

A professor who suffers no fools

By [Lawson Bader](#)
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Deserts are peculiar barren land areas with little precipitation and hostile living conditions. They often serve as dramatic settings of Biblical proportions—quite literally. In the New Testament we read of John wandering in the desert for 30 years before beginning a very public ministry.

I thought about this recently, when I attended a private screening of a new PBS documentary, [Suffer No Fools](#). The film tells the story of George Mason University (GMU) economics professor and radio personality Walter Williams. At first glance, there aren't many parallels between Walter “the Williams” and John “the Baptist.” Walter dresses more fashionably and can sink a three-pointer from the corner. John’s version of sipping wine was sucking the juice out of fermented grapes. If you’ve ever walked into a wine shop with Walter, be prepared to take out a small mortgage to quench his oenological thirst.

But on the other hand, Walter is like John in another way—a prophet crying out in the wilderness.

In a previous life I traversed the country meeting with supporters of GMU and its affiliate organizations. Almost universally, eyes would brighten and heads nod when I said I worked at “the same institution as Walter Williams.” He was the common denominator that began conversations and created bonds with people I’d just met.

Walter is no wallflower—and not just because he is taller than most people! I recall fondly one of the Cato Institute’s Milton Friedman dinners, where Cato founder Ed Crane thanked the table sponsors and VIPs in the room, and then asked if there was anybody important in the room he should have thanked. Walter alone stood up, and to great applause and laughter, waved and bowed.

Walter calls it as it is. He is particularly critical of the modern welfare state—not just its paternalistic policies and lack of economic reasoning, but its destruction of society’s social bonds. His sharp words occasionally draw the ire from many, but he never apologizes for tone or truth. He describes the negative impact of the minimum wage on low-skilled workers in general, and on low-skilled minority workers in particular.

Speaking recently on the [RealClear Radio Hour with Bill Frezza](#), Walter acknowledged that most elected officials do have a “general concern for their fellow man.” But he then explains that if the

government forces you to pay \$8 to somebody whose skills allow to produce only \$4 of value, it simply doesn't pay to hire that low-skilled worker. (Disclosure: My organization, the Competitive Enterprise Institute, cosponsors the program.)

In today's conversations of haves and have nots, of 1 percenters and the 47 percent, it pays to remember some uncomfortable parts of history. As an educator, Walter doesn't disappoint.

As Walter reminded listeners, in apartheid South Africa, white leaders passed policies to protect the jobs of white low-skilled workers from competition from similarly skilled black workers. And as the Congressional Record shows (on March 31, 1931, to be precise) in the floor debates regarding the Davis-Bacon Act, the act's sponsors openly state that one reason they want to force federal construction contractors to pay their workers "prevailing wages" is to favor whites-only unions over non-unionized black workers.

Suffer No Fools is partly based on Walter's 2010 book, [*Up from the Projects*](#), an honest, self-deprecating, and often humorous look at his life and career. I actually pity the U.S. Army officer who had to deal with one Corporal Walter Williams who had serious authority issues!

The end of the film carries an important lesson. Yes, Walter rose from poverty to relative affluence. But that's not the point. Its greatest lesson is the fact that when we encounter people late in life, no matter their vocation or station, we can never be sure of where they actually started. Mobility—up *and* down—is a dominating force in a free society.

Unfortunately we often forget that. Farmers and sugar growers want handouts and subsidies. Established businesses seek protection from competitors. And they all vote for the politicians who will provide them the goodies. More and more Americans—from all walks of life—find it OK to rob Peter to pay Paul. And politicians are happy to oblige in exchange for electoral support. We have become, as Walter so forcefully put it, a "nation of thieves."

Yet, Walter offers a glimmer of hope. He points to a "spirit of revolution" in our midst—constitutional debates, Tea Partiers and Occupiers, private citizens and state officials suing the federal government, state legislatures passing 10th Amendment laws, and crowdfunding trying their own thing. Walter laughs when he also notes more Americans are arming themselves.

Too little or too late? Perhaps. But that's not Walter's job—he's got the megaphone and has spent a lifetime using it. Time for us to respond. And bring him out of the desert.