

We Are in Need of Renaissance People

By Victor Davis Hanson

The songwriter, actor, country/western singer, musician, U.S. Army veteran, helicopter pilot, accomplished rugby player and boxer, Rhodes scholar, Pomona College and University of Oxford degreed, and summa cum laude literature graduate, Kris Kristofferson, recently died at 88.

Americans may have known him best for writing smash hits like “Me and Bobby McGee” and “For the Good Times,” his wide-ranging, star-acting roles in *A Star is Born* and *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, his numerous solo albums, especially with then-spouse and singer Rita Coolidge, and the country group super-quartet he formed with Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, and Willie Nelson.

In other words, Kristofferson was a rare Renaissance man who could do it all in an age of increasingly narrow specialization and expertise.



At certain times throughout history at particular locales, we have seen such singular people from all walks of life.

Classical Athens produced polymaths like Aristotle—tutor to

Alexander the Great, logician, student of music, art, and literature, educator, think-tank founder, biologist, philosopher, and scientist. Later Greeks like Archimedes and Ptolemy, as men of action, mastered six or seven disciplines and applied their abstract knowledge in ways that made life easier for those around them.

The late Roman Republic was another cauldron of multitalented geniuses. It produced the brilliant stylist, historian, politician, and consummate general Julius Caesar, as well as his republican archrival Cicero—politician, philosopher, orator, master stylist, lawyer, and provincial governor.

Turn-of-the-century Victorian Great Britain produced giants like Winston Churchill—prime minister, statesman, essayist, historian, orator, strategist, and wartime veteran. As Britain's war leader, between May 10, 1940, and June 22, 1941, he, almost alone, resisted the Axis powers and prevented Adolf Hitler from winning the war.

But we associate the idea of a “Renaissance man” mostly with Florence, Italy, between the 15th and 16th centuries. In that brief 100 years, the Florentine Republic hosted multi-talented geniuses like Leonardo De Vinci—master painter, sculptor, architect, scientist, engineer, and inventor—best known for the *Mona Lisa* and *Last Supper*.

The multifaceted talents of his younger contemporary Michelangelo were as astounding, whether defined by his iconic sculptures *David* and *Pietà*, his stunning painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, or as the master architect of the Vatican's St. Peter's Basilica.

The American Revolution was a similar embryo of Renaissance men. Thomas Jefferson was perhaps the most famous example of unchecked abstract and pragmatic genius displayed in almost every facet of late 18th— and early 19th-century life—main author of the Declaration of Independence, third U.S. President, founder of the University of Virginia, inventor, agronomist, architect, and diplomat.

But Benjamin Franklin may best approximate the model of the Florentine Renaissance holistic brilliance—journalist, publisher, printer, author, politician, diplomat, inventor, scientist, and philosopher.

Franklin's life was one of perpetual motion and achievement. In one lifetime, he helped to draft the Constitution, invented everything from the lightning rod to bifocals, founded the American postal service, and successfully won over European countries to the nascent American cause. Theodore Roosevelt—president, historian, essayist, conservationist, naturalist combat veteran, battle leader, explorer, and cowboy—exemplified the idea of an American president as the master at almost everything else.

The history of our own contemporary Renaissance people often suggests that they are not fully appreciated until after their deaths—especially in the post-World War II era.

Why?

We have created a sophisticated modern society that is so compartmentalized by “professionals” and the credentialed that those who excel simultaneously in several disciplines are often castigated for “amateurism,” “spreading themselves too thinly,” “not staying in their lanes,” or not being degreed with the proper prerequisite letters—BA, BS, MA, PhD, MD, JD, or MBA—in the various fields that they master.

But specialization is the enemy of genius, as is the tyranny of credentialism.

Because the Renaissance figure is not perfect in every discipline he masters, we damn him for too much breadth and not enough depth—a dabbler rather than an expert—failing to realize that his successes in most genres he masters and redefines is precisely because he brings a vast corpus of unique insights and experience to his work that narrower specialists lack. The Greek poet Archilochus first delineated

the contrast between the fox who “knows many things” and the hedgehog who “knows one—one big thing.” We have become a nation of elite hedgehogs, whose narrow expertise is not enriched by awareness of or interest in the wider human experience.

Renaissance people often live controversial lives and receive 360-degree incoming criticism, not surprising given the many fields in which they upstage specialists and question experts—and the sometimes overweening nature of their personalities that feel no reason to place boundaries and lanes on their geniuses and behavior or to temper their exuberances.

The best American example of the current age is the controversial Elon Musk, a truly Renaissance figure who has revolutionized at least half a dozen entire fields.

No one prior had broken the Big Three auto monopoly of GM, Ford, and Chrysler.

Musk did just that. He exploded all three companies’ dominance with his successful creation of the first viable electric vehicle, Tesla, whose comfort, drivability, reliability, safety, and power rivaled or exceeded the models of all his competitors.

His spin-off battery storage and solar panel companies allowed thousands of families to go off the grid and stay self-sufficient in power usage.

Musk’s revolutionary Starlink internet system—a mere five years old—provides global online service to over 100 countries. Through its some 7,000 satellites, Starlink brings internet service to remote residents far more effectively and cheaply than do their own governments. When natural disasters overwhelm utilities or war disrupts the normality of peace, all look to Musk to restore online reconnections to the outside world.

Musk, almost singlehandedly, transformed the U.S. space program from a NASA 60-year-old government monopoly to an arena of fervent private-public competition. His Space Exploration Technologies Corporation (SpaceX) created a rocket and spacecraft program that has kept the U.S. preeminent in space exploration and reliable satellite launches. When NASA and old aerospace companies falter, the government looks to Musk to bail them out.

Musk, at great personal cost, radically transformed the old Twitter—poorly managed, censorious of ideas and expressions not deemed progressive, and mired in scandal for partnering with the FBI to silence news deemed possibly injurious to Democratic candidates and left-wing campaigns.

His new X replacement is an unfettered platform for free expression. And the more the left abhors their loss of the monopolistic old Twitter's ideological clearing house, and vows to flee X and start their own new left-wing, censorious Twitters, the more they stay on X.

Musk's newest companies have now entered the convoluted, little-understood, radically competitive, and dangerous field of artificial intelligence (OpenAI) and the emerging discipline of bonding the natural brain to the electronic online world (Neuralink). To the degree Musk is successful, America will lead these areas of intense international rivalry that involve the gravest issues of national security and survival.

Overspecialization has helped make vulnerable and sometimes doomed complex top-down societies from the Mycenaeans to the Aztecs to the Soviets. A tiny credentialed and often incestuous elite manages the lives of a vast underclass whose daily lives are scripted by top-down master planners—as an autonomous and skeptical middle class disappears.

America is increasingly becoming a bifurcated, two-tiered society of a specialized government-corporate-media-political-credentialed class of degreed overseers and managers who

attempt to micromanage an increasingly less well-educated, dependent underclass.

The overclass cult lacks sufficient common sense and pragmatic expertise outside their narrow areas of specialization to direct society, and the masses are often without the education, money, and power to challenge them or the esoteric complexity of their modern society. And the result is often disastrous, as we see everywhere, from the trivial to the existential—from our currently paralyzed state space station program and inability to build a floating pier in Gaza, to ineffectual and insensitive state responses to natural disasters like Hurricane Helene and an increasingly dangerously incompetent Secret Service.

Renaissance people provide a link to the proverbial people, as they master almost anything they attempt while keeping themselves attuned to the practical effect of their achievement among the people.

The Renaissance physicist Richard Feynman once explained to the entire nation why the Space Shuttle 1986 *Challenger* catastrophically imploded shortly after launch. A polymath Albert Einstein explained to America why it had to begin the Manhattan Project and beat Nazi Germany to the acquisition of an atomic bomb. Theodore Roosevelt used his expertise as a politician, conservationist, outdoorsman, explorer, and writer to help establish and preserve 230 million acres of public lands.

So, we should occasionally pause and reflect on the Kristoffersons and Musks in our midst. They play a vital role in enriching culture and civilization for the many without becoming part of the narrow few. And we owe these people, who belong to a rare and hallowed caste of the ages, for making our lives richer, more enjoyable, easier, and safer.

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