

## INTRODUCTION

### *The Last American Liberal*

It was one of the greatest upsets in American political history. Nearly every poll and pundit predicted a sweeping victory for the Republican candidate in 1948. His party was confident and united, and he had massive campaign funds to spend on newspaper and radio ads. In the weeks immediately prior to the election he ran a relaxed campaign, preferring to issue press releases and publicly discuss his new cabinet and legislative agenda. In contrast, the Democratic candidate led a badly divided party. Distrustful of his outspoken advocacy of racial equality and calls for the expansion of social programs, many conservatives had bolted. He was so short of money that he could not afford radio ads, billboards, or even campaign buttons. While the Republican pondered appointments, the Democrat conducted a non-stop personal campaign to bring his message directly to the people. Working eighteen-hour days with up to fifty speeches, he railed against the “do-nothing Republicans” and promised to expand the New Deal programs of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Despite his energy, the only groups that seemed to respond were African Americans, labor unions, and ethnic organizations. Many of his supporters privately told reporters they had abandoned hope for victory in the contest for the executive and were concentrating their efforts on electing Democrats to Congress. Newspapers, nearly unanimous in their support of his

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opponent, even prepared headlines announcing a Republican victory.

Despite the polls and predictions, on November 9, 1948, the Democrat pulled off a stunning victory. G. Mennen “Soapy” Williams defeated Republican incumbent Kim Sigler to capture the governorship of Michigan. On the same day, Harry Truman beat Thomas Dewey.

In early 1985, the Episcopal bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa embarked on a speaking and fund-raising tour of the United States. The most famous critic of South Africa’s racist policy of apartheid, Tutu came to America to lobby for support for black rule and racial equality in his nation and to solicit funds to expand the anti-apartheid effort.

After an exhaustive tour in the Northeast, he flew to Detroit for a reception at the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, the home of an affluent congregation that had provided money and support for racial equality in both America and Africa. Tutu was tired and spent only a few moments with each guest. In exchange for their donation, each received a handshake, a smile, and a chance for a photo with the guest of honor. As he worked the room, Tutu was introduced to a tall figure in a green and white polka-dot bow tie. “I am Mennen Williams,” he announced, “I was assistant secretary of state for Africa.” Tutu smiled and shook his hand without any sign of recognition. “That means Ambassador to Africa,” Williams explained. The African nodded and began to move on. Williams’s wife, Nancy, followed him and said: “Bishop Tutu, this is Soapy Williams!” Tutu paused, turned around, smiled broadly and shook hands again. “Ah, *Soapy* Williams! You’re a great man!”

The new Michigan Supreme Court justice faced a hostile audience. The Economic Club of Detroit was a bastion of conservatism. Its members had been nearly unanimous in their opposition to his policies as governor, and many had campaigned against his election to the court. This elite group of bankers, financiers, and brokers felt he had “betrayed his class” by attacking the wealthy and demanding taxes on income and

profits to pay for programs to aid the poor. They viewed him as antibusiness, soft on crime, and an advocate for a more activist and intrusive role for the judiciary. Most expected a speech defending the rights of the accused or a call for stricter regulation of business. Few expected a sermon.

After a brief introduction, the speaker moved to the podium and recited the words of the Old Testament prophet Micah: “He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” The Supreme Court, like all other branches of government, has an obligation to “do justly” and offer “love and mercy,” Mennen Williams argued. Removing his glasses, he paused and looked directly at his audience. Man is God’s instrument to ensure a just and fair society on earth, he declared. We know what is right and just, and it is our obligation to our God to see that it is done in politics, in business, in the law, and in life.

Critics denounced G. Mennen Williams as a do-gooder, and they were right. Although the term was meant to be derogatory, Williams was convinced that it was his fate and duty to do good in the world. To understand his actions you must know his thoughts, and always at the core of his thoughts was religion.

Religion and politics are often joined in America, and invoking the name of God rarely hurts an elected official. If there are no atheists in foxholes, there are few if any in U.S. politics. While politicians may appeal to a higher power, few were as directly motivated by personal faith as was Mennen Williams. He was convinced that the overriding objective in life is to try to live out the teachings of Jesus and that government is the perfect vehicle to facilitate Christ’s admonitions to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and love your neighbor. To Williams, politics was a noble calling, as it carried with it the power to do good in the world. Such power must be in the hands of “good” people, who will use it to create a better society for all. Civil rights for all races is not only an essential part of the American civic creed as expressed in the Declaration of

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Independence, but it is also a moral issue, a divine mandate ordained by scripture. To him, expanded mental health facilities, raising the minimum wage, and building new schools were more than political programs. They were religious activities to move toward the just society that Jesus proclaimed.

Williams never hid his religion. Nearly all of his speeches were laced with biblical references and quotations, and political opponents were often perplexed to hear themselves referred to as “lost sheep” or “forgiven sinners.” At political dinners Williams would frequently offer a loud prayer, even after the guests had begun eating. (He would even go into the kitchen to pray for the cooks and waitresses.) His opening words at his first inaugural as governor in 1949 declared: “Not quite two thousand years ago, Jesus of Nazareth said that He came into this world so that men might have life and life abundant. . . . He enjoined men to have a care for one another, not only in matters of the spirit, but in the production and distribution of the necessary goods of this world. . . . It is for this purpose—that men may in fact live together as brothers having a care for one another—that modern democratic states exist.” He concluded by saying that in the past Michigan had failed to live up to Jesus’s proclamations, but beginning that day it would begin to do so.

Such overt religious imagery and references seemed to some critics to be hypocrisy, as Williams was a tough and at times vicious politician who frequently relied on personal attacks, innuendos, and smears. By portraying his enemies as lost sheep he implied that he alone understood God’s intent and he alone could carry out His plan. His opponents were not convinced that God was a New Deal Democrat.

His religious beliefs also led Williams to develop an unshakable belief that he was right and near total confidence that his decisions were correct. Even when his choices led to political disaster he never doubted that they were right. He was certain God was on his side, even if the legislature, the voters, or bureaucrats in the State Department were not. His faith also led him to an unwavering optimism, and he rarely brooded over setbacks, as he was certain he would win the next fight. Politics

and policies were a form of divine battle, and he never questioned the ultimate outcome.

If religion was at the core of Williams's political ideology, it was expressed in an unyielding and at times strident liberalism. The Great Depression and Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal response shaped his vision of government, and he was faithful to this model until his death. He never moderated his commitment to ever-expansive state and ever-increasing social programs even as the nation moved away from these New Deal assumptions. To Williams, government was the solution to society's problems. It was the instrument with which to achieve racial equality, alleviate disparities in wealth, and empower the masses. America had big problems and needed big government. As the rich had most enjoyed the nation's resources, they should pay the most for programs to help those less fortunate. This may appear to be a rather simplistic political theory, but to Williams it was the essence of good government.

His convictions were consistent, and that was his problem. His belief in governmental power and his refusal to compromise led his state into bankruptcy and destroyed his dreams of occupying the White House. His eagerness to inform others (even within his own party) of their failures pushed him ever farther toward the margins of American political power. "The word *compromise* is not in my vocabulary," he proclaimed, "I am more of a John the Baptist than a disciple." In U.S. politics, however, compromise is often the means to accomplishment and maintaining power, and John the Baptist lost his head.

Mennen Williams's career showed both the strengths and weaknesses of twentieth-century American political liberalism. He was one of the few politicians to adopt and maintain an absolute commitment to racial equality in the era prior to the emergence of a national civil rights movement. He revitalized and reorganized the Democratic Party in Michigan, building a powerful coalition of organized labor, African Americans, academics, and ethnic groups that broke the stranglehold of the Republicans on the state and became one of the most successful political machines in the nation.

His six electoral victories, however, never led to the expan-

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sive liberal agenda he advocated for his state. Faced with a hostile Republican legislature, he often chose confrontation over consensus. If *compromise* was not in his vocabulary, neither was *pragmatism*. His accomplishments as governor were impressive but never all that he hoped for and never enough to make Michigan into his model for America.

When he shifted from Lansing to the State Department he proved to be surprisingly adept in adjusting to the different political environment of Washington and the new arena of international affairs. He was an unyielding advocate of an “African first” foreign policy that rejected the prevailing European orientation of American diplomacy. Williams’s vocal opposition to colonialism and continued white minority rule on a black continent enhanced America’s image in Africa and ultimately led to a significant reorientation of U.S. policies. He also displayed an ability to understand and survive in the internecine world of bureaucratic politics while maintaining his fundamental principles.

His dedication to “Africa for the Africans” and advocacy of a major U.S. economic commitment to the continent’s development, however, had only limited results. As in Michigan, he refused to accommodate himself to the realities of the situation, and the continued importance of Europe and the ever-increasing dominance of the war in Vietnam combined to frustrate his vision of a new American foreign policy and led him to return, unsuccessfully, to electoral politics.

During the last sixteen years of his life, as a jurist on the Michigan Supreme Court and later chief justice, he displayed previously unrevealed skills as an administrator by modernizing an archaic legal system and showed a new and surprising ability to work for compromise and consensus. Although his core liberal beliefs remained intact, they were muted in the secretive and supposed nonpartisan atmosphere of the judiciary. The uncompromising liberal emerged as the voice of reason, compromise, and camaraderie in the 1970s and 1980s. Age and the changed mood of the nation transformed the combative “Soapy” into the conciliatory and revered “Justice Williams.”

Williams’s career was unique in American politics, as it

involved three distinct areas of government: executive as governor of Michigan, administrative as assistant secretary of state for Africa, and judicial as a member of the Michigan Supreme Court. It also embraced both domestic and international issues. His life provides a vehicle through which we can better understand both the issues and the personalities that dominated America in the decades after World War II. At his best, he was the liberal conscience of the Democratic Party, demanding a clear commitment to racial equality, expansion of the economic reforms of Franklin Roosevelt, and basing political decisions on the needs of the people over the powerful.

The style in which he advocated his liberalism, however, often alienated the very national leaders he wanted to influence. Williams knew well and interacted regularly with nearly every major figure in the Democratic Party from 1948 to 1968. His relationships with Adlai Stevenson, Hubert Humphrey, Estes Kefauver, Averell Harriman, Chester Bowles, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and others offer an insight into the ideas and actions of these individuals as well as an understanding of Williams. He liked them all (he seems to have liked nearly everyone, even Republicans), but his constant hectoring, refusal to accept compromise, and unsolicited advice managed to anger each of them. At the 1956 Democratic National Convention, he managed to provoke the wrath of Stevenson, Johnson, and Kennedy within seventy-two hours, and they never forgot his actions. (Kennedy and Johnson would become his bosses and Stevenson his colleague when he moved to the State Department in 1961).

Mennen Williams began his career when television was an insignificant aspect of U.S. politics, when black Americans still faced legal segregation, when society dictated that women remain subservient, when Europe ruled nearly all of Africa, and when the global battle against a monolithic communist conspiracy was assumed by nearly all Americans. During his forty years in public office, he witnessed the communications and media revolution, the end of legal segregation, urban riots, black separatism, the feminist revolution, the independence of the third world, the divisiveness of the war in Vietnam, and the

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beginnings of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The nation and the world had changed and so, too, had American politics. But Soapy Williams did not change. His vision of America, formed during the Depression and New Deal and sharpened during the 1940s and 1950s, was consistent but increasingly old-fashioned during the turbulent 1960s and 1970s.

In an age of political consultants, focus groups, and calculated image, Soapy Williams seems to be of an ancient age. When the word *liberal* is political anathema and both political parties have scurried toward the center, Williams's unending advocacy of *more* programs, *more* spending, and *more* power in government is decidedly out of fashion. His call for an American foreign policy committed to third-world economic development and racial harmony seems equally anachronistic in an era of brutal power politics and military solutions to international issues.

Williams's repeated religious emphasis and flamboyance are perhaps even more distant than his populist policies. He would be a current political consultant's worst nightmare. Who would vote for a skinny, six foot four millionaire in a polka-dot bow tie who loves square dances, quotes the Bible, and is called Soapy? In an era of sophisticated TV ads designed to avoid too clear a position, how could you "package" Mennen Williams? In his era, campaigning began at 4:30 a.m. with handshaking at automobile plant gates and ended eighteen hours and thirty speeches later dancing the schottische at the local Polish American club. Today a candidate's thirty-second TV spot would reach far more people, and the message could be carefully modified and targeted. Bill Clinton may have played his saxophone on MTV in 1992, but MTV has millions of viewers. His folksiness and flamboyance seems calculated compared with Williams's volunteering to sell ice cream cones at a county fair or getting out of his car at railroad crossings to pass out campaign literature. Few U.S. diplomats today would strip to a swimsuit and ride a water buffalo in the Philippines or dismiss the translator so he could practice his French with Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia (who did not speak the language).

G. Mennen Williams was a fascinating mixture of political idealism motivated by religious conviction and a tough, com-

bative politician who used nearly every means to advance his agenda and punish his enemies. He could be a sophisticated intellectual, lecturing his audience on Roman history, Greek philosophy, biblical criticism, Michigan botany, and English common law and then lead his campaign staff in the Mexican hat dance to celebrate his reelection. He was the rich kid from Grosse Pointe, heir to the Mennen cosmetic fortune, who campaigned by attacking the wealthy and the indifference of big business. He got the highest grades in the history of Salisbury preparatory school, graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Princeton, and was awarded the Order of the Coif at the University of Michigan Law School. He did not smoke, drink, or swear, but his greatest support was among the tough blue-collar workers in Detroit's union halls. He went to mass every morning, studied the Bible every night, and spent much of his time battling Jimmy Hoffa and the Teamsters for control of the Democratic Party in Michigan. Williams was occasionally cocky and always ambitious but never pretentious. He built a bridge connecting the two Michigans, he built a new Democratic Party in his state, he tried to build a new American foreign policy, and he built a more efficient Michigan court system. But for every accomplishment in Michigan and Washington, there was a failure. The failures were as often the result of his style and personality as they were his policies. He claimed he could say "hello" in seventeen languages. He had a hard time saying, "I'm wrong" in any.