

The Washington Post

Walter E. Williams, free-market economist, anti-government commentator, dies at 84

December 4, 2020

Matt Schudel

Walter E. Williams, an economist and writer who was one of the country's leading Black conservative public intellectuals, known for his outspoken views that included opposition to the minimum wage and affirmative action programs in colleges, died Dec. 2 in Arlington, Va. He was 84.

The death was confirmed in a statement by George Mason University, where he had taught since 1980. According to university spokesman Michael Sandler, Dr. Williams taught a graduate course in microeconomics on GMU's Arlington campus that ended at 10 p.m. on Dec. 1. Several hours later, police found him unresponsive in his car in a university parking lot. He reportedly had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Dr. Williams was a provocative scholar and writer who challenged orthodox ideas on economics, race relations and the role of government. He often held verbal sparring matches on television with such figures as the Rev. Jesse Jackson and former NAACP executive director Benjamin Hooks.

He published more than 10 books, was a syndicated newspaper columnist and was an occasional substitute host of Rush Limbaugh's radio show. He was considered something of a rock star in conservative and libertarian circles. Republican senators Ted Cruz (Tex.) and Rand Paul (Ky.) tweeted their condolences.

Dr. Williams said he formed his views from several sources, ranging from his youth in a poor neighborhood in Philadelphia to the free-market economic ideas of Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek and the novels of Ayn Rand.

"I'm not a member of any party — I'd call myself a Jeffersonian or Madisonian liberal," he said in a 2011 interview with National Review.

He maintained that the role of government was to provide for the common defense, policing, road-building and little else — although he cited "typhoid eradication" as "clearly in the general welfare." Dr. Williams, who taught at taxpayer-funded public universities throughout his career, considered taxation a form of stealing and believed that many of society's problems were caused by too much government intervention, rather than too little.

"Two-thirds of the federal budget goes for things that could be considered legalized theft, and I might add, unconstitutional," he told the Virginian-Pilot newspaper in 1995. Social Security,

government-provided health care and other safety-net programs were part of that “legalized theft.”

In one of his first books, “The State Against Blacks” (1982), Dr. Williams wrote that much of the unemployment in Black communities was the result of two forms of government mismanagement: minimum-wage laws and deficient public schools.

“The minimum wage, in effect, discriminates against young people, and particularly against minority-group youths,” he told U.S. News & World Report in 1980, “who share the additional burden, in many cases, of having gone to poor high schools that graduate them unprepared for work.”

He believed that unimpeded free-market capitalism could solve virtually all the country’s social ills.

“It’s the individual pursuit of individual achievement that makes for the common good of society,” he told the *Virginian-Pilot*.

Hooks derided Dr. Williams in a 1981 *New York Times* op-ed essay, writing, “Black conservatives are basically a carbon copy of white conservatives. They object to affirmative actions designed to overcome preferences long accorded to white males . . . they object, in some ways which are difficult for me to understand, to government spending to meet human needs and to assist poor people.”

Dr. Williams was known for his contrarian views on many subjects. Among other things, he did not use the term “African American,” and he refused to travel on commercial airlines because they would not allow him to smoke. He was opposed to affirmative action programs for African American students, writing in 1989 that “official policy calling for unequal treatment by race is morally offensive whether it is applied to favor blacks or applied to favor whites.”

In a 1983 column for *USA Today*, Dr. Williams wrote that “hunger in America is the latest hoax being played on a vulnerable American public.”

He added: “I rather suspect most people in U.S. soup kitchen lines have a few coins in their jeans they’d rather keep for items not handed out for free — like wine, dope or cigarettes.”

The column prompted a rejoinder by *Washington Post* columnist William Raspberry, who wrote of “hungry people . . . rifling garbage cans behind Connecticut Avenue restaurants . . . But Williams can only see a hoax. That may not tell us very much about nutrition in America, but it tells us an awful lot about Walt Williams.”

Walter Edward Williams was born March 31, 1936, in Philadelphia. He was 3 when his father left the family, and he and a sister were raised by their mother, who cleaned houses.

Dr. Williams often cited his own experience of overcoming poverty without government handouts. After high school, he drove a taxicab for two years, then was drafted into the Army.

Something of a rebel in uniform, he marked “Caucasian” as his race on an Army form. When questioned, he replied, “If I checked off ‘Negro,’ I’d get the worst job over here.” The ploy paid off with a relatively easy assignment.

After his discharge, he attended California State University at Los Angeles, graduating in 1965. He then entered graduate school in economics at the University of California at Los Angeles, where he was drawn to Friedman’s writings. While there, he befriended Thomas Sowell, a well-known Black conservative economist and writer who became a lifelong friend.

Dr. Williams received a master’s degree from UCLA in 1968 and a doctorate in 1972. As a professor at Temple University in Philadelphia, he made headlines in 1975 for publishing an open letter criticizing other faculty members for being too lenient in grading African American students.

“Far too many blacks today,” he told the Washington Times in 2010, “don’t receive honest assessments of their work or abilities due to a teacher’s misguided efforts to compensate for our history of being discriminated against or fear of intimidation by students and accusations of racism.”

In 1980, Dr. Williams joined George Mason, which is known as a bastion of conservative economic thought. He also had a long association with the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

During his four decades at GMU, Dr. Williams lived in a Philadelphia suburb and never moved permanently to the Washington area. He published an autobiography, “Up From the Projects,” in 2010 and was the subject of a 2014 documentary, “Suffer No Fools.”

His wife of 47 years, the former Connie Taylor, died in 2007. Survivors include a daughter, Devon Williams, of Washington; and a grandson.

In 1986, soon after Dr. Williams’s GMU colleague James Buchanan received the Nobel Prize in economics, both professors were at a reception. According to an appreciation on GMU’s website by Daniel Houser and Donald J. Boudreaux, the current and former chairmen of the economics department, Buchanan “noticed that the number of people milling around to speak to Walter was much larger than was the number milling around to meet” him.

“I realized then,” Buchanan said, “that I’m only the second most famous economist at George Mason.”