

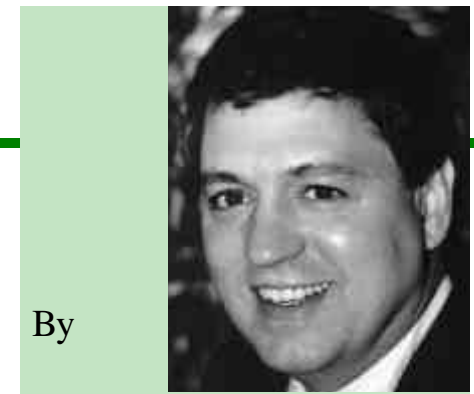
Individual Liberty and Limited Government: Walter E. Williams and The Spirit of George Mason

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The American College is pleased to reproduce the 1993 Frank M. Engle Lecture in Economic Security, the sixteenth in a series endowed by Frank M. Engle of Tulsa, Oklahoma. This annual lecture series is designed to stimulate the study of economic security and economic life in the United States, with particular emphasis on the social and economic impact of public policy and private economic activity. Notable scholars, commentators, and policymakers have delivered past Engle Lectures. And this year's Engle Lecturer is no exception to our rule of exceptional individual achievement.

Our 1993 Frank M. Engle Lecturer is Dr. Walter E. Williams, the John M. Olin Distinguished Professor of Economics at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. Dr. Williams is a native of Philadelphia and former faculty member at Temple University. He is the author of numerous scholarly articles and several books, including *The State Against Blacks*, which was later made into the PBS documentary "Good Intentions." He writes a weekly syndicated column and appears frequently on television.

Dr. Williams has received numerous awards and fellowships, including the Valley Forge Freedoms Foundation



By

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George Washington Medal of Honor, Adam Smith Award, Hoover Institution National Fellow, California State University Distinguished Alumnus Award, and George Mason University Faculty Member of the Year.

It is a fortuitous set of circumstances that Dr. Williams hails from Philadelphia, teaches at George Mason University, and speaks on "The Legitimate Role of Government in a Free Economy." There is, in my mind, a remarkable irony in this convergence of Dr. Williams' birthplace and home, the namesake of his university, and the subject he addresses.

A little over 200 years ago, George Mason was a Virginia delegate to the Constitutional Convention held in Philadelphia. Although many Americans do not readily recall much about him, George Mason was among this country's most influential Founding Fathers.

A neighbor and longtime friend of George Washington, Mason was an American patriot from his youth. An ardent believer in liberty and a republican form of government, he authored much of Virginia's constitution and wrote the State's Declaration of Rights, adopted in May 1776. Calling Mason "the wisest man of his generation," Thomas Jefferson drew heavily from Mason's Declaration of Rights when he wrote the Declaration of Independence.

When he wrote Virginia's bill of rights, Mason noted that individuals have



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"certain inherent rights, namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety." And he declared that "no free government or the blessings of liberty can be preserved to any people but by a firm adherence to temperance, frugality, and virtue." George Washington likewise noted the unity of Mason's moral, political, and socioeconomic premise as the basis for real economic security when, in his first inaugural address, he said, "There exists in the economy and course of nature an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness...."

At Philadelphia's Constitutional Convention, Mason was among the five most frequent speakers. His words, and more so his convictions, had powerful impact on the Convention. He did not win all arguments; the Convention did not adopt his every viewpoint, especially his position that slavery should be abolished. That argument would be won decades later during the fight to save the Union.

But Mason, as much as the Federalist James Madison, contributed to the constitutional birth of this nation's Union. Mason cherished liberty and distrusted a strong central government. He feared that the Constitution, as proposed, would produce enormous growth in the power of the federal government and threaten individual liberties.

The first to speak on the Convention floor in favor of the Constitution's incor-



George Mason

poration of a Bill of Rights that would provide personal guarantees to individuals and explicitly limit government's powers, Mason made a final plea for its inclusion before the Convention adjourned. Upon its rejection, he was one of three men present who refused to sign the final draft of the Constitution that was sent to the states for ratification.

As Madison later reported to Jefferson, "[Mason] considers the want of a Bill of Rights as a fatal objection." Four years later, on December 15, 1791, only a few months before George Mason died, his home state Virginia ratified the Bill of Rights, making the first ten amendments part of the Constitution. That Bill of Rights is both a tribute to and a confirma-

tion of George Mason's vision that individuals have fundamental rights that no government, however constituted, may alter or abolish.

It is altogether fitting, then, that Walter Williams, a man from Philadelphia, a professor at George Mason University, should speak to us on "The Legitimate Role of Government in a Free Economy."

When I read Professor Williams' work, I see an advocate of individual liberty, virtuous action, personal responsibility, private property and limited government. When I listen to him, I hear the voices of men like George Mason, and I am uplifted by his belief in moral standards and individual achievement and merit. When I listen to Walter Williams, I hear, as Paul Harvey called him, "a professor who can translate economics into shirt-sleeve English," "a first-class man" who, like George Mason in his day, is "at long last, ... being heard and heeded."

So, ladies and gentlemen, I suggest we roll up our shirt-sleeves and get ready to listen, to think, and to be challenged. For George Mason has, this day, returned to Philadelphia.

This essay appeared under the title "The Spirit of George Mason" in *The Frank M. Engle Lecture 1993, The Legitimate Role of Government in a Free Economy*, a lecture delivered by Walter E. Williams at The American College on May 24, 1993.
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