



AN IMAGINARY INTERVIEW WITH WALTER E. WILLIAMS

By Carole E. Scott

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Walter E. Williams, who is known for his libertarian views, has been a member of the faculty of George Mason University since 1980. There he is the John M. Olin Distinguished Professor of Economics. He loves making economics fun and understandable.

The leftist teaching agenda, Williams says, is that of Vladimir Lenin, who said, "Give me four years to teach the children and the seed I have sown will never be uprooted." He believes "students should record classroom professorial propaganda and give it wide distribution over the Internet. "I've taught," he observes, "for more than 45 years and routinely invited students to record my lectures so they don't have to be stenographers during class. I have no idea of where those recordings have wound up, but if you find them, you'll hear zero proselytization or discussion of my political and personal preferences. To use a classroom to propagate one's personal beliefs is academic dishonesty."

While stationed in the South after being drafted into the Army, Williams "waged a one man battle against Jim Crow from inside the army. He challenged the racial order with provocative statements to his fellow soldiers. This resulted in an overseeing officer filing a court-martial proceeding against Williams. Williams argued his own case, and was found not guilty.

More than 50 of his publications have appeared in scholarly journals. He has frequently appeared on radio and television and has published extensively in non-academic publications such as "The Wall Street Journal" and "Newsweek". Among his ten books are "Race and Economics: How Much Can Be Blamed on Discrimination?"

and "Up From the Projects: An Autobiography". Since 1981 he has been writing weekly columns. With his permission, recent columns distributed by Creators Syndicate were used to create the following imaginary interview with him.

The Interview

Q. Why do progressive politicians who rail about how much more corporate CEOs make than do average workers say nothing about athletes and actors who make far more than do the CEOs?

Part of the progressive agenda is to create hate and envy. One component of that agenda is to attack the large differences between a corporation's chief executive officer's earnings and those of its average worker. Though sports and Hollywood personalities earn multiples of CEO salaries, you'll never find leftists and progressives picketing and criticizing them. Why? The strategy for want-to-be tyrants is to demonize people whose power they want to usurp. That's the typical way tyrants gain power. They give the masses someone to hate. In 18th-century France, it was Maximilien Robespierre's promoting hatred of the aristocracy that led to his acquiring dictatorial power. In the 20th century, the communists gained power by promoting public hatred of the czars and capitalists. In Germany, Adolf Hitler gained power by promoting hatred of Jews and Bolsheviks.

Q. In the past you thought some laws, like minimum-wage laws, helped both white and black people and that they protected workers from exploitation.. What do you think today?

Minimum wages have their greatest unemployment impact on the least skilled worker. After all, who's going to pay a worker an hourly wage of \$10 if that worker is so unfortunate as to have skills that enable him to produce only \$5 worth of value per hour? Who are these workers? For the most part, they are low-skilled teens or young adults, most of whom are poorly educated blacks and Latinos. The unemployment statistics in our urban areas confirm this prediction, with teen unemployment rates as high as 50 percent.

The politics of the minimum wage are simple. No congressman or president owes his office to the poorly educated black and Latino youth vote. Moreover, the victims of the minimum wage do not know why they suffer high unemployment, and neither do most of their "benefactors." Minimum wage beneficiaries are highly organized, and they do have the necessary political clout to get Congress to price their low-skilled competition out of the market so they can demand higher wages.

Q. What was the effect on the world of the introduction of capitalism?

Prior to capitalism, the way people amassed great wealth was by looting, plundering and enslaving their fellow man. With the rise of capitalism, it became possible to amass great wealth by serving and pleasing your fellow man. Capitalists seek to discover what people want and produce and market it as efficiently as possible as a means to profit. A

couple of examples would be J.D. Rockefeller, whose successful marketing drove kerosene prices down from 58 cents a gallon in 1865 to 7 cents in 1900. Henry Ford became rich by producing cars for the common man. Both Ford's and Rockefeller's personal benefits pale in comparison with that received by the common man by having cheaper kerosene and cheaper transportation. There are literally thousands of examples of how mankind's life has been made better by those in the pursuit of profits. Here's my question to you: Are people who, by their actions, created unprecedented convenience, longer life expectancy and a more pleasant life for the ordinary person — and became wealthy in the process — deserving of all the scorn and ridicule heaped upon them by intellectuals, politicians and now the pope?

Q. What is your response to those who claim that capitalism robs the poor, thereby enriching capitalists?

There is no material poverty in the U.S. Here are a few facts about people whom the Census Bureau labels as poor. Dr. Robert Rector and Rachel Sheffield, in their study "Understanding Poverty in the United States: Surprising Facts About America's Poor" (<http://tinyurl.com/448flj8>), report that 80 percent of poor households have air conditioning; nearly three-quarters have a car or truck, and 31 percent have two or more. Two-thirds have cable or satellite TV. Half have one or more computers. Forty-two percent own their homes. Poor Americans have more living space than the typical non-poor person in Sweden, France or the U.K. What we have in our nation are dependency and poverty of the spirit, with people making unwise choices and leading pathological lives aided and abetted by the welfare state.

Q. Are environmentalists simply “tree huggers”?

Occasionally, environmentalists spill the beans and reveal their true agenda. Barry Commoner said, "Capitalism is the earth's number one enemy." Amherst College professor Leo Marx said, "On ecological grounds, the case for world government is beyond argument." With the decline of the USSR, communism has lost considerable respectability and is now repackaged as environmentalism and progressivism.

Big natural gas users and environmentalists have foreign allies, suggested by the statement of Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, who told Saudi Arabia's oil minister, Ali al-Naimi, that rising American shale gas production is "an inevitable threat." Nigeria's oil minister, Diezani Alison-Madueke, agrees, saying that U.S. shale oil is a "grave concern." In light of these foreign "concerns" about U.S. energy production, one wonders whether foreign countries have given financial aid to U.S. politicians, environmentalists and other groups that are waging war against domestic oil and natural gas drilling. It would surely be in their interests to do everything in their power to keep the West dependent on OPEC nations for oil and gas.

Q. Why do politicians continue to support policies many economists have repeatedly told them are harming the country?

For years, I used to blame politicians for our economic and social mess. That changed during the 1980s as a result of several lunches with Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., which produced an epiphany of sorts.

At the time, I had written several columns highly critical of farm subsidies and handouts. Helms agreed, saying something should be done. Then he asked me whether I could tell him how he could vote against them and remain a senator from North Carolina. He said that if he voted against them, North Carolinians would vote him out of office and replace him with somebody probably worse.

Q. Why don't you blame slavery, which in the past split families apart and prohibited slaves from getting married, and discrimination today for the black illegitimacy exceeding 70 percent?

There may be some pinhead sociologists who blame the weak black family structure on racial discrimination. But why was the black illegitimacy rate only 14 percent in 1940, and why, as Dr. Thomas Sowell reports, do we find that census data "going back a hundred years, when blacks were just one generation out of slavery ... showed that a slightly higher percentage of black adults had married than white adults?" This fact remained true in every census from 1890 to 1940"? Is anyone willing to advance the argument that the reason the illegitimacy rate among blacks was lower and marriage rates higher in earlier periods was there was less racial discrimination and greater opportunity?

Q. What, other than his race, most distinguishes President Obama from our previous presidents?

Obama became the first person in U.S. history to be elected to the highest office in the land while having a long history of associations with people who hate our nation, such as the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Obama's pastor for 20 years, who preached that blacks should sing not "God bless America" but "God damn America." Then there's Obama's association with William Ayers, formerly a member of the Weather Underground, an anti-U.S. group that bombed the Pentagon, U.S. Capitol and other government buildings. Ayers, in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attack, told a *New York Times* reporter, "I don't regret setting bombs. I feel we didn't do enough."

Q. What do you mean when you call a high school diploma fraudulent?

When a student is given a high-school diploma, that attests that he can read, write and compute at a 12th-grade level, and when he can't do so at the eighth-grade level, that diploma is fraudulent. What makes it so tragic is that neither the student nor his parents are aware that he has a fraudulent diploma. When a black person is not admitted to college, flunks out of college, can't pass a civil service test or doesn't get job promotions, he is likelier to blame racial discrimination than his poor education.

Q. What is the difference between negative and positive rights?

Negative freedom or rights refers to the absence of constraint or coercion when people engage in peaceable, voluntary exchange. Some of these negative freedoms are enumerated in our Constitution's Bill of Rights. More generally, at least in its standard historical usage, a right is something that exists simultaneously among people. As such, a right imposes no obligation on another. For example, the right to free speech is something we all possess. My right to free speech imposes no obligation upon

another except that of noninterference. Likewise, my right to travel imposes no obligation upon another.

Positive rights is a view that people should have certain material things -- such as medical care, decent housing and food -- whether they can pay for them or not. Seeing as there is no Santa Claus or tooth fairy, those "rights" do impose obligations upon others. If one person has a right to something he did not earn, of necessity it requires that another person not have a right to something he did earn.

Q. To what do you attribute the recent outbreak of mass murders with guns?

Why -- at a time in our history when guns were readily available, when a person could just walk into a store or order a gun through the mail, when there were no FBI background checks, no waiting periods, no licensing requirements -- was there not the frequency and kind of gun violence that we sometimes see today, when access to guns is more restricted? Guns are guns. If they were capable of behavior, as some people seem to suggest, they should have been doing then what they're doing now.

Customs, traditions, moral values and rules of etiquette, not just laws and government regulations, are what make for a civilized society, not restraints on inanimate objects. These behavioral norms -- transmitted by example, word of mouth and religious teachings -- represent a body of wisdom distilled through ages of experience, trial and error, and looking at what works. The benefit of having customs, traditions and moral values as a means of regulating behavior is that people behave themselves even if nobody's watching. In other words, it's morality that is society's first line of defense against uncivilized behavior.

Q. Why do you believe people should be able to sell organs for transplant?

There are more than 88,000 Americans on the organ transplant waiting list. Roughly 10 percent of them will die before receiving an organ. These lost lives are not so much an act of God as they are an act of Congress because of its 1984 National Organ Transplant Act, as amended, which prohibits payment to organ donors.... Just ask yourself whether having a car, clothing or a house should be determined by the same principle governing organ transplants: "altruism and public trust." If it were, there would be massive shortages.

[A] stated concern is that if there's a market for organs, poor people will sell their organs and become ill. From an ethical point of view, if people own themselves, they should have a right to dispose of themselves any way they please so long as they do not violate the property rights of others. Of course, if people belong to the government, they have no such right. By the way, most proposals for organ sales are only for cadaver organs.

