Walter Williams's Big Classroom

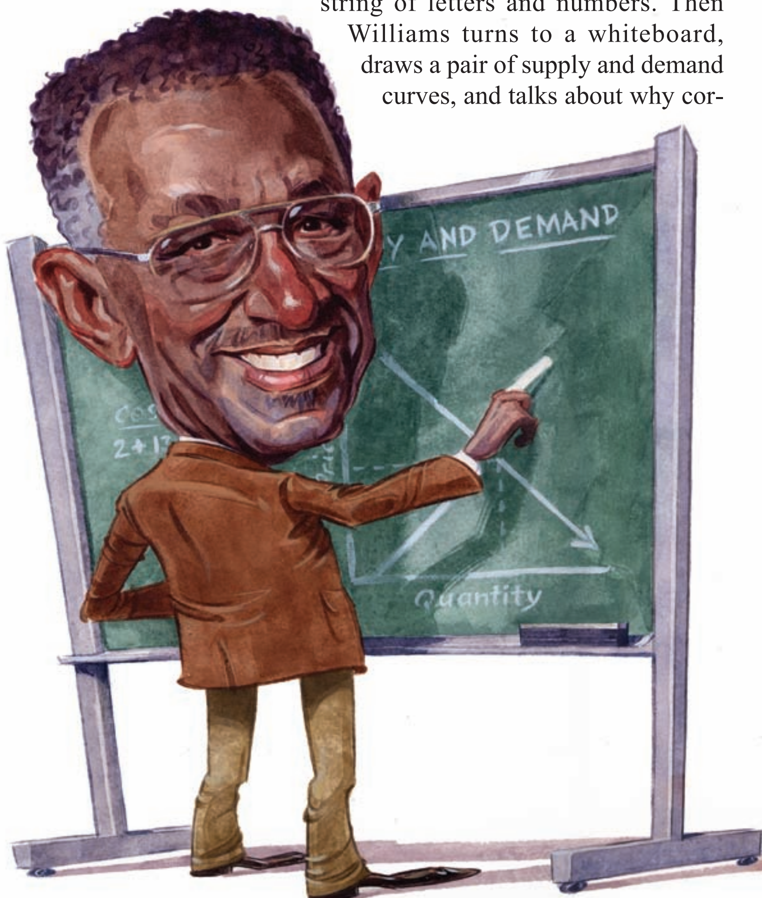
The George Mason professor has spent a career debunking damnfoolery

BY JOHN J. MILLER

AT 7:30 in the morning, Walter E. Williams hobbles into his classroom, ready to teach. He's limping from a recent fracture to his foot. At six-foot-five, however, he remains an imposing physical presence. The economics professor is a second cousin to Julius Erving, the basketball legend nicknamed "Dr. J," and it's still possible to catch a glimpse of an athlete in his 74-year-old body.

Several of his three dozen students sit up straight. One yawns and another munches a Pop-Tart. The full bustle of campus life at George Mason University won't begin for another hour or two, but Williams likes to start early. "I could get going even earlier," he says. "I'm up at 4 o'clock every day."

He sets down a mug and passes out a homework sheet. His charges stare at its first equation, a long, complicated string of letters and numbers. Then Williams turns to a whiteboard, draws a pair of supply and demand curves, and talks about why corporations don't pay taxes ("only people pay taxes") and how government-mandated professional licensing hurts the poor. His students learn more about free markets before 9 A.M. than most college kids do all day—or maybe all semester, given the biases of the modern academy.



Enrolling in Williams's single spring course, known as Economics 306, is tough. "The spots fill up right away," says Catherine Ciskanik, a senior at GMU. "It doesn't matter that class is so early." The laws of economics can be brutal: The supply is low and the demand is high for receiving instruction from one of capitalism's great evangelists, a man whose influence as a public intellectual reaches far beyond the walls of Room 274 in GMU's Enterprise Hall.

It's an unlikely career path for a black kid who grew up poor and fatherless in Philadelphia. "My life," writes Williams in his new memoir, "illustrates one of the many great things about our country: just because you know where a person ended up in life doesn't mean you know with any certainty where he began." For Williams, it began in hardship. His autobiography, published last December by the Hoover Institution, is called *Up from the Projects*. The title refers to his humble roots and alludes to the self-help philosophy of Booker T. Washington. Williams claims that he had not planned to write about his life until his daughter insisted. "I told him he had to do it now, before he forgot everything," says Devyn Williams, laughing.

As a boy, Williams knew Bill Cosby in passing: "Fat Albert and Weird Harold—those were real guys in my neighborhood," he says. Williams tried to earn money any way he could. He stocked grocery shelves, shined shoes, and washed dishes. One of his favorite jobs was at the U-Needa-Hat millinery factory—and he lost it, he says, when a seamstress complained about the violation of child-labor laws. Williams was working long hours on nights and weekends, and his co-workers didn't appreciate the added competition. The experience would shape his adult views about government regulation. The nature of his schooling also would influence him. "I'm happy to have gotten my education before it became fashionable for white people to like black people," he says. In his book, he describes several white teachers who held him to high standards. Only with hindsight did he understand that they were doing him a big favor. Later on, he would see firsthand how many of today's teachers go easy on black students for fear of being called racists.

As a young man, Williams was "rudderless and drifting." Then the Army drafted him in 1959. Although the military had desegregated, he bristled at institutional prejudice—and demonstrated his willingness to challenge racial orthodoxy. He complained constantly about discrimination, even writing a letter about it to his commander-in-chief, President Kennedy. When he stepped off the plane for a posting in Korea, he was told to fill out a paper with personal information. In the box for his race, he claimed to be white. "No, you're not," said a warrant officer who reviewed the form. "Yes, I am," replied Williams, who knew perfectly well that he couldn't pass for a white guy. Williams explained his choice to the officer: "If I checked off 'Negro,' I'd get the worst job over here." He thinks the officer probably corrected the form later. In any event, his first assignment in Korea was what he considered a plum job in Seoul rather than with a front-line unit.

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After his discharge, Williams found himself married and in Los Angeles. He enrolled at Cal State and began to pursue a degree in sociology. He switched to economics and earned a grade of D in his first class on the subject—again, from a white teacher who wouldn't let him cut corners. Williams thought about dropping out but instead he decided to work harder. Soon, he flourished. Next came advanced degrees from UCLA, whose economics department by pure coincidence housed a small bastion of free-market scholars. "I had no idea about the strength or the character of the department," Williams says.

He took classes with Armen Alchian as well as a visiting professor named Milton Friedman. Another visiting economist at UCLA was Thomas Sowell. "Walter was never a student of mine," says Sowell. "He just suddenly showed up in my office and wanted to talk about race issues. It turned out that we were thinking almost the same way." In other words, they questioned emerging liberal orthodoxies about group rights and federal programs. The two men thought their fellow blacks were best served when treated as individuals and left alone by government. They became chess partners and close friends. By this point, Williams was reading Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek. "Some thought I might be a Black Panther because I wore dashikis, a beret, and a tiger's tooth necklace," he writes in *Up from the Projects*.

Nowadays, he looks every inch the professor, with close-cropped hair, a mustache above his lips and a soul patch below, and a couple of pens sticking out of his shirt pocket. "I'm not a member of any party—I'd call myself a Jeffersonian or Madisonian liberal," he says. "We need to take back the word 'liberal' because the people who use it to describe themselves today are not liberal at all." Williams is in large part a libertarian—what some people call a classical liberal—though he says he splits with many libertarians on national defense and foreign policy: "We live in a hostile world, and isolationism is not the right way." He doesn't mind being labeled a conservative.

His first brush with notoriety came in the 1970s, when he was teaching economics at Temple. Student activists demanded the creation of a "black economics" course, and several white professors were taking the idea seriously. This display of racial guilt outraged Williams—and he fought back with satire. He distributed a homemade certificate that absolved his colleagues of responsibility for the actions of their ancestors. This has become a running gag: Today, visitors to Williams's website can print their own copies of a "full and general amnesty and pardon to all persons of European ancestry," which obliges its white holders "not to act like damn fools in their relationships with Americans of African ancestry."

The economics class didn't form, but Williams continued to fight similar battles. In 1975, he found himself on the front page of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* for having written an open letter to Temple faculty in which he criticized professors for their "differential treatment" of black students—in specific, for handing out better grades than what many of these students truly deserved. He believed black students would benefit from the evenhanded approach that had marked his own upbringing.

When the Joint Economic Committee of Congress asked Williams to prepare a report on the minimum wage, it may not have been aware of the professor's willingness to provoke. He returned a sharply critical evaluation, pointing out that teenage unemployment was lower among blacks than whites before the coming of the minimum wage, and higher in its wake. "People weren't making these kinds of arguments in 1977," says Williams. The committee refused to publish his findings. It took the intervention of two Republican senators, Orrin Hatch of Utah and the late S. I. Hayakawa of California, for the study to see the light of day. The dispute drew attention to Williams and his work. "If nobody had tried to suppress my report, it probably would have gone into the circular file," he says. "But I started getting calls for interviews." Williams was becoming a minor celebrity among right-of-center economists. Books followed. *The State Against Blacks* became a PBS documentary, and *South Africa's War Against Capitalism* took an unconventional approach to the heated subject of apartheid. (His next book, *Race and Economics: How Much Can We Blame on Discrimination?* comes out in April.)

As his exposure increased, so did his skills at promoting his ideas. The day after a televised debate on school vouchers—Williams favored them (and still does)—he took a call from Milton Friedman, another school-choice advocate. "He said that I was right about everything but that I had made one mistake: I didn't smile," recalls Williams. "He pointed out that when you talk about liberty, you have to smile. It was one of the most valuable pieces of advice I ever received." So Williams became a happy warrior. He also assumed a couple of responsibilities that he continues to hold today: his weekly newspaper column and his job at GMU.

At the university, Williams occupies a corner office. On the wall above his desk hang a couple of framed photos of black soldiers who served in the Confederate army—more evidence of Williams as provocateur. "Someone sent them to me," he says, offering no other explanation for their presence, as if they were the ho-hum decorations of a mild-mannered academic. Although he has taught at GMU for three decades, he still lives

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just outside his native Philadelphia, in Valley Forge, Pa., making the two-and-a-half-hour drive up and down I-95 at the start and end of each week. Williams fills the time by listening to recorded lectures sold by the Teaching Company. His favorite subjects are scientific: cell biology, particle physics. During one of his recent classes, he illustrated a point about economics by referring to polymorphonuclear neutrophils, a term he scribbled on the board and teased his students for not knowing.

The GMU economics department has had its share of worthies, including a pair of Nobel Prize winners: James Buchanan in 1986 and Vernon Smith in 2002. Yet neither of them has guest-hosted Rush Limbaugh's radio show, something that Williams started doing with regularity after appearing on the air for an interview in 1992. Listeners won't hear him smile, but they can tell he's having a good time. One of his catch phrases is "black by popular demand!" As with the best radio talkers, he's usually making an argument, and in his case it often has to do with economics. "I like to think of Rush's audience as my big classroom," he says. Williams says he's received offers to start his own radio show but never has wanted one. "It's a full-time job," he says. "I enjoy teaching too much."

Yet he's a born showman. In 1997, at the Cato Institute's 20th-anniversary black-tie dinner, Cato president Ed Crane buzzed through his opening remarks. He skipped the routine, common in Washington, of introducing a long list of dignitaries. "I just asked all the famous people to stand up," he says. "It was sort of a joke." But Williams rose from his seat near the front of the room and waved a white handkerchief over his head. "He stood up and brought the house down," says Crane. What most observers didn't notice was one of Williams's table companions: the actor Kurt Russell, whose movie *Breakdown* would open No. 1 at the box office the next day. Russell remained planted in his chair, laughing at the stunt with everyone else. Remembering the incident, Williams quotes his grandmother: "It's a poor dog that won't wag its own tail."

When it comes to President Obama, Williams prefers to bark: "He's a mistake for the country and a mistake for black people." He turns to a sports metaphor, as he often does: "When Jackie Robinson broke into baseball, he had to be the best. There was no alternative. Today, black athletes can show up and fail and nobody will say blacks can't play. We can afford incompetent athletes, but we can't afford an incompetent president. The first black president needed to be better than Jimmy Carter."

Yet America's problems run much deeper than the politics of a single White House administration. Williams the economist is quick to make a cultural observation: "People have always wanted to live at the expense of others. That's human nature. But there was a time when it wasn't acceptable," he says. "When I was a kid, one way to insult people was to say that they were 'on relief,' meaning they were on welfare. My mother was on relief from time to time, and she was always embarrassed by it. She got upset when the case officer came by in his uniform. But now nobody's embarrassed by it. We've become a nation of thieves."

He goes on like this for a couple of minutes, sounding like the radio jock he chose not to become. "I love what I do," says Williams. "A lot of people look forward to Friday. I don't. I look forward to the classroom." **NR**

When the Nazis Stole MY PAINTING

And the Austrians didn't much care

BY DAVID PRYCE-JONES

IN the final year of the 20th century, my family, or to be precise my aunt Liliane, received notification from authorities in Austria that they would be returning a painting stolen from us by the Nazis. Since the end of the war, it appeared, this picture had been on permanent exhibition in the Belvedere, Johann Lukas von Hildebrandt's architectural masterpiece that has become a museum in the center of Vienna. Now a change in the law obliged those in possession of such stolen art to restore it to the rightful owners.

Plain sailing, you might think. They knew who we were and how to reach us. In a masterly display of bureaucratic obstruction, though, the Austrian authorities resorted to one delaying tactic after another, succeeding in spinning out their response to this obligation for eleven years. At times, I felt that since they wanted so badly to keep this picture, we should let them have it. But my cousin Elisabeth, Liliane's daughter, rightly maintained that in principle theft should not be condoned, however much frustration and indignation this might arouse in us.

The picture in question, titled *Hungarian Shepherd Boy*, is small, a mere eight by ten inches, painted in oils on a piece of board. A barefoot ragamuffin is shown sitting on the ground, intent on eating from a blackened cooking pot that rests on his knees. This may have been a study for some larger work, because the detail of the figure is very full but the background remains unfinished. Living in the Habsburg Empire in the 19th century, the artist, Johann Gualbert Raffalt, tended like many others of that period to idealize his subjects. A slight coating of sentimentality does not detract from the genuine pity Raffalt evidently felt for the poor Hungarian boy. An expert from Christie's puts a value on the picture today of $3,000; in the light of this estimate, the tenacity shown by the Austrian authorities to retain it is all the more extraordinary. Eleven years of defensive bureaucracy will have cost them many times that amount.

The picture used to hang in Meidling, the house Gustav Springer built in Vienna for his daughter Mitzi, his only child. The reddish stonework, the mock-Renaissance details of roofs and windows, the immense wood-paneled staircase that rises through the center of that house, are a celebration of opulence; visitors would have to make of it what they liked. Born in 1842, Gustav was the kind of character captured in the novels of Balzac, Musil, or Joseph Roth. In surviving photographs he is usually shown wearing formal clothes and a top hat. In old age he was bald, the skull like ivory. The expression on his face is serious but sensitive, as befits a self-made man who became one of the great magnates of the day, an industrialist with railway concessions all over Europe, owner of prize-winning racehorses, someone who earns a worthy mention in the history books. At