

Thomas Sowell

Maverick Intellect

b. June 30, 1930

Prolific Author

School Choice Advocate

Free Market Economist

Social Theorist



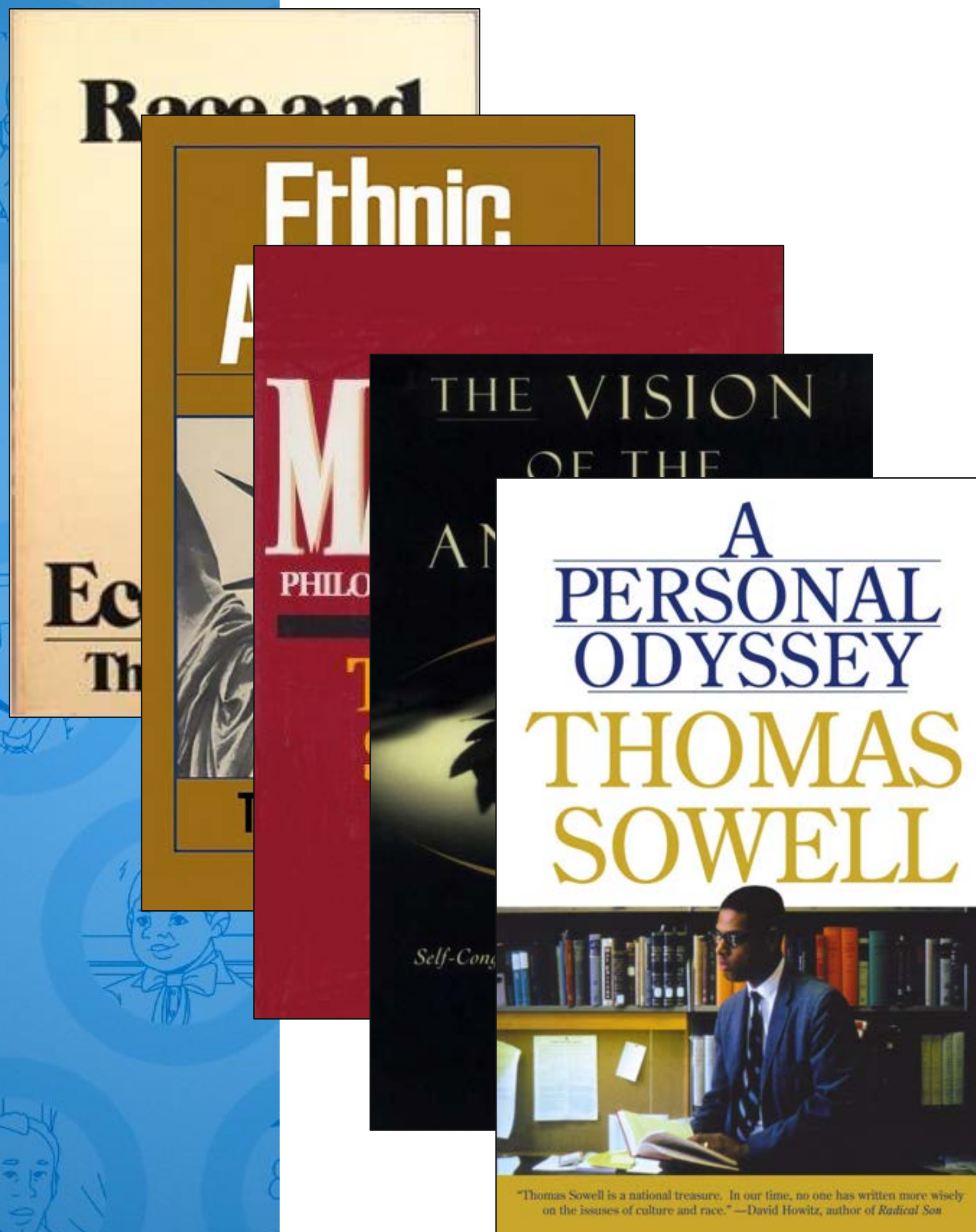
Contemporary Scholars: **Lesson 2**

Economist and Social Theorist

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

People have different ideas about the best ways to solve social problems. These differences can cause division over which policies and laws are morally just and promote prosperity.

Thomas Sowell encouraged people to not just accept the answers that are popular, but to think deeply and critically about the effect of policies on everyday people.



Thomas Sowell: Renaissance Man



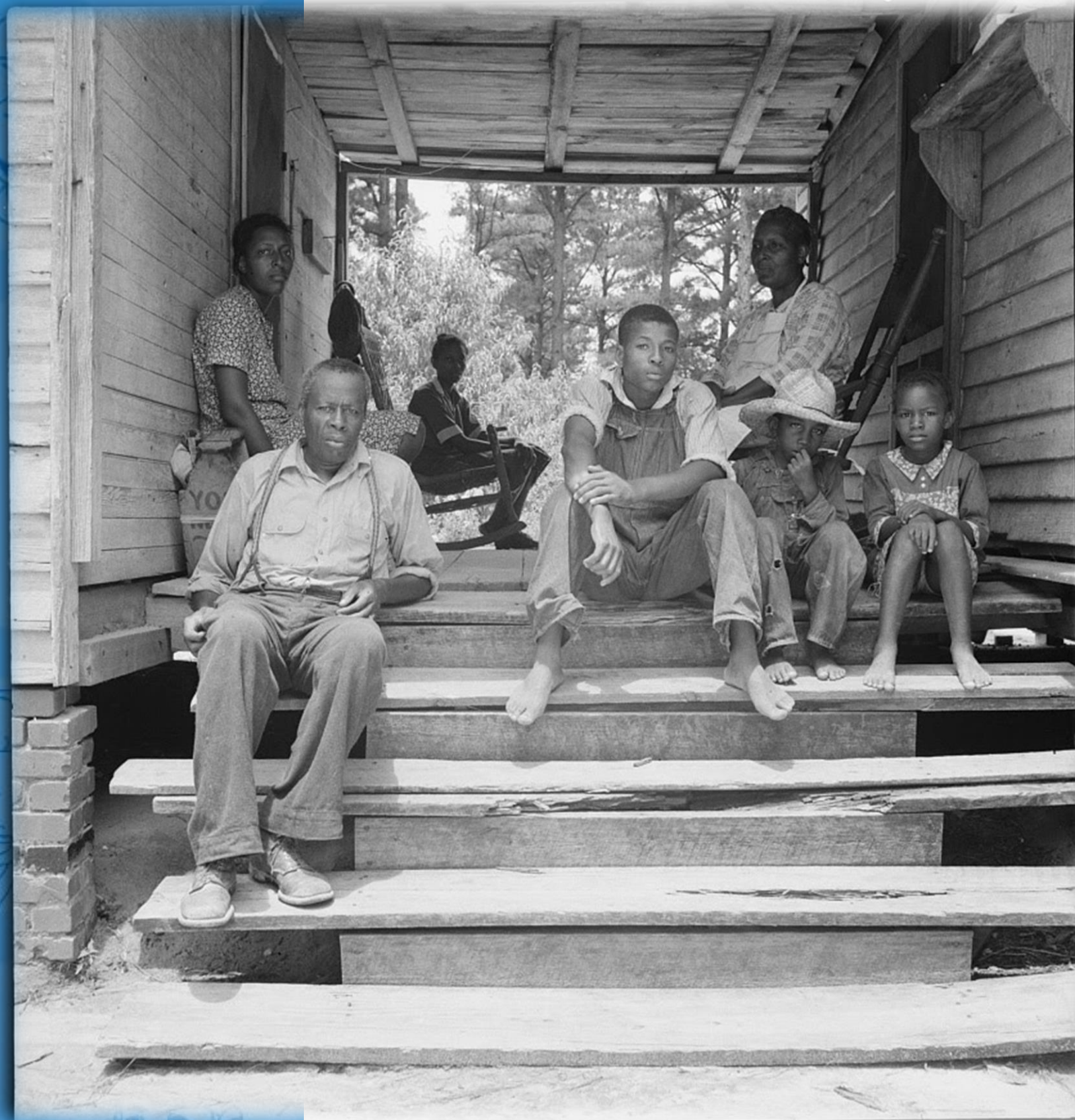
Thomas Sowell is celebrated as one of America's greatest intellectuals. He is known for being honest, even when his opinions were unpopular and his motives were attacked. He has spoken out on issues about the economy, government assistance for the needy and social values and morals.

Still productive at over 90 years of age, Sowell has written more than 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 believes in judging policies based on evidence of *results* rather than the moral vision of their *intentions*. But his ideas have also been shaped by his life story, one that might surprise critics who say he lacks sympathy for the poor.

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

Early Life in North Carolina



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

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 long after.

Sowell spent his early years in a small, poor, rural town. None of his relatives had attended school beyond the sixth grade, and the house he grew up in did not have electricity nor hot running water, which was true for most Black Americans in his town.

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 people.

Early Life in North Carolina

Despite the lack of modern **amenities**, Sowell has fond memories of his youth. 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.



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

Growing Up in Harlem



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

In 1940, when Sowell was nine years old, he and his adoptive mother moved to New York City and settled in Harlem. So many Black Americans were moving away from the rural, segregated South at that time, that it came to be known as "the **Great Migration**."

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

Growing Up in Harlem

Sowell was a bright student, but he often had conflicts 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.”

While he had warm relationships with some teachers, Sowell was not afraid to question his teacher's decisions, especially when it came to classroom discipline. Sometimes, this caused conflict with his teachers.

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



The Value of Knowledge

A friend of Sowell's family named Eddie Map, was a few years older and came from a more affluent family. Map became a kind of mentor for Sowell. He was the first to introduce Sowell to the public library, which would become one of Sowell's favorite places throughout his youth in Harlem. The library was central to Sowell's 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”

Sowell's relationship with “Mom” gradually 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*. “Mom” agreed to introduce them only if Mary Frances kept up the fiction. Eventually, lies like this and increasingly hostile behavior by Sowell's great-aunt caused Sowell to leave his home.



In his *Odyssey*, Sowell said that after many fights, including one in which “Mom” threatened him with a hammer, they became “simply enemies living under the same roof.” Sowell became an **emancipated** minor and set out on his own.

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. 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, D.C., 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.

In those days, the city was still very southern, 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 hobby 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, SC – last stop on the way to Parris Island, c. 1950s.

A Passion for Pictures

Sowell learned the art and science of photography while juggling other responsibilities of Marine Corps life.

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.

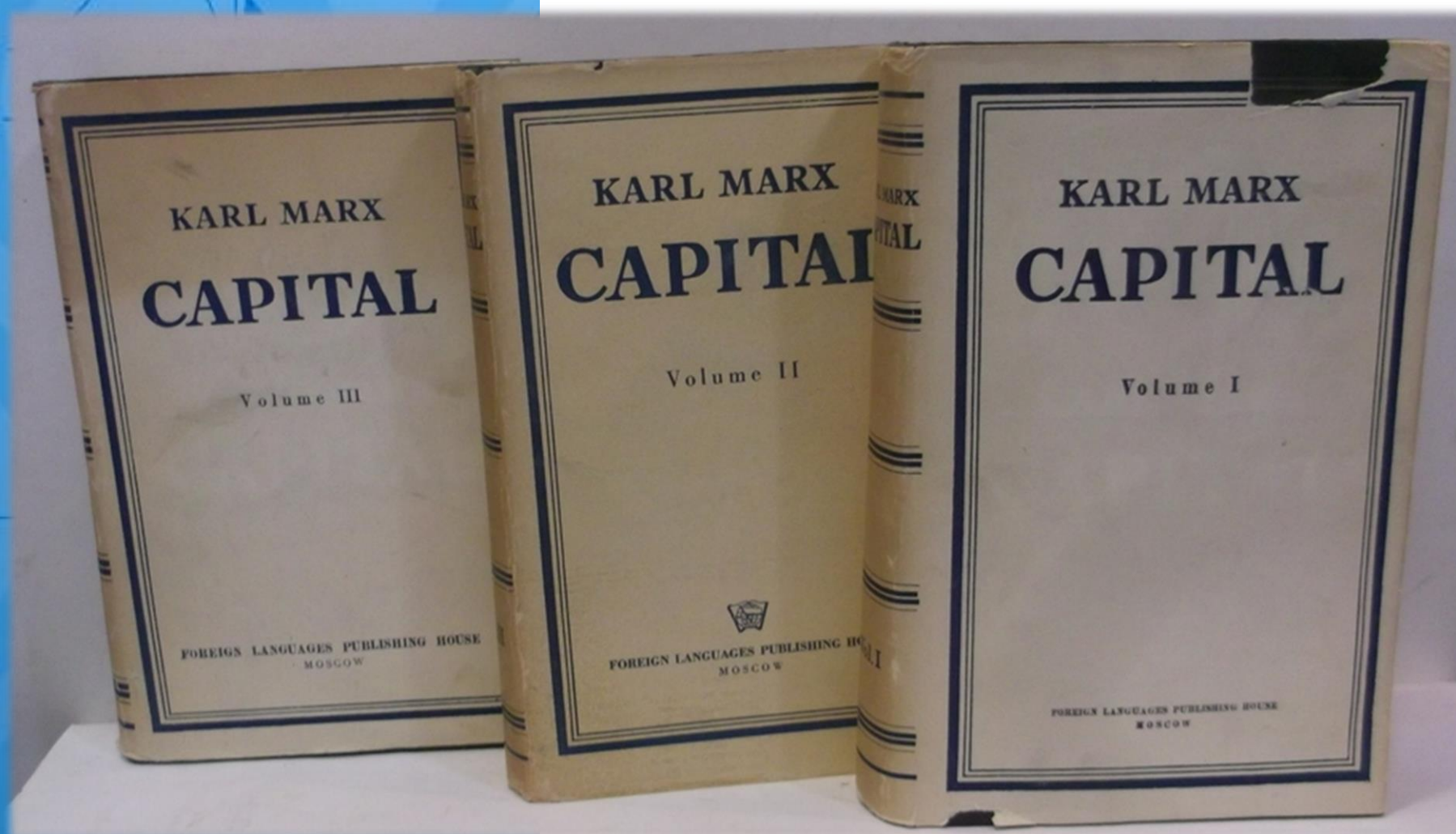
Sowell in the Marine Corps, 1951.



Harvard and Columbia

When Sowell's time with the military ended, he went back to D.C. and attended 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. Sowell studied and wrote on Karl Marx's theory of the business cycle. Determined not to be influenced by other's opinions 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



*Thomas Sowell
in the 1960s.*

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 drew 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."

Sowell always believed in reading widely and deeply, so he read Marx's many critics, too. But they didn't change his mind. 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.

University of Chicago

Sowell was awarded 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** analyzing “a classical economics principle holding that supplies of goods and services create their own demands” was recognized for its thoroughness and scholarship. Even though they did not agree with his viewpoint, Chicago faculty supported Sowell's work and helped him secure funding and fellowships.



Department of Labor

Sowell had been exposed to many intellectual defenses of capitalism, but none of them changed his mind. Practical experience, however, did.

In 1960, Sowell worked as an economist with the Department of Labor, studying the sugar industry in Puerto Rico. 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 question the policies. Sowell **wryly** observed later, that creating and implementing these minimum wage laws “employed a significant fraction of all the people who worked there.” Seeing that the proposed solution could actually create more problems, Sowell quickly lost his enthusiasm for the kind of central planning required by socialism.

Finding a Home: The Hoover Institution

Sowell held several teaching positions, including at Cornell and UCLA, where he met his lifelong friend and intellectual compatriot, libertarian economist Walter E. Williams. But he was frustrated with campus bureaucracy and what he saw as declining academic standards.

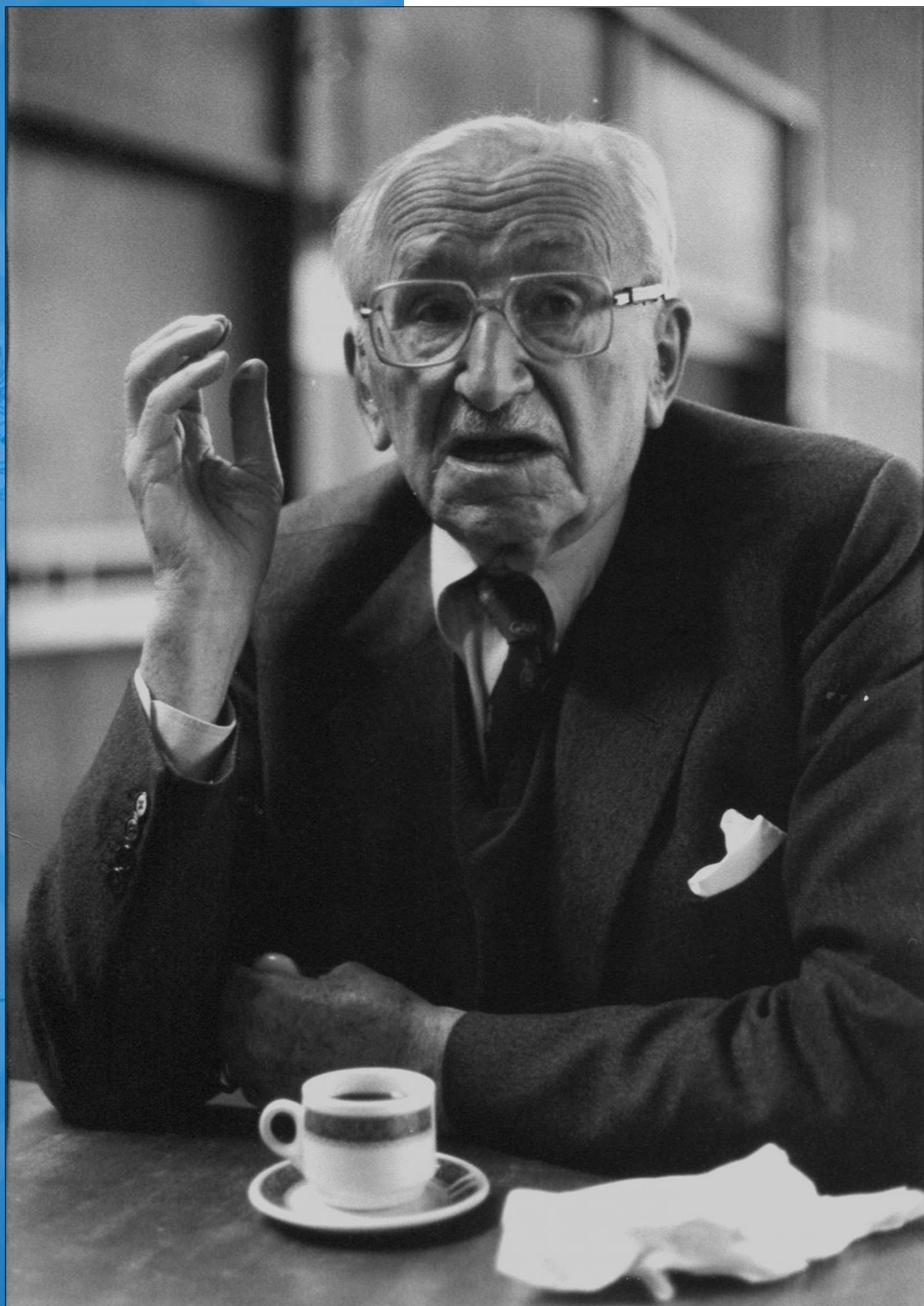
Then, in 1980, with positive reactions to early drafts of his book *Knowledge and Decisions* circulating among likeminded economists, Sowell was offered a Senior Fellowship at the Hoover Institution, a conservative think-tank on Stanford University's campus. At Hoover, Sowell was not required to teach and could 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.



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

***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, he asserted, is the best way for this knowledge to work to benefit the whole society, without interventions from government management or regulation.

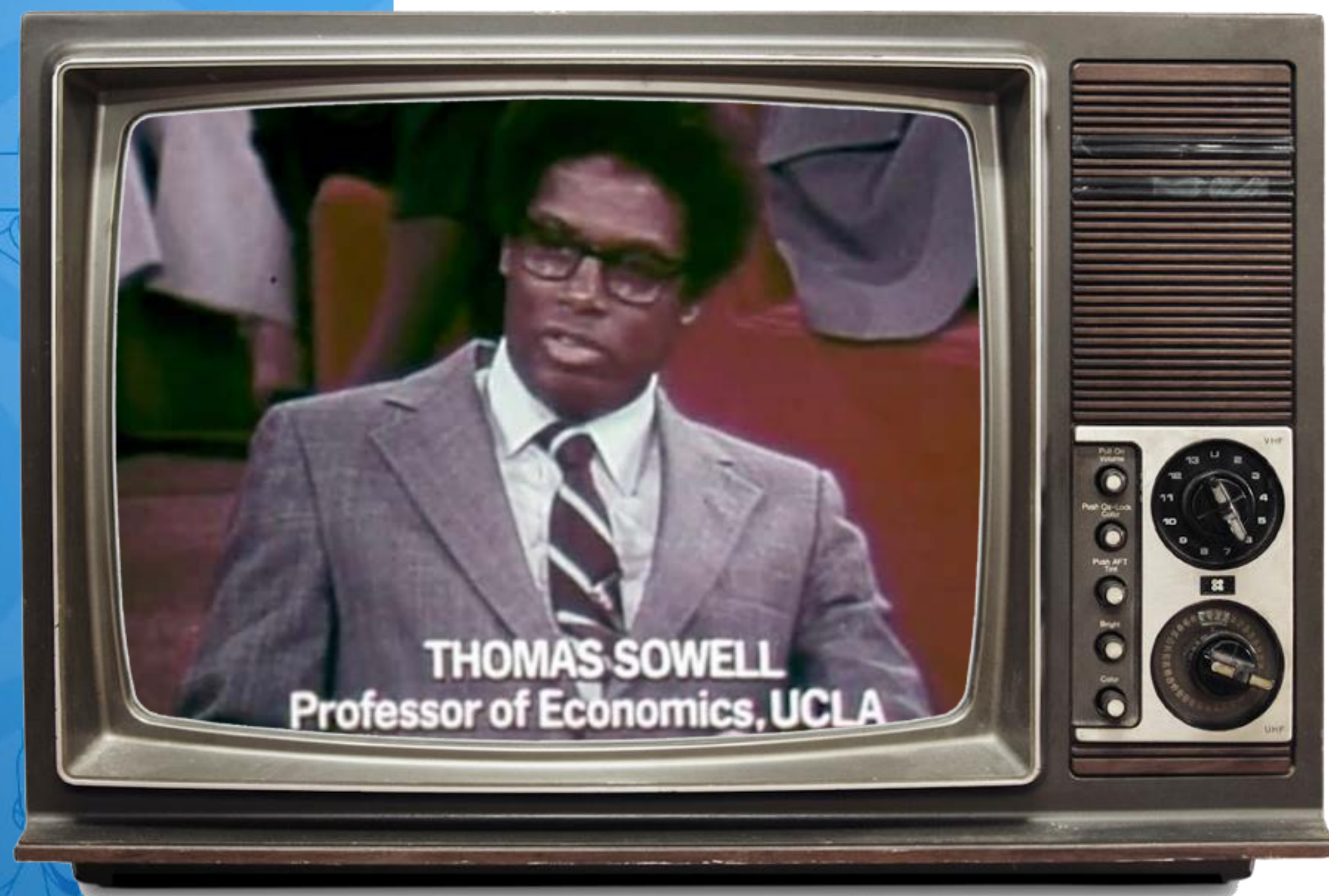
Sowell built on the work of influential Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek – who praised Sowell’s book for expanding his ideas into new areas with a realistic approach to modern problems.

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

***Free to Choose* (1980)**

In 1980, Milton Friedman, a Nobel prize winner and former professor of Sowell's, created a program for PBS called, *Free to Choose*, which critiqued the popular economic ideas that supported welfare and "anti-poverty" programs.

In roundtable discussions moderated by Friedman, Sowell and other conservatives like Water E. Williams debated intellectual adversaries like Pennsylvania Secretary of Welfare Helen Bohen O'Bannon and socialist political scientist Frances Fox Piven.



How do people decide what to spend money on? What causes them to make good (or bad) financial choices? When does government "help" become "interference"?

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

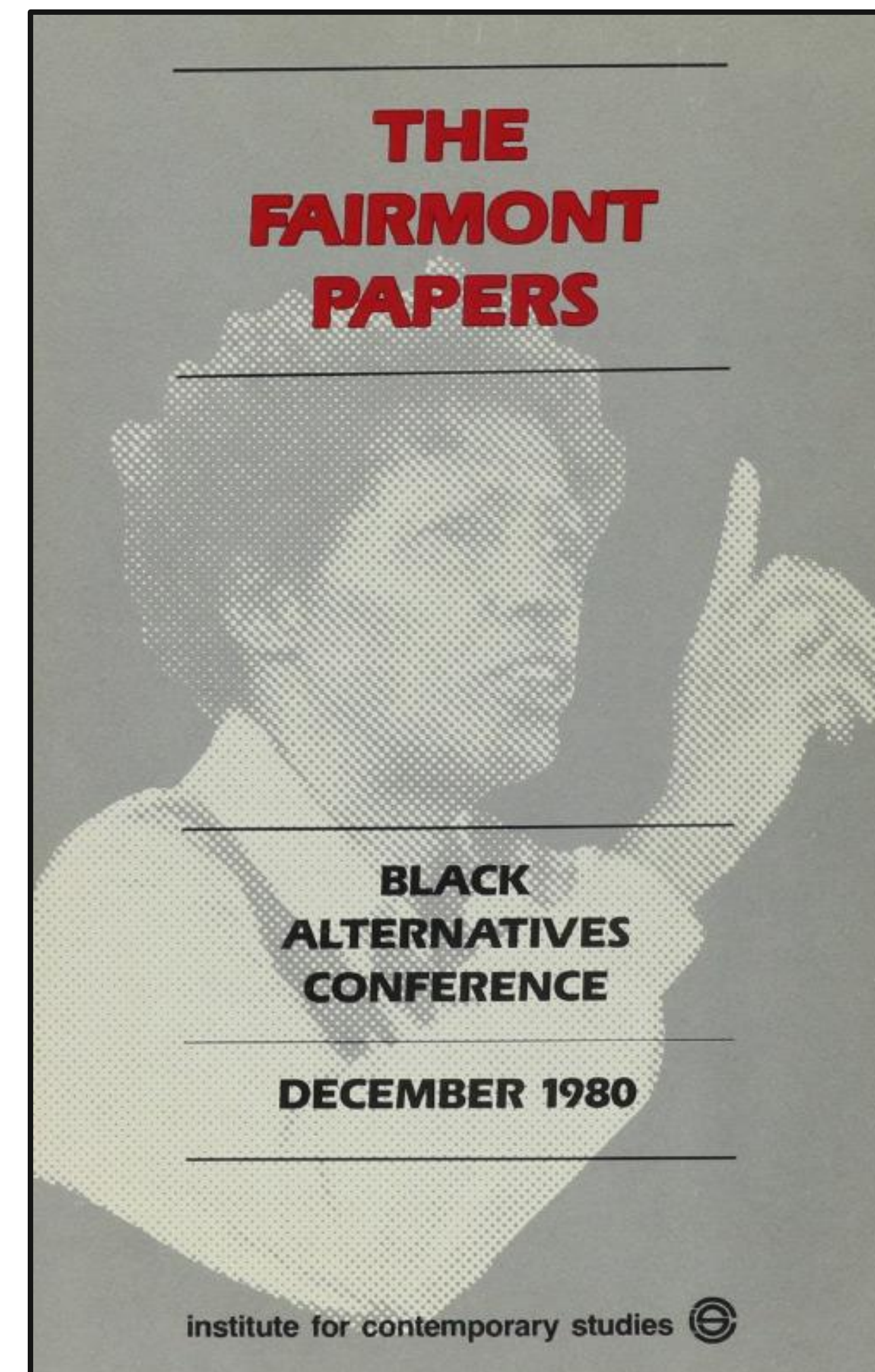
Click the TV and follow the link to the clip!

Black Alternatives

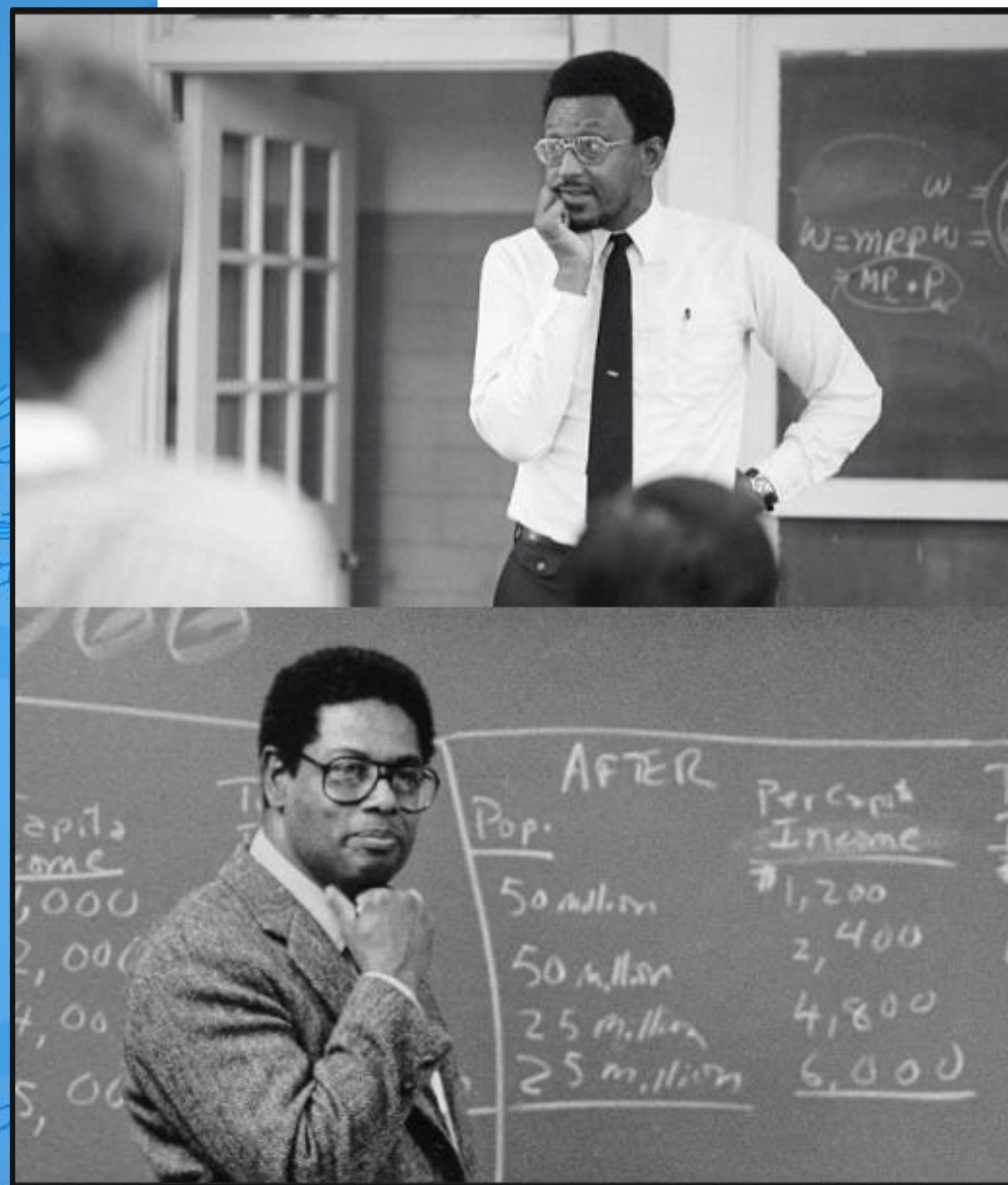
By 1980, disillusionment with the welfare programs of the 1960s – and their unintended consequences – was widespread in America. Policies promoted by Friedman were becoming more popular among politicians like President-elect Ronald Reagan and his opposition to “big government.”

Thomas Sowell organized “Black Alternatives,” a conference at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, to bring together those who believed that the policies intended to help 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.

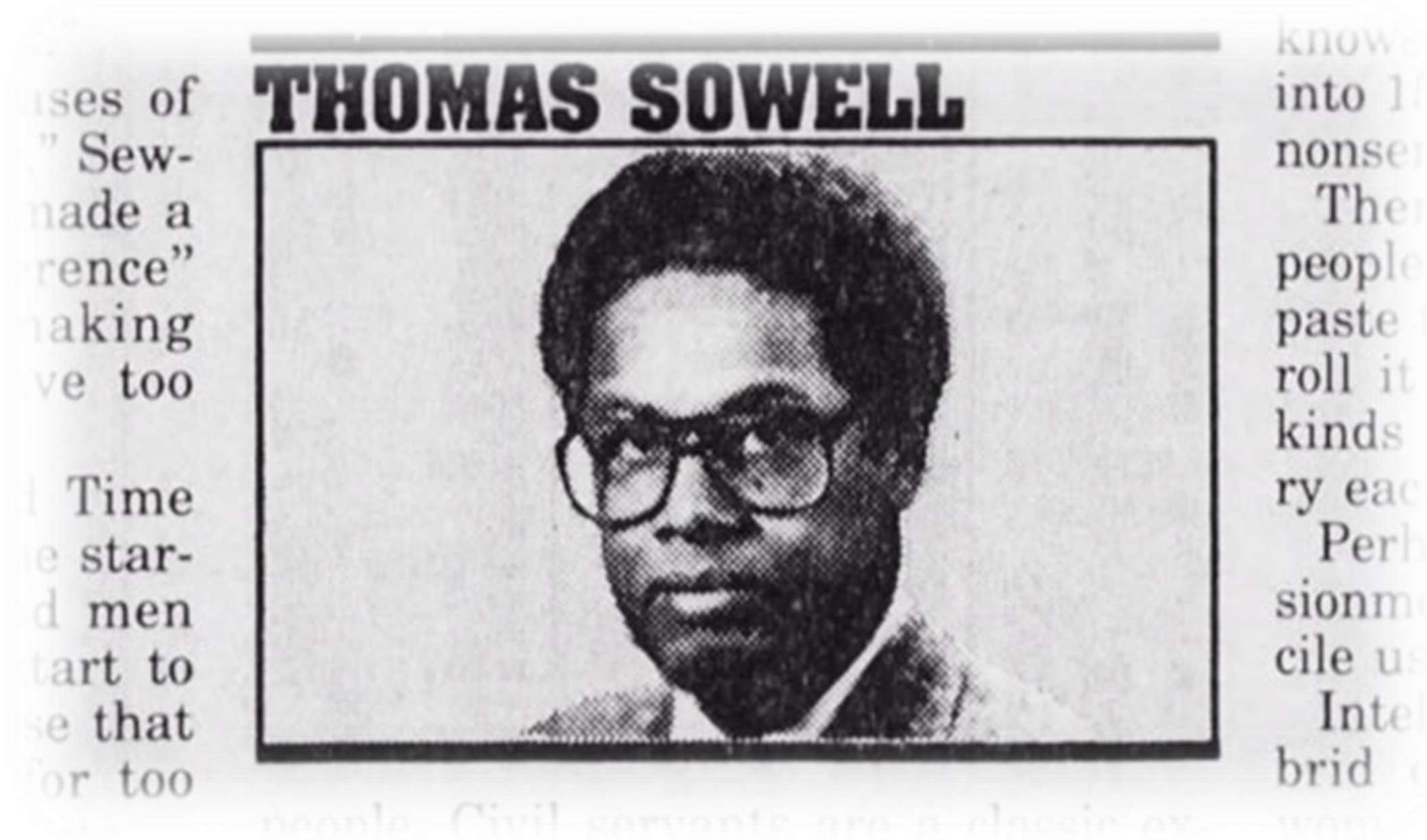
Sowell argued that established Black leaders came from affluent, well-educated families and were out of touch with the common people. He believed that the policies they advocated made life worse for Black working-class families like those in which he was raised.

In 2020, in honor of Sowell's 90th birthday, Williams wrote that his friend "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?

Speaking Plainly

In the 1990s, Sowell began writing his weekly column, which he would continue for a quarter century. He earned devoted readers throughout the country with his **unpretentious** writing and evidence-based approach to controversial issues.



Throughout his career, a consistent target of Sowell's scorn were academics, policy "experts," and politicians who advanced policies that made them look enlightened and kind-hearted – regardless of whether their policies succeeded or (more often) failed.

Think about a time when an expert explained a new idea to you. Did you understand them? Could they have used simpler language?

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

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.

Sowell often wrote about education policy and declining public school standards, advocating for voucher programs and **charter schools** – including his book *Charter Schools and Their Enemies* (2020).

A favorite case study of his on this subject was Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C. 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:

“Dunbar High School...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.”

Work on Late-Talking Children



In 1968, Sowell's son, John, almost 4 years old, still could not talk. As other children his age began speaking in complete 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 lead Sowell to make contributions to a field far outside his formal training: child development.

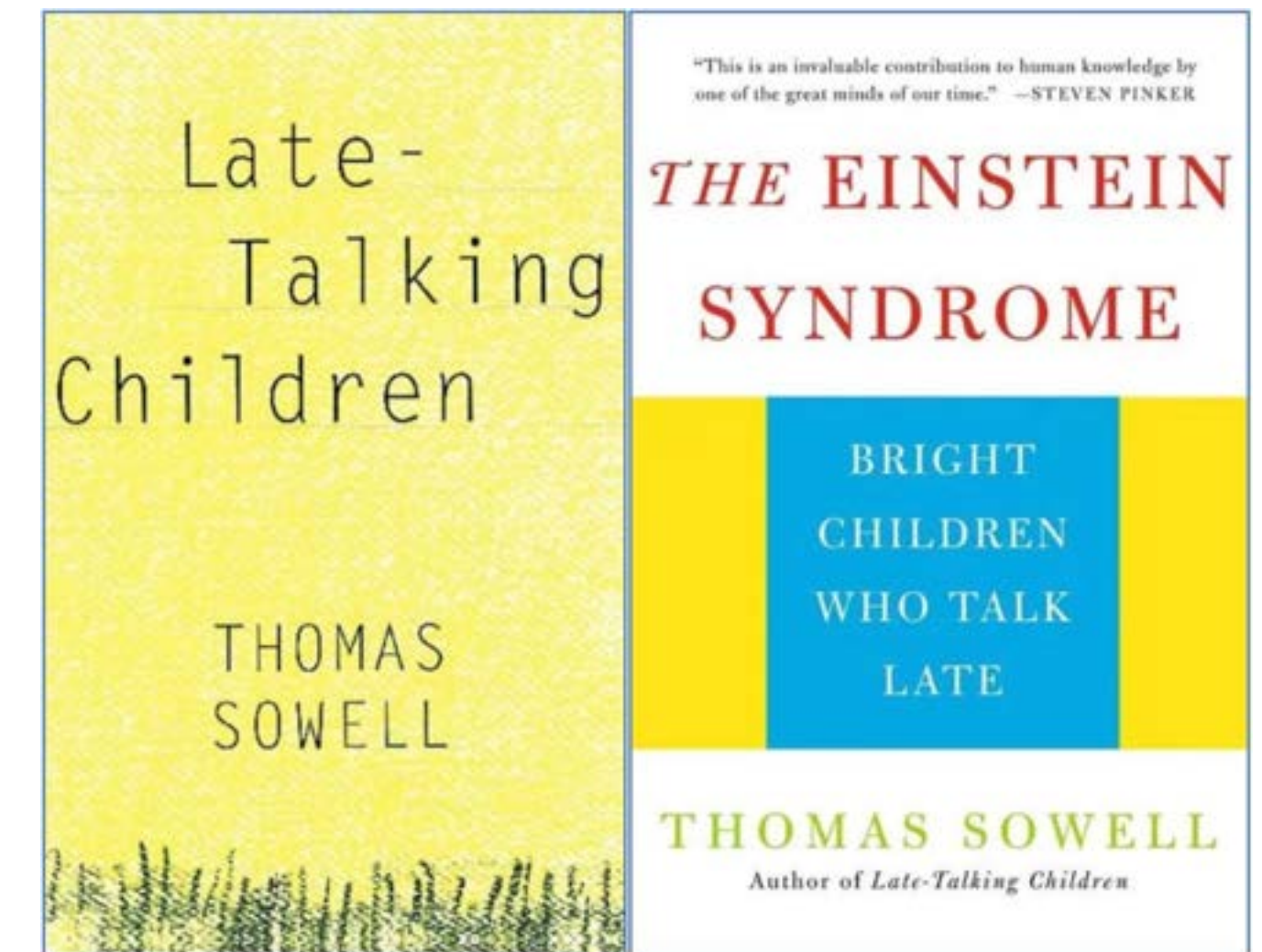
Sowell's own photograph of his son, John, as a child in the late 1960s.

Work on Late-Talking Children

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

Thomas Sowell wrote about this experience in a column in 1993 and was met with a flood of letters from parents who had similar experiences with their children. Frustrated at his inability to find scholarship to help answer these parents' questions, he helped build a network in which these parents could share their observations.

Sowell also connected with child development experts working on the topic. Drawing on his own research, anecdotes from other parents, and 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.



Thomas Sowell's books Late-Talking Children (1998) and The Einstein Syndrome (2002).

Picture This: Sowell the Photographer

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

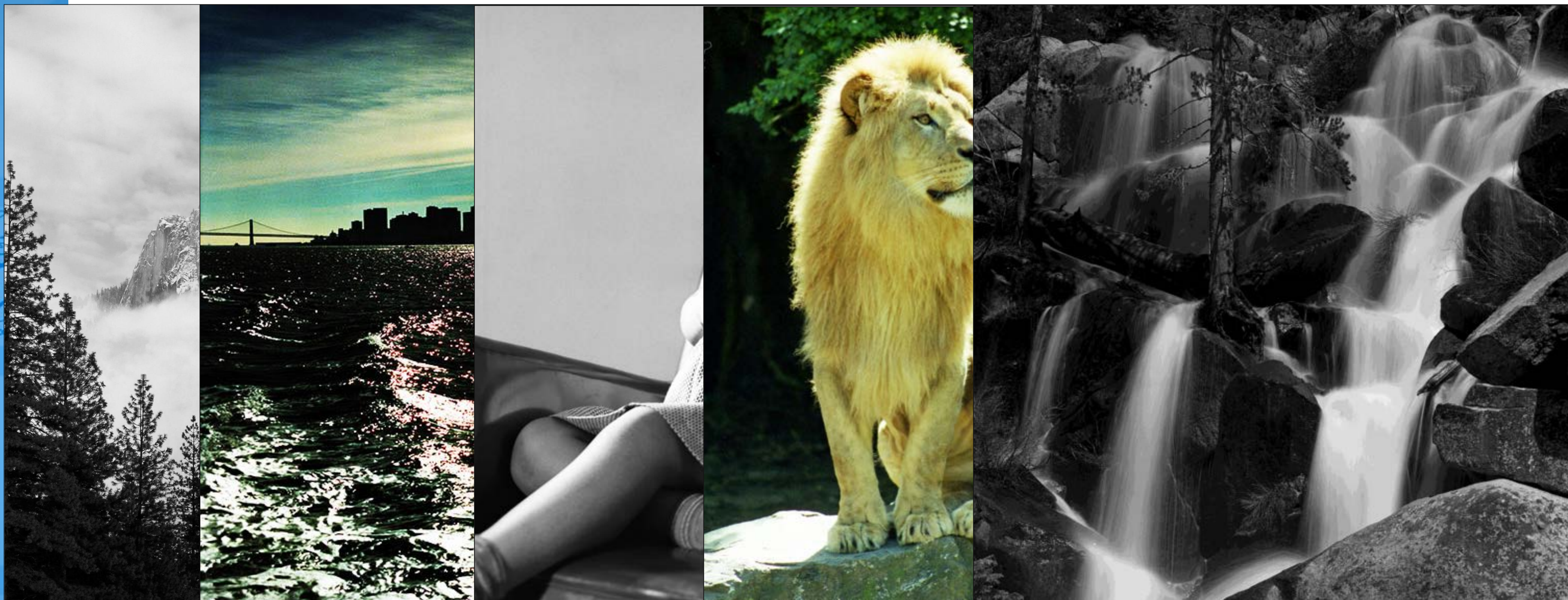
In his 2016 “Farewell” column, Sowell explained his decision to stop writing regular op-eds at age 86:



“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 unknowns.

Which did you find most memorable?

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

What might be attractive about photography to someone like Sowell?

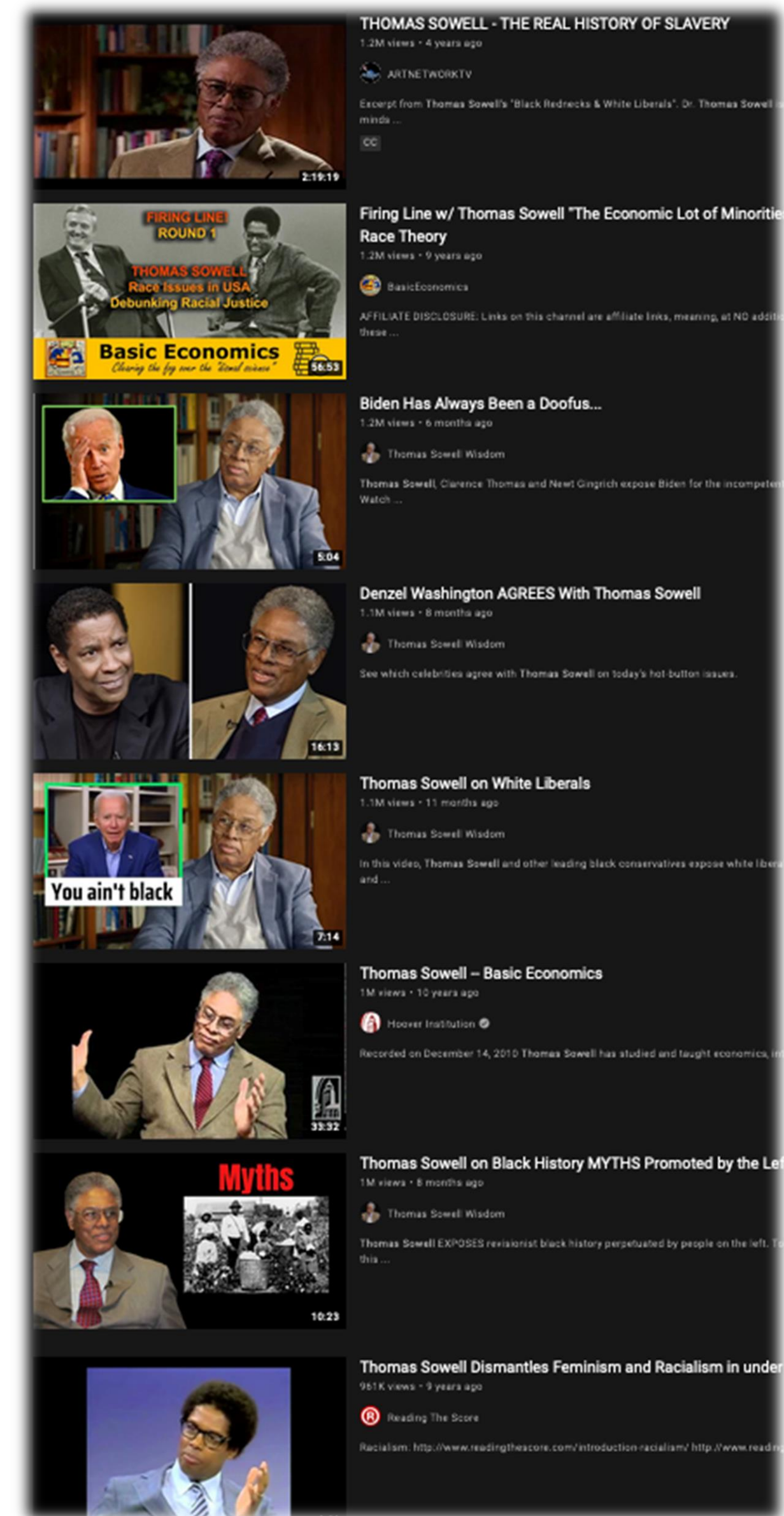
New Generation Discovers Sowell

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 **incisive** 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

amenities
charter schools
demerits
deteriorate
disillusioned
dissertation
emancipated
hardscrabble
hypothetical
incisive
linguist
migration
precocious
socialism
unpretentious
voraciously
wry

