The Knowledge Project Keypoints — Society, History & Education

The Knowledge Project Keypoints

Episodes in this pack: 7

Top Principal: Stop Sending Your Kids to School | Joe Liemandt

Guest: Joe Liemandt
Date: 2026-03-31 · Duration: 2:11:47
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRcVDhOkij4

KEYPOINTS

• Traditional school is time-based and coded for IQ and conscientiousness, so money alone can't fix it.
Liemandt argues the classroom model rewards two traits—high IQ and being a natural grinder—and doesn't adapt for anyone else, while family income strongly predicts outcomes. Pouring in more money doesn't raise either trait. Standards have quietly dropped: he says about 80% of Harvard grades are now A's, and the median U.S. student gains roughly one point on the 300-point NWEA MAP scale from eighth grade to senior year.

• Mastery-based AI tutoring makes learning effort-based, not IQ-based.
Knowledge is cumulative, so a seventh grader who struggles usually has fourth- or fifth-grade holes. Like a coach who won't let a point guard lose the ball 20% of the time, the system only advances you once you know material cold. Bloom's 'two sigma' finding showed mastery tutoring's power but was unaffordable with human tutors. Grade-level laws in some states make it illegal for teachers to teach below grade—so the sixth-grade teacher hands sixth-grade work to kids who can't read.

• Material takes far less time than school allots: roughly 20–30 hours per grade per subject.
Seventh-grade science gets ~180 class hours plus homework in a normal school; with Alpha's app, Timeback, the average student masters it in about 22 hours. Lessons target the 'zone of proximal development'—80–85% correct—because 99% means no learning and 50% means disengagement. He estimates the teacher-in-front-of-the-class model wastes about 90% of kids' time.

• Generative AI writes personalised lessons; chatbots for academics are 'cheatbots.'
Alpha doesn't hand kids ChatGPT—he says 90% of academic chatbot use is cheating. Instead an LLM combines the curriculum, the child's knowledge graph, their interest graph (baseball analogies, an Avengers choose-your-own-adventure at the right Lexile level) and, from 2026, cognitive-load theory. A frontier model also watches the screen and coaches behaviour, with a 'waste meter' flagging skipped videos or scroll-to-the-questions habits. It currently costs about $10,000 per child, which he aims to cut below $1,000, then $100.

• Motivation is 90% of the problem, and time back is the motivator.
His first week as principal, fifth graders said they'd love school with 'less school'—ideally none. They negotiated two focused hours in exchange for four hours of 'awesome stuff.' Ed tech mostly fails, he argues, because dropped into a six-hour day kids have no reason to engage. At the sports academy, kids play once the meter turns green, and coaches tell them to stop messing around so everyone can play.

• The rule: kids must love school—more than vacation.
When 96% of students said they loved school the metric stopped being useful, so Alpha now asks whether they'd rather be at school than on vacation; 40–60% say yes. In May, two-thirds of high schoolers asked him to keep school open over summer. He challenges executives who say school should be 'spinach': would they say that about their employees' jobs?

• High standards with high support is what makes kids happy.
Kindergartners climb a 40-foot rock wall, harnessed, and come down beaming. Child development is a cycle of struggling, failing, sometimes crying and succeeding with a caring adult—a cycle families expect from sports but schools rarely provide. He links middle-school disengagement and mental-health problems to low standards and dopamine loops, not to pressure.

• Redefine teachers as guides who only connect and motivate.
A standard teacher needs five hard skills: subject expertise, teaching technique, motivating kids, handling parents and administration—then gets underpaid. Alpha removes subject matter and pedagogy (AI handles them), hires a dean of parents, and hires the top 1% of teachers purely to coach. Parents of teens are asked: do you trust your guide to hold high standards so you can provide unconditional love?

• The school owns the outcome: if a child isn't learning, it's the system's fault.
About 50% of educators leave when told they're accountable for every kid learning. Lesson designers get on calls with kids stuck on their lessons. He traces this to Jack Welch telling him that even an award-winning product sucks if the customer gets no ROI.

• Parents are being misled by grade inflation.
Among hundreds of transfers from $40–75K private schools, some A students were ahead a grade, but many more were three years behind; B students were three to seven years behind. Parents also resist having kids fill gaps below grade level, which is why many schools fear assessments that would reveal holes.

EXAMPLES

• Results: top 1% in every subject and 2x growth in two hours.
Alpha students score top 1% on MAP in every grade and subject; a typical student expected to gain five points gains ten. Third and fourth graders outscore half of U.S. high-school graduates. Many students score 790–800 on SAT math; non-honours targets 1350 in two hours a day, honours 1550 plus AP fives in three.

• '100 for 100': $100 for a perfect state test at any grade level.
Seventh graders who thought 100% impossible pick the third-grade test, ace it, then fourth, then get 75 on fifth and let the tutor fill gaps in about a week. Alpha now gets more perfect scores in a 200-student building than a district of 100,000. Fewer than 10% of parents think their child could score 100; Alpha kids say 'of course.'

• Second graders running a 5K by December.
Guide Faith taught Atomic Habits' 1%-better idea, signed the class up in August for a Christmas Jingle 5K, walked the track with them on day one, then added a quarter-lap of running each time. They finished in about 35 minutes and told parents, 'I can do anything.'

• Texas Sports Academy: $300 a month for aspiring D1 athletes.
Tuition is $15,000; Texas's new $12,000 voucher leaves income-eligible families about $300 a month. Students arrive mostly in the bottom half academically and use the same two-hour system, testing whether selection effects explain Alpha's results.

• Jack Welch's reality check after the Forbes cover.
Liemandt arrived as the youngest self-made Forbes 400 member; Welch rated him roughly a mid-level product manager and asked whether this was his first step or his last. Liemandt wrote 100 to-dos on the flight home. Welch also bet him and his son they could switch from hockey to skiing only by finishing first and second in a race—they did.

OTHER RELEVANT

• Make goals definitive and small.
Alpha's dashboard says 'you're 6 hours away.' Math Academy publishes hours per course (about 28 for a grade of math); student Maddie earned her New York flight to meet a Broadway producer by putting in the hours to hit 790.

• Use extrinsic rewards to change a child's self-image, then withdraw them.
Middle schoolers get $1,000 for reaching top 1%; once they see themselves as good students, payment isn't needed—alumni in college hold 4.0s unpaid. Earned money teaches saving, investing and the lesson of losing it at 13 rather than 27.

• Run a 168-hour audit.
Students draw an ikigai of who they want to be, then log every hour of a week and realise they're on track to be 'the world's best TikTok scroller.' Passion projects pull them out.

• Quantify soft skills to scale them.
Every third grader solves a Rubik's Cube, every eighth-grade class finishes a Tough Mudder together, fourth and fifth graders pass Wharton's MBA teamwork simulation, and an AI app grades public speaking.

Pierre Poilievre: Canada Is About to Collapse

Guest: Pierre Poilievre
Date: 2025-12-27 · Duration: 0:54:40
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Go5wjr20mTs

KEYPOINTS

• Poilievre's first principle: government is the legal use of force, so it should only do what people can't do for themselves.

Pierre Poilievre, leader of Canada's Conservative Party, argues that what makes government unique is its legal power to compel. That justifies the military, border control, policing, basic infrastructure and support for those who can't provide for themselves. It does not justify business subsidies, since capital and credit markets exist, or government acting as a media provider.

• He defines Canadian identity as freedom, not ethnicity, and wants a 'Canada first' civic pride restored.

He cites Wilfrid Laurier saying 'freedom is its nationality' — people 'don't come here for the weather.' Protestants and Catholics who fought for centuries in Europe got along in Canada as neighbours. He blames the 'post-national state' framing and immigration at levels too high to absorb for people dividing along home-country lines. His wife, who arrived about three decades ago, was taught to feel privileged to be Canadian.

• On immigration, his diagnosis is 'too much, too fast' relative to housing, jobs and healthcare.

He says roughly a million arrivals a year grew the population almost 3% while housing stock, jobs and doctor and nurse supply grew about 1–2%, producing shortages and weaker integration. He would end the temporary foreign worker program, arguing it undercuts wages even where youth unemployment is in double digits.

• He calls today's young Canadians 'generation screwed' — and the hardest-working youth since WWII.

His 'rap sheet': doubled housing costs pushing down payments into the late 30s, rising rents and food prices, and job competition such as 700 applicants for one role. He meets waitresses working 60 hours while taking university classes. His pitch is 'hope, jobs and homes,' and he explicitly treats hope as electoral strategy: if voters believe nothing can improve, incumbents win by default.

• Economic second-order effects show up in family decisions.

He recounts an airline attendant and his partner deciding never to have kids because they can't afford more than a 600 sq ft apartment. Poilievre, who had his first child at 39, cites a study that laid-off parents reported higher happiness than childless unemployed people, while saying he respects people who choose not to have kids.

• Deficits are lose-lose: borrowing crowds out private capital and printing causes inflation.

With a $78B deficit, 'everything comes from something.' He points to Israel cutting its deficit in the 1990s, freeing capital that fuelled its tech sector. His signature proposal: no capital gains tax when gains are reinvested in Canada, taxed only on final cash-out.

• His US strategy is to gain leverage by opening other export markets.

He calls American capitalism and military the most powerful in history and right next door. Oil and gas is Canada's biggest net export. One blocked pipeline to northwest BC would move about a million barrels a day — roughly $30B a year or $1,400 per family — about 75× the $400M from an Indonesia trade deal. Canada has ~1,300 trillion cubic feet of gas selling for about four times as much abroad.

• He argues corporate subsidies to foreign multinationals don't deliver.

Companies 'lawyer and lobby' money out with few conditions, then 'cash and dash.' He cites a ~$15B Stellantis deal — almost $1,000 per family — after which it cut Canadian jobs and announced a $13B US investment. His alternative is broad tax cuts on investment and energy that apply only to activity in Canada.

• 'Complexity has been weaponised.'

Asked whether empathy has been weaponised, he says the real issue is programs too complex for the average welder or small-business owner to scrutinise, letting a 'bureaucratic and political industrial complex' expand. He notes over $240B spent on Indigenous priorities since 2014 with poor outcomes, and names 'Build Canada Homes, which doesn't build any homes.'

• On speech: if citizens can't judge truth, neither can censors.

He says the best antidote to bad information is more good information. He questions whether media receiving $3.4B+ in support since 2017 (excluding the CBC) can be independent — 'Can something that is dependent be independent?' — and criticises Bills C-11 and the online-harms proposal.

EXAMPLES

• Reconciliation through enterprise.

He cites Chief Billy Morin of the Enoch Cree Nation cutting unemployment from 20% to 3% and balancing the budget, and Ellis Ross of the Haisla helping land the $40B LNG Canada project, the largest in Canadian history. Both are now in his caucus.

• Paying an electoral price for honesty.

He says he openly promised to shrink the federal bureaucracy while running for an Ottawa seat and lost it, rather than say what voters wanted to hear.

• A Windsor treatment centre with a 70% first-attempt success rate.

He contrasts abstinence-based treatment with safer-supply programs, which he says profit pharma and bureaucracy. One graduate started a renovation company employing only fellow graduates. He traces the crisis to Purdue's OxyContin and proposes murder charges for trafficking over 40 mg of fentanyl, since 2 mg can be lethal.

• Personal side: Hulk Hogan and a funeral-home limo.

At 10 or 11, his dad built a PVC wrestling ring and Bruce Hart taught the kids to wrestle; they rode to Stampede Wrestling in a funeral home's limousine. He was elected at 24 against the Defence Minister and likes being underestimated. He trains with kettlebells in 15–20 minutes and is now mostly carnivore.

• Daughter Valentina's progress.

His favourite memory of the year: Valentina, who faces challenges and isn't yet speaking, now communicates through her own signs, follows the day's plan and proudly chose dress shoes for a Hanukkah party.

OTHER RELEVANT

• A simple anti-worry loop.

From a Hindu priest: do you have a problem? If not, why worry. If so, is there a solution? Either way, worry doesn't help. He says the more stress he faces, the less stressed he gets by focusing on what he controls.

• Don't grant powers you wouldn't want your opponents to hold.

Shane's framing for his kids, which Poilievre endorses: never give your friends power you wouldn't want your enemies to have — applied to censorship.

• Listen as a citizen, not a fan.

Shane notes both Poilievre and Prime Minister Carney got the same invitation, with no questions in advance and no editorial control. These are one party leader's positions; weigh them against the other side.

My conversation with Pierre Poilievre

Guest: Pierre Poilievre
Date: 2025-04-13 · Duration: 1:20:57
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hS-xso4Nmo4

KEYPOINTS

• Poilievre frames his 'why' as 'the Canadian promise': you can start anywhere and get anywhere.

He was adopted by two Calgary schoolteachers, and his wife came to Canada as a refugee from Venezuela. He rejects comparisons to Trump, citing Trump's wealthy upbringing and policy differences. He says the opposition leader's job is adversarial by design ('two sword lengths apart'), but governing means uniting people as 'Canadian first', judging individuals by conduct rather than group identity.

• His case for growth starts with natural resources as the base of the national economy.

He argues resources are Canada's largest export sector, which supports the dollar and purchasing power. Resource companies and their workers pay large amounts of tax that fund roads, hospitals and schools. He lists Canada's endowment: third in oil, fifth in gas, first in uranium and potash, the longest coastline and the most fresh water. He proposes training 350,000 young people for trades jobs he says can pay $200,000–$300,000, and giving First Nations a stake in royalties. 'Decline is a choice.'

• He explains the productivity gap as a shortage of investment, not of good workers.

By his figures, Canada produces about $53 US of GDP per hour worked versus $78 in the US. Business investment is about $15,000 per worker per year versus $28,000 in the US, or 65 cents for every dollar of the OECD average. He says workers lack the machines and equipment that raise output, and blames high taxes and slow permits. He cites Ireland, poor when his grandfather left and now with about twice Canada's GDP per capita, after embracing low taxes, fast permits and free trade.

• He proposes making Canada the fastest place in the developed world to get permits.

He cites the second-slowest building permits in the OECD, 17 years to approve a mine, and a 14-year wait for the Indigenous-led Squamish LNG project. His plan is to repeal C-69 and C-48, target six-month approvals for major projects, and create 'shovel-ready zones' where environmental studies are done in advance and a legally binding permit is pre-published. He'd add a 25% regulatory cut and a two-for-one rule audited by the Auditor General, because the current one-for-one rule is gamed by merging rules under fewer titles.

• His tax pitch centers on a 'Canada First Reinvestment' cut: no capital gains tax when proceeds are reinvested in Canada.

A business owner selling after 40 years would get a deferral by reinvesting in homes, businesses or equipment such as CNC machines, but not if the money leaves the country. He also promises a 15% income tax cut for the average worker, calling income tax 'the fine we pay for the crime of hard work', and cites a $500 billion net outflow of investment to the US over a decade.

• He argues big government and deficits transfer wealth upward, 'from the have-nots to the have-yachts'.

He says inflation from deficit spending hurts the poor while asset owners gain, and housing restrictions inflate mansion values while shutting out young and immigrant buyers. He points to $21 billion a year on consultants ($1,400 per family) and says Mark Carney wrongly dismissed inflation risk in 2021, while farmers and small-business owners predicted it. He wants to keep the core social safety net.

• To balance the budget, he'd make politicians feel scarcity through a dollar-for-dollar rule.

Every new dollar of spending would need a dollar of savings, modeled on the 1990s US pay-as-you-go rule he credits with balancing the budget under Clinton. He invokes Thomas Sowell: economics starts with scarcity, and politics ignores it. He'd shrink the public service by not replacing all of the 17,000 annual retirees, and cut consultants, foreign aid and corporate grants.

• On tariffs, he'd retaliate but offer a tariff pause and quick renegotiation, using only concessions Canada could reverse.

He argues retaliation is needed for deterrence. He'd propose freezing tariffs for 100–120 days to renegotiate CUSMA, and offer increased defense spending for the shared continent, which he says Canadians want anyway. Any commitment would be revocable if tariffs returned. He argues tariffs on Canada strengthen China by weakening both North American economies.

• He wants to reduce dependence on the US by getting energy to other markets.

He says nearly all Canadian gas and about 95% of its oil go to the US. Canadian LNG sells for about $4 versus about $14 in Europe. He cites advantages: cold weather making liquefaction about 25% cheaper, 11 days' shipping to Asia from BC versus 20 from the Gulf Coast, and surplus hydroelectricity. He'd create a pre-approved national energy corridor. For internal trade barriers, he'd pay provinces the extra federal revenue generated when they remove them.

EXAMPLES

• 23,500 projects in two years

During the financial crisis, he says, the Harper government's infrastructure minister demanded one-page applications and a single environmental review. 23,500 projects were completed in two years, and he says the environment commissioner found no resulting environmental harm. His takeaway: the extra reviews protected nothing.

• Seven years in BC, seven weeks in Dallas

A BC businessman waited seven years for approval for a plaza. In Dallas, the mayor met him at the airport and he had permits in seven weeks.

• 40 offenders, 6,000 arrests

In Vancouver, police arrested the same 40 people 6,000 times. He blames the C-75 bail law and proposes jail rather than bail for repeat violent offenders, a three-strikes rule, release earned through behavior and job skills, and addiction treatment for 50,000 people.

• The eye surgeon working as a technician

The technician at his Ottawa eye surgery performs surgeries in the UAE but can only assist in Canada. His fix for an estimated 20,000 immigrant doctors and 32,000 nurses is a voluntary national licensing exam modeled on the 72-year-old Red Seal standard for trades.

• Greenhouse tomatoes and Rio Tinto aluminum

He argues carbon taxes on Manitoba greenhouses make Mexican tomatoes cheaper locally. Rio Tinto's Saguenay smelter emits about 2 tonnes of CO2 per tonne of aluminum versus about 14 in China, so he'd cut taxes on low-emission Canadian producers to reduce 'carbon leakage'.

OTHER RELEVANT

• His view on media and speech

He'd repeal C-11 and end media subsidies, which he argues can make coverage look dependent on whoever offers the most money. Citing Bastiat's candle-makers petitioning against sunlight, he argues more voices are an opportunity. Incitement is already criminal, and for AI rules he wants full transparency about any instructions the government gives AI companies.

• Why trust in government fell

He argues that people were promised help, then got doubled housing costs and food-bank lines, so government should do 'a few things right'. On his reputation, he says what reads as aggression comes from caring about people who are struggling, and he wants voters to go to the polls hopeful, not angry.

• Parenthood and empathy

His six-year-old daughter Valentina is non-verbal, which has made him think about how families of children with disabilities pay their bills and plan for decades ahead.

Tyler Cowen: Prepare for the Brave New World | Knowledge Project Podcast (Audio)

Guest: Tyler Cowen
Date: 2022-11-22 · Duration: 0:53:49
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSMIzfDyxZI

KEYPOINTS

• 'Average is over': you either work with smart machines or compete against them.

The divide Cowen describes is whether computers enhance your productivity or replace you. Old factory jobs that needed no degree built the middle class, but that era is mostly gone. Today's work means relearning technology every three to five years, which many people find very hard. Two groups do well: the highly conscientious who are good with tech, and people with superb people skills in sales, marketing and management, which computers won't take over soon. His advice is to figure out which you are and be one. Doing both, like Mark Zuckerberg, is rare. The outlook is mixed: income gaps widen, but automation makes many goods nearly free, so the poor consume better than you'd expect.

• Regions and countries are diverging, not catching up.

After World War II, poorer American cities caught up with richer ones. Now poorer parts of Louisiana and Mississippi fall further behind Silicon Valley. Creative clusters form where rents are very high, and you're either in one or not. Much of Eastern Europe is emptying out despite the economists' convergence story. Even the clusters suffer: most artists can't afford Manhattan, or now Brooklyn. What we gain is access to culture in seconds through Spotify, YouTube and Netflix. It's denser, if less often live.

• Global markets push value toward what's scarce: prime land, good ideas and unique skills.

Since he first wrote that, Cowen says, it has become more extreme. Land prices in London, Paris and top US cities keep climbing, and a hit product that once reached Western Europe and Japan can now sell to billions in more than 100 countries. Attention is scarce too, especially for high earners, so media rewards authentic or niche work like The Sopranos or The Wire: 'you can't just put slop out there anymore.' He expects most newspapers to depend on wealthy owners, with The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal among the few that stay profitable. Bundling classifieds, sports and world news together 'was always crazy'.

• America has become a 'complacent class': individually rational safety that makes the country collectively worse off.

Americans move less, worry more about how they raise children, medicate more, and run a less dynamic economy, with slower productivity growth outside tech. Every item on that list makes sense individually. Together they mean slower growth, budget strain and 'screwy politics'. Change has actually slowed. His grandmother saw antibiotics, cars, radio and flight arrive by age 50. At 56, Cowen lives in a 50-year-old house and drives a car anyone from 1968 could operate. Post-war science fiction imagined utopias; today's is dystopian. Complacency can't last, and he cites the Trump phenomenon and the loss of Pax Americana as early cracks.

• We've stopped building the physical world. Price the roads instead of waiting for technology.

Parts of New York's subway signaling date from the 1930s and 1940s. People prefer homes from the 1920s–50s, though no one wants a phone from then. Getting around takes longer than it used to. Cowen favors congestion pricing: tolls on I-66 into Virginia can hit $30–40 at rush hour, but without them 'it was just a big parking lot'. London and Singapore show it works. Self-driving cars could make traffic worse if people send empty cars to fetch smoked salmon from Whole Foods.

• The future belongs to the 'meta-rational': people who know their limits and when to defer.

Algorithms will increasingly tell you what to buy and at what price, and people who think they can beat them will make more mistakes. The key skill is knowing when to trust Yelp, a podcast or an expert. 'Epistemic modesty' now pays off more than raw IQ. Build judgment by combining trusted mentors face to face with 'extreme and intense online experimentation': Wikipedia, creative Googling, blogs and a carefully curated Twitter feed. Online learning built in about 15 years is, he says, among the world's greatest achievements, like 'the 1780s for classical music'.

• Learn to be re-energized by never being the best. Chess taught him most moves are mistakes.

Online, someone is always smarter or stronger, unless you're Magnus Carlsen. When peer groups were local, that wasn't so obvious. Cowen played tournament chess intensely from about 10 to 16. Following Alexander Kotov's How to Think Like a Grandmaster, he wrote out his own analysis of games and compared it with a grandmaster's 'to see how rotten yours was'. An Elo rating tells you exactly where you stand every morning. He calls the lesson compound learning: keep learning a steady percentage a year and 'stay alive'.

• Avoid 'devalue and dismiss', and assume you're wrong more often than you think.

Bayesian logic says someone always knows more than you, but you need judgment to pick whom to copy. So hold opinions more loosely and become a generalist at evaluating sources, since 'the internet makes smart people smarter and stupid people stupider'. If something offends you, don't assume it's wrong. Cowen prefers books he disagrees with, because books he agrees with bore him. In arguments, including with a spouse, you're right less than half the time, since often both sides are wrong. Internalizing even 10% of that helps.

EXAMPLES

• How he reads

He finishes about one book in ten. The first 20–30 pages decide whether to continue, and more than half fail. Reading 'quickly' comes from a lifetime of reading: asked how long a book took, the true answer is '53 years'. He reads physical books because he remembers where things sit on the page, and folds corners to fix ideas in memory.

• Quake books

When you're young, books like Hayek, early science fiction and John Stuart Mill's autobiography can shake your worldview. After 40, reading shifts to history, biography and 'cultural anthropology' of places and industries. He rereads Shakespeare most.

• Don't give books as gifts

People read gifted books out of obligation and look for hidden messages. He leaves review copies in a lending library near his house.

- **Parenting advice**
  In the teen years, introduce your child to as many admirable friends as possible. By then they've absorbed what they will from you.
- **Minimum wage and compounding**
  Raises cost some jobs and get partly given back through higher food prices. He judges policy by whether it involves compound learning, as productivity growth does.

OTHER RELEVANT

- **Low rates hurt savers**
  Near-zero rates (as of this 2018 conversation) reflect global wealth seeking safe assets. He fears thin retirements for millennials. His daughter saves using fixed, almost religious rules.
- **Managers are philosophers**
  As others specialize, managers become generalists who must understand what motivates people. CEOs are increasingly hired from other industries.
- **On Bitcoin**
  In 2018 he called it a legitimate store of value, not a bubble but not a currency, and blockchain still unproven beyond it.

Robert Greene on Reading, The Laws of Power, and Detecting Lies | Knowledge Project Podcast Archive

Guest: Robert Greene
Date: 2022-10-11 · Duration: 1:14:35
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwqveKLfpfg

KEYPOINTS

• The 48 Laws of Power lasts because it tells the truth about power that polite books avoid.

Published in 1998, when Greene was 39 and had 'no success' after jobs in Hollywood and journalism, the book sold steadily for two decades and is nearing two million US copies. He designed it to feel timeless by drawing on all cultures and periods of history. He wrote it out of 'hunger and anger' that books about power were so skittish about the manipulation he'd seen in offices and politics. He admits some literary license, but says every chapter reflected things he'd lived through or seen. Some readers hate it for exactly that reason. Its success then brought him into consulting with powerful people in music, politics and business, including 50 Cent, which made him 'a little more sophisticated'.

• Social intelligence is more than half of any power situation.

His next book (on human nature, in progress during this conversation) grew from Mastery's chapter on the 'seven deadly realities' of people, which drew huge reader response. It became 18 timeless elements, including envy, grandiosity, irrationality, narcissism and passive aggression. You can be brilliant at coding, he says, but if you can't deal with people you won't get far. Knowing your own aggression or narcissism is what lets you improve. He also deliberately added more stories about women, such as Coco Chanel, because 'you can't write a book about human nature if it's all white men'.

• Great books show deep thinking and are willing to speculate. Bad ones have one idea and repeat it.

After roughly 2,000 books of research, Greene can tell from the back cover or the first five pages whether a book has 'juice'. Weak books state an interesting idea in chapter one, then repeat it, or grind an axe. He found Walter Isaacson's Steve Jobs rushed and shallow, and says 5,000 pages on Napoleon never quite nailed 'what made him tick'. He admires Robert Caro's Master of the Senate as 'an incredible treatise on power'. He mostly reads biographies and dead authors, and avoids contemporary pop nonfiction (even Malcolm Gladwell) so he won't overlap with it, aiming for the 5% that's truly his.

• His note-card system: mark the margins, wait weeks, then transcribe onto cards by theme.

He reads a good book carefully and marks passages in the margins, skipping 'like hell' through bad ones. A couple of weeks later he copies the notes onto cards, each headed with a theme such as 'envy'. If one book yields nine cards on a theme, it may anchor a chapter. Irrationality alone gathered more than 100 cards from more than 50 books. He writes by hand with a fountain pen because 'there's a logic to it', it makes him think more deeply, and he can flip through 2,000 physical cards, backs included, faster than on a screen. He taught the system to Ryan Holiday.

• Let the themes emerge from the research, like reducing a sauce.

For the 48 Laws he read Machiavelli, Sun Tzu, Clausewitz and Nietzsche without knowing what the book would be. About 80 recurring themes emerged and were 'whittled down' to 48. The human nature book went from about 30 themes to 24 to 18. Keeping the project open-ended keeps it alive: 'you can sense the brain matter of the writer flickering on the page.' Decide everything in advance and 'it dies on the vine'.

• Translate history into psychology you can act on, such as Napoleon's flank attack.

Writing The 33 Strategies of War meant asking how Napoleon's flanking maneuver applies to someone at a Silicon Valley software firm. The answer is indirection: no punch is more powerful than an unexpected one from the side. A frontal approach lets rivals raise their best defenses. A surprising sale, seduction or competitive move works on the same psychology as Austerlitz. He spent months with annotated Chinese texts of Sun Tzu to understand what force and momentum really are.

• Sustain hard mental work with routines, and be 'a bit of a tyrant' about your time.

Each book takes him about four years. He writes three hours a day, which is 'about all I can stomach'. He meditates every morning (Zen, for about eight years), swims a mile and a half nonstop every third day, hikes, and does a yoga and Pilates routine. A daily 20-minute back routine, holding each pose about a minute, ended his back pain. He says no to almost everything near the end of a book. It's lonely, but constant distraction short-circuits the unconscious processing that produces ideas in the shower.

• Realism means widening the small slice of reality you perceive: yourself, other people and the times.

Maybe 95% of our mental processing is unconscious. Raising your awareness to 6–7% makes you a realist. First, ask why you're drawn to a book, a person or a field ('know thyself'), so you can choose work that fits 'your weirdness'. Second, stop projecting onto others; you can be married 30 years and not know someone. Third, read the zeitgeist and your competitive environment. Ask questions like Socrates, assuming you know nothing about the person in front of you: 'the worst sin today is people feel like they know everything.'

EXAMPLES

• Spotting a bullshitter

Ignore the words and look at what they've actually done, Machiavelli's 'effective truth' applied to a warlord pope. Watch nonverbal signals too. Constant talking signals insecurity, while quietness and admitting you're wrong signal substance.

• Outshining the master

As a TV researcher he was so good at finding stories that everyone resented him, and he was fired. He broke Law 1 three or four times before writing it down.

• Say less than necessary

Talking more makes you seem common and makes foolishness likelier. Saying less makes people talk, which reveals their desires. He criticizes oversharing online: 'I don't really want to know where you went to lunch.'

• Escape 'tactical hell'

Plan all the way to the end: set a one-year goal against a rival, then work backward, instead of reacting to every tweet like an

animal.

- **Live time vs. dead time**
  The only thing you own is your time. A Burger King shift is dead time, unless you're reading Nietzsche, studying customers at 2 a.m. and saving for night school. Then it becomes live time.

OTHER RELEVANT

- **The favorite law is Law 48**
  Formlessness means staying alive to each situation, which can mean ignoring the other 47. Which law matters depends on where you are.
- **His big mistakes were career choices**
  Journalism and Hollywood cost him creative years, but through amor fati he treats them as lessons.
- **Don't step into great shoes**
  Following a famous predecessor, or writing like 'Malcolm Gladwell Jr.', invites comparisons you'll lose. Set off in a fresh direction.

Balaji - This country will win the future (and how they'll do it)

Guest: Balaji Srinivasan
Date: 2022-07-07 · Duration: 0:26:54
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXHbToq1SDU

KEYPOINTS

• The century may be China versus the Indians.

Asked to bet on one country to dominate the future, Balaji Srinivasan names China — then adds that by around 2040, the century may be defined as centralised China against India and the international Indian diaspora. That would echo how the second half of the 20th century was the US against the USSR. He stresses it's a historical analogy, a scenario rather than a certainty, and he doesn't put extremely high weight on it. But he argues that the civilisations rising after generations of being laid low are China and India.

• The number one power can fall fast.

In 1913 the British Empire was 'the big dog,' if rickety. Then came what Balaji treats as a 30-year war from 1914 — a 'giant bar brawl across continents' including the invasion of Manchuria. In that 'final four showdown' of Japan, Germany, the US and USSR, plus France and the UK, Britain was knocked down to third or fourth by 1950. Few in 1913 predicted it. But Alexis de Tocqueville, in 1835, foresaw Russia and the Anglo-Americans each holding 'the destinies of half the world,' extrapolating from growth trajectories and sheer land.

• The US resembles late Britain or the 1980s Soviet Union.

Balaji isn't a bull on the 'American empire.' He sees a rickety edifice cracking inside and out, like the late USSR with its Solidarity strikes, Gorbachev's reforms and alternating crackdowns, until it fell over. Possible triggers, none certain: hyperinflation, military defeat, or both. One scenario is 'financial secession,' where cities and states refuse the old debts. He points to state attorneys general coordinating and the interstate compacts revived during the pandemic as states building that muscle. Places leaning into the future — Texas, Florida, Colorado, Wyoming, perhaps New York City under Eric Adams — may do well.

• From USA to 'America,' as USSR became Russia.

When the Soviet empire ended, the ambitious players of the global 'great game' left. What remained was Russia, a culture you might love for Pushkin, nationalist rather than universalist. Balaji expects the US, after any collapse, to become 'America': baseball and hot dogs, not hundreds of bases worldwide. That's closer to the late-1800s commercial republic; global empire was a mid-century development. Isolationism is growing on both left and right, and an empire, he argues, is either expanding or contracting.

• China plays the world's best home game.

Look at Shanghai and Shenzhen before and after, the bullet trains, the infrastructure: China built the country in 40 years and became the world's manufacturing powerhouse. It took years of mockery as uncreative and kept its head down while building a treasury, a military and infrastructure across Africa. Balaji lists its human-rights record — Falun Gong, Tiananmen, Hong Kong, the Uyghurs, tech founders, Taiwan — and says people must hold two ideas at once. You have to respect a rival realistically before you can compete. He doubts that China can't build a blue-water navy: it ships to the entire world and knows logistics. WeChat beat Facebook, and its Groupon equivalent was more innovative than Groupon.

• Building big requires building small.

Why could a democratic 1950s America build, when today's can't? Balaji's answer isn't authoritarianism but culture. Mid-century Americans were acculturated to the assembly line, punching clocks and executing physical work. Today we hit keys on keyboards. China is arguably the only society still deeply acculturated to factory work. Offshoring manufacturing has non-obvious consequences. Governments allocate billions yet can't build a bus lane or bullet train because nobody involved has built anything. Like hiring software developers without knowing software, they can't call out 15 layers of subcontracting and graft.

• China's weakness: it's terrible at English-language PR.

Following Ross Douthat's idea of a 'Chinese decade, not a Chinese century,' Balaji says China excels at persuasion on its own internet, which has 'root': every node ultimately folds into the Communist Party. But it can't make its moral case in English, so it relies on hard power and money. Power causes fear, and fear causes bandwagoning: China's neighbours are as nervous of it as Russia's are of Russia, but more so. The scale is reversed from WWII. The Allies outnumbered Nazi Germany's 70 million about five to one; China's 1.3–1.4 billion outnumber the US's 330 million about four to one.

• India is the Goldilocks base.

China is dangerously competent, Balaji says, and the US state dangerously incompetent; India sits in the middle. It's competent enough to keep the lights and internet on — 4G LTE reached almost a billion people in about five or six years — but not so competent it threatens anyone. Its nuclear deterrent is enough to defend itself. Infrastructure has improved dramatically in about a decade, with modern highways and traffic lights, and he says Chennai is cleaner than San Francisco. Meanwhile, the US and India almost seem to be switching places.

EXAMPLES

• A tech and media superpower.

India is third in tech unicorns and exports CEOs and founders. Hollywood credits like Tenet's 'look like a New Delhi phone book,' thanks to Indian animation and graphics work. And most English-speaking internet users, followers and likes will increasingly be Indian.

• The Kill Chain's war games.

Christian Brose, John McCain's aide on the Senate Armed Services Committee with sight of the whole budget, including the black budget, opens his book by noting the US has lost almost every war game against China. He later left to join Anduril.

• Legacy media's lost niches.

Balaji argues outlets like Teen Vogue and Sports Illustrated have abandoned their niches for predictable politics. That leaves openings for Substack-style newcomers and for creators in VR and crypto, where Indians' verbal and visual talent could thrive.

- **The liminal Anglosphere.**
  India, Israel, Singapore and Nigeria 'forked' the UK code base differently from the US. A Nigerian, Singaporean, Israeli and Indian technologist share common law and cultural references, and could form a rising coalition on the English internet.

OTHER RELEVANT

- **Defence is decentralising.**
  Like Thiel moving into national security and Palmer Luckey from VR to drones, Balaji sees technologists pushing defence's frontier.
- **Explicit versus implicit speech codes.**
  In Chinese-controlled territory, the rules are explicit: don't criticise the party. Watching what you say in the US, he argues, is similar but unwritten.
- **Hold this lightly.**
  Balaji repeatedly frames his forecast as one scenario that 'may be completely wrong.'

What You Can Learn From History's Greatest Innovators | Walter Isaacson | The Knowledge Project 121

Guest: Walter Isaacson
Date: 2021-10-05 · Duration: 1:24:37
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkAV3UvcNUI

KEYPOINTS

• Smart people are a dime a dozen. Isaacson studies creative people who see patterns across fields.

Working at Time, Isaacson noticed that intelligence rarely amounts to much on its own. What set Franklin, Einstein, Jobs, Leonardo and Jennifer Doudna apart was creativity: an interest in everything knowable, and the pattern-spotting that let them make mental leaps others missed. He writes chronologically because that's how lives and character develop. A Louisiana mentor told him the state produces preachers and storytellers: 'For heaven's sake, be a storyteller.' He edits on screen, then prints everything at night, reads it on paper the next morning to catch 'kludgy' sentences, and then reads it aloud.

• His biographies are not how-to books. Learn from many lives and play your own cards.

When people, Elizabeth Holmes among them, told him they used his Steve Jobs as a manual, he said 'don't try this at home'. There's only one Jobs, and only one Leonardo. You need to study many lives, see what makes each person effective, and work out what fits you. Isaacson admits that as a manager at Time and CNN he was never comfortable being brutally honest. Jobs ('if something sucks, I tell them to their face') kept only A players. Doudna has prospective lab members meet everyone first, so that people feel they fit. Franklin was the diplomatic 'glue' among passionate, upright and brilliant founders. Each style worked for its owner.

• 'Impute': everything signals something the moment people see it.

Mentor Mike Markkula's 1979 memo listed empathy, focus and the awkward word 'impute'. Jobs insisted on four-color boxes for the original Mac despite the cost, because the box had to impute delight. Opening an early iPod felt like opening a Tiffany jewel box. Isaacson contrasts this with junky remote controls and software that seems to announce a bad experience. Jobs put products before profits. Chasing profit leads to cutting corners, and building an insanely good product brings the profits.

• Care about the beauty of the parts nobody sees.

When Jobs and his father built a backyard fence, his father insisted the back facing the scrubland be as beautiful as the front: nobody else would know, 'but you will know.' So Jobs fussed over the original Mac's circuit board inside a sealed case, and had about 30 team members' signatures engraved inside it, where only they would know. Isaacson watched Jobs and Jony Ive handle about seven prototype European plugs, discussing their chamfers and how each would feel in the hand. The flip side was perfectionism that delayed shipping, until Apple put up a sign: 'Real artists ship.'

• Creativity comes from in-person collisions in diverse places, and then disperses.

Jobs designed Pixar's headquarters so everyone had to cross the atrium and bump into each other. Florence in the 1470s, Philadelphia in the 1770s and Silicon Valley in the 1970s became cradles of creativity because diverse people and ideas gathered there. Such places burn out when tolerance is crushed, as with Savonarola's bonfires of the vanities. Zoom recreates maybe 60% of it. The CRISPR scientists started in person and then worked across three continents. Today, creativity is spreading to Austin, Nashville, New Orleans, Boston's Kendall Square and even Memphis, where CRISPR is being used to treat sickle cell.

• Leonardo shows that curiosity, not raw horsepower, is within everyone's reach.

Einstein had a processing power most of us can't match. Leonardo probably wasn't as rigorous as his mathematician friend Luca Pacioli. What he had was insatiable curiosity about things the rest of us stop noticing. Both Leonardo's and Einstein's notebooks ask why the sky is blue. Leonardo sprayed water into light, wondered why fish swim faster in water than birds fly in air, and dissected heart valves well beyond anything his art required, purely for delight. He was illegitimate, gay, left-handed and distracted, yet Florence embraced him. Children are all curious, Isaacson says, until grown-ups tell them to quit asking dumb questions.

• Perfectionism cost Leonardo many finished works, but it made the Mona Lisa.

Leonardo completed only a handful of paintings. He kept the Mona Lisa, commissioned by a Florentine merchant as a portrait of his wife, through Milan, Rome and France, adding thin layers until his death. He understood that the center of the eye sees detail and the periphery sees shadow and color better. If you look directly at the corners of her lips, they don't turn up. Shift your gaze and the smile appears. He and Michelangelo, a gregarious figure and a loner, were commissioned as rivals to paint opposite walls of Florence's town hall, and both quit.

• Don't specialize too soon. Go deep on a few things, but also go wide.

At Time, one of the last general-interest magazines, Isaacson might write about medicine one week and music, business or politics the next, which trained him to see patterns. 'You can learn anything,' as Sal Khan says. He studied tensor calculus to understand general relativity, then left the equations out of the book. Read original sources where you can: Einstein's 1905 special relativity paper has one footnote and is 'gloriously written'. Leonardo left more than 7,000 notebook pages, and paper's 'battery life is almost infinite'. Then triangulate with interviews.

EXAMPLES

• Knock on the parents' door

At 17, at the Times-Picayune, an editor sent him back to interview the parents of a girl who'd been killed. They wanted to talk. Ever since, he has known that people love talking about themselves if you just listen, and if you stay silent, they fill the silence.

• What he left out of Jobs

He weighed how important a detail was for readers against how hurtful it would be, especially for things the sick Jobs said in anger in his last year. He chose history over clickbait.

• Why CNN changed

With three networks, the goal was a broad, reliable audience. With 500 channels, the formula became a passionate niche, sometimes enraged on purpose. He hopes reader revenue and paying per article will reward valuable content.

• Ada Lovelace's leap

Byron's daughter was tutored in math to keep her from being 'poetical', and she invented 'poetical science'. Seeing punch-card looms, she realized Babbage's engine could handle anything expressible in symbols. A century later, Turing answered 'Lady Lovelace's objection' that machines can't think.

• The 17-year-old ethicist

David Sanchez, a teen with sickle cell, first said his kids should decide on editing because the disease forged his persistence. Later he said he'd edit them. Isaacson's point is to have first, second and third thoughts.

OTHER RELEVANT

• The CRISPR race

Doudna and Charpentier showed in 2012 that bacteria's virus-cutting system could be programmed to cut targeted DNA. Feng Zhang's lab beat Doudna's to human cells by about two weeks and won the first patents. The Nobel went to Doudna and Charpentier.

• Hard ethical lines

Isaacson edited human cells himself. Curing disease seems clear-cut, but the rich buying better memory for their kids would encode inequality into the species. Is a natural sprinter's mutation fairer than an edited one?

• Life is a river

Near the end, Jobs told him it isn't what you take out of the river but what you put into it.