



“He Touched Many Lives” – Tributes to Walter Williams

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Professor Walter E Williams passed away on 2 December 2020, aged 84. He was the John M Olin Distinguished Professor of Economics at George Mason University.

Dr. Thomas Sowell describes Williams as “my best friend for half a century.” He adds, “There was no one I trusted more or whose integrity I respected more. Since he was younger than me, I chose him to be my literary executor, to take control of my books after I was gone. But his death is a reminder that no one really has anything to say about such things.”

Sowell writes further that Williams “was unique. I have heard of no one else being described as being “like Walter Williams.” We may not see his like again. And that is our loss.”

Don Boudreaux writes in the *Wall Street Journal*: “America has lost one of its greatest economists and public intellectuals.” He describes the 40-year-long impact of Williams on George Mason University’s Department of Economics: “Our department unapologetically resists the trend of teaching economics as if it’s a guide for social engineers. This resistance reflects Walter’s commitment to liberal individualism and his belief that ordinary men and women deserve, as his friend Thomas Sowell puts it, “elbow room for themselves and a refuge from the rampaging presumptions of their ‘betters.’”

Boudreaux describes Williams as in the league of titans such as Sowell and Milton Friedman.

Veronique de Rugy, writing for *National Review*, describes Williams as a “great economist and freedom fighter.” He “was a great communicator of ideas and a prolific, provocative and uncompromising writer. His voice, his happy-warrior demeanor, his cosmopolitan views, his endless fight on behalf of those with no political voices, and his generosity to all of us at Mason will be missed.”

At the *Cato at Liberty* blog, David Boaz writes that Williams “was a scholar who made an impact on the public debate, and a great teacher of economics.” Boaz continues: “After early stints as a cab driver, a soldier in Korea, and a probation officer, Walter focused on education and got a Ph.D. in economics from UCLA in 1972. From 1973 to 1980 he taught at Temple University in Philadelphia before moving to George Mason University for the rest of his career.”

Boaz highlights that in 1989, “the Cato Institute and Praeger published Walter’s book *South Africa’s War against Capitalism*. In it he showed, with detailed economic and historical analysis, that South Africa’s apartheid regime was not ‘capitalist,’ as its critics often believed.” Rather, “South Africa’s apartheid is not the corollary of free-market or capitalist forces. Apartheid is the

result of anticapitalistic or socialistic efforts to subvert the operation of market (capitalistic) forces.”

Per the *Economic Policy Journal*, Williams was the author of “over 150 publications which have appeared in scholarly journals.” He authored 10 books, including *The State Against Blacks* – this was later turned into the PBS documentary “Good Intentions.” He also “wrote a nationally syndicated weekly column that was carried by approximately 140 newspapers and several web sites.”

Earlier this year, Williams wrote, “The absolute worst part of the COVID-19 pandemic, and possibly its most unrecoverable damage, is the massive power that Americans have given to their federal, state and local governments to regulate our lives in the name of protecting our health. Taking back that power should be the most urgent component of our recovery efforts. It’s going to be challenging; once a politician, and his bureaucracy, gains power, he will fight tooth and nail to keep it.”

His articles and books, his ideas and arguments, have helped many question the accepted economic narratives of the last decades – and his unparalleled body of work will continue to guide and inspire people for many years to come. The above highlights of tributes, and the outpouring of grief at the news of his passing – but also immense gratitude towards him – stand as testament to how many lives Williams touched throughout his life.

It falls to all of us to honor his legacy, acknowledge his incredible impact on people’s lives and their thinking about the pressing issues of the day, and to carry forth his work.