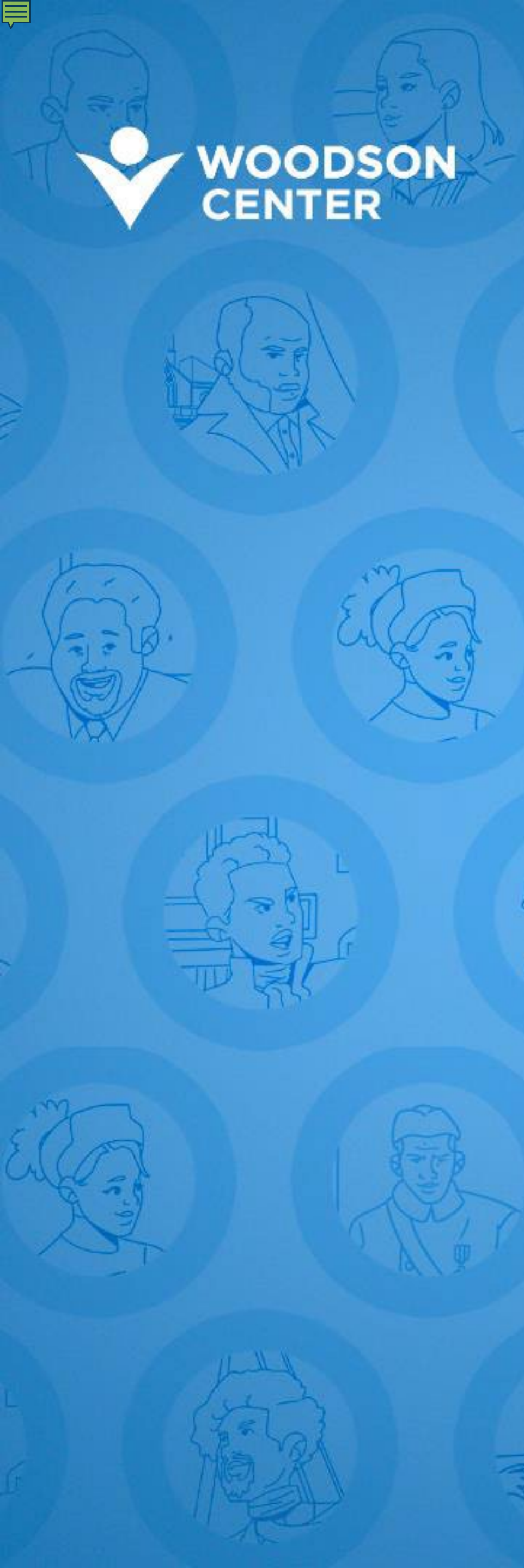
Why does racial inequality persist
despite the changes brought by the
Civil Rights movement?

Why do many government
aid programs fail to reduce poverty?

If you've ever thought about questions like
these, you have something in common
with **economist** Walter E. Williams.

His work challenged **assumptions** and
helped people think through modern
society's most difficult problems.





Walter E. Williams: Popular Economist

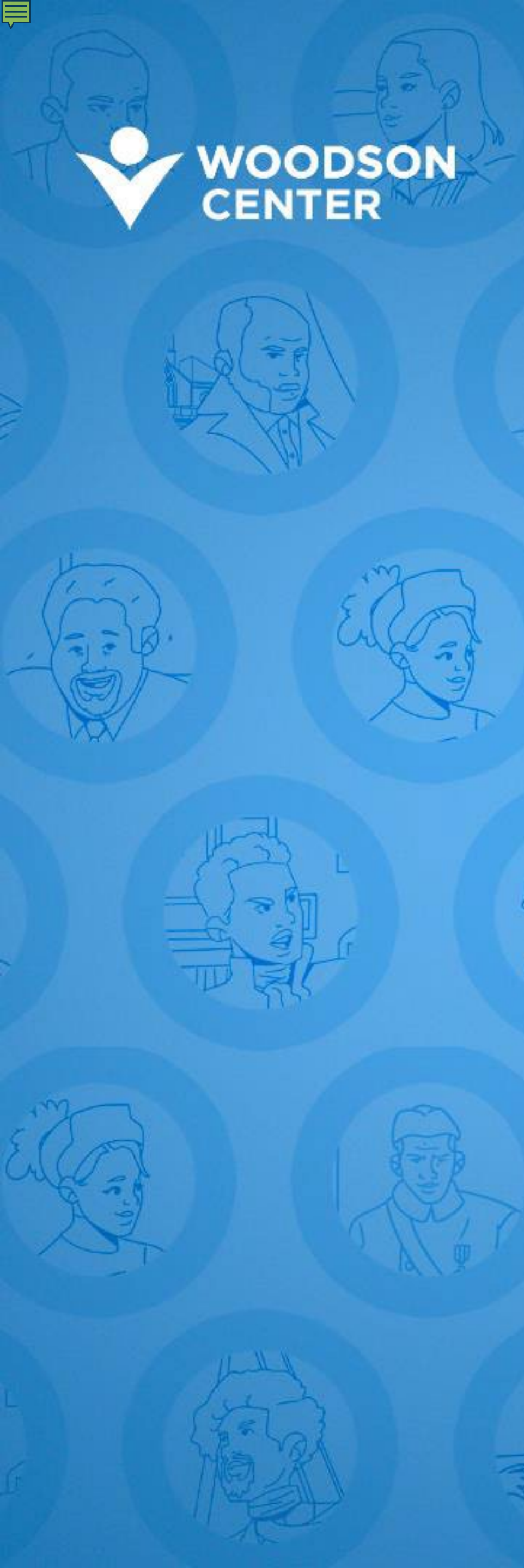
Williams was a *popular* economist in all senses of that word. He helped popularize economic theory by making it to easier for everyday people to understand.

His books, essays, and media appearances were enjoyed by a wide variety of audiences. He defended his economic positions by explaining how they would help ordinary people – even when his ideas seemed to go against traditional ways of approaching issues.

Throughout his 40 years of writing and speaking his work left a lasting 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, leaving his mother to provide for the family alone.

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 stated that while his family was relatively poor and lived in the projects, there was little violent crime in his community, and most of the children there grew up with both parents living in their home.

Above, sign from the newly-built Richard Allen Homes in North Philadelphia; below, the homes in the 1940s.





Growing Up in Philadelphia

His mother was the major influence on his development and early life. Even though they were poor, 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.

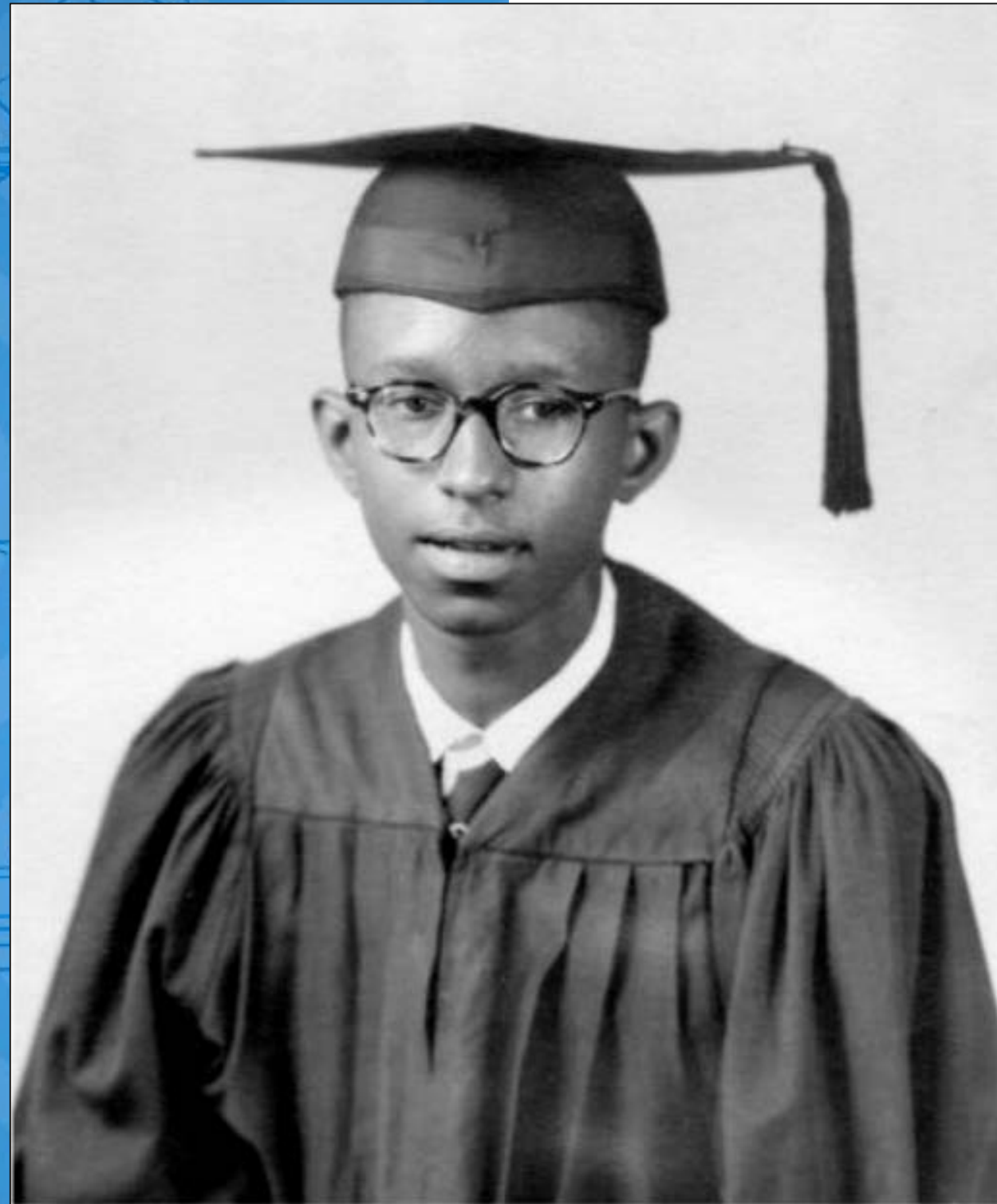
Are there places or events your family goes to regularly? What do you do together?

What cultural or educational events have made a strong impression on you?



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

A Promising Underachiever



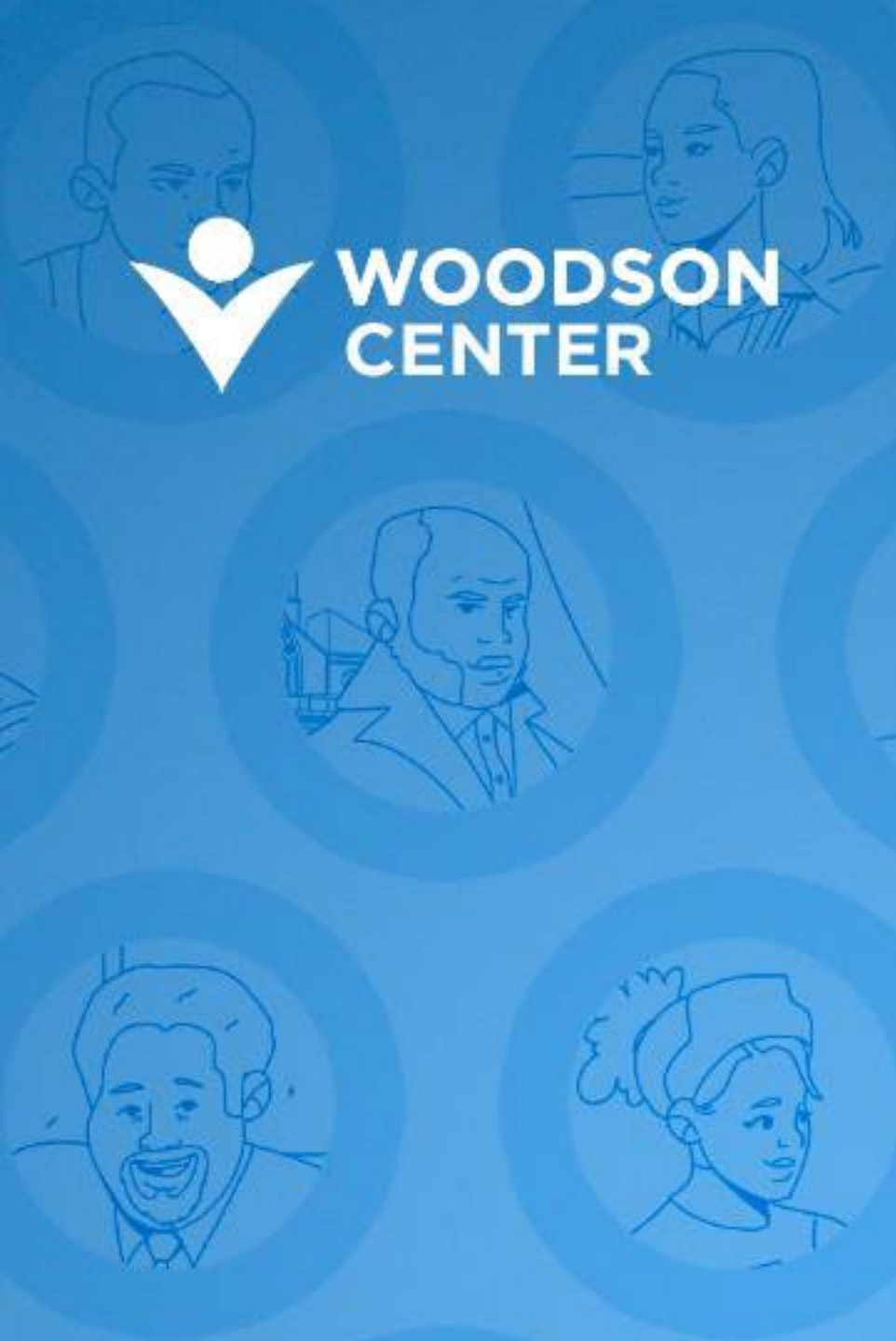
*Williams upon
graduating
Junior High in
1951.*

In school, Williams demonstrated academic talent – and 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’ 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.

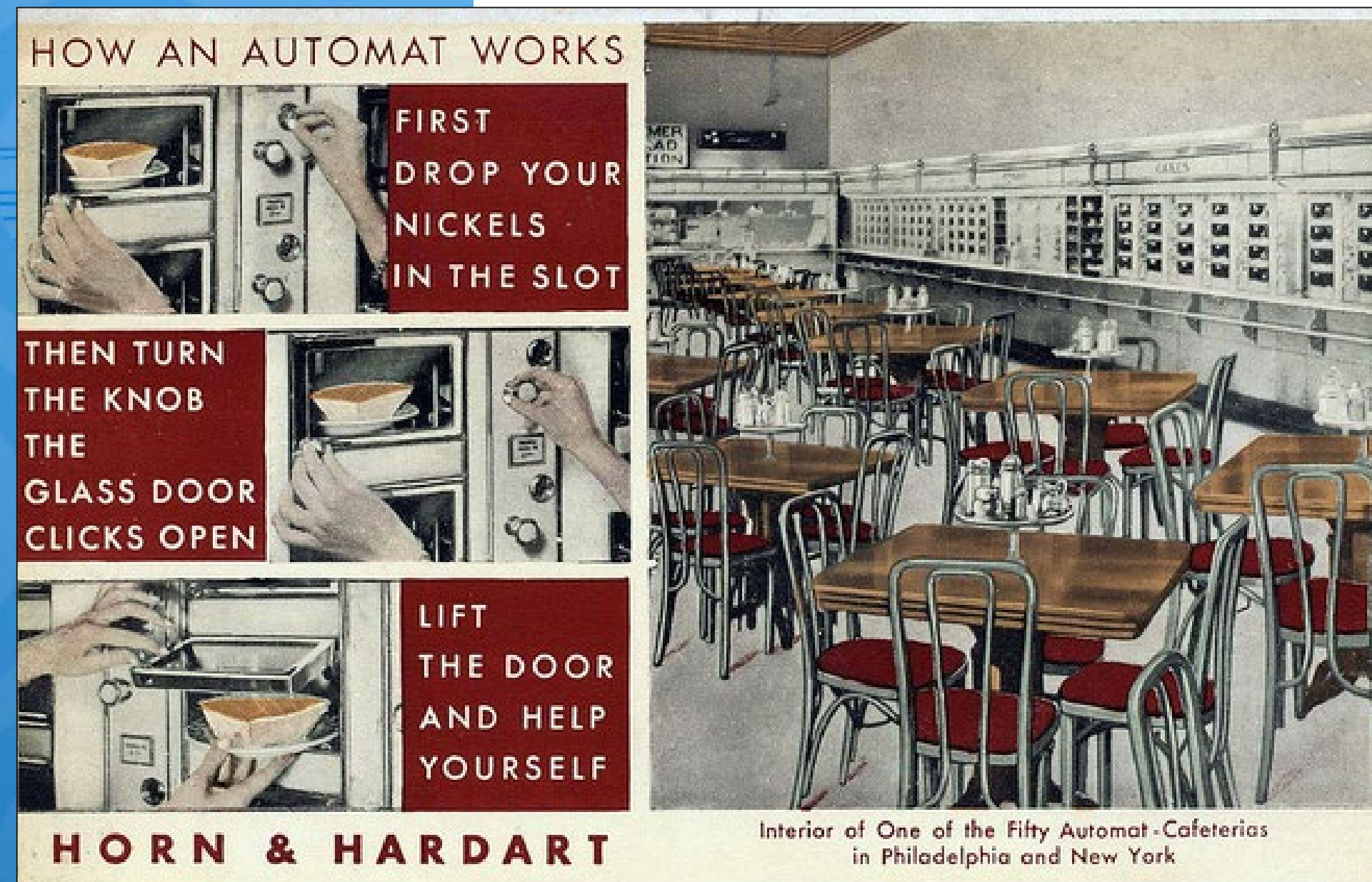
**Why do you think there are laws about children working?
Does every law have unintended consequences?**



Family Ties & Odd Jobs

Walter worked many jobs throughout his teenage years. In the 40s and 50s, with a growing 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.

For Walter, the jobs were a path to pride and self-confidence. His extended family was 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.

As an adult, Williams expressed dismay that young men had fewer opportunities for upward mobility than he did in era when open racism was far more common.

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

Family Ties & Odd Jobs

Do you think it is easier or more difficult for young people to earn money now?

What are some jobs kids can do?



Philadelphia in the 1950s.





Family Ties & Odd Jobs

Williams' life was transformed when his mother married 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' 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 and met his future wife, Connie Taylor.

Like Walter, Connie grew up poor, and they complemented one another beautifully. Walter said what he believed, even when it was socially **inappropriate**. Connie helped smooth Walter's rough edges. When Walter continued his education in 1962, Connie worked full time to help support them.



Connie, Pops, and Walter in the 1970s.

“A Million-Dollar Experience”



From the 1940s through the early 1970s, the U.S. government was **drafting** able-bodied men into the Army. In August 1959, Williams was drafted, with orders to report for duty in Georgia.

Pops, who had served 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 what Pops meant. The Army taught Williams many difficult, but valuable life lessons.

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”

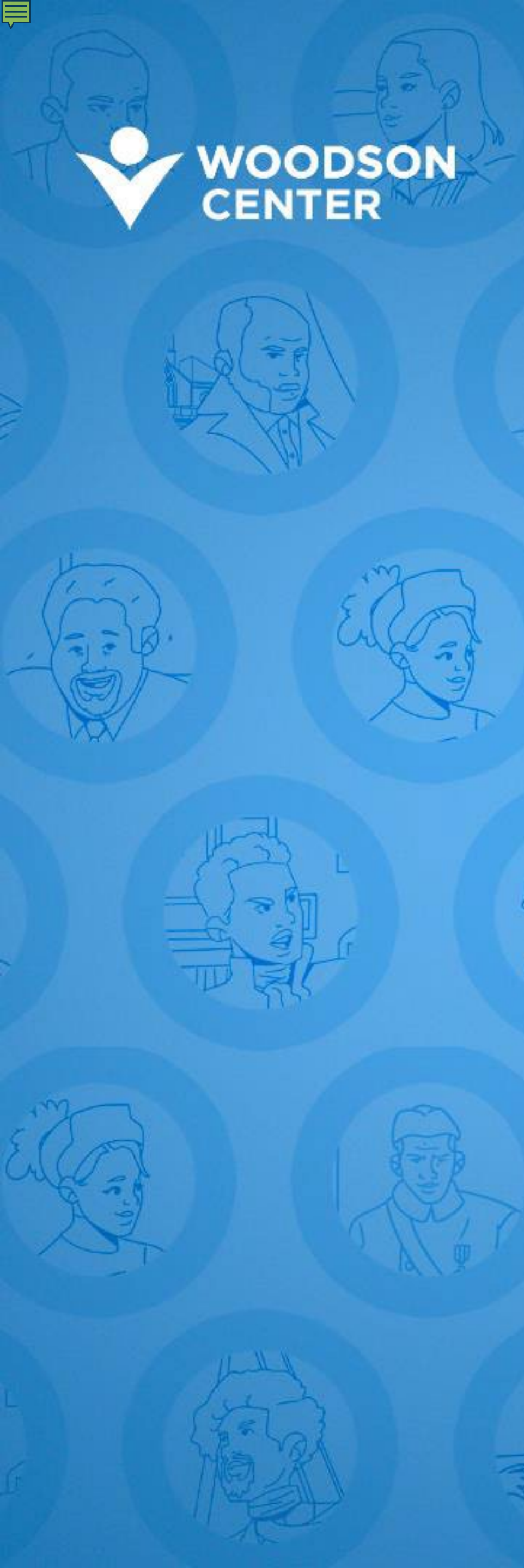


On the bus trip to Georgia, Williams had his first encounters with official segregation.

“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’ 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.

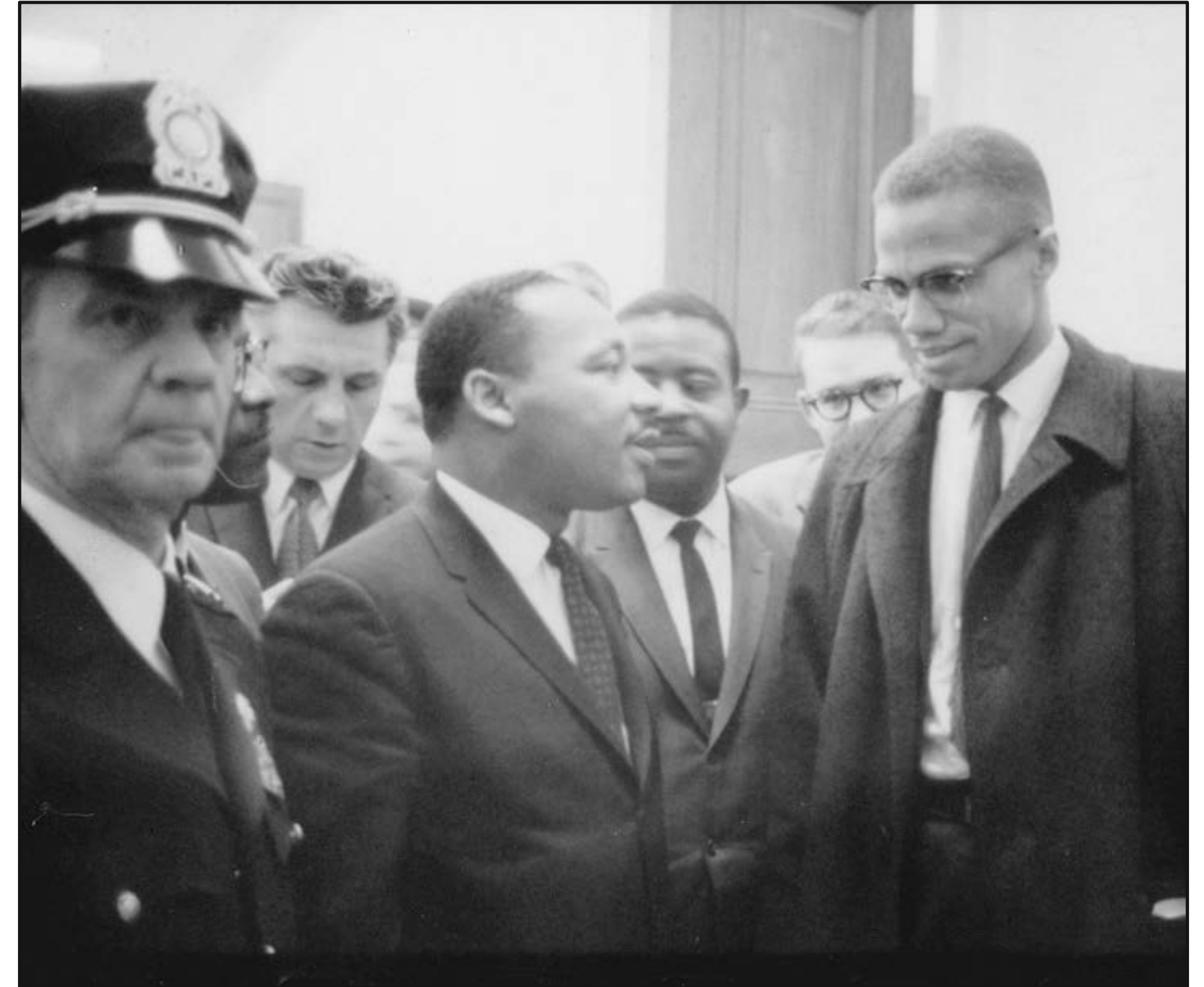


Facing “Jim Crow”

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

His **confrontational** attitude continued during 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. Racism was still common on the base. Segregated social events and beliefs that Blacks were only suited for menial labor persisted.

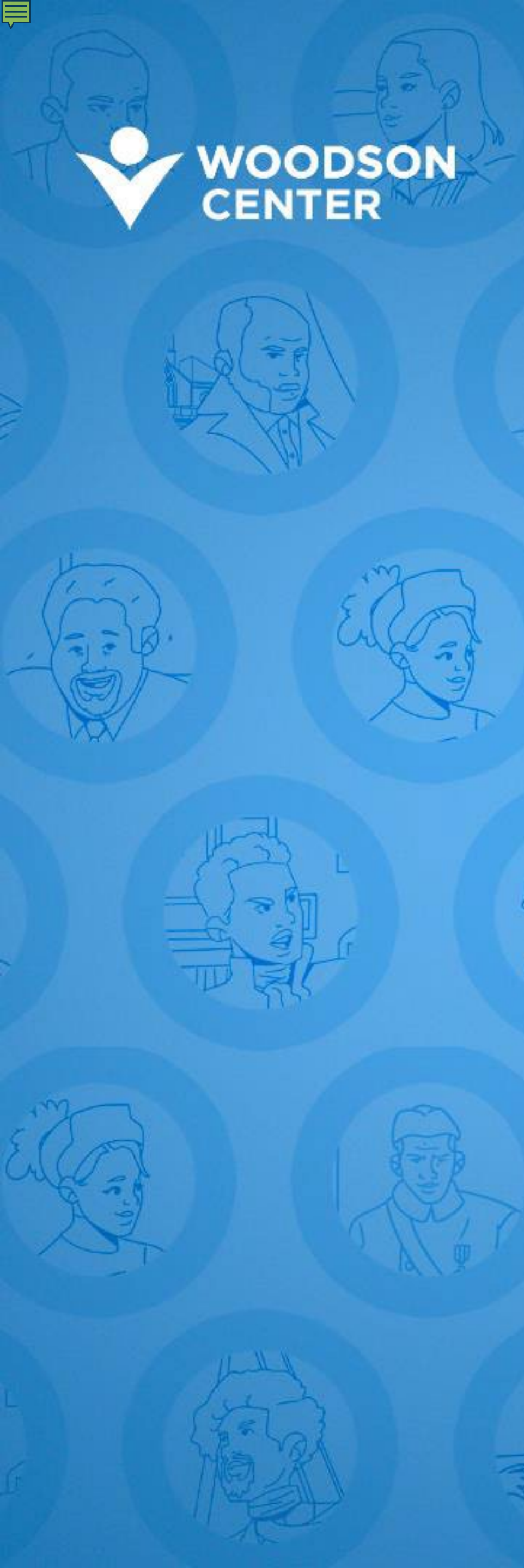
Williams **bucked** these conventions throughout his Army career, earning threats not only from Whites, but from Black soldiers who saw him as a Northern interloper making trouble in a culture he didn't understand.

What kinds of issues or problems make you want to speak up?

Do you know anyone who has written a letter or gone to a public rally to protest?



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



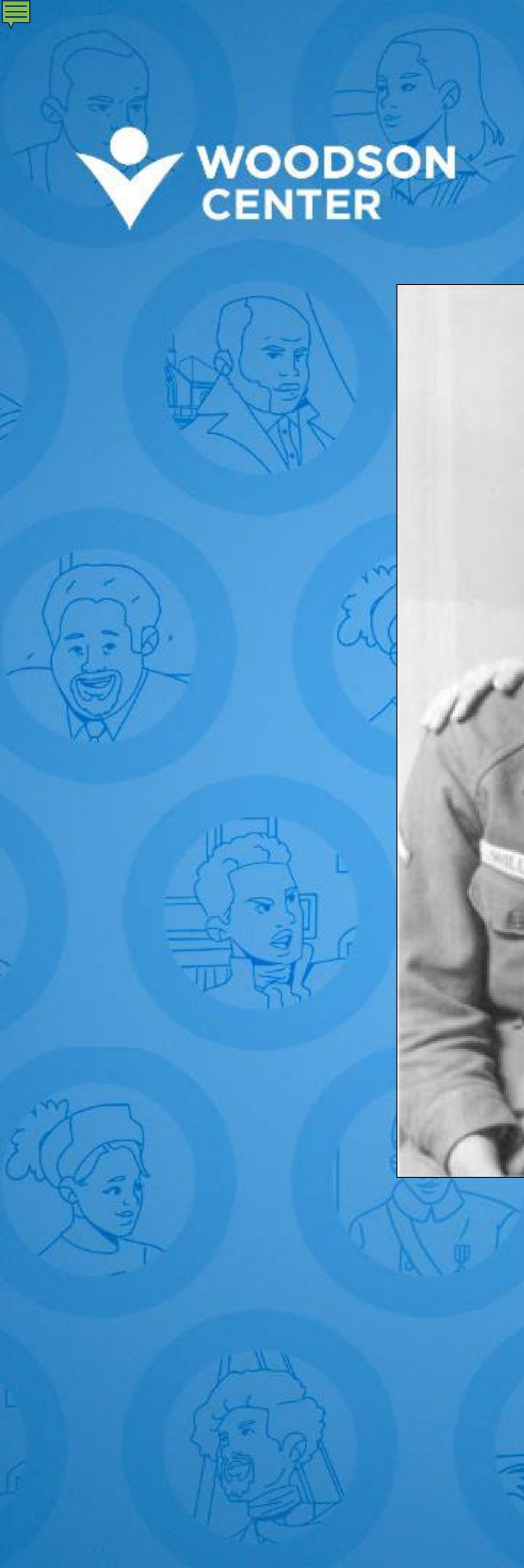
All Enemies Foreign & Domestic

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’ 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 got 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

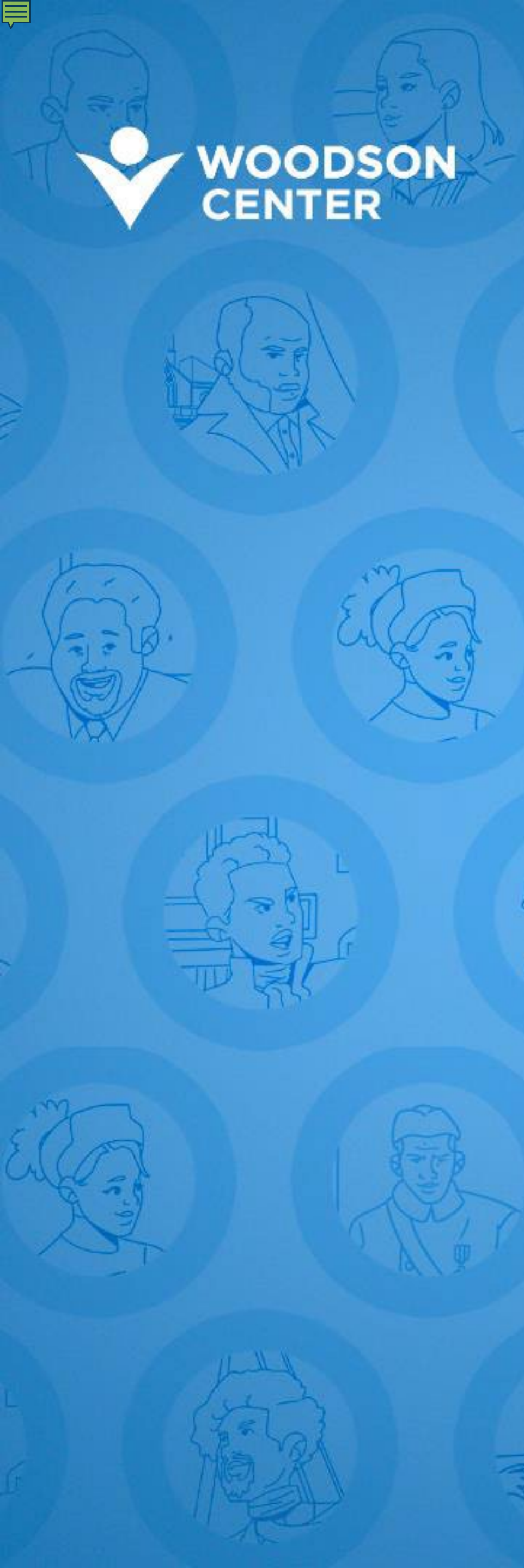


Williams with his karate instructors while stationed in Taegu, South Korea.

In 1960, two officers planned 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.”

Williams was ordered to serve the rest of his deployment in South Korea, which he saw as a punishment. 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.

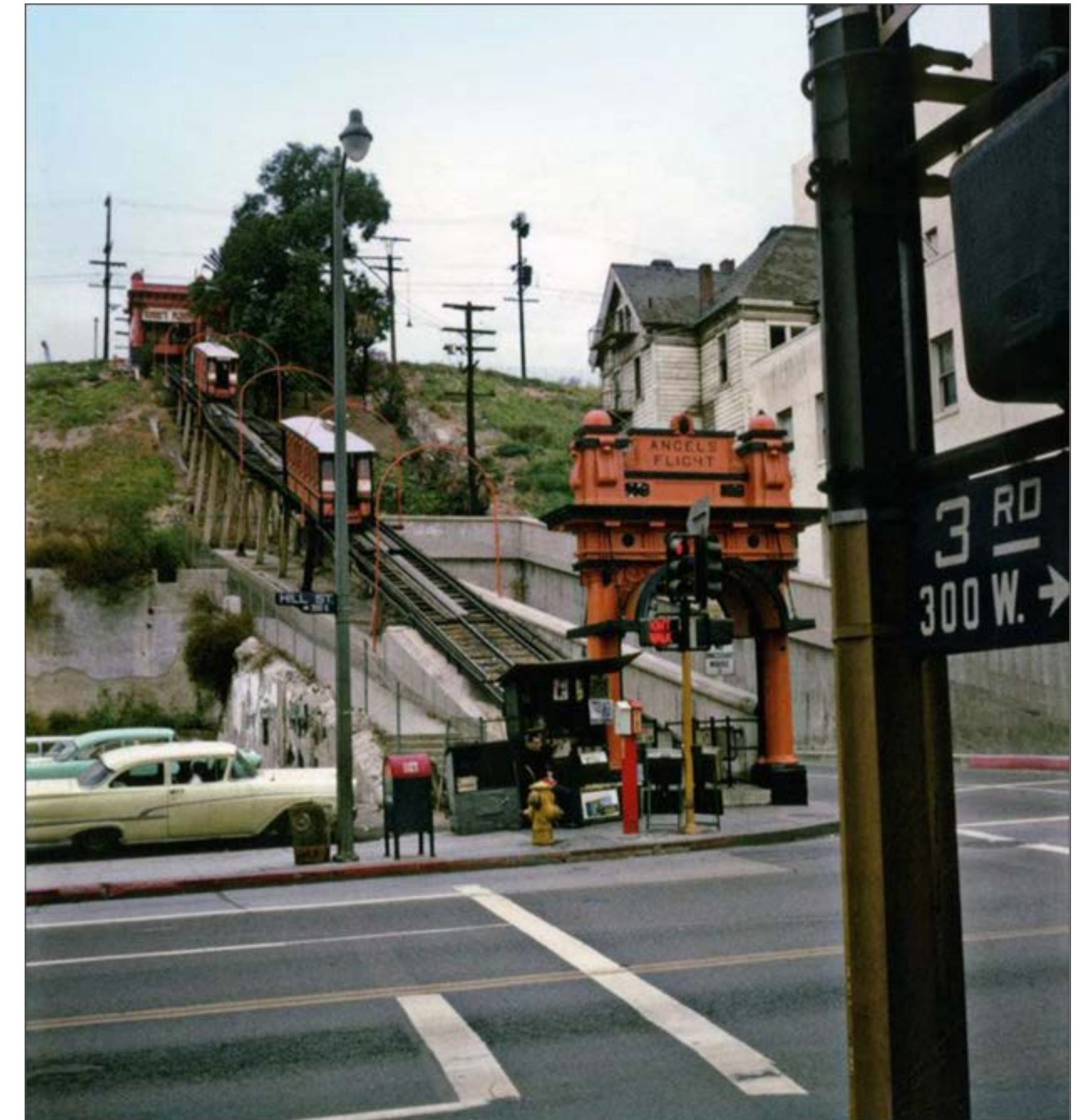
His light duties also gave him plenty of time to read and reflect on his future. He and Connie had married hastily right before he shipped off to Seoul. Now 24 years old, Williams was eager to get his life back on track.

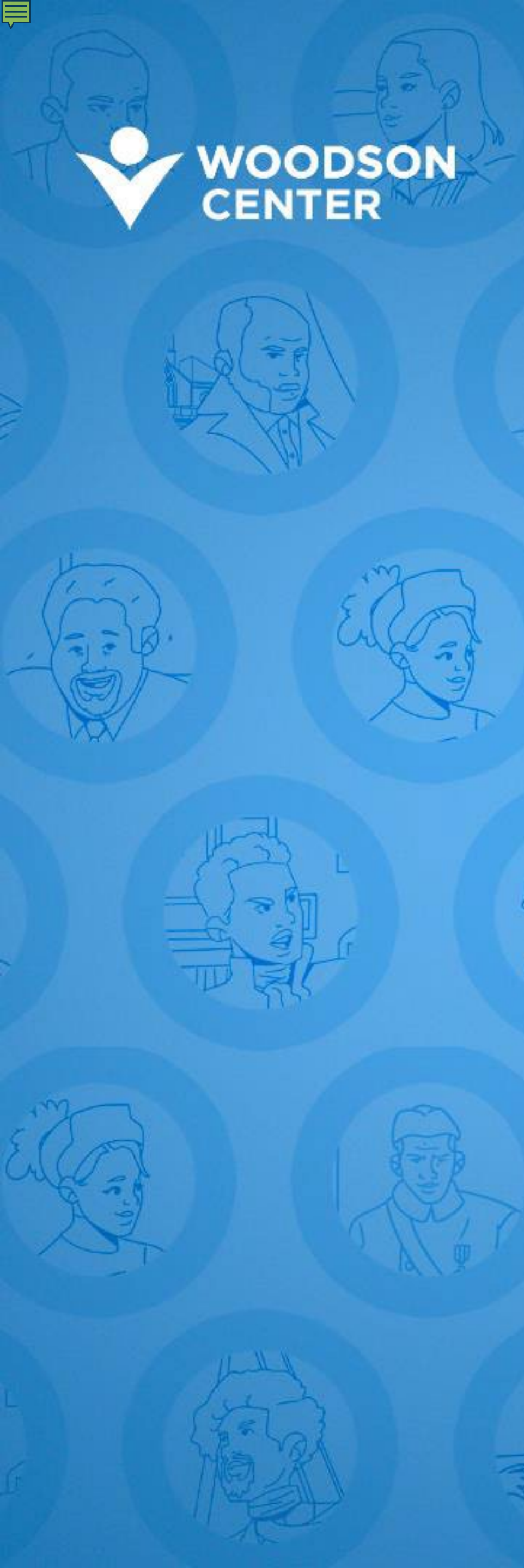


Going West: Los Angeles

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 saved money carefully, sometimes traveling to multiple grocery stores in one 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.





Going West: Los Angeles

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

Have you ever thought about what your future would look like?

What kinds of things do you want to learn about?

What kind of work do you think you might be good at and enjoy?



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



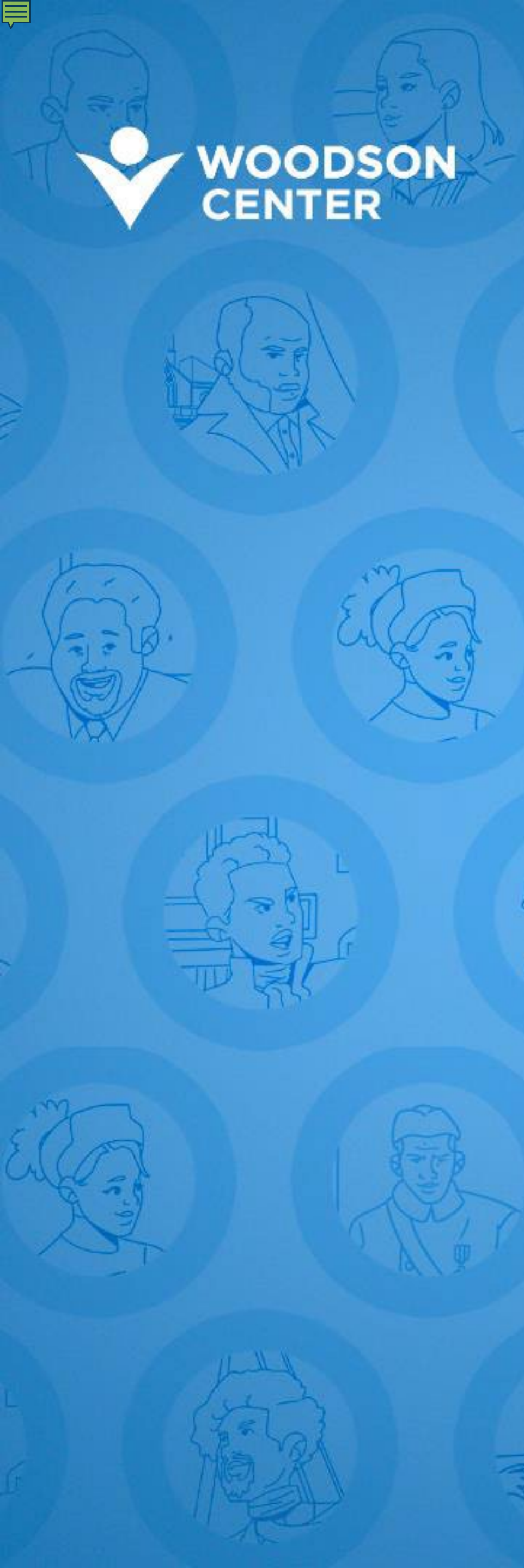
Though he sometimes struggled academically –sometimes earning the top grade, sometime scraping by with a “C” – Williams had found his calling in economics.

Arthur Kirsch, his microeconomics professor, became Williams’ 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.

Eventually, 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.

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

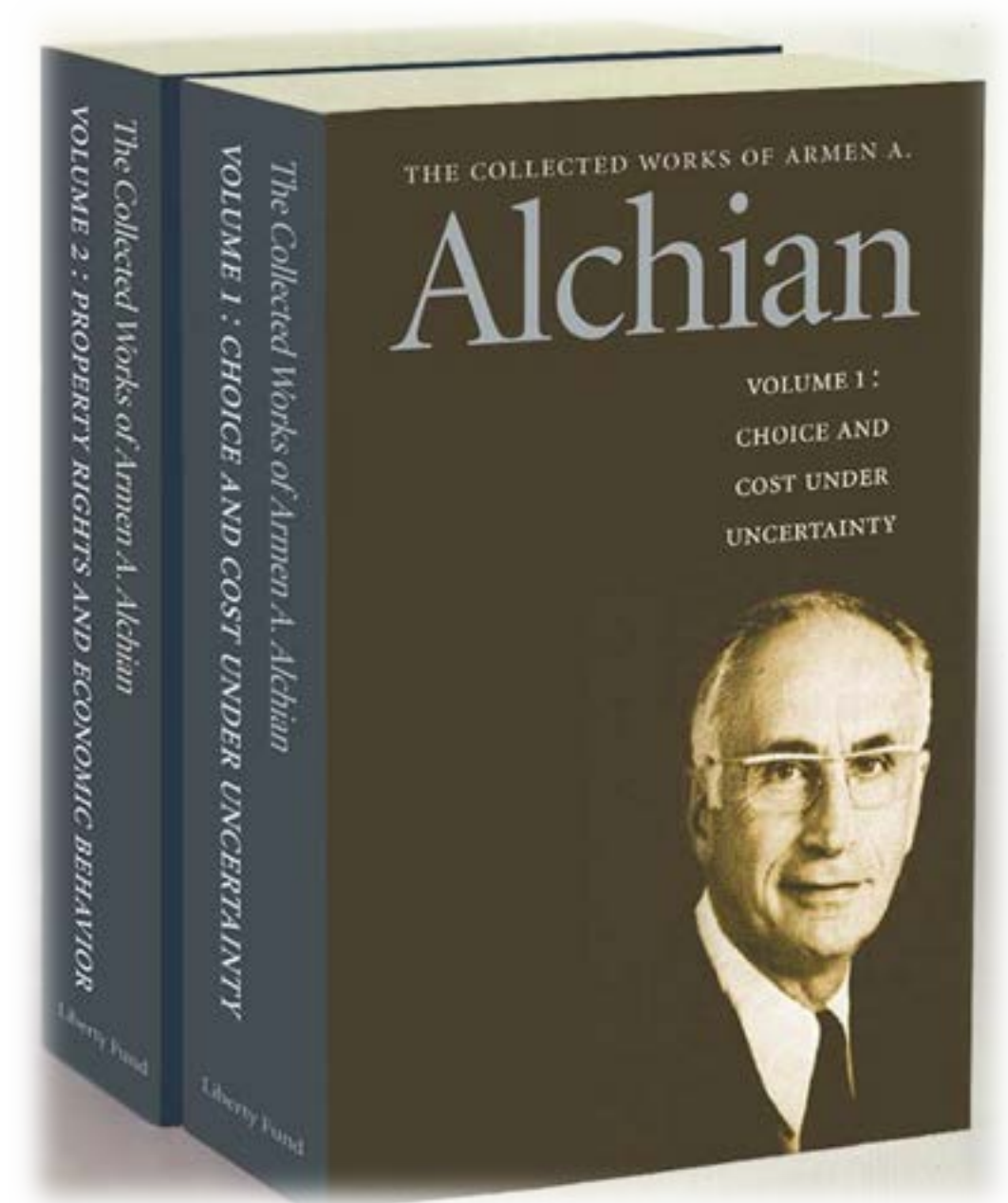


Discovering Economics

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' liberal beliefs, especially on labor policy, by asking Williams if he cared more about the *intentions* of a policy, or that policy's actual *outcomes*.

Williams' refused to see anyone as his better and was willing to debate his ideas with his professors. His professors appreciated his enthusiasm, but also criticized his arguments. They saw his potential and encouraged him to do better, taking time to coach him through difficult material.

Williams later wrote that he was grateful for the rigorous intellectual atmosphere at UCLA, worrying that some modern professors do not give honest criticism to Black students because they are afraid of being called racist.



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



A Passion for Teaching

Looking back on his education at UCLA, Williams said he appreciated "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' 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, the most damaging form of racism was **condescension**, even when motivated by good intentions 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 where he would be able to work on his own projects or travel to nearby Washington, D.C. for any events or meetings that arose.



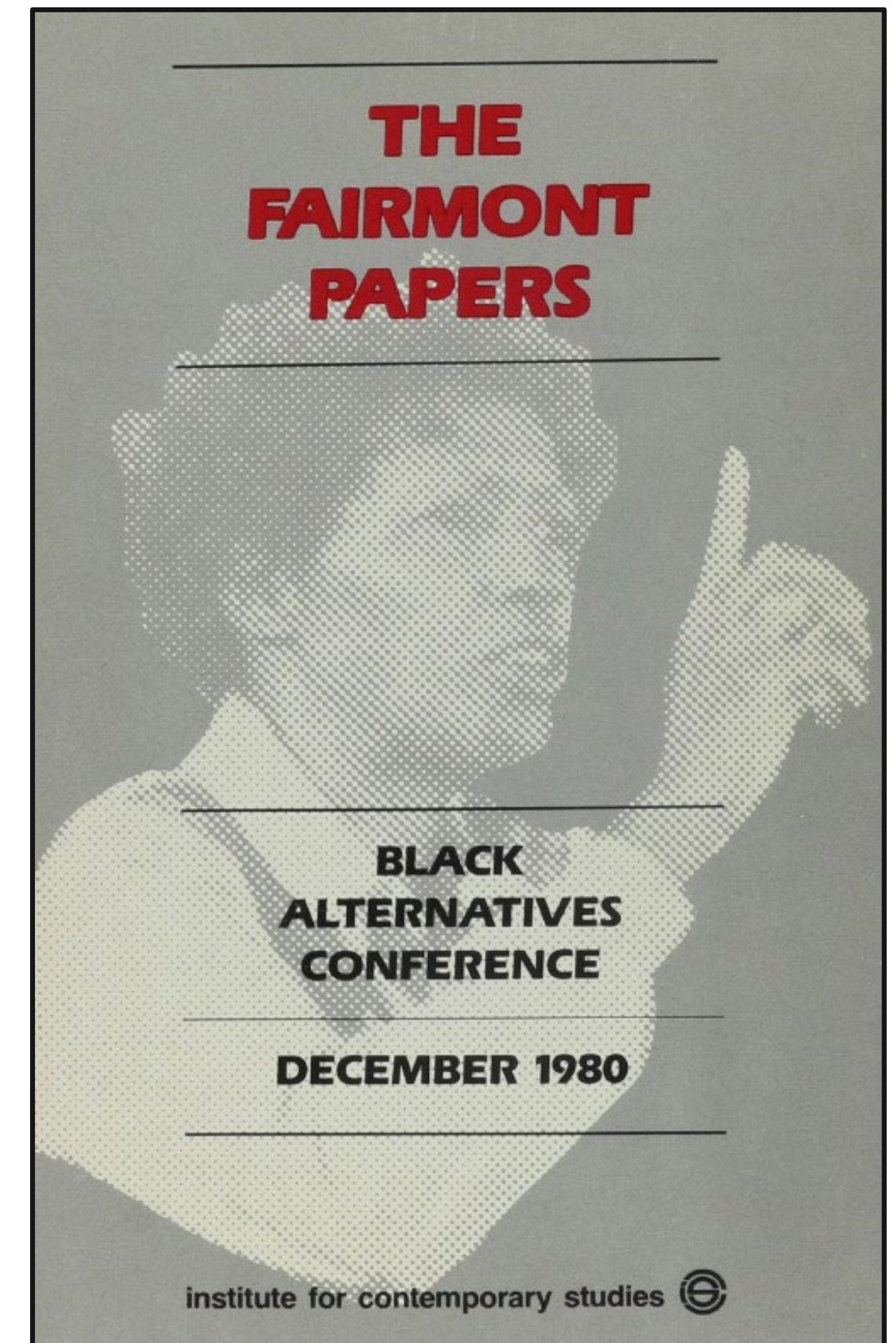


Black Alternatives

In the 1980s many in America questioned if the social policies of the 1960s and 1970s were effective. Free market ideas were becoming more popular and were a key part of President Ronald Reagan's small-government platform.

Williams wrote and spoke in support of these policies, part of a group of Black conservatives and **libertarians** that included future Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas, journalist Tony Brown, and Williams' best friend and fellow economist Thomas Sowell.

These thinkers, along with other scholars and political figures, represented a break from the traditional political views held by Blacks since the Civil Rights movement. Just a month after Reagan's election, they participated in the 1980 "Black Alternatives Conference."



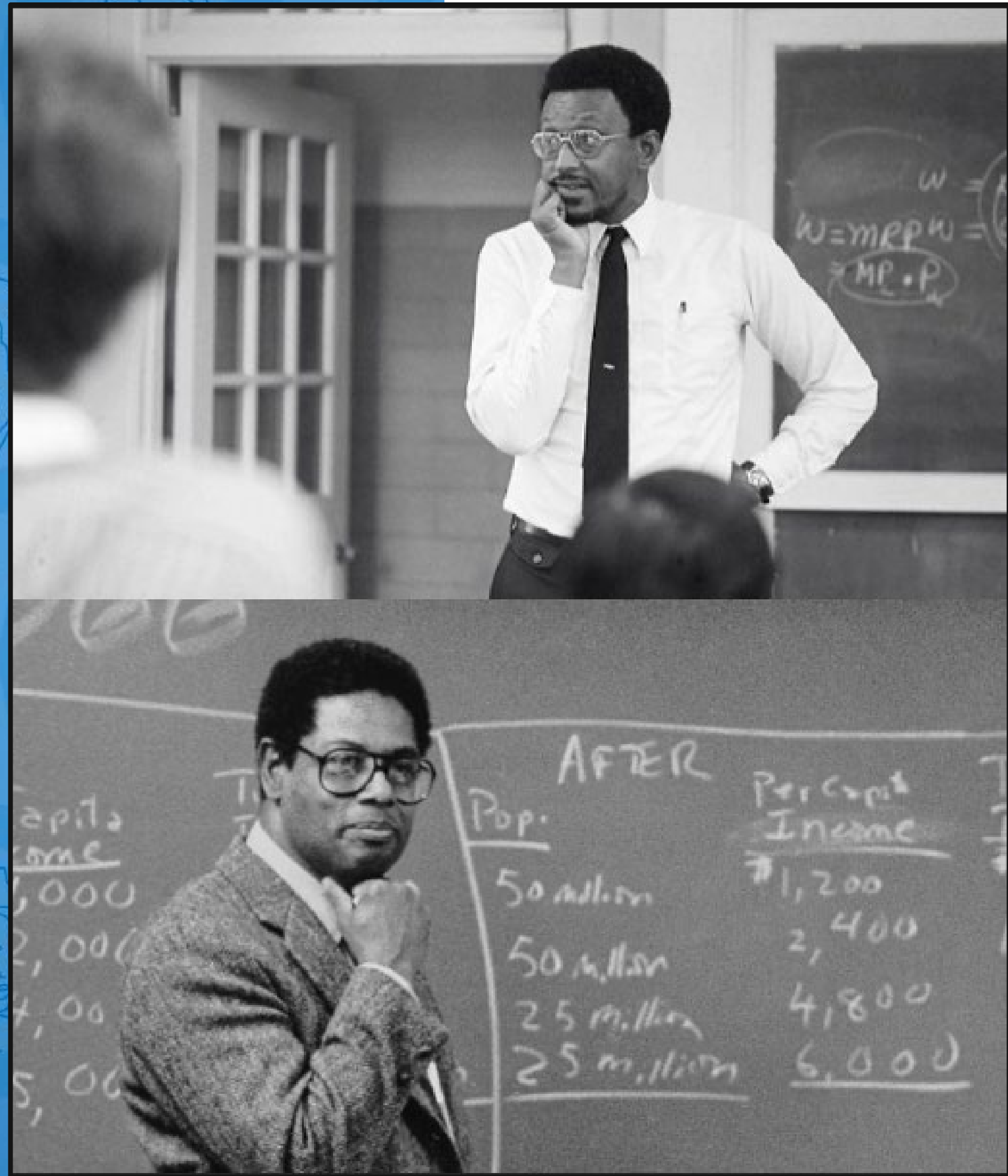
Black Alternatives ... and a Backlash

These talks were later collected as the "Fairmont Papers," named for the hotel in San Francisco where the conference was held. The arguments of Williams, Sowell, and other panelists were dismissed by some mainstream Black leaders – and hit with harsh criticism by others.

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

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

What was it about Williams and Sowell’s arguments that made observers like Hooks and Rowan so angry?



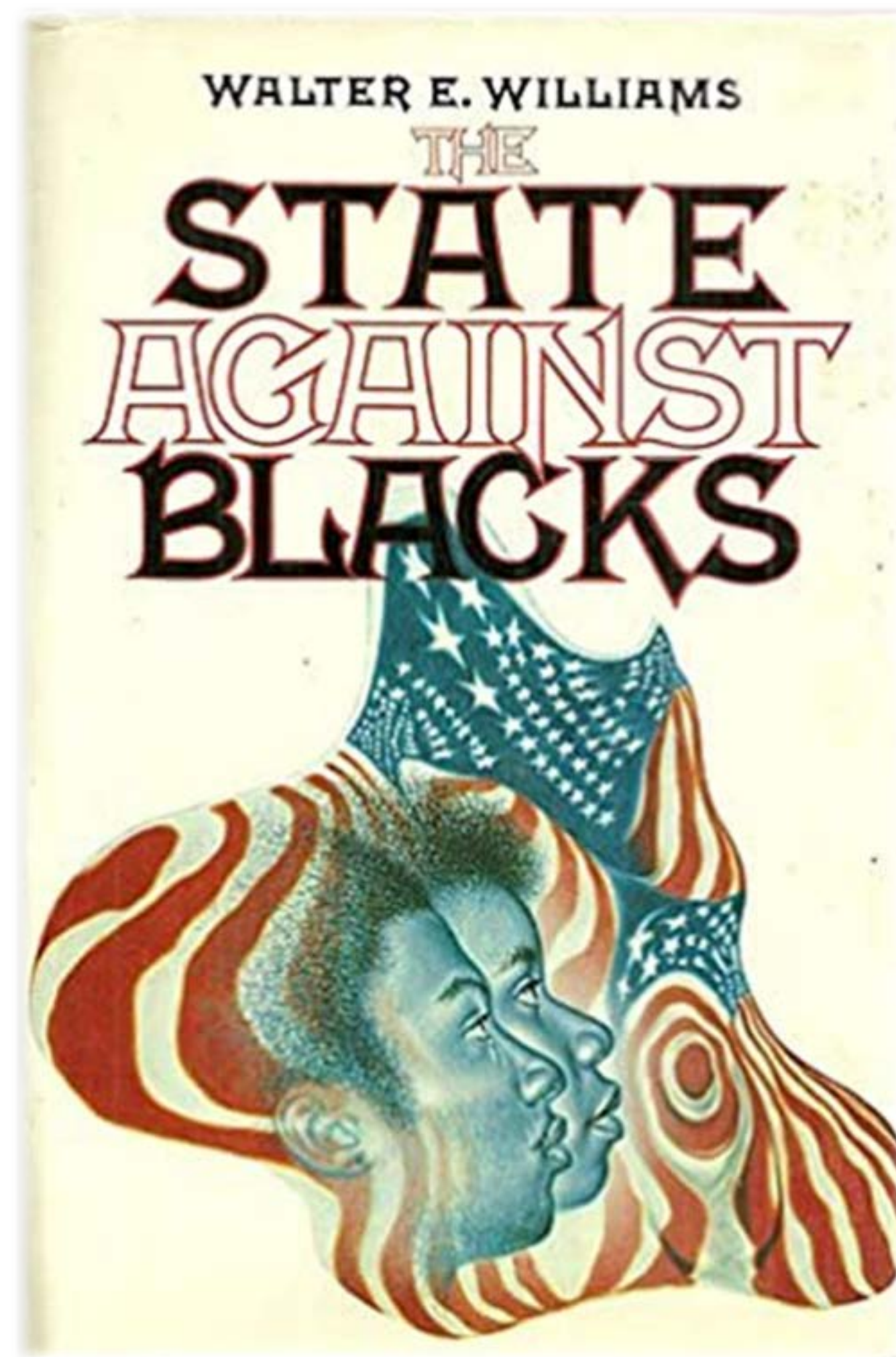
The State Against Blacks (1982)

In Williams' first book he laid out many of his core Libertarian ideas, including what he saw as the role of government in hindering Black Americans from economic opportunity.

He didn't deny that racism and discrimination were real and worsened inequality. But he argued that too many local, state, and federal regulations – from minimum wage laws to strict licensing practices for occupations like being a plumber or electrician – were the main culprits behind Black socioeconomic inequality.

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

Why are some reasons to have laws like those Williams criticized?



“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 neighborhood of North Philadelphia, the program argued that regulation made it harder for businesses to hire young Black men, and criticized government control of 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’ youth in the 1950s to the 1980s?

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

“A Minority View”

Georgians

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

pravity of mind, or an aggravated battery to the victim.”

This statutory language is broad that it openly invites the jury to impose the death penalty in every murder case,” Marshall and Brennan argued. Without comment, the court majority, however, refused to review the cases of:

-William A. Brooks convicted of murder, kidnapping, rape and armed robbery in the July 15, 1977, slaying of a 23-year-old woman in Muscogee County.
-Eddie Spraggins and Freddie F. Davis, convicted on the Jan. 31, 1977, rape-slaying of Frances Coe, a 55-year-old neighbor in Meriwether County.

-Tony C. Hill, convicted of murder and rape in the slaying of 12-year-old Angela Johnson in Milledgeville on April 22, 1979. The victim had been beaten to death and raped.

-Henry Wills III, found guilty in the slaying of a police officer in Bleckley County. Justice Potter Stewart joined with Brennan and Marshall's dissent in Wills'

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.

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 set the price of oranges, and similar situations that Williams believed hurt consumers by keeping grocery prices high.

His final column, a critical look at government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially the effect on ordinary working people who lost retail or service industry jobs, was published on December 9, 2020.

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



Fixture of the Conservative Media Circuit

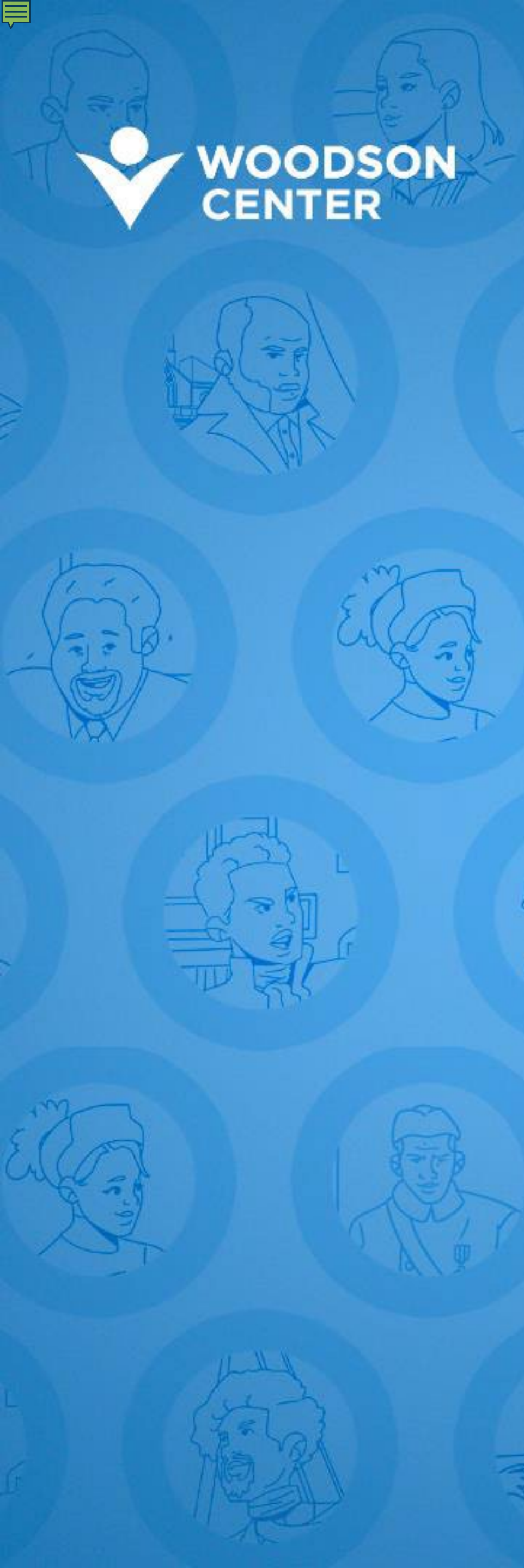
In addition to his column, Williams was a regular in conservative media, critiquing socialism, the welfare state, and the **mendacity** of politicians.

Williams was direct, even harsh at times, when attacking the policies and, sometimes, the personal character of established Black leaders aligned with liberal causes and the Democratic Party. 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 and radio personality Mark Levin on the set of Life, Liberty, and Levin in 2018.



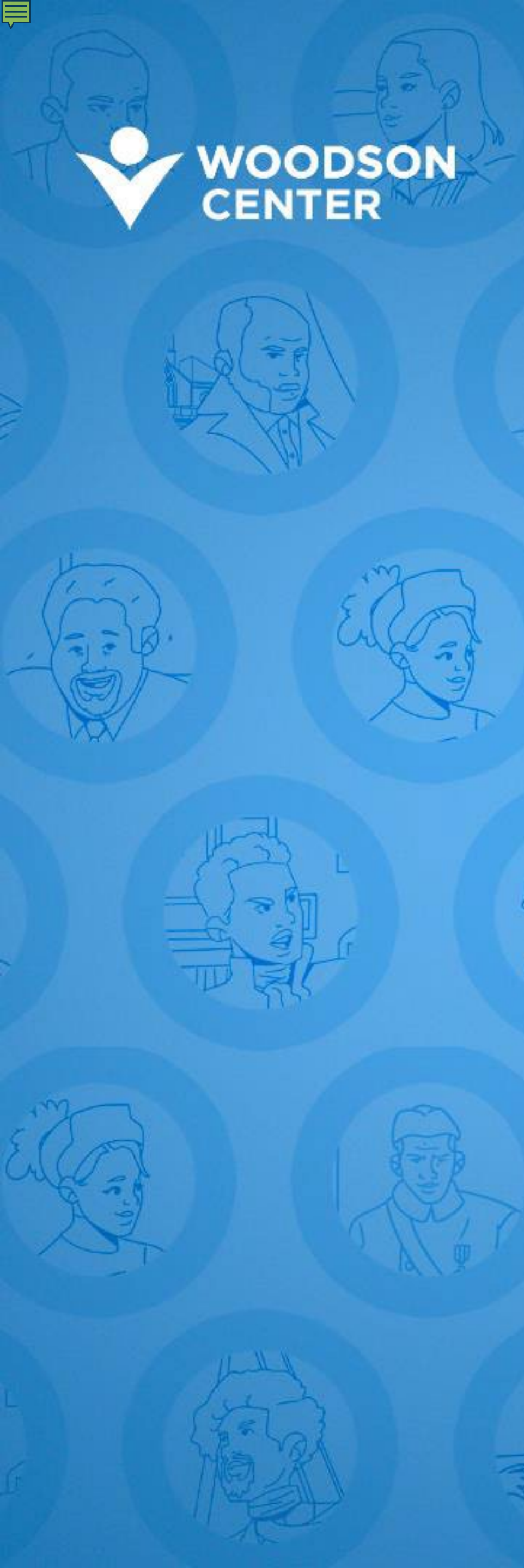
No Excuses

But despite his blunt language, Williams' 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.”

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' family, friends, colleagues, students, and intellectual compatriots.





An Uncompromising Vision of Freedom

Williams' colleague at GMU, Donald J. Boudreaux, praised him as "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 production of Suffer No Fools (2014), a documentary about his life and work.



Vocabulary

Assumptions
Colluded
Condescension
Confiscated
Confrontational
Contradictory
Court Martial
Cultural
Drafted
Economist
Inappropriate
Libertarian
Memoir
Mendacity
PhD
Sociology
Solidarity
Syndicated

