

In April 1962, U.S. President John F. Kennedy spoke at a dinner honoring Nobel Prize winners and said this: “I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.” Yeah, “except when Jefferson dined alone.” Isn’t that a great quote? All that Nobel-level brainpower and amazing knowledge gathered together in one room as a gaggle of some of the world’s top specialists...and President Kennedy compares them to one man, Thomas Jefferson!

And what a man Jefferson was, clearly accumulating great learning and accomplishing great things. How about these... The third President of the United States. The second U.S. Vice President. The first U.S. Secretary of State. The primary author of the U.S. Declaration of Independence. Founder of the University of Virginia. Starter of several libraries from his personal collections of books. Jefferson’s knowledge and his libraries were both encyclopedic in scope. Then, take a look at Jefferson’s wide array of talents, skills, and activities: naturalist, agronomist, paleontologist, linguist, lawyer, inventor, architect.

And then there’s this: slaveowner. Ugh. Yes, a huge blotch on his record that some feel justly obliterates all his life’s contributions. But quite paradoxically, in his era Jefferson himself refuted the widely-held notion that *Native Americans* were inferior—yeah, he believed that Native Americans were equal in body and mind to people of European descent. So. Go figure. For Jefferson: Native Americans, yes. Blacks, no.

But the underlying, driving reason for Kennedy’s accolades about Jefferson is the comparing of generalists to specialists. Back in 1953, the philosopher Isaiah Berlin reached all the way back to a Greek philosopher to acquaint modern folks with this adage: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” And that’s the point about Jefferson—he knew a whole lot about *many things*...he wasn’t just knowledgeable about *one thing*. Jefferson was a fox, not a hedgehog...that’s what Kennedy was saying.

Which brings me to the subject of this podcast episode—Thomas Sowell. Who, you might say? Well, of all the people living today, Thomas Sowell is certainly a top one worthy of knowing. Well, let me amend that just a bit: most of us can’t really *know* Sowell in an intimate personal sense. But you can feel like you know this unusual man. Just ask his countless fans around the world who read his writings and hear him—and give almost universal responses: wow, meaningful learning...powerful mentoring...immense gratitude.

So just who is Sowell? Well, hold on to your hat. Not only is his early story fascinating, but it’s also totally relevant and integral to the impact he has had throughout his professional life. Thomas Sowell was born in rural North Carolina to a household with no running water or electricity. He became an orphan at a very young age. His great aunt adopted him and moved to Harlem. He was seen as very bright but dropped out of school at age sixteen. He took on a number of menial jobs, keeping a knife under his pillow for protection in his neighborhood. Sowell called this era his “school of hard knocks.” He then joined the Marines, becoming skilled at photography and teaching pistol shooting.

Here’s what Sowell wrote about this time of his life. “In retrospect, even my misfortunes were in some ways fortunate, for they taught me things that would be hard to understand otherwise, and they presented reality from an angle not given to those, among intellectuals especially, whose careers have followed a more straight-line path in familiar grooves. I have lived through experiences which they can only theorize about.” Let me stop right there—because that is exactly right!

Here’s the deal. Sowell has influenced millions of people for decades through his unique books, syndicated newspaper columns, and numerous video podcasts. But his research for what he speaks of or writes about is consistently *empirical*. And here’s what the Oxford language dictionary says that “empirical” means: “based on, concerned with, or verifiable by observation or experience rather than theory or pure logic.” Let me be blunt: this alone sets Sowell apart from many in the modern era. Truth be told, massive numbers of opinions—whether written or spoken—are based on flimsy, biased, often twisted theories. And that’s especially true in the research areas where Sowell dwells. And where are his conclusions? Sowell can be easily accessed...he’s on Twitter (now known as “X”) with over a half million followers, that remarkably

on an account first established and then run by an anonymous fan who had never even met him. And just go to Amazon and look for the books Sowell has authored. Or easily find his videos online.

So, what happened next in his life...how did he get to that summit? Well, after the Marines, Sowell earned his GED degree, then started at Howard University, then transferred to Harvard, where...no surprise...he affirmed Marxism. He earned a degree in economics, then a master's degree from Columbia. He wanted to study further under his mentor at Columbia, George Stigler. But Stigler had accepted a position at the University of Chicago, so Sowell followed him. And Sowell earned his doctorate there in 1968 with his dissertation written under the tutelage of both Stigler and none other than the amazing Milton Friedman.

Bet you know a bit about the University of Chicago and its economics experts—but wow, Nobel prizes in Economics have been awarded to 34 professors there since 1970—including Paul Samuelson...Friedrich von Hayek...Milton Friedman...George Stigler...Ronald Coase. These economists have been powerfully influential in their individual nooks and crannies of the economics field, epic-ly so. This “Chicago School” routinely upended conventional wisdom in economics in favor of free markets...in monetary policy...and much beyond that in many areas. So where does Sowell fit into that constellation?

Well, no Nobel has been awarded to Sowell, even though Milton Friedman called him a genius! *Better for us*, he has taught *millions* with his street-savvy, grounded thinking that often explodes political correctness and changes minds. And like Jefferson, Sowell didn't confine himself to a narrow slice of reality.

Indeed, Sowell did teach college for a number of years, then the elite Hoover Institute at Stanford University beckoned and that opportunity freed him up to research and write broadly. Ultimately his now-famous, highly-regarded book titles include *Knowledge and Decisions*, *A Conflict of Visions*, *The Vision of the Anointed*, *The Quest for Cosmic Justice*, and *Basic Economics: A Common-Sense Guide to the Economy*. I'm looking at a couple of those books on my bookshelf right now. But there's more: ThomasSowellTV on YouTube has 375,000 subscribers and 550+ videos at the moment...and as their blurb about those videos says, “Enjoy the best of Dr. Thomas Sowell. We use the work of Dr. Sowell to debunk cultural narratives.”

So, needless to say, the practical-thinking, real-world Sowell left utopian Marxism decades ago, and his revised intellectual position certainly cost him favor in university curriculums in America. That's simply because he pokes holes incessantly in many sacred cows about supposed cultural and economic “truths,” stuff that “everybody who's anybody” supposedly “knows.” Early on, Sowell and his research had been doing that in various areas. But he was then getting encouraged to do work on always-explosive race issues. Here's how author Jason Riley reported on that in his fabulous biography on Sowell titled *Maverick*.

“Sowell may be best known for his writings on racial controversies, but race isn't a topic he initially set out to explore. ‘I never thought that just because I'm black, that made me an authority on race matters. I figured there were people who specialize in this stuff and they must know what they're talking about. Then I started reading what they were saying, and so much of it was rubbish. I thought, ‘Good heavens, it's time for us amateurs to get into this thing.’” The rest is history. Like so often happens, Sowell's clear-eyed, data-driven approaches to thorny problems dependably anger armchair theorists and demagogues.

Did you catch a key point there? *Sowell is Black*...yes, a Black man who has helped liberate folks of every ethnicity to pursue the best answers without regard to false cultural or racial preconditions as to what conclusions “must” be reached. And do you remember his biographer, Jason Riley? Well, Riley happens to be Black, too, and writes for the *Wall Street Journal* with Sowell-like approaches—a high compliment!

Let's conclude with an intimacy that bridges across eras: *slaveholder Thomas Jefferson meet Thomas Sowell, a free Black man* who's every bit the deep thinker and savvy generalist that you were...yes, Thomas Sowell, every bit the equal of you in gifting, then highly productive in advancing and modeling the inherent promise of the words that you yourself wrote about equality in the Declaration of Independence. So, Mr. Jefferson: Native Americans, yes indeed! But Blacks, yes, too! *And bravo, Thomas Sowell*—you embody the Declaration's promise of equality rightly unleashed...and then truly realized into personal greatness!

A&A: Application & Action

1. Before hearing or reading this podcast episode, were you familiar with Thomas Sowell? If so, go re-read a favorite book or access a video online. If not, why not? ... You are missing an easily-accessed treasure trove of knowledge and wisdom! Where to start? Try Sowell's majestic book *A Conflict of Visions* to see him sculpt a very important, foundational facet of reality. Begin by reading Amazon reviews of the book. Action!
2. Americans live in the midst of character assassination that's routine in the current cancel culture. Isn't it deeply gratifying and even exhilarating to grab on to the story of Thomas Sowell, a man who rose from destitute orphanhood to the greatest heights of substantive influence? So, are you choosing to be saturated with this type of expectant thinking exemplified by Sowell? Or are you more debilitated by the current cancel culture? Discuss.
3. We need and access specialists so much in a modern country in the modern era—plumbers, electricians, doctors, and more! But just who are you accessing to get information and wisdom from—those amazing generalists who are *seamlessly integrating specialized information into the appropriate, big-picture reality-based context*? Make a list of those folks....be sure to include Thomas Sowell and the Apostle Paul on it...as well as other extraordinary people who can do that for you as part of your ongoing learning. Then share your list with others.