

Walter Williams, Forerunner To Tea Party Movement

By [GEORGE NEUMAYR](#), FOR INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY Posted 02/07/2012 01:29 PM ET

Williams' Keys

** Hoover Institution fellow, member of the Mont Pelerin Society, author of a syndicated column carried by 140 newspapers.

** "You have to be willing to come early and stay late."

Many economists rise to academic honor by conforming to conventional wisdom.

Walter E. Williams achieved it through independence of thought.

A syndicated columnist in 140 newspapers -- including IBD -- and a conservative radio pundit, Williams has distinguished himself in academia, serving on the faculty of George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., since 1980 and as its economics department chairman from 1995 to 2001.

He has written 10 books and published countless articles.

He's a Hoover Institution national fellow and in 1989 won the Adam Smith Award, which the Association of Private Enterprise Education bestows on contributors to the free-market ideals laid out in Adam Smith's 1776 book, "The Wealth of Nations."

"I don't feel the need to be invited to parties," Williams told IBD, explaining his willingness to buck academic trends. "I don't have to be around important people."

Sturdy

Williams notes that his multiple sources of income from an early age -- he began investing in the stock market years ago -- also immunized him to academic peer pressure. This, he said, made it easier to tell critics "to go to hell."

He also received a superior education before it was fashionable for "white people to like black people," as he facetiously puts it.

Williams pursued his graduate studies in economics in the 1960s at UCLA, where, he notes, a culture of affirmative action and grade inflation had not yet taken root. The quality of his work, not the color of his skin, drew interest in the class. "My professors didn't give a damn about my self-esteem. They held me to a high

standard," he said. "A C was an honest C ; an A was an honest A."

The lesson stuck. Williams is famous at George Mason for resisting grade inflation. "This is a real college course," he tells students at the start of the academic year.

He also learned from his UCLA professors to follow the economic data wherever they lead.

Example: He arrived at the school assuming that minimum wage laws made sense. One of his professors challenged his complacent assumption, pointing out to him that those laws kill off jobs for youth and low-skill workers.

The Shift

"Like most young people, my philosophical leanings were toward the liberal side of the political spectrum. In the 1964 presidential election, I voted for Lyndon Johnson over the conservative Barry Goldwater," wrote Williams in his autobiography, "Up From the Projects." "I thought that higher minimum wages were the way to help poor people, particularly poor black people. That political attitude endured until I had a conversation with a UCLA professor (who may have been Armen Alchian) who asked me whether I most cared about the intentions behind a higher minimum wage or its effects. If I was concerned about the effects, he said, I should read studies by Chicago University professor Yale Brozen and others about the devastating effects of the minimum wage on employment opportunities for minimally skilled workers."

Williams is often lumped together by liberals with another black conservative economist, the Hoover Institution's Thomas Sowell. President Carter's secretary of health, education and welfare, Patricia Roberts Harris, infamously wrote in the Washington Post in 1981, "People like Sowell and Williams are middle class. They don't know what it is to be poor."

She was flat wrong. Both Sowell and Williams come from humble origins. Williams grew up poor and fatherless in the projects of 1940 s West Philadelphia.

He attributes his libertarian streak in part to his mother, who raised him alone through self-reliance. "She just wanted to be left alone," said Williams, 75.

Tough Love

A woman of demanding standards, she insisted that her son go to good schools and refused to spoil him. In his autobiography, Williams recalls how she cut off his school lunch loans after he wasted them on weekend entertainment.

"Hearing that, I thought she was the cruelest person on earth, and I hardly spoke to her for the next few days," he wrote. "Because I had no other sources for a loan, I came home from school starving on that Thursday and Friday. Looking back, the entire incident must have been hard on my mother; seeing one's child hungry could not have been pleasant. But I learned a lesson. That was the last time I squandered my school lunch money. I adopted the practice of putting it aside as soon as I got home with my weekly earnings."

Williams was on the way to acquiring habits of hard work, savings and investment -- habits that he has steered from his taxi-driving days to his career as an economist

and opinion leader.

Dan Mitchell, a scholar at the **Cato Institute**, a think tank in Washington, D.C., marvels at his friend's diligence. Williams gets to work early, as evident in his "5 a.m. emails," said Mitchell.

Long before the rise of the Tea Party movement, Williams offered blunt criticisms of creeping socialism in American politics, using economic data, common sense and wit to advance a robust defense of capitalism and free markets.

Through his popular syndicated column and guest-hosting duties for Rush Limbaugh on the radio, he turned America into his classroom.

"He assumed the role that the Republican Party had abandoned," said Mitchell, lamenting the GOP's plunge into prodigal spending during the George W. Bush years.

The philosophical parameters of American politics have widened, thanks to politically incorrect economists like Williams who broke from the academic herd.

Williams thinks back to the ferocity of old debates from the 1970 s and 1980 s and laughs.

"I was very critical of minimum wage laws," he said, recalling the hostile reaction to such positions from the academic community and chattering class. "It was like I had come out against motherhood."

His calls for privatizing Social Security, another taboo topic, also provoked fury. But his view that big government is an exhausted and discredited solution to America's problems has gained currency.

Good Memories

Williams is modest about his contribution to the Tea Party movement, as he is about his life.

"I had the good sense and good fortune to marry a wonderful woman who shared my vision of wanting to move up the economic ladder," he said, referring to his late wife, Connie. "She is very much a part of what I am today."

Williams is also grateful to the United States of America, a country in which he could, as he puts it, "do it my way" and still prosper.