GAUTAM: There's something about some leaders that they're able to listen to, someone who tells them, “I think you're wrong,” and actually listen and internalize it and change their viewpoint. And it has something that's the sense that, like I told my students to think like a scientist, right. That what makes a scientist special - the only thing that I signed as special is they try to prove themselves wrong instead of trying to prove themselves. Right. Right. I have this line I use over and over again, “Your brain is not wired to make you right. It's more required to make you feel right.”

CHRIS: Welcome to *No Turning Back*, a podcast hosted by General Stan McChrystal and myself, Chris Fussell. Our goal here is simple: to have serious conversations with serious leaders so that we can learn from the best and navigate these complex times together. Thanks for joining us.

ANNA: This week, Stan and Chris speak to Gautam Mukunda. Gautam is an expert in leadership, who says he aims to have the world's most confusing resume. Gautam is a Jeopardy champion, former consultant, an author of two books, and a Research Fellow at Harvard Kennedy's Center for Public Leadership. He has degrees from Harvard and MIT, and is the host of Nasdaq's "World Reimagined" podcast. Gautam speaks to leadership and power, the risks of having "superstars" on teams, and gives us a new perspective on the story of George Washington and his wooden teeth.

We encourage you to check out Gautam's podcast, "World Reimagined." A new season airs next Tuesday, June 8 and features the likes of Rob Kaplan, the CEO of the Dallas Fed, and John Dickerson from CBS News. Thanks so much for Gautam and his team for the team for taking the time Now, to the discussion.

STAN: Gautam my friend, welcome. And thanks for joining us today. We really appreciate it. Now I've been excited to have you on one because we've been friends for a while. And two, because you have, have a uniquely broad perspective on leadership.

You looked at it from a lot of different angles. You went to an unnamed college in Boston, you know, actually I spent a year there and I'm trying to forget that now. And Chris and I had been teaching at Yale for many years now. And so, there's a certain rivalry, but you've been a consultant. You've been an author. You've been a professor. You are all of those things you have just been, which gives you a look at leadership that may be somebody who's down in a trench C and six inches ahead sometimes loses. So, I'm going to start right out front. How you thinking about leadership now?

GAUTAM: Well, thanks Stan. It's, it's a pleasure and an honor to be here. I mean, I can't tell you how excited I am to get a chance to chat about this with you and with Chris. It's been really it's, you know, like I told some of my friends, I was being interviewed by you and they're like, that doesn't sound right. Aren't you interviewing him? I'm like, well, this time.

So, let me say first, the, the short explanation of that is that what I'm looking at right now is the, the breadth thing was key for me. So I came from, I come from McKinsey, where leadership is,

you know, like McKinsey self-defines so everyone's a leader here. You can be skeptical about that self-definition, but that's what they say. I might go to academia, I'm doing my PhD and you know what academics basically say leaders don't matter. Like, this is kind of crazy, right?

Like, like you're like, wait, what? You know and, but when you look into it, you say that's not, you know, they don't have dumb reasons for saying that, right. There's a lot of empirical evidence. There's a lot of data and a lot of theory behind why that doesn't matter. And so, the breadth was largely a product of me trying to understand how both of these groups of people who are very smart can be right. Right. So how does it make sense that, or, or if they're wrong, are they wrong in interesting ways?

Right? What is it, what is it that says that why they're wrong? And so, what I came out with were… so sort of a broader con, right? The, the, the disadvantage of breadth is specialists will always know more about their field than you do, right? Like, like, like, no matter how smart you are, you will never be as good. You know, the, the world's greatest athlete who's at a decathlete will not make the finals in the Olympics in the hundred-meter dash. It's just, it's just not, there's no one that's that talented, but it does mean that you can see things in lots of different areas that look similar, right – that someone who only sees one area will not see.

So, the thing that human brain is unbelievably good at is pattern recognition. So, what I said was like, I want to be a generalist because like I'm never going to be, I'm never going to be as good at, you know, the specific stuff. But if I look at lots of things, I can put the pieces together. And for me, what I'm looking at now is when I think about leadership, right? Like I think about … what I say is that there there's lots of work in two areas, and they're not integrated very often. And I want to sort of, what I'm thinking about right now is how to piece the two together.

So, one is this idea that, that I think of leadership as having basically two components. The way I… I have friends on the Patriots. So, the way I think about it now is practice and game time. Right? So, the practice is leadership policies. They shape culture. They pick people, they create environments. And what I would say, and I mean, I say, I mean, it's not, I learned this from you and Chris, right? Like that they empower their people to a remarkable extent, right?

One thing I'll say both from personal experience and from the empirics, right? One thing we know is that teams where people are energized and active and take ownership and sort of trying to solve problems at the ground level, will always beat teams when the superstar on that team is a genius. Right. Like, so we actually find that there's empirical research that needs to show that teams with superstars actually underperformed teams without them, because the team with the superstar relies on the superstar to do everything instead of everybody pushing out.

And like, you know, it turns out that five people are better than one person, no matter who the one person is. But one of my friends, who's more of a basketball fan than I am, said, “Look, Michael Jordan was the greatest basketball player of all time. This is pretty liberal on times, but if he'd had to play six on five, he wouldn't have won many games.”

And I had just never thought of it that way, but I think that's right. So that's the first component. And interestingly, I think, in sort of a shift in the fashion of the way we think about leadership, that's the focus now, right? When you read popular books on leadership, when you read a lot of the academic research on leadership, people talk a lot about that culture and that shaping of that empowerment.

I just know it's easy to talk about it and it's harder to do it. So, so lots of people love to talk about it, but it's harder to do it. If I'll say, Stan, when I first met, when I reviewed one of your books, and when I basically said in the review is what's most impressive about this?

It's, you know, he's saying you and Chris wrote this together, right? He's saying stuff that a lot of the people in the business literature say you should do, but he actually did it, which is different from well, from almost anyone else. So, that was what really struck me.

The second component that I've focused on is to be a leader, is to have power. Right. Like, and this is the thing for some reason that sort of dropped out of the discourse now. So, to be a leader is to, is to be a person with power and power is incredibly important. It's important in a lot of ways, right? It's important first in that it gives you the ability to make decisions and make choices that other people can't make.

And so sometimes even in the most non-hierarchical, most collaborative organization, sometimes the person at the top or the person who has influenced the organization is going to have to make a choice. And that choice is going to have huge implications. And interestingly, we've stopped that in a weird way, stop thinking about, you know, the leaders are not just the people that create the culture. They're the people who make these choices.

The second part of power that I think is incredibly important and that I was a little bit of an obsession with me at the moment is that power getting power is one of the most profound experiences a human being can have.

So, you have both, you both understand this, you know, viscerally firsthand, but people don't talk about it enough. And so I like to talk about it all the time, right? Power changes who you are. Right. We have all this research on the psychometric nature that when we make some, put someone on it, think about how easy it is to create this effect.

We ask people to write about a time when they felt powerful. We can't like give someone power in a lab, right? There's no way to do that. So, we just asked them to write about a time that they felt power. And after doing that, we find out that these people have been primed to think about themselves as powerful are more aggressive, more Machiavellian, more deceitful, and more sexually aggressive, like about 90% of them are just worse people.

So, we actually talk about this thing, the psychopathic spectrum, why like everybody's on the spectrum, right? From like Gandhi to Hannibal Lecter. Everybody's somewhere on that spectrum. And for like 90% of people, they get moved towards the Hannibal Lecter side, right? They become more psychopathic when they're given power. Interestingly about 10% of people

go in the opposite direction. They become better people. They become more honest, more altruistic, more community oriented. Essentially what we, you often hear people talk about power as a moderating force, and that's just, it's like, you know, they'll say, oh, this person has power and that will be responsible.

That's like profoundly wrong. Power is not a moderating force because when you don't have power and you pretend to be what other people want you to be in order to get power. But once you have it, you get to stop pretending. Power is a liberating force, right? Power frees you to be the person you are underneath.

And it turns out that, you know, for some people, the person they got underneath is actually better than the person they were before they had power. And so, trying to understand who those people are, cultivate, you know, leaders who are like that is, is another thing that I've, I've become increasingly obsessed with over the years, for reasons I'm sure you can both…you can like it's… that are not like hard, hard for either of you guys to figure out. And so that's the other part of what is that this, this twofold component of both the leaders as the creators and the energizers of their people and the people empower their people, but also leaders, so at the end responsibility of power devolve upon, especially in a crisis, that's that to me is the two components of leadership that, that, for some reason, don't get integrated very often.

STAN: Wow. Well, I have the power to ask a follow-up, so I'm going to abuse it now. I had a different follow-up, but, but when you took it down the road of power, it's just too fascinating not to ask about and start with a story. Military guys in my experience, Army guys, came up and you have different jobs, and you get to know your peers and they're fine people, and you get along well with them. You socialize and you see them as good people. And then when you get a certain level, we'll call it in this case battalion command, that's when you have about 600 people working for you.

I had one peer who was a very charming guy and that sort of thing. And then one day he got relieved of command because he had grabbed the telephone off his desk, thrown it at one of his company commanders, hit him in the head and sent him to the hospital. And, you know, it was, it was shocking to the rest of us. But then people inside his organization said, “No, that was him.” And it really plays to your point that this idea that when you have fewer things constraining you, you're less corseted by outside forces. Some people go in the wrong direction.

And yet we celebrate it. If I look at business magazines, I don't see the leadership team of company X on the cover. I see the woman or man who is the strong leader, and that's who I see on CNBC that's who I see… why do we celebrate the power?

GAUTAM: So, so that's a fascinating question that I've been trying to disentangle for a while now. I think one is because a combination of the size of organizations and the resources that they have now, right. And the trend, the broader trends in society, we're sort of, we've become more and more unequal. Just means that the leaders of organization, the big organizations, have a sort of towering status that's almost inconceivable two generations ago.

We now have multiple CEOs of companies who have been paid over a billion dollars and their time as CEO. That's the sort of compensation you only used to get when you founded the company, right? Like not when you just raised up through the ranks and ran it, but now a billion dollars …it's not only like, it's not unheard of, right. It happens. And so that's sort of striking. The second is, is that with those resources, so we've all heard, the sort of free, famous line, right? Like power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. So, here's the thing. People misunderstood that line doesn't mean what everybody thinks.

It means like at all right. People thinks it means all people with power become worse. Well, I mean, we just talk about that. That's true. But what the line actually is about is about other people who are studying people who have power and looking at people at power. Right. And what the essay says is, you know, we want to believe that great people are good people, but it's usually not true.

And in fact, there's research showing that people have in their psychology like a deep belief in kind of the justness of the world, but people who have power must also be good people. And so, when we see people who are a huge position, we kind of get a little hypnotized by that, right? Like it's the power has a magnetism that in many ways, corrupts, not just their judgment, but our judgment of the people who have it.

And it's just, it's just extraordinary and it's hard to step back from, right. Because, and I'll, I will then flip that on its side, the danger of that, of when you're aware of it and trying to compensate for it, is cynicism. Right. Which is to my mind, just, just as corrosive. Right? So it is, it is, it is just as bad to believe that everyone is evil, as it is to believe that everyone is good. You know, I once asked my students when they were in a very cynical mode, I was like, if someone told you the truth and you refuse to believe that, how would you recognize it? What would that look like? And the striking is saying even more is, Don Hamrick, who's like one of the great sort of towering leadership researchers who's ever lived. Don has this wonderful paper where he looks at measure CEO narcissism, and he measures it elegantly by the size of the CEO photo in the annual report and correlates that with company performance.

And he finds out that the more narcissistic a company CEO is, the worse the company that does. Right. So it's not just that we in the media do that. And it's not just that, like, if you were in this position, right. I mean, I mean, is there anything bad? So, a CEO who will go unnamed I once had dinner with, he had just stepped down from a major, you know, the leader of a major fortune 500 company. And he sits with the next to me and says, you know, when I was CEO, I got constantly harassed by all these shareholder activists who would complain about how featherbed we are and how spoiled we are and how like ridiculous all the perks were.

And I was … if they only knew what my life was really like. They would be so much more angry. Like I was glad that he had that perspective, but I actually thought that it was actually quite insightful. Right? If you've ever been around, I mean, both of you have, and I, and Stan, I mean, I imagine it's not that different when you're a senior level on the military, right. These guys are like, top level CEOs are pampered at a level that human beings can sort of find hard to process. Like maybe my dog gets treated better than that, but that’s about it.

And I think that that also plays into the desire by people, by teams to magnify this one person, both because right. It's, it's a, it's a perfect self-fulfilling prophecy. They are treated this way. Therefore, there must be a reason they're treated this way. Therefore they must deserve to be treated this way. Therefore, we should cover them as if they're treated this way. And if we cover them this way, then of course, it just feeds right back into the cycle and it increases steadily more and more and more. But the most complex, competent leaders I've ever met, sort of pushed back against that pretty strongly.

Stan, I will embarrass you slightly. I was telling some, some of my friends about you and I said, "Look, there are a lot of things I admire about him. So, the thing that I find most striking is he seems to be in this like zen-like state where there, where ego doesn't come up anymore." Right. I'm sure you have an ego, but I'm just like struck by the fact that for whatever reason, you, it doesn't seem to dominate your actions anymore.

Right? Like everybody has an ego. And I'm like, if I were to pick, like, there are a lot of things I would love to learn from you. But if I were to pick the thing, I want to learn from you, that's the thing I want to learn. Like, how did you get to that position where you're just like, Nope, I don't need to prove anything to anybody anymore. Like I know who I am, and I can do this is who I am now. And I don't need that.

STAN: Well, you're about to get married. You're going to find out where mine came from.

GAUTAM: She's very good at that!

CHRIS: Stan's very into crystals and herbal tea and meditation. So that's really fascinating thread and I'd love to pull on it just a little bit.

When you look at, I experienced that up close and personal one time, as you know, when I was, Stan McChrystal's then-Three-star general's aide in the staff that was at, you know, five years in and they, they had reached really the Zen level of running this global machine and it had this global reputation and at a very unique time in our history. Not all great, obviously. And so it was, it, it was entering into this fascinating bubble. And I was able to observe, I had a role to play in trying to keep that bubble from becoming dangerous to the organization and obviously stands, um, approach on that was critical. He was the one that insisted that that happened.

But one of my observations from that was, and I think you might've, you might be saying this as well, but, it can feed that ego. We cover it as if that makes sense. But then also when I left that bubble and reconnected with peers in that special operations community, strong-willed alpha people, they wanted to believe that that myth was true.

And I had just come from that circle and they would say, "Well, you know, McChrystal only sleeps four hours a day - superhuman." And I would say, "True, he doesn't sleep much, but he's very stressed. He can't sleep. He's running a war on like six continents at once. You wouldn't

sleep much either. And we wake them up in the middle of the night, every night. Right. So I'm guessing he would rather sleep more."

And their response was, "No, you don't get it. I'm like, I just spent a year with the man. I'm telling you like, this is, this is this isn't, this isn't a myth. This isn't… take that off the pedestal. And I always, I always thought it was part of us and I'm guilty of this as much as anyone we want to believe in the superhuman, because it gives us an excuse not to be that person.

Do you, do you ever look at that or, or any reflections there?

GAUTAM: So, plenty of reflections. I won't claim it's academic research, but it's something I've seen all the time. You see all the time. Right? So, there are people you…so, okay. So two, two components. One is it's absolutely true - there is a huge amount of variation in people's ability to handle stress and sleep deprivation, things like that. My, my, my first, you know, my mentor at McKinsey really was one of those people that only slept four hours a night and his entire life, he had never slept more than four hours a night. And it drove me absolutely out of my mind. I was like, this isn't fair. Right? So, the variation exists and it's easy and because you sort of get the urban legend, right? So like you hear stories about this person and then it spreads and then they're the one person who's like, that creates the expectation there must be other people like that. And somehow everybody's supposed to be like that.

And that's, you know, it's profoundly unhealthy, but Chris, so here's where, when I think about the legend and the, uou know, as you said, the other, the need to believe, I kind … little bit back to the earlier thing we talked about with cynicism, right? Like, I mean, we live in a cynical age. I think that's true. Right? Like we're constantly told to believe the worst of people. And human beings, like we don't function that way. Right. I mean, like there's something about human psychology. You cannot go through like, most of us can't go through life believing in that.

So, if you're constantly told that, I think what happens is you, you split out, right? Like you're like, well, everybody I meet is awful, but there's this other person, right? Who's just over the horizon who I've heard about, that person must be perfect to counterbalance all the awful that, that, that I'm told to believe in every day.

And I can't remember who the quote is from, but he said that, you know, no person is a hero to their valet. Right. And as you know, the second half of the quote is it's not because the person is any less, but because the valet is a valet, right? Like they're in that role of, uh, of sort of seeing this person, you know, naked and all their flaws.

And what I would, what I would think is that we needed some like balance. Right… So the CEO, I most admire, it was a woman named Cynthia Carroll, who was the CEO of Anglo American Mining. Whose story I love to tell because she literally changed the world, right? She went into this company 160, 2000 people. She had never worked in mining for, you know, for day in her life. And she finds out that 45 people a year are dying in their mines. And she says, I know… she goes through a board of directors and says, I'm going to fix this. And if you don't agree with it,

fire me. Right? Like, like just, if you don't agree with it, fire me, like I'm just, this is unacceptable.

And then she does over the course of six years, she takes their fatal accident rate from 45 people a year to under 10. And she does this so powerfully. It's not just that she changes their company, but every other company in the mining industry has to like follow her. So that's incredible. Right? I'm that is… that is genuinely heroic. I think of Cynthia as a heroic figure.
But I, you know, and when I first met her for the first couple of years, I was just, I was just, you know, I was just blown away by, I mean, now I know her really, really well, and I would say, you know, she's still one of the most admirable people I know, but I don't think she's perfect.

Right. Like, like if you asked her about her time and her time to see you, I think she'd say, "Well, you know, I mean, I made a mistake here," and I think I, you know, and I would say that, but it took me a long time to get to that for a long time, I, you know, I like encountered CEOs who were, you know, like the idea of making that kind of a long-term investment sacrifice for their people.

When it said you could just maximize your short term bonus would have been inconceivable. So I wanted to believe that the person who had done that was actually superhuman. But she wasn't, she was human, just like the rest of us, just able, willing, willing, and able to do something that other people could have done, but they didn't.

STAN: So let me follow that one because we tend to put leaders on pedestals and be very disappointed if they step off them. How much should we tolerate? How much humanness? And I'm really talking about human frailty. If a leader is very good business leader, political leader, but there's a dark side to their personal life, or there is a, you know… how much should we be willing to discount that, you know, that, what do you think?

GAUTAM: I mean, it's a profoundly hard question, right? And I would say it's, it's in a real sense, it's more art than science. Yeah, right. So, so my, my, my first book was *Indispensable: When Leaders Really Matter* and my second that's coming out in the spring is called *Picking Presidents.*

Right. So it's, how do you analyze presidential candidates and have some level of confidence that they're actually gonna do a good job, right? That's what I'm asking. Do you have confidence? They they'll actually be good at their job. So I do not include in that second book, anything about personal lives.

Right. There's no analysis of it because my answer was like, I can't, I can't tell. Right. Like Franklin Roosevelt cheated on his wife, and treated her horribly. He didn't just cheat on Eleanor, he treated her horribly, but you know, you really kind of want Franklin Roosevelt to be … like, like who would say, oh, I'd rather not have had Franklin Roosevelt as President of the United States.

My favorite president by far, you know, my favorite, really the historical figure who I most admire is Abraham Lincoln. And they're, you know, an infinite number of reasons like, like let's not get me started on that because then that, that that's like three hours of monologuing on Abraham Lincoln.

But if I were to crystallize it in one sentence, it's because there are, I would say there are great people and good people, but there are very few great and good people. And he seems to peg the scale on both dimensions. And that to me is sort of, is extraordinary. So, to circle back to your questions Stan, I guess what I'd say is: I would focus on people's professional lives when I'm assessing leaders, as opposed to their personal ones, because I don't know what the relationship is between personal… I'm sure there is one, but I can't identify it cleanly. But I would draw a professional life pretty broadly. If you are an extraordinarily skilled, you know, battlefield commander, but you throw your phone at your subordinates, like, I'm sure there are things that you do and maybe a, you know, a sufficiently adaptable organization could actually find a role to use those talents where you didn't have subordinates, but you could, you know, do something where you couldn't do that.

But I would not under any … like the longer-term toxic effects of that on an organization are so profound that it is difficult for me to imagine any level of skill or performance that would make up for that.

The classic example I would use for that is Volkswagen. Right? So, Volkswagen was created by, what's wrong with me, the legendary beyond legendary, the Piech Porsche family. And so he was, I mean, he was a genius. He was the Steve Jobs of cars, right. He took, you know, what was, he gave me easily created the largest car company in the world, 600,000 employees, you know, obviously it was lots of pieces that he put it all together and, and he was known as you know, and this is sort of unique, the finest automotive engineer in the world. So, I spent two years sort of embedded with folks who I can kind of fall on their CEO around after the diesel emissions scandal, to understand what was going on, how are they recovering from the, from the diesel scandal.

And what you would get these stories of like the technical people at Volkswagen, who were stuck for weeks on some complicated problem and Piech would wander into the room and look over their shoulder and “Did do it that way.” And it would work. Right. So that's the upside obviously you have something like that. It's amazing. The downside is he was a screamer. He was abusive. He yelled at people. He was a tyrant. He created this culture where you could never, ever say to him, “No. We can't do that.” Right. Because you know, let's be fair. People had said that to him before, and he had said, “Yes, you can do it this way. And it had worked.” But it is very obvious that the diesel emissions scandal was entirely a product, 100% of that culture that he created and that scandal almost destroyed Volkswagen, right?

It came within, within the skin on your teeth. I'm taking that entire company down. I have no doubt that a better structure, a better environment. Right. But essentially, if I'm in particular better mentors, when he was younger would have taken Piech aside and said, “You're genius, but you can't act like this.”

And if, and if he couldn't learn, then they would've said, “You know what? We can't, you know, this, this is not tolerable.” And maybe Volkswagen in the short run under him would not have reached the heights that it did, but it also would never have had that scandal of that depth. What was most striking to me was on the Matthias Muller, their CEO, who I shadowed for a while.

He once to send to me, right, he said, “Look, the scandal is not the important thing.” I was like, “What do you mean? The scandal is gargantuan.” He said, “No, the scandal is just what happened. But if it hadn't been this scandal, it would have been something else. It might not have been something worse because our culture was so broken that something like this was inevitable.” That was really striking. And that was, I thought I was writing a profound insight as to what had gone wrong.

CHRIS: Let's tease out this point around ego, which is probably oversimplifying a little bit because I think it's an important question for wrestling, for leaders to wrestle with, even from the youngest days.

Because if you, if you take, I mean, there, there are two great examples that are between Volkswagen and then you're referenced to Cynthia Caroll's work with looking at her case study as, as a model, that's a person who you said, as you said, walks in no experience in the industry says, “This is a problem I'm going to fix it.” That's it. There's healthy ego there. Right. There has to be because you're, you're saying I'm going to over-invest in this thing that none of you industry experts get how important this is. And that's going to come at a cost as some other bottom line for the business. She could have been completely wrong. Right. But she was right and approved, proved out change the industry.

So you don't want the ego-less leader, right? They have to walk in with a spine, but in your thoughts, what's the differentiator or is there, is it a flip of the coin? Who can have a strong spine or ego, however you want to look at it, but keep it in check when it comes to culture?

GAUTAM: So I think culture, like the culture of the framework in which you surround people is profound in terms of keeping it in check. So, I tell my students that, you know, if you get stuck, I ask you a question, right? And you don't know the answer. There's a cheat code. The right answer is always, “It depends on context.”

Right. So that's your escape handle if you don’t know, right? But the answer is because it's true, right? Context is so important for this kind of thing, but everything always depends on context. And so, let me go back and say, so I wrote my first book before I, before I met you, Stan.

But when I am thinking about the third book where I'll be featuring you, some lessons from the first book kind of popped to mind, right? So, what I will, at the end of the book, what I say is, I talk about leaders who are really, really great, or really, really awful. They're not in the middle and what, you know, what makes, what is it that makes the one or the other?

And, you know, my, my biggest answer frankly, is luck. You know, you know…Once said that luck is better than skill. I can't use you if you're not lucky. Um, I actually think that's, that's probably true, right? I mean, like luck it's… we vastly undervalued the, the role of luck in human and the human experience.

But, you know, since luck is not a scientific thing and I can't like bet on luck and future. What else is it? And so here's what, here's what I would say. The people identifying that first book I would say is who would have found a way to succeed if it was possible, right? Like you drop them into an environment and they like, you know, if it's possible, we would've found a way, which is not true for most of the people you look at.

We're characterized by two things. So, one is the Chris, exactly what you just said… like, like they, they wouldn't just have self-confidence they have like supreme levels of self-confidence. Abraham Lincoln, right? To go back to Lincoln, we could present the United States at the greatest moment of crisis in the entire history and his estimate had in his own estimate had less than six months of formal education, right?

His political national political experience was one term in Congress, his Cabinet, meanwhile, by the way, had people like William Henry Seward in it, who was a two term Senator and two term Governor of New York, right? If you got to pick the person to be presently United States, you don't pick Lincoln. You pick Seward.

Seward is way more qualified. And yet over and over again, when Seward, including the earliest, like administration tries to seize control of the US government, Lincoln has the self-confidence to say, “Nope, we're not doing that.” Right. Like now we're going my way. And I'll note paired that with a skill with people so extraordinary, but after slapping Seward down like that, And he was nonetheless, let flip sort of making me do a strongest ally, which is a, sort of a unique, a unique combination of skills.

So, what I would say, Chris, the first part is that self-confidence like, that's not ordinary self confidence, right? Normally people don't have that kind of self-confidence. That is a level of self-confidence that kind of baffled, boggles the mind. Right? Who's that certain of themselves that in that moment, in that environment, he's just like, “Nope, I got this. I know … I can do.”

So, but the flipside of that, let's take the second half of the story. When Lincoln is first planning on doing the Emancipation Proclamation, Seward says to him, “You can't, this is the wrong time to do it. We are losing the war.” He says he will sound like a last trumpet and on the way to defeat and Lincoln, doesn't say, “No, you're wrong, William. We're just going to keep going.”

He says, “I think you're right.” Right. He actually says, “Nope, Nope, you're right. I'm going to put this back in my pocket and I'm going to wait until the right moment in time before we issue this.” So this is, you know, something that clearly was passionately important to him, like a profound part of his identity, you know, and, and you know, him, he knew when he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, that's what he would be remembered for.

And he was still willing to listen to this guy who he overruled many times and said, “Nope, I'm open to that.” So let me, Chris, I want to flip actually go in a sense. I want to flip this back here. Right? So that's intellectual humility at a level that's kind of awe inspiring, right? Like, like it's this pairing of the two. So, so the reason I want to flip this back is, cause this is the question I want to the question I wanted to ask you guys for a long time and I haven't gotten a chance, so I'm going to do it on my podcast, but I'm going to do it here. But first, so Stan, a thing, so I've told you this before, right?

That I have cited your article in the *Atlantic* to more people than any other like thing I've read I've read, right? Where you talk about your feelings about Robert E. Lee and how you change your mind and don't hang that picture up. So the reason I, that was so meaningful to me is because of this, this thing about Lincoln, right?

Because what, here's what I know when people tell me that something that I believe deeply in my core is not true, it really bothers me. I get upset. I can get, you know, like people who have known me for 20 years, have never seen me raise my voice. I will have, I can see me get angry about that.

Right? Like, because it's part of your identity. This is who you are. Let me an example. We all know George Washington owned slaves. And we all know that Washington freed the slaves, one of those slaves on his death, I'm like, you know, it sort of makes us feel better about the fact that he own slaves.

And we know the story about Washington's wooden false teeth. So, what I learned recently, is that it's true. Washington had wooden false teeth, but the set of dentures he used most often were taken from slaves, literally ripped out of the jaws of slaves and implanted into teeth to make false teeth for him.

I didn't know that before. And I got to say it was kind of like, like slavery is cruel and awful and barbaric in a way that we've always identified, but that shook me, right? Like that, like, that's, that's a sort of visceral, cruelty and callousness that shook me in a really profound way. And I was like, I was upset when I read that. I was also like, I wish I hadn't known that. Right. Like, like I almost wish I didn't know that.

It doesn't make me change my like overall historical evaluation of Washington. I still think he's one of the most extraordinary people that are lived, but it complicates it some. And so, what I would say is, is what…like there's something about some leaders that they're able to listen to someone who tells them, “I think you're wrong.” and actually listen. And internalize it and change their viewpoint. And it has something the sense that, like I tell my students to think like a scientist, right. That what makes a scientist special? The only thing that makes a scientist special is they try to prove themselves wrong instead of trying to prove themselves right. Right. There's a… I have this line I use over and over again, “Your brain is not wired to make you right. It's wired to make you feel right.” They're very different things. And all of the scientific training can be summarized as overcoming that training so that you actually try to make yourself right by proving yourself wrong over and over again.

So, so you guys like, like Stan, you, you, you do too, Chris, I bet like you developed some way to think about the world, that if someone tells you you're wrong, you're actually willing to listen to them. What's your approach for them?

STAN: Yeah, I first off, I think that's an amazing story about George Washington. And one of the things that I think is, for me is key, is there are a lot of good people who at times are just wrong. They just get it wrong. They make a wrong decision, or they take a wrong action and it doesn't necessarily make them bad people. It just makes them good people who are wrong, just like we're all wrong a part of the time.

I would say really when I describe how I think I evolved as a leader, because it clearly was an evolution over time, Chris and his comrades had a lot to do about it because, when I was working in more conventional military forces, you're expected to be the smartest person in the room.

You're the commander, you're the this. And you say left and everybody like baby bird sort of chirps up. And then it goes left. When you work with seasoned special operators, two things happen. One is they know an awful lot and two, they are not shy about telling you what they know. And so there is a relationship that you want to build with them.

And that relationship is you want them to do what you want. But part of that depends upon you being willing to listen to them and at least a percentage of the time in letting them do what they, what they think is right. Which shapes your behavior. There's a great story of the After-Action that they did of the Usama Bin Laden raid, and President Obama went to Fort Campbell and he sat down with a bunch of the CEOs who've done the operation who Chris and I know well, and the aviators. And when it came time to brief the President, the commander, the senior SEAL, literally just said, “Sir, my men will tell you about it,” and stepped aside.

And most people, their ego would, would want to be the poster child and someone asked later why he did… the President actually asked an individual later why the commander would have done that. And the response was different. Not that he was a great person, although he is, the answer was the social norms of the SEALs demanded that he couldn't have led credibly differently.

And so, Chris, I'm going to bounce to you because I think that context and that then the organization you're in it certainly shaped me.

CHRIS: Yeah. It's a, it's a great example of that. And I think also folks, in that those communities, I mean, I grew up in the SEAL teams and now in 10 years in consulting, but we do pretty complex, problem-solving type consulting as you are familiar with as well. I always assume that I'm moving mostly wrong out of the gates, right? Because when you grow up in a world of trying to solve wicked problems, you know, you're not seeing the full, the full thing. So you're, you see this as sort of incremental solutions, but if you think you have the grand vision, you, you just you're wrong, right?

You're not going to get there. And so that that's a forcing function towards, towards lowering your ego, but you have to have elevated confidence. Maybe there's an interplay between those two. It's also one of the shifts I think that is happening in an industry for leaders, which is, there are so fewer linear, transactional type spaces in industry now that those leaders of leaders that still think I have the grand vision, they're a dying breed. If you've gone through enough cycles. you know, all of us experiences as young leaders in the special operations community thinking, okay, "I'm the leader, I'm in charge. I've got the answer," that lasts about six minutes, right?

And so you learn the hard way quickly that you have to assume you're missing key variables and build a team that can identify them and communicate that quickly. And what's unique about that community is that translates from a 20-person unit like Stan just described or a 20,000 person unit, Stan was in charge of, right. So, if you scale that behavior up and down effectively, and you can really create a different sort of culture.

STAN: Let me jump on because I'm really gonna point it at Chris. And then circle. Chris, you went through sort of famously BUD/S, which has hell week involved with it.

And it, it really pushes perspective SEALs to the breaking point. What does that have to do with… it would seem like it might build up your ego because I made it and suddenly, I'm a special person. What does it really do?

CHRIS: Well, that's when I remember that this is classic sort of SOF selection. There's versions of this and Ranger School and all over the place. But the, but the day… you get the weekend to recoup, you come in Monday. And one of the instructors walks in and goes, "All right. You've made it through hell week. You're all, you're all macho now." And then he kind of laughed.

He's like, "It's not that hard. Let's be honest." And he looks, you know, whoever the first guy sees, I mean, "McChrystal made it through," you know, just to pick a person like, and you all kind of laughed. Like, hey. And the point is you made it through as a team, every one of you, if we'd have ridden you hard enough and last week would have, we could have found your breaking point.

And what they're looking for is teaming behavior. And so, if you separate from the group or you're, you're, you're not interacting effectively as a team, they can, they can pull you out and make you quit in about 15 minutes. Right. We're all breakable. And so, I think that's the one thing that you've come through things like that with it is that self-reflective, "I'm not actually as tough as I thought I was, and I only made it through because of the people on my left and right. Now let's build on that understanding going forward."

STAN: Yeah. So now you teach elite young people. People who have been through an incredible selection process to be at Harvard. And they, they arrive with a certain level of self-confidence because of, you know, the, the glittering resumes and whatnot, and a bright future. How do you approach trying to shape them as future leaders?

GAUTAM: So, I mean, every student's different, that's the first thing you got to remember is, uh, so back when I was at HBS, I would have 188. Ideally that would, I mean that I had 188 different approaches, each one, like, you know, no one can do that, but to the maximum possible, because a lot of them have that. And then some of them would come to my office and cry because they thought they really didn't belong here.

Right. Like, you know, you, you meet people with that kind of resume who have imposter syndrome and they're sort of, you know, "I did not belong here." And then that's a completely different approach with, with someone who has had, who you have to think through, like, "Okay, how do we, you know, how do we build this person up?"

It's striking, right? There's no correlation, right? Some of the most accomplished agents I've ever had will be the ones who came in and like, :I didn't belong. You know, like I'm flunking all my classes." I remember one student came and said, like, "I know I'm flunking your class." And I'm like looking at the, if I remember they were like fifth from the top.

I'm like, "Well, I'm pretty sure you're not." Um, so, so yeah, so. The, what I, what I love about teaching is in that. And I mean, when I started out, even at the end of my time, there, I wasn't that much older than them. When I started out, I was younger than a third of them, is you get a chance to, to, to, and I just think about BUD/S is what I've read about it, right? Is that it started out as very much a selection process, right? Like the idea was you're, you're good enough to make it, or you're not and that over the years, it's my understanding that there's actually been some, like, you know, are there ways we can tweak it? Not tweak that, but like tweak the approach to increase graduation rates because there may be a developmental, right?

It may turn out that if you're not born able or not able to get through that, there's a developmental component. We might actually get a lot more people through it if we shift to a developmental, a little bit of our developmental focus. I think there's… I know there's been some psychological research on like positivity, and you know, getting people to do sort of trade their internal narratives and disrupt them at BUD/S in particular. So I've seen the papers written on that.

So, when I think about with these, with these students, is this… I have a few responsibilities, right? So one is the most basic level is skill is skill transmission, right? But there are things you can learn in a classroom that make you a better leader. I really do believe that. My… every year some student asked me, can you teach leadership? I'm like, well, that's what I've spent most of my adult life doing. So if I, if I think you can't, I have a big problem. Right. So yeah, I do think there are things you can learn in a classroom that make you, that can make you much more effective outside of a classroom.

Skills, you know, everything from how to deliver feedback, to how to, you know, to practicing empathy, to how to design an organization. I think these are the things that are best learned in classroom.

But the second one level beyond that, but I'm trying to, I want to get to, I would say is what we were trying to teach them, one of my colleagues who is a, you know, a far more accomplished

both academic and teacher than I am, would say that we're trying to teach them courage. And so, I have a basic rule of the world, which is the with the exception of pretty rare circumstances that almost always occur at the highest levels of government, so the sort of thing that you're used to, we, most of us go through life, knowing that the right thing to do is. Right. Like, like most situations that you encounter, you know, you know what the right thing to do is. Like most business leaders, they know… the hard thing… is not knowing it's doing it.

Right. And so when, when I used to teach ethics and our ethics classes would have these long debates about, well, is the right thing to do this, the right thing to do that? But they were very, like, it was all about international politics, right? Should we go to war or not go to war? Should we fight the war this way or that way? Well, quite often, I don't know what the right thing to do then that is a matter of like incredibly deep philosophical debate. But in your everyday life, even if you are a leader of a big, you know, like a company, like most of the time knowing what the right thing to do is not the hard part. It's doing it.

Right. Because, you know… West Point… it says the hard right versus the easy wrong. And I would say that if you need to know all of moral philosophy, right, like that's not all of it, but it'll get you like 90% of the way there. You know, because the, the, the way we go wrong, I always, I will often tell my students, it's not, it's not, you don't make one bad choice. You make a thousand small choices and, you know, character doesn't break – it erodes is my sort of general feeling about these things.

And so, what the other thing I'm trying to do is I look at my students and I, you know, and I like, I love my students. Like they are, you know, I like every day, my favorite part, like there's nothing like teaching. Teaching is like crack, right? Because every day you get to come to class and you get to be in front of 90 or, you know, or 18, it doesn't matter how many people, who are smart and funny and, and hard-working and energetic and idealistic. Right? Like they want to do the right thing. And, and sometimes when you get them through open up, there'll be that like, like they know that, you know… my predecessor 30 years ago also, who's sitting in the same seat, also wanted to do the right thing and now he's in prison. So, what happened? And what you want to get them… to me, what you want to get them to do is like, it's more than anything else for me in that leadership role, you want to get them to figure out what their values really are, because I think most of us go through life without knowing that.

And if you know what they are, if you really have thought through what's important to you on what it isn't, I think that's a big, big step on the path to doing the right thing when it's hot or to doing it. Because like you, you know, you know… this is so the example I use off as my dad. My dad is, you know… I teach ethics sometimes I'm like, my dad makes me look like a twisty Machiavellian person. Right? Like, like he is the most straight arrow, honest, human being who has ever lived. I really believe that. And so when I was growing up, I remember when he would go, you know, he had, he had to travel for work a lot, you know, as he got older and he was 60, something like that, that kind of got harder and harder for him.

And he would still like take the Metro to the airport instead of taking a cab. Right. He could have taken a cab, it would've saved him an hour and it would've cost the taxpayers an extra 40 bucks.

It would not have been against the… the rules were fine. The rules where you can take a cab, that's fine. And God knows what made easier on him, but you know what? He took the train because $40, you know, 40 taxpayer dollars will be saved that way. And that was the right thing to do. And that lesson has stuck with me for the rest of my life. Right. Like you like, like he didn't do it just because the $40 were important. But because if you squeeze those $40 out, it makes it easier to squeeze 15 tomorrow and 60 the day after that… and that was the, that was the real lesson underlying

STAN: That's phenomenal. You know, Chris and I had been together almost two decades now We met during the war, he was a young SEAL officer, and I was commanding JSOC. And then we founded a company. We've been teaching at Yale together for a long time. And we've exchanged a lot of books giving each other books because there's nobody in the world I admire more few years ago, he gave me a book to shape me and it was how to dress better by GQ.

So I'm trying to internalize what that message was. It hasn't worked Chris, as you can tell. Let me thank you, Gautam. This was extraordinary conversation and we are deeply appreciative. For this, and of course for your friendship.

GAUTAM: Thank you so much. It's been an honor and Stan, I got to say, calling you a friend is one of the thrills of my life.

STAN: Thanks so much.

CHRIS: Great to see you.

GAUTAM: Great to see you too. Thanks very much guys.

CHRIS: So diving right in to some reflections here, really great discussion. You know, not surprising to folks, you sort of have a script in minds and questions you want to ask. I don't think we touched on the single one, which is always a good sign of a strong discussion.

Obviously, Gautam has been thinking about this stuff for decades. And I was super interested, I mean, we teased out that thread for a while on self-confidence versus ego. We didn't really lay it out, but what I was hearing him describe was a bit of a spectrum. And how do you, how do you maintain self-confidence without getting into the space of ego? Did that jump out to you?

STAN: It really did. I think he, that spectrum Gandhi to, to somebody at the other end and, and, he talked about, you know, power and, and the ego together. The thing I liked about it was as we got into the, the raw discussion of power, the idea of that is the goal for many people. That's, that's their objective. It's not a tool that they use to do the greater good. It is the point of it. And I think that if we do reflection on leaders and maybe on ourselves as well, it's the kind of thing that might question some of our decisions and motives.

CHRIS: Yeah. One of the things that I think would be interesting… of interest for, for listeners, if you want to dive into a bit about the protection that you can put in place around that. Like I

watched, I've watched you on many occasions, use a staff effectively to, to cover those blind spots. You can't cover them all, but recognizing what's the saying that, you know, to the Royal family, everything smells like fresh paint. Like how do you, how do you beat that bubble? Because it is, for those that haven't experienced it, I mean, we have listeners that live it as leaders or around it, it is real. That bubble is a real thing. When I worked for you, I told people it was about a 300 yard bubble and it was, you could measure the physical distance cause everybody knew where you were going to be. For the president, it's 300 miles, who knows, but it gets, but you have a hard time seeing the real world if you don't get your staff in line to make it happen.

STAN: And as he described, he said, you know, you, don't your character, doesn't break it erodes. And it can erode in thoughtless ways. You think about, Chris, we'd be traveling somewhere and I'd either be tired or I'd be doing one thing and it would run long. And you turn to somebody who says, "Is it okay if we stay longer here? Or if we cut off the trip and we don't do the rest of the day?" and everybody around you goes, "Oh yes, great leader." Of course it is. What they don't say is there's a group of SEALs over there who have been waiting to see you. And we got them gathered because they said you were coming and you do all these things and suddenly thoughtlessly, not evil-y, but thoughtlessly, you just treat them like trash and it gets it's to what you and I talk about.

How do you surround yourself with people who remind you, who are brave enough to say, "Hey, boss, guess what? You asked to do this, and if you make that decision, you are going to, to really treat some people shabbily." And so, it's a constant tension to, to force yourself not, not to get comfortable in a cocoon.

CHRIS: Yeah, we've probably reflected on this over the years, but you learn these lessons in important moments. I remember when I was on your staff there early on, not understanding quite, you know, if this, this senior person is coming in, the ripple effects, right. And you have to spend an inordinate amount of time smoothing that out.

Otherwise, it's just going to happen organically. So, you actually spend more time not preventing those things from happening. It's much easier just to be laissez-faire and it'll all just get and put in place. I remember walking in, we'd flown to an outpost somewhere in the middle of a war zone and you were going to meet with a four-star leader. So you couldn't be… that was critical, you couldn't be like to that. It was a, you know, a little side office and this, you know, plywood shacks everywhere. And as we walked in, there were some young Rangers. One of them was going to get promoted and I'd put it on the schedule that you were going to do promotion, which of course you'd want to do.

But as we walked in, we looked to the left and there were a hundred Rangers in formation and you had no idea what was going on, but you, you glanced at me, and you knew you screwed up. Like you didn't, you didn't it. And I knew, oh, I screwed up. Right? Because you had to go to an hour long meeting with this four-star general and these Rangers were going to stand in formation for an hour. And nothing I could do at that point was going to convince him to go anywhere else because in their minds, like, well, if you walked out early, I'm just going to stand here for an hour. And I mean, it didn't turn it… I didn't get my head cut off for it, but it was such an

important lesson around thinking through, for your leaders, all of those traps, and making sure that you are setting conditions as a staff. And this is true in the corporate space as well, that when the, when the CEO is visiting the factory or going out to do a region visit…think through all of the impression that that person is going to leave on the culture of the organization, because he or she won't be able to get ahead of it in the moment. And I think that was one of the points that Gautam was making.

STAN: Yeah, I mean, personal, you are responsible as the leader as well. And once on the receiving end, I was in the Pentagon. We had been in JSOC and we'd been deployed for years. I was just back after five years, and I'm in this job, I'm a Lieutenant General, a three-star general in the Pentagon. And we have a change in administrations and the new president, President Obama is going to come visit the second day in office. He's going to visit the Pentagon. I have a meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and, and I'm in the room because I'm the Director of the Joint Staff.

Okay. That's fine. That's great. Looking forward to it. Then early that morning before the President arrived a bunch of fairly young staffers and advanced people come and because my office, my suite of offices was just right down from the tank, the meeting room would we'd meet. They came in and with this really irritating arrogance, they go, okay, we're going to set up in your office here. We're going to, for our stuff here, we're going to all this. So, a group of 20-somethings are, you know, kind of trashing my office, pushing my executive assistant around and say, well, the president's coming. Now the president's not doing that, but in that moment, I was irritated at a President I had not yet met.

And I'm just saying, I don't need this. Now, you know, all that passes, but the reality is the senior leader is responsible. So, you have to communicate, you can't just say, well, that's the way it is because I'm a great leader and it's gotta be that everyone's gotta be inconvenienced for me. There is a message you send, by the way you let your team interact with people.

CHRIS: Yeah, it's a great point. And there's an art, I think to executives, military leaders, whomever, when they, when they walk into those environments, because they're living in sixty second increments, but they can quickly take a moment and identify, you know, oh, it's great to meet the, the executive assistant. Is this your desk here? Or why someone else at that? And they can see, like, why is one of my staff sitting in her desk or his desk or whatever the case may be, and making a mental note and following up later and saying, tell me exactly how that happened.

Because if you flow through it, it'll just continue to happen. It's so it's so easy to ignore ,as a leader, which may be, is somewhere on that spectrum of confidence versus ego. And it ties to that, you're exactly right. That, that takeaway of character doesn't break it, it erodes over time. Such a good message from that discussion.

STAN: Yeah, I really enjoyed the conversation with Gautam. He thinks about this stuff. You mentioned this upfront, you know, many of us get in the mode of doing, and we use that as an excuse for not thinking, and he has had the opportunity and the self-discipline to really ponder.

CHRIS: Yeah, he certainly has. Busy guy, book coming out, his own podcast, it’s fantastic. You've been on it, plus his, his work there at Harvard. So, we really appreciate, him taking the time to, to chat with us today.

Alright, thanks everyone for joining us. We're looking for the next discussion here on *No Turning Back.*