

## Kevin Williamson's 'The Smallest Minority'

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In the early 1990s I was at the Houston location of a prominent, globally known jeweler. I was there with a friend who was about to ask his longtime girlfriend to marry him. In talking to the manager, it was disclosed that the Houston outpost's jewelry selection was somewhat different, and seemingly more gold-laden, than what could be found in for instance New Canaan, CT. It seems Houstonians liked a bit more flash in their bracelets, necklaces, and rings.

This experience came to mind while reading the brilliant Kevin Williamson's excellent new book, *The Smallest Minority: Independent Thinking In the Age of Mob Politics*. The Houston-based Williamson's very entertaining and insightful book is among other things a rejection of "mob politics," and "its effects on our political discourse and our culture."

In the free market, the mob most certainly doesn't rule. Ever cognizant of how different we are in different parts of the United States, and around the world, market actors strive to account for those differences in their efforts to meet our individual needs as much as possible. Free markets are about *individual choice*, as opposed to decrees from the Commanding Heights about what we'll purchase, and how. When Burger King rolled out its plant-based Whopper, it tested it in St. Louis first, as opposed to ramming it down the throats of thousands of franchisees. More broadly, some make a point of complaining in dramatic fashion about Amazon, Google, Facebook and others learning as much about us as possible, but the reality is that we're happier and better served the more that the market-disciplined uniquely understand us.

Williamson plainly doesn't trust the mob, and it seems one message the *National Review* reporter is trying to send is that we should aim to localize our policymaking a la Burger King. If so, bad ideas will be contained while good ones will be widely adapted. The free markets account for our many differences, while politicians increasingly strive to craft national solutions to perceived problems. Williamson would no doubt prefer to leave things to the people.

Interesting about Williamson's book is how unlikely its publication was, at least at one time. For readers who aren't aware, Williamson departed *National Review* around 18 months ago in order to become a columnist at *The Atlantic*, or as he references it in *The Smallest Minority* (TSM going forward), "THAT AUGUST JOURNALISTIC INSTITUTION." Though he admits to having once written a *National Review* cover story in 27 minutes (he learned how to write fast from his early days in newspapers), Williamson was eager to reach *The Atlantic's* theoretically more diverse audience, while writing long-form pieces that might take up to six months to put together. And since Williamson was a card-carrying member of the "Never Trump" crowd, *Atlantic* editor Jeffrey Goldberg assumed a writer he deemed one of the most talented in America would pass muster with his publication's left leaning audience.

From the beginning, and realistically before the beginning, the protests about Williamson began. The author's recall of his all-too-brief time at "“THAT AUGUST JOURNALISTIC INSTITUTION”" is on its own a reason to purchase *TSM*. It's a truly entertaining account of how vicious the left-wing mob can be when an "organization that the Left regards as its own" is invaded by someone of opposite ideology. Worse, at least for threatened members of the left, Williamson backed his ideology with unmatched skill. Things were bound to go south quickly.

As Williamson puts it, "I should have just packed up my personal belongings in a shoebox right then and made for the elevators," when former owner David Bradley (Bradley had recently sold the publication to Laurene Powell Jobs, whom Williamson describes as just "another nobody MBA student until she started banging Steve Jobs") called Williamson into his office on his first day of employment, only to tell him in reference to his controversial hire that "We are not wavering. I am not wavering." With hindsight, he concludes that "when an old WASP banker with no ass feels compelled to put on a serious face and promise that he's not about to fuck you, you're already fucked."

Members of the left who doubtless reveled in forwarding pointed critiques of Donald Trump by Williamson at *National Review*, couldn't handle a self-described "extremist" with very rigid views about abortion inside their own tent. And so they protested, and then protested some more. Even though Williamson was expected to spend exponentially more time working well outside of the *Atlantic's* Watergate offices than inside them, females in the publication's employ who were Washington, D.C.-based made plain to Goldberg that Williamson's presence was intolerable. So he was pushed out within a few days.

And for those who think the Right equally capable of the extraordinary intolerance that the Left reveals every time someone who thinks differently shows up on their property, think again. While Williamson doesn't hide his disgust with the modern Right, and while he acknowledges the "would-be suppressors, censors, and worse" inside the conservative movement, he concludes that as "of this writing, I am unable to find a single case of a progressive-leaning speaker being targeted with firebombs on a college campus or a Democrat being fired by a Silicon Valley technology company because of his liberal politics" or, for that matter, a highly talented lefty reporter being pushed out of a right wing publication as a consequence of the conservatives in its employ being made to feel uncomfortable. When the left talks tolerance, it does so with the most forked of tongues.

Notable about the above is that it doesn't scratch the surface when it comes to retelling Williamson's rather brief tenure on the other side. Again, for the *Atlantic* recollections alone, readers should rush to purchase *TSM*. Williamson has a way with words (more on this in a bit), and in particular he's got a way with words when he's describing those whom he dislikes. For now, and getting back to how unlikely *TSM* theoretically was, readers should keep in mind that by Williamson's own admission, his rather quick dismissal care of Goldberg gave him a level of fame, and by extension interest in his latest book, that didn't exist before. In his words, "my little book proposal was met with almost no excitement until I became, for a couple of weeks, the headline in the story."

So while Williamson's story is "the beast with many heads" that is mob politics in the age of social media, it's so much more. Without knowing Williamson on a personal level (we've e-mailed on occasion over the years), what happened to him must(?) very much inform how *TSM* reads. It's often very angry, and maybe even seething at times. I read *TSM* because I've

long found Williamson a great writer who is also very erudite and insightful. The erudition and insight are very apparent in *TSM*, but with an edge that I seemingly didn't always recognize? The latter shouldn't be construed as a critique as much as *TSM* reads differently. It also doesn't read as a Regnery publication given all the swear words, scatological references, and countless passages like this, during which Williamson describes the political discourse of the moment versus that of the past ("with sentences and stuff"):

"a hokey *luchador* wrestling match between the mind-killed partisans, grunting modern primitives, talk-radio hucksters, cable-news hustlers, purveyors of freeze-dried apocalypse lasagnas and mystical doggie vitamins, associate professors of being pissed-off and generally aggrieved, and the sundry other dumbasstical shitweasels who currently dominate our political conversation, a spectacle and a debacle that will go on and on – until it doesn't."

This isn't your father's or mother's Regnery, plus I didn't nor do I know what *luchador* is, or what it describes. That's the other thing about *TSM* that is quickly apparent: Williamson is not just a wildly talented writer, he's also a writer in possession of vast knowledge, and a vocabulary that is *otherworldly*. I read this very entertaining book at various times over three days, but if I'd looked up every word and reference that sailed well over my head, I'd still be reading it. On the page in which "luchador" makes an appearance there's also a reference to "those old Lubang Jeriji Saleh cave paintings" (oh yes, *those*), the word "semiotic" is used, not to mention "dumbasstical shitweasels." On page 168 there's "jactitation." I *did* look it up: according to Google it's the "restless tossing of the body in illness," or "the twitching of a limb or muscle." No wonder the lefties were threatened by Williamson. He knows quite a bit more than they do, and more than most on the right too.

In between the obscure words and even more opaque references, there's as mentioned a great deal of erudition and insight. Most important is Williamson's muscular disdain for democracy. "I come not to praise democracy but to bury it." As he later explains, the "Founding Fathers understood the dangers of democracy" without limits on government: it would lead to *ochlocracy*, another word introduced to me by Williamson which is, you might have guessed, mob rule.

And while most would describe Williamson as a conservative, particularly given his views on abortion, he's really a libertarian as the previous paragraph makes rather plain. Williamson believes in individual freedom to do as one wishes short of hurting others, and undiluted democracy has little to do with freedom. Williamson's libertarianism is arguably even consistent with his views on abortion, as some libertarians would conclude. Indeed, it's the view of many free thinkers that with abortion there's *another life* to be considered, that abortion amounts to the extermination of one life without an answer from the owner of same.

It's fairly easy to tie Williamson's abortion views to his elevation of the individual. In his words, "the individual is the one who can stand at least partly away from the demands of his tribe and class and try to see things as they are, and shout back over his shoulder what he sees." He would like more individualism, but doesn't feel the latter is compatible with mob rule or with a social media that is all about collecting likes and follows, including those who revel in being followed by Williamson himself. The individual isn't always a cheerleader, and certainly not a popularity seeker. Williamson holds a great deal of contempt for those in search of clicks as it were, and their "abject, craven, humiliating need to be loved by strangers." About social media communications, Williamson writes that it "has more in common with dogs barking at one

another than it does with actual political discourse.” It’s all fair enough, but then communication from North America to Europe cost \$10/word with a 10-word minimum just a little over 150 years ago. Williamson has complaints about the present state of debate and communication, but he would probably admit an unwillingness to comfortably return to what existed before the explosion of what gave the barking dogs a voice.

The basis for the above assertion is Williamson’s excellent point about hypotheticals. Those prone to at least philosophically dismiss unfettered freedom invariably point to theoretical downsides. My own example is that to some in my orbit, "marriage equality" will eventually lead to the odd woman marrying her dog, and an even crazier man marrying his daughter. Both hypotheticals have been presented to me over the years as an excuse for limiting marital freedom for gay people. Without knowing Williamson’s stance on marriage, I’ll surely use his comment on hypotheticals involving free speech in the future, and during debates about marriage rights. Williamson writes that if “we are willing to give a hypothetical [free speech] evil a moral weight equal to that of an actual evil, then there is no limiting principle at all that is possible, because it is easy to construct an unfalsifiable counterfactual in which practically any particular kind of political communication we find objectionable could contribute to an illiberal or undemocratic outcome, or a criminal one, in some hypothetical scenario.” He goes on to write that “hypothetical evils are generally preferable to real ones.” Amen. Leave people alone. The good of freedom outweighs the bad by many miles.

About President Trump, Williamson writes that he “is a cretin and an ignoramus, a deeply corrupt buffoon who does not appear to be able to go twenty-four hours without lying in public about something...” This will surely cheer many lefties, many conservatives too, and surely many libertarians. About libertarians and Trump, it would be interesting to ask Williamson a question that’s been posed by me countless times to Ed Crane, the co-founder of the Cato Institute and arguably the father of modern libertarianism: isn’t there a libertarian argument for a president who is empowering his minions to rein in Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, who is skeptical about all the military adventurism that’s defined modern U.S. foreign policy, who appointed a libertarian to head the FCC, who appointed a Competitive Enterprise Institute old hand to staff his EPA, who exited the Paris agreement, who has more Cato types in his administration than any other modern president, who outsources his judicial nominees to the Federalist Society, and who, arguably most importantly of all, is actively shrinking the majesty that for too long has been associated with the presidency itself? No doubt good, card-carrying libertarians can bring up the obvious departures from libertarianism, Trump’s odious stances on immigration and trade most notably, but even there it’s reasonable to make an argument that the 45th president is mostly different from his verbally more moderate predecessors *in terms of rhetoric*, as opposed to actual policies. Figure that every president since at least Reagan has committed horrid protectionist errors, albeit sheepishly, while none have exactly been pure on the matter of immigration. This is a long way of asking if, words and style aside, the policy outcomes of Trump’s presidency would cheer libertarians assuming Rand Paul occupied the White House.

Regarding Trump’s election itself, Williamson thankfully stands apart from a Trump-hating media mob eager to promote the laugh line that the Russians or Facebook did it. Williamson’s view is that Facebook’s alleged influence on elections “is almost certainly negligible.”

On the subject of transgender this and that, Williamson has no time for those desperate to make treatment of the gender uncertain some kind of major civil rights story. He writes in blunt fashion that a “cultural climate that is uncomfortable to transgender people is in a different category of things from shoving Jews into ovens or organizing an effort to shove Jews into ovens.” And if “you cannot understand that, then you should probably stop reading here, because you are not packing the neural gear for either of us to benefit from further conversation.”

What about disagreements? There were a few. Williamson thinks the mob ridiculous, and foolish, and contends that there’s “no special moral value” in “asking 50 percent plus 1 of a sprawling and almost pristinely ignorant group of barely improved chimpanzees” what they think about the world, what they think of policy, etc. The notion of voters too confused and too information-deficient to vote is a popular one on the right. “Low-information voters” and all that. That’s fine, mob rule is dangerous, but Williamson is a believer in markets. By extension he’s a believer in people. Though most voters and people and Americans are almost certainly less bright than Williamson, in total they’re exponentially brighter. *They are the market*. And if markets are wise, then so must voting markets be pretty wise too. This isn’t to excuse policy errors, nor is it to excuse certain White House occupants in modern times (my own view is that George W. Bush is the worst president of my lifetime, and no one else come close), but *it is* to say that there’s immense amounts of information even in a mob of low IQs. The answer should be to learn from the mob, while limiting the ability of politicians to act regardless of who’s in it. No less than William F. Buckley long ago quipped that he would prefer citizen leadership to that from academia any day of the week.

The tendency to generalize about the stupidity of the voter also extended to comments about the feeling within the mob. While Williamson happily doesn’t fall into the “carnage” trap embraced by Trump, and others searching for meaning behind his election (Williamson happily notes that poverty is plummeting, and so is death from war and disease), he makes the odd contention that the masses “are miserable.” He can’t know that, plus it’s an odd assertion to make about 330 million individuals. The U.S. is a vast place. But assuming misery, or American-style misery that would likely read as happy anywhere else, it says here that the latter is rooted not in rising inequality, but because inequality hasn’t increased fast enough. Think about it. Though witless and rather high IQ academics focus on the widening gap between rich and poor, they ignore the *why* behind the gap: more and more of the poor and middle classes have access to amazing comforts that were either formerly enjoyed solely by the rich, or by no one at all. Rising inequality is the surest sign of soaring living standards, and soaring work opportunity. If the masses are miserable, which is a reach on its own, they’re likely that way because standards of living and work aren’t increasing fast enough. More economic freedom that will result in rising inequality will help solve this.

On the same page as the “miserable” assertion, Williamson writes that “Globalization has brought wealth and cooperation, but it has also disturbed longstanding modes of life and upended communities, especially those affected negatively by outsourcing and offshoring.” Williamson has to know the previous line isn’t true. If it were, then it would also be true that Los Angeles and New York would be the most disturbed U.S. cities of all since they were once the U.S.’s biggest manufacturing locales, but now are largely bereft of work that was long ago outsourced. The more obvious truth is that it’s the cities least touched by globalization that are suffering the most, and they are because the work of the past left them the most slowly. And because it did, the people most capable of driving prosperity left the cities stuck in the past the most quickly.

Economic exchange among people that changes the nature of work in a city could never harm a city, but the departure of human capital has destroyed all too many. It's the departure of talent that brings on carnage, not the closing of a factory, and human capital is most likely to depart the locales clinging to the past.

On the next page Williamson writes about "non-college-educated white men" seemingly left behind by a rapidly changing economy on the way to "overdoses and other drug-related deaths, deaths from alcohol-related causes, and suicide." About this, Williamson himself has shown from his reporting in Appalachia that men aren't failing because of economic forces beyond their control; rather they're in freefall because they've made and are making dumb decisions. While it's easy to feel sorry for all sorts of *individuals* in the United States, it's very hard to broadly feel sorry for anyone lucky enough to speak English, and to be living the United States where they're free to migrate to the best opportunity in the world's greatest free trade zone.

Thankfully Williamson himself ultimately backtracks from the economic misunderstanding about an allegedly glorious, pre-globalization past that has tripped up all too many conservatives, including Yuval Levin, Edward Conard, and even free thinkers like Brian Domitrovic. He eventually refers to the "myth of the postwar generation" in regard to economic abundance. As he puts it, "Very few Americans in our time would willingly accept a 1957 standard of living if it were offered." No, they wouldn't. Conservatives eager to explain Trump as a response to the alleged horrors of globalization, and who excuse opioid addiction and other maladies as a consequence of a U.S. more integrated with the wider world, get it so very wrong.

Williamson writes about the non-knowledge within the electorate about the nature of corporations as "another piece of evidence, as though one were needed, of the failure of our educational system." Ok, but what does education have to do with it? Did people get the true nature of corporations in 1919, but not in 2019, because schools are bad in 2019? My own guess is that a misunderstanding of corporations is a consequence of wealth. About so many things we can afford to be oblivious in 2019 simply because there are few consequences for not knowing. It's called progress. Most can't milk a cow, replace a car's flat tire, or sew a button onto a shirt either. Thank goodness. Just as globalization frees us from the brutal work of the past, it also frees us from having to know things. To paraphrase Williamson, everyone's got a crisis, including education-focused conservatives who are convinced that every modern malady can be tied to bad schools, a lack of vouchers, or both.

About the crisis narrative, it's easily my favorite part of Williamson's book. He nails it. He very insightfully writes of "the permanent state of emergency in the United States. Every interest group, faction, and policy entrepreneur in the country has a crisis narrative to peddle. The Right blames the rhetoric of the Left every time a cop is ambushed, the Left blames the rhetoric of the Right every time a gay man or Muslim is assaulted or worse." Conservatives and liberals, and conservative and liberal pundits most of all, have thoroughly stripped any meaning from the word "crisis." Thank goodness Williamson is willing to showcase this truth. At the same time can't it be said that Williamson's fear of budget deficits is evidence of him joining those he dismisses? Thinking about deficits, the yield on the 10-Year Treasury note was over 11% in 1980, while today it's under 2%. It's been falling for decades. The market for U.S. Treasuries is easily one of the deepest and most informed in the world, and the consistent message from this market for decades has been that the U.S. itself is one of the safest loans of all. If so, where's the "deficit" crisis? To be clear, none of what's been written should be construed as evidence of a

desire on my part for more government spending. Not at all. It's merely meant to make the point that the markets plainly don't care one bit about the deficits that plainly occupy Williamson's mind at times. About this, it's arguably not said enough that a focus on the "crisis" of "deficits" distracts people from the real shame that is government spending itself. The lack of progress that government spending implies is surely a much bigger problem than the way in which government siphons away the dollars to spend. Just a thought.

Along similar lines, Williamson contends that Google, Apple, and Facebook "are too rich for their own good," that they "suffer from a form of corporate gout, political inflammations in the joints that are least exercised in the pursuit of the actual business of the firm," and that the modern "corporation functions as a totalitarian state in miniature." The corporation talk seemed a waste of words. Corporations can't be totalitarian simply because their powerful existence is so ephemeral. Lest readers forget, GE was the most valuable company in the world when the 21st century began, AOL and Yahoo were the most prominent internet companies, Enron was the best managed corporation. If they're totalitarian, fear not as they won't be for long. Williamson seems to agree, after lamenting the influence of corporations he points out that the average life expectancy of a Fortune 500 company "is fifteen years and declining" versus 75 years in the 1960s, and that's the point. Why spend so much time on corporations as "analogs," and the producers of "paralyzing risk aversion," if their shelf life is rapidly decreasing?

Whatever the answer, the disagreements and commentary about same are just an acknowledgment of how important, how interesting, and how pertinent is Kevin Williamson's *The Smallest Minority*. What a glorious read it is, and what a message. Williamson's conclusion at book's end is that "the biggest democracies will always be a dangerous place for the smallest minority," as in the individual. So true. The answer is freedom. In a free society with a constitutionally limited government, national politicians must defer to local politicians in the way that Burger King does with its product rollouts. So the answer is freedom, always freedom. Read Williamson's excellent book for clarity on this most important of subjects.