

The End Is Near and How It's Going to Be Awesome: How Going Broke Will Leave America Richer, Happier and More Secure

Kevin D. Williamson

A misleading title to an otherwise interesting book.

Williamson is a good writer; he has excellent credentials and a vast amount of experience. He chose the title that would sell the book, but it does not describe the book. It teasingly suggests that the developed world will not be able to support its high level of debt, decreasing level of education, and so on for very long. It proposes that when the old is gone, the new which replaces it will be more attractive.

The book hits on both sides of the equation. Our system of entitlements, in the United States and most of the developed world, is unsustainable. However it works out – other authors are more articulate – governments will simply have to default on promises they have made for retirement and health benefits. There will be something of a collapse, and somehow institutions will persist after the collapse. The title suggests that the author will lead the reader from A to B. That does not happen. There is no discussion of the nature of the impending collapse, or a suggestion of the mechanics by which healthier institutions will reemerge.

He does talk about healthier institutions. Williamson talks about the coercive nature of government and legal systems. He notes that human societies have developed a number of alternatives to formal governments and formal courts of law. Informal negotiation, arbitration, and community norms would be three of them.

He talks about the problems of writing legislation that will actually improve things. There are several strikes against this happening in the first place. First, the electorate is not well enough informed to recognize its own interest. Secondly, the interests of the legislators are not aligned with those of the voters. A legislator wants to get reelected and wants to get rich, most case. Third, there is the agency problem. Even a well-intentioned law has to be implemented by people. Those people have their own venal interests, as time servers until they retire, or worse, selling their office for financial gain. The upshot is that politicians make laws because, among other things, that is what they are elected to do. Those laws rarely improve the well-being of society. Specifically, in this week's news, we learned that Oregon conducted an experiment of providing universal healthcare to some people and not to others on a random basis. The outcomes were the same, even though those who did not have to pay for doctor visits used much more medical service.

Society is vastly complex. Even creating models to properly understand how it operates is impossibly difficult. Modelers recognize that they have to simplify, leaving out variables. They hope that the variables which they omit are not critical. Public policy, however, complicates the equation by attempting to change things. We are not simply trying to understand how healthcare works, but we are attempting to change outcomes. The author cites authorities who estimate that public policy only

achieves positive results, however short of the intended result, about 10 percent of the time. Quote: “Jim Manzi, an entrepreneur and mathematician, examined experimental data derived from randomized field trials— the gold standard of scientific evidence— in his 2012 book, *Uncontrolled*, and his main finding was that 90 percent or more of the policy innovations in health care, education, and criminal justice produced no measureable benefit when subjected to the most rigorous standard of examination.”

The author states that politics is a monopoly. It is averse to change, because it is not subject to evolutionary pressures. It does not grow more efficient over time; it grows less so. Under politics, gross misallocation of material resources can continue indefinitely— right up until the moment that the material resources run out, in fact. Democratic procedures are insufficient. He quotes James Bovard , saying, “Elections are vastly overrated as a means for restraining government abuses.” Abuses are the least of it— politics paradoxically does more harm when it is performing as intended than when it is distorted by lawlessness or corruption.’

He provocatively claims that government is violence. Government likes to pretend it has a monopoly on violence. It is by nature coercive. The author draws comparisons between mafias and legitimately constituted governments, historical parallels between the rise of market groups, the Taliban, and English kings. The use of force is always the same. The consent of the governed is a matter of choosing the lesser of evils.

Making his case for voluntary associations, the author makes the point that reputation is important. Many fracking operations operate with environmentally protective measures for an excess of what the law requires. They do this as a matter of professional solidarity with one another and the result is that when a company does accidentally despoil the environment, if they have been conscientious they will get lighter treatment.

The discussions about how to save Social Security are rather fanciful. The analysis of what’s wrong with the program, that there are unsustainable benefits are that is absolutely on the money. The idea of how wealthy might pay more on behalf of the poor is not as well conceived. It is true that the scheme could transfer either income or wealth to the poor. Or rather, to a trust to be dispensed on behalf of the poor.

However, he doesn’t go into the problem of free ridership. If the money is there, certainly people will queue up to take it. It is worth more to them than the people from whom it is extracted. More than that, the impecunious would use the small income to have more children, while the more responsible, higher earning people would feel constrained about having children. There would be a constant slide downhill.

Williamson says that the rich might be willing to give five percent. It’s not that they are selfish, but that money given to politics is used by politics. You cannot trust politicians to efficiently administer giveaway programs. In that he is absolutely right, although the five percent taken from a family making \$150,000 per year would represent a significant bite. It is not easy to raise children even on \$150,000 year in the

big city. After taxes you have maybe \$100,000, And given the state of the schools, after a couple of private school tuitions you're down to half that. The money does not go nearly as far as he would anticipate.

Williamson does obliquely concede that the poor may be poor on account of their own bad decision-making. He does not go into whether or not they could remedy that bad decision-making. This is really at the crux of the problem. People make bad decisions for number of reasons, not the least of which is that they do not have the intelligence to do otherwise. Intelligence being hereditary, their children suffer the same deficit. At a minimum there are vast cultural bridges separating the subpopulations of many developed countries, especially the United States. Williamson would like to think that most of the world shares his rational approach to life. It is simply not so. He should read Gert Hofstede and Robert Putnam to name some uncontroversial authors. Authors whose work is not discussed in polite company, Arthur Jensen, Richard Lynn and Philippe Rushton would propose even more profound reasons for bad decision-making.

Williamson does not even mention race and ethnicity. He talks about our altruistic, charitable impulses. These stem from our distant ancestry, and they are certainly stronger toward members of our own kind, that is only to members of the family and tribe, than to strangers. While we certainly celebrate and support genius in any race, the enthusiasm for money being transferred from our average children to average or even somewhat above average children of other groups slows down in a hurry. We are a tribal species, we support our own. Williamson uses the word "blackmail" quite appropriately to describe how society currently buys peace by transferring money from one group to another. He should not deceive himself that it is given ungrudgingly.

Williamson has a relatively short but good riff on homeschooling. He darkly suggests that the authorities resent and resist it. Whereas this was the case perhaps 20 years ago, homeschoolers are relatively unmolested in the United States. Germany and Sweden are the places where the government strongly enforces its monopoly.

Williamson observes that private schools are really an extension of public schools, one which allows people who can afford it a way out of a failing system. He points to the irony of the fact that 40 percent of public school teachers in Philadelphia put their own kids in private school. Private schools are something of an escape valve, in that they can exclude the academically unpromising via admissions, and can expel troublemakers, enforcing classroom discipline. But what he does not say is that private and public schools both draw from the same pool of teacher talent. As he does say, they are the group which scores the poorest on SATs and other standard measures. They are also exposed to the same relentless education school brainwashing. Private school education is better because the kids are smarter, but not because the schools differ radically in philosophy. I write this as a former private school parent, trustee, teacher and education school student. I am homeschooling my second family.

The Kindle edition of the book has a significant problem with superscripting, or lack thereof. In the discussion of complexity, Williamson throws around several very large numbers. One of those is

4.51×10^{17} . The problem is, this is not a large number at all. What he means is 4.51×10 to the 17th power, which is large. This problem occurs half a dozen times.

Williamson uses two words, statist and etatist, which are similar both in meaning and spelling. The latter, derived from French, means a believer in state socialism. I would've benefited by a footnote as to the etymology of the word. It is not one that one frequently encounters.

Overall, the book was a pleasure to read. Williamson is a delightful writer, and his points are well made. I reluctantly give it five stars. The content merits such a rating: the deceptive title, however, is hard to forgive.