



**Walter Williams on Nullification, Secession, and More**  
**Guest: Walter Williams**  
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**Walter Williams is a professor of economics at George Mason University, a nationally syndicated columnist, and a regular fill-in host for Rush Limbaugh. His books include *The State Against Blacks*, *South Africa's War Against Capitalism*, *Up from the Projects: An Autobiography*, and *Race and Economics: How Much Can Be Blamed on Discrimination?***

**WOODS:** I want to start off with a recent column of yours in which you bring up the idea of peaceful secession, which sounds crazy and radical to most people, yet you explain it as if it's just common sense.

**WILLIAMS:** Well, the name of the article is "Parting Company." And I've talked about this before. And I ask the question: should people, if one group of people prefers a strong government control, management of people's lives, while another group prefers liberty and people's desire to be alone, I would say ask the question, should they be required to enter into conflict with one another to have their way? Should peace-loving, liberty-loving people, should they be forced to enter into conflict with those people who want government control? And I say no, they should not be forced into conflict. That is, they should part company. And I was giving the example that the problem that we face as a nation is very similar to a problem in a marriage. If one partner in the marriage disobeys the marital vows, tries to impose all kinds of restrictions on the other partner, and the question is, should they be forced to fight or should they peaceably separate? And I think that they should peaceably separate.

Now when people bring up this issue, they bring up the issue of the War Between the States in 1861. And they point out, well, do we want all of this bloodshed? And I say no, we didn't want the bloodshed. We want people to be able to peaceably separate from one another. As a matter of fact, there's a group of young people, and they're trying to organize about 20,000 Americans to move to the state of New Hampshire. [TW note: Williams is referring to the Free State Project.] And then peaceably take over the government through the voting, through the democratic process, and then send their senators and congressmen to Washington to negotiate with Congress to obey the Constitution. And if Congress doesn't obey the Constitution, some of them are saying that they should make a unilateral Declaration of Independence.

**WOODS:** Why do you think it is, though, when you explain something like this, it sounds so logical, it doesn't sound like you're saying anything crazy, but for some reason, Americans seem to be almost allergic to the idea of secession. They're okay with secession if it's going on somewhere else in the world. The Czechs and the Slovaks can secede from one another. But for some reason, it's unthinkable for the American Union to be divided into smaller parts. Why do you think that is?

**WILLIAMS:** I don't know, but I think that most Americans do not have a very good understanding of our history. That is, when we separated, when we seceded from King George, the Treaty of Paris in 1793 established 13 sovereign nations. These were, New York was a nation, Pennsylvania was a nation, etc. So these nations came together in 1787 to have a confederacy, to have a federalist system. As a matter of fact, if you read the ratification documents of New York, Rhode Island and Virginia, they say that if the federal government becomes abusive of the powers that we've delegated to it, we have the right to resume those powers. And a matter of fact, the Constitution of the United States would have never been ratified if the states did not believe that they had the right to secede. And just one other thing: we have to keep in mind that the average American just does not know that the federal government was created by the states. That is, the states are the principals and the federal government is the agent of the states. And principals have the right to fire an agent.

**WOODS:** I couldn't have said it better myself. I think that's the point: who are the principals and who is the agent? And on that topic, of course, I can't help bringing up the subject of state nullification. You were kind enough to write a nice blurb on the back cover of [my book on that subject](#), and then you testified in front of either the House or Senate Judiciary Committee, I think, in South Carolina.

**WILLIAMS:** It was the House.

**WOODS:** It was the House. Okay. On the subject of nullification. And we were all cheering you for that. This has become a bit of a controversy. There are people who increasingly support this idea. But then you find some people on the right, in right-wing radio—I

don't want to mention names—who are quite abusive towards people who believe in the idea of state nullification. Can we put you officially on the record as being in the pro-nullifier camp?

**WILLIAMS:** Well I take the position of Jefferson and Madison when they wrote the, what is it, Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions. And they said that if the federal government, if Congress makes laws that are unconstitutional, we have the right to ignore those laws. We have the right to nullify those laws. And moreover, getting involved with the issue of what's constitutional and what's not constitutional, I believe was Madison, or either Jefferson, I forget right now, said that we should not give the Supreme Court a monopoly on the interpretation of the Constitution because if we give the Supreme Court a monopoly on the interpretation of the Constitution, then we'll be living under oligarchy.

**WOODS:** And it turns out they weren't just making that up. As a matter of fact, we now know exactly what the dystopia that they feared would be like.

**WILLIAMS:** Well I would say, when I was in South Carolina, testifying in South Carolina, we were talking about nullification of Obamacare. That is, to make the citizens of the state of South Carolina immune to, where they did not have to obey, Obamacare laws. And Obamacare is not in the Constitution. So why should the people of South Carolina, or any state, obey a law that's not in the Constitution? But you might say to me, there are a whole lot of laws that we are forced to obey that are not in the Constitution.

**WOODS:** Yeah. But that is the fundamental question, and there never really is a good answer to it.

I want to shift gears and take a couple questions from my listeners. And one that came up that I found interesting was, they want to know what your thoughts are on Martin Luther King. A couple of people in recent history. Martin Luther King and then I want to add Nelson Mandela. What are your thoughts on both of these figures?

**WILLIAMS:** Well I think that Martin Luther King, his role in the civil rights movement, I think was very, very important to our country. However, I think the Civil Rights Act in 1964 evolved out of the civil rights movement, that much of it was led by Martin Luther King. And I think that writing the 1964 Civil Rights Act was a big mistake. I think that what the federal government should have done, or what the courts should have done at the time, was to say, look, the United States Constitution applies to every single American, regardless of religion, race, etc. And just leave it at that.

Now Nelson Mandela, I mean, we might say, according to today's standards, he engaged in terroristic acts. But that does not necessarily make him a bad fellow, because if you ask King George about the founding fathers of our nation, he would have probably called them terrorists as well. But I think that Nelson Mandela, I think he was very, very important to moving South Africa away from the apartheid regime, that is, he was not a mean person. He sought reconciliation as opposed to revenge. Throughout a lot of history, when one tyrant is overthrown, another tyrant takes his place. As a matter of fact, many times, when I visited South Africa quite a few times during the apartheid era, and I was telling the people whom I spoke to, you know, large audiences, I said, the issue is not getting rid of apartheid. The question is, what is going to replace it? Because there are things that are worse than apartheid. And we've seen them under Mao Zedong, Hitler and Stalin.

**WOODS:** Would you describe yourself as a libertarian? Do you use that word?

**WILLIAMS:** Well a small-l libertarian. I'm not a part of any political movement.

**WOODS:** So if that's the case, how do you answer what must be a very, very almost dreadfully common objection from people who would say: look, Williams—I took that conceit out of your columns—look, Williams, don't you understand that it was federal actions again and again, whether it's affirmative action or antidiscrimination law or what have you, that created the black middle class and allowed people to prosper, and if you were in charge, you know, you can finish the rest of that question. How do you answer that?

**WILLIAMS:** Well, most of the problems that black Americans faced in our country from its inception was a failure of government to do the job. That is, the people were able to get these discriminatory laws and Jim Crow laws because of, with the help of government. And the government ignored the extralegal measures that were taken, such as lynching and beating and stuff like that, to enforce segregation. I think one of the questions one has to realize is that, whenever you see a law on the books, one of your first suspicions should be is that that law is on the books because not everybody would otherwise behave according to specifications of the law. And so, if restaurants or theaters or train companies, trailer cars, would not allow blacks to enter under the same condition as whites, why in the world would you ever need a law, segregation laws? Evidently, some whites would have. So the system would have tended to collapse.

But speaking of discrimination, I believe that people have the right to engage in discrimination on any basis they want. That is, you can discriminate as far as race or sex or criminal background, etc. But you don't have the right to use government to force other people to concur with your discrimination. A lot of times I've written an article, as a matter of fact I've written a whole chapter in one of my recent books, *Race and Economics*, in pointing out that people discriminate all the time. When I was choosing a wife to marry, I

didn't give every woman an equal opportunity. I discriminated against Chinese, white women, Italian women, women with criminal backgrounds, women who did not bathe regularly, etc.

**WOODS:** I want to harp on this a little bit because this is probably one of the hardest, most challenging objections to deal with. The response you get is this: you believe in private property; I get it. But you'd want to live in a society where people could put a sign in front of their shop window saying such and such group can't come in here? Is that the kind of society you want to live in?

**WILLIAMS:** I think that the true test of whether people believe in the idea of freedom of association doesn't come when you allow people to be free to associate in ways that you think they should. It comes in when you allow people to be free to associate in ways that you find despicable. It's just like free speech. The true test of one's commitment to free speech doesn't come when he allows people to say what he thinks they ought to say. The true test of one's commitment to free speech comes when he allows people to say things that he finds offensive. It's the same thing with freedom of association.

So yes, I would find it offensive that a person would not let me in their restaurant because I'm black. But nonetheless, I hold freedom and liberty in such a high esteem, that I wouldn't do anything to stop them. That is, I wouldn't do anything to people who voluntarily, without the aid of government, decided to discriminate against me based on my race. Or based on any other attribute. They might not like tall people or handsome people.

**WOODS:** You know, it's funny. Just the other day on my Facebook page, a belligerent person thought he was really sticking it to me by saying, hey, Woods, are you telling me that you would believe in a society in which the Aryan Brotherhood could have their own community and it would just be them and they would live there? And I said, well, I guess I do, because I don't believe I should have a gun and be able to tell people where they ought to live. But in any case, why would that be a bad thing? I would like all these people to live apart from the rest of us so they don't have to be my next-door neighbor. Why would that be a bad solution? That was my reply.

**WILLIAMS:** I think you're absolutely right. Then the point you have to keep in mind is that I don't believe—if you said tomorrow that white people, white restaurant owners, have the right not to admit blacks, maybe you would find a few that would refuse to admit blacks but the overwhelming majority would. And the reason why is that these people are in business to make money.

**WOODS:** Right. Especially today. Profit margins are razor thin. It is really costly to indulge your prejudices, especially at a time like this.

**WILLIAMS:** And another example of discrimination: black people are 80 percent of professional basketball players, and they are the highest-paid ones. Would you care if some team said, well, we're not going to have any black basketball players? Well, probably the team would wind up in the cellar. Why would you force them to do something so that they could be more profitable or win more games?

**WOODS:** I want to ask you, as we start to wind down here, who your major influences were because you, obviously, came to hold views that are not exactly consonant with those of Jesse Jackson. And yet Jesse Jackson's views are much, much more common among blacks. How did you not get caught in that trap? Did you read different people? Were you traveling in different intellectual circles? How did Walter Williams come to be?

**WILLIAMS:** Well, I've always been a radical, wishing for people to leave me alone. But another thing I tell people, and maybe it's not as nice for me to say this, but I was fortunate enough—I'm 77 years old—to get most of my education, virtually all of my education, before it became fashionable for white people to like black people. So what that meant is that teachers and other mentors, they didn't give a damn about hurting my feelings. They didn't give a damn about my self-esteem. They would say things like: "Walter, that's absolutely wrong. That's nonsense." And then I got my Ph.D. at UCLA and I was under the influence of very, very tenacious mentors. And then I took classes from Milton Friedman, Armen Alchian and Friedrich Hayek. Friedrich Hayek came and lectured a couple times. So I had some tough-minded people. One time, one mentor, Axel Leijonhufvud, a Swedish economist, he was on the faculty at UCLA, I was telling him that I think that the minimum-wage law is a good idea. This is like back in the '60s.

**WOODS:** Oh, okay.

**WILLIAMS:** So he asked me: well, which do you care about the most? The intentions behind a law or the effects of a law? And to look at the effects of the law, why don't you read Yale Brozen's article. He give me a couple of Milton Friedman's articles. I read them and I changed my mind. The evidence caused me to change my mind. And this was true with many things.

**WOODS:** What do you make of what now seems to be the fashionable trend among economists to all of a sudden support an increase in the minimum wage?

**WILLIAMS:** Well, you know, I think they can support them, but they cannot deny the effects. Many economists are saying, well, what

some are saying, look, we recognize that there are unemployment effects of the minimum-wage law but we can take care of the unemployment by food stamps and welfare. But we say that people who get the jobs will somehow be better off. And nonetheless, it is true that those people who get, who receive a higher wage and also keep their job, many of them will be better off for a while.

**WOODS:** Yeah. You bet.

**WILLIAMS:** For example, it's very interesting that you see at Wawa. If you go to Wawa and you go in and order, well you know there's nobody to take your order anymore.

**WOODS:** Yeah. Right. They've mechanized it.

**WILLIAMS:** They're little machines.

**WOODS:** Yeah. They got their wish.

**WILLIAMS:** Somebody makes your sandwich and you go to the cashier. So the higher minimum wages tend to reduce employment sooner or later.

**WOODS:** All right. Last thing. This can be quick but I have a lot of people who want to know, have you had second thoughts about the Iraq war in the ensuing years?

**WILLIAMS:** Well, I think that, well, yeah, I do have second thoughts, but I think that if we should have been there at all, that we should not have sent troops. We should have fought a more capital-intensive war. That is, if there was a basis for unseating Saddam Hussein where we could have easily unseated him and then just returned. But we decided to try to engage in nation-building and that was a major mistake.

**WOODS:** Suppose somebody wants to dive into Walter Williams' work. Do you have one particular book you'd steer them to first?

**WILLIAMS:** Well, no. Well at first I would suggest they would go to my webpage at [WalterEWilliams.com](http://WalterEWilliams.com), and there are many things that I've written there and there a lot of videos that are on the webpage of lectures that I've given. And then I think one of the books that I'm proud of, a very small book, is *Race and Economics*, and the subtitle is *How Much Can Be Blamed on Discrimination?*

**WOODS:** Right, right, right.

**WILLIAMS:** I don't believe that racial discrimination explains as much as people say it explains, which is not to deny the existence of racial discrimination. It just does not explain very much nowadays.

**WOODS:** And there's a great book, of course I'm sure you know, one of Thomas Sowell's underrated books, *Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality*, that takes on that topic, but a lot of that data would be out of date by now because the book is from the mid-'80s.

**WILLIAMS:** Oh, yeah. Some of the data will be outdated, but the principles and theory are not.

**WOODS:** Right, right. Well, Walter Williams, I sure appreciate your time. I guess it was about 20-21 years ago, I was at an IHS event at Harvard you spoke at. And I got my copy of *The State Against Blacks* signed. I have cherished that thing ever since. I sure appreciate your time today. Thanks so much.

**WILLIAMS:** Okay, Tom. Let's do it again.