



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on December 8, 2010

## Walter Williams' Memoir: Up from the Projects

Walter E. Williams is my oldest and closest friend. But I didn't know that his autobiography had just been published until a talk-show host told me last week. I immediately got a copy of *Up from the Projects*, started reading it before dinner and finished reading it before bedtime.

It is the kind of book that you hate to put down, even though I already knew how the story would end.

The first chapter, about Walter's life growing up in the Philadelphia ghetto, was especially fascinating. It brought back a whole different era in black communities — an era that is now almost irretrievably lost, to the great disadvantage of today's generation growing up in the same neighborhoods where Walter grew up in Philadelphia or where I grew up in Harlem.



Although Walter's memoir is titled *Up from the Projects*, the projects of the era when he was growing up bear virtually no resemblance to the projects of today.

For one thing, those projects were clean, and the people living in them helped keep them clean, by sweeping the halls and tending to the surrounding areas outside of the buildings as well. The people living in the projects then were probably poorer than the people living in the projects now. But they had not yet succumbed to the moral squalor afflicting such places today.

More important, they — and the whole black community of which they were part — were far safer than today. As late as 1958, when Walter was a young taxi driver in Philadelphia, he used to park his cab in the wee hours of the morning and take a nap in it. As he points out, "A cabbie doing the same thing today would be deemed suicidal."

There were jobs for black teenagers in those days, and Walter worked at a dizzying variety of those jobs. Most of those jobs are long gone today, as are the businesses that hired black teenagers.

While there are greater opportunities for many blacks today, there are far fewer opportunities for those blacks at the bottom, living in ghettos across the country and trapped in a counterproductive and even dangerous way of life.

The times in which Walter Williams grew up were by no means idyllic times, nor was Walter a model child nor always a model adult, as he candidly shows. He even reproduces the documents recording his court martial in the Army.

How Walter Williams changed for the better — partly as a result of his wife, who "became a civilizing and humanizing influence in my life" — is one of the themes of this book. The other great influence in



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Walter's life was his mother, one of those strong and wise black women who has had much to do with providing the foundation from which many other black men and women rose out of poverty to higher levels of achievement.

With Walter, that path was not a straight line but had many zigs and zags, and there were times when he was a disappointment to his mother. But, in the end, he vindicated all the efforts and hopes that she had invested in him.

There were also teachers, and then professors, who played a role in developing his mind — especially hard-nosed teachers in Philadelphia who chewed him out when he messed up and UCLA professors who bluntly told him when his work wasn't good enough.

None of them was the kind of warm, chummy educators that so many hold up as an ideal. After Walter Williams earned his Ph.D. in economics and went on to become a professor himself, he was scathing in his criticism of fuzzy-minded faculty members who think they are doing students a favor by going easy on them or giving them higher grades than they deserve.

As he began to write about racial issues, Walter was able to draw not only on his research as an economist, but also on his personal experiences in the Philadelphia ghetto, in the Jim Crow South and in South Africa, where he lived for some months during the era of Apartheid.

Few others had so much to draw on, and many of them failed to understand that Walter Williams saw a lot deeper than they did. As a result, his conclusions made him a controversial figure.

When I finished reading *Up from the Projects*, I wished it had been a longer book. But it got the job done — and its insights are much needed today.

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