

Jeff Goldberg: And so we obviously we always admire, it's usually done without a team. Um, and uh, and an academic, a former university president. And at the tender age of, when did you become? 37? Um, interesting, uh, uh, one of the more interesting or most interesting people in the Senate. Uh, obviously those of you who know anything about him know that, uh, he is, uh, not in the caucus of diehard Trump supporters and the republican wing of the Senate. I think that's an understatement. Um, he's going to just keep his face stone faced when I say that. By the way,

Ben Sasse: I'm still waiting for the marine biology questions. Chris Stations Talk, uh, maybe another blue book. Yeah.

Jeff Goldberg: Um, the, uh, and, and so what I thought would be interesting, uh, to do it because I find you're so interesting and because you are an academic and you've been thinking about, um, the problems that are upstream from politics that we could limit the, the, we'll have Q and a and ask obviously whatever you want, but limit the politics and talk about some things that, um, are more basic or more structural. But the easiest way to do this because maybe not everybody here knows you, um, is to, uh, is for me to ask you to give us a little bit of your biography, um, where you come from, how you developed and with an emphasis on your intellectual biography. I think that would be useful because you are a heterodoxical figure in a city that doesn't actually reward, uh, heterodoxy very much so. Um, the floor is yours. Tell us a little about yourself,

Ben Sasse: So first, for having me. Thanks David. And all of you for spending time with me. Um, I am the son of a football and wrestling coach who has aspired since about age seven to be the offensive coordinator for the Nebraska Cornhuskers. Uh, it's still my dream job. I'm out of here in a second. If I can be a, a graduate assistant on the offensive staff for Scott Frost. Nebraska's the winningest football team in the last 50 years. We've just had a really bumpy last 18.

Ben Sasse: Um, and

Ben Sasse: I, uh, wasn't good enough to play sports for Nebraska. Football is my passion, but wrestling is what I was actually good at. Uh, so I went to Harvard because they had crappy athletics recruited by Harvard. Yeah. I wasn't good enough to play for Nebraska. So I went away to school, to a school that got to a level of athletics where I could fit in a, and then I didn't really know what my vocational or intellectual track was expected that I would move back home. Um, right.

Jeff Goldberg: Did you fit in at Harvard and other ways or did you just fit in as a wrestler?

Ben Sasse: We, I had lots of good friends and so interesting and diverse community. I mean in a, in a weird way. It took me a year and a half into college to realize that almost all the guys I ended up living with were non coastal evangelical athletes. So we had lots of things in common though. I don't think we self consciously

built a rooming group that, um, but I had lots of different communities that I fit in and undergraduate environment. But uh, sports were a key part of how I got there. But I left Undergrad and went to work for the Boston consulting group. I later did McKinsey, I later did some private equity and it took a few years into the digital revolution or my experience of the Devo digital revolution to have any intellectual categories for what was happening. But Max Faber has the distinction between entrepreneurial and bureaucratic management. And I realized that as the Internet, or as we called it, the worldwide web or e-commerce in 1993, 94, 95, um, it was going to blow up almost every sector of the economy.

Ben Sasse: And I'm an incredibly impatient person. My wife is in the room and so I'm hoping she's not going to give a shout out to affirm this with an amen. But, um, impatience is a personal vice, but it can be a work virtue, right? If you, if you're not content with bureaucracies or organizations that aren't functioning very well, and I kind of realized two or three or four years out of Undergrad that there was probably room to not have to take any longterm job and get to the bureaucratic management side of adding value in an organization. You could kind of just jump from crisis to crisis to crisis to crisis because the Internet was going to blow up every sector of the economy that existed. And I'm now 47, so I'm sort of 25 years into that. I've been in the Senate for four and a half years. I was a college president for five years, and both of those are twice as long as any other job I've ever held.

Jeff Goldberg: When did you realize that you were a conservative in disposition or since that is a more of a default category in Nebraska, did it ever actually strike you that you were conservative in outlook until you got to Harvard maybe or got into east coast elite management?

Ben Sasse: Yeah, I mean, well let's maybe, let's distinguish between like tote Villian understandings of community and American political debates today. So, yeah, I've, I mean, my family was Republican. We weren't very political. Um, and I sort of always had a fairly conservative disposition. Um, and I'm the third or fourth most conservative voter in the u s senate by voting record. But I'm not at all tribal, uh, in the sense that I don't think these political parties are very interesting and I don't think they have a lot of plans to deal with the big stuff we should be tackling over the next five, 10, 15 and 20 years. So I think of myself as classically liberal, um, and a principal pluralist who believes that lots of different communities are going to argue about big and important things that are more important than power. Um, and therefore more important than politics. But politics is necessary to maintain a framework for ordered liberty in a dangerous world where there are lots of bad guys who want to take your life and your liberty and your stuff. And so we need to have some shared understanding of what we use power for. But none of the really interesting questions are going to be solved by power. So I'm culturally and dispositionally conservative. I'm obviously a free market guy.

Jeff Goldberg: Sure you're conservative, but you're not very republican. Capital R republican.

Ben Sasse: I love Abraham Lincoln. Uh, I mean I've been the one who came after Lincoln that they attract your fancy Harriet Tubman was prior to and coterminous Webb though obviously the Republican Party's done. Lots of really wonderful things in policy debates that I care about. I just don't put my partisan identity as a top five identifier. I'm a husband and a dad and a Christian and in Nebraska and I want to be football coach and a conservative and a whole bunch of things before I'm a Republican.

Jeff Goldberg: Stay on this thing. But you, you, you've made waves periodically. By By. By. Answering any, any senator who makes any senator who answers a question forthrightly makes waves obviously, but you've answered this question in a forthright way that's caused some consternation, I guess on your party. You've been asked do you want to run as an independent next time? Do you want to leave the party? And you've said, I'm thinking about it. So many words go. Where are you in that process right now? Um, and, and the, the small question is, uh, would that prohibit you from actually winning reelection next year if you actually were to leave the party?

Ben Sasse: Well, first of all, I'm four and a half years into a six year term. I'm one of eight people out of a hundred in the US Senate who's never been a politician before. I've never run for anything in my life before being elected here four and half years ago. And I pledged to Nebraskans through a thousand public events, 400 town halls where we lived off a bus for 16 months in 2013 and 2014 that permanent incumbency is one of the problems in DC. And so I pledge that for four and a half years I would act like and pretend that I'm never running for reelection. And once we get four and a half years into our term, then my wife and I will huddle and rustle through it. And it turns out the clock ticks four and a half years next week. So we're in the course of starting over.

Jeff Goldberg: We can do that conversation right now.

Ben Sasse: Oh, we're all a family. Didn't deliberate together. I'm sure nobody has any recording device. Um, so the, the first thing is you just, your question assumes things about reelection that just are not core to my identity or the stuff I care about. I think there are massive problems flowing from the digital revolution will be coming, the richest people in all of human history we already were. But the shape of the curve is going to be inflected upward. Kind of like what happened at the industrial revolution. And at the same time as we become the crazy richest people. And I don't just mean all of you who can go to and wonderful but weird events like your at, uh, I mean middle-class Americans are the richest people anytime at any place in all of human history and the total output on the globe because of the digital revolution is going to go through the roof. But it's not at all clear that that's going to run down to the stability of local communities for median people in our country or across the world. I care about

stuff like that and I only care about politics to the degree that it can speak to that.

Jeff Goldberg: Okay. I want to get to that. I mean that wasn't an original answer to the question. Are you running for reelection by the way? Um, but we can, we can, cause that's not til next week. We can jump to this question, which I think is a, is a question on the minds of anybody who studies Washington and it looks at, uh, is being in the senate an actual bad experience for an impatient intellectually oriented person. Uh, and action oriented person such as yourself. I mean, what's it been like for the last four and a half years? Feel like you've done anything?

Ben Sasse: Uh, we have a no complaining rule at our house. My Dad was a football coach. Uh, getting serving in the u s senate is a great privilege and getting to represent Nebraskans is an awesome once in a lifetime kind of privilege. I'm incredibly gratified to do that. The Senate is not a serious institution right now though. Right? The, the founders had a vision of six year terms as being a place where the passions of the POW house, which need to reflect short term public opinion would go to cool and say what are the big longterm things we should be talking about? And by and large, the congress has for decades. This isn't a new thing. This isn't something you can attribute to Donald Trump or to Barack Obama and George W. Bush. This is a decades long thing in the coming, it really goes all the way back to the new deal. But for 80 years the congress has been consistently punting more and more and more power to the executive branch. That would freak the founders out because they thought three separate but equal branches could check and balance one another because people in these branches would be jealous of their prerogatives and they would want to go home to the communities where they're actually from. They wouldn't think DC's the center. And so you would think a legislature wouldn't want to hoard power and the legislature absolutely wants to give up our,

Jeff Goldberg: I'm just thinking, I mean just in the AUMF and the, and the authorization for use of military force debates. It's, it's the, it is the oddest thing historically that congresses you guys over in executive ranks do whatever you want. We don't want to deal with this. What's the cause of that? This is an open paranthetically. Yeah.

Ben Sasse: Yeah. Fascinating. I think it's a big deal. Um, so if anthropologically the great secular motivators, cause there are obviously lots of altruistic and theological and philosophical motivators that matter in people's lives too. But if the great secular motivators are money, sex, power and fame, um, most people would. Washington in a nutshell. I Dunno. Uh, not a lot of sex. Um, there's um, without the sex right there, there is a own assumption that DC doesn't work because there are a whole bunch of power hungry people. So in sociology, I think David Brooke spoke on one of these panels yesterday. Um, he, David translates to a lot of people, the pure link relationships, people like you, all sort of people who

achieve a lot in the world tend to be much better with superiors and some subset of those people are also good leaders. Uh, so with subordinates inside organizations, but if you're really good with superiors and subordinates, you tend to not be as good with peers in south Boston, there are a whole bunch of people who are really good with peers and not as good with authority up or down and an org chart.

Ben Sasse: And so I think one of the assumptions of why DC doesn't work is that there are a whole bunch of super achievers who don't share the ball well. There are a bunch of people who hoard. And so the assumption is the most dangerous place in Washington DC is between senator x and a television camera and these people can't work well. I don't think that's actually what's wrong in Washington DC. If you have a two by two by two matrix of nefariousness and efficacy, you've just decided that the main problem in DC is outer quadrant problems. Lots of self interested people who are highly competent but kind of jackasses, right? DC is mostly made up of opposite quadrant people who are really nice, well-meaning people, but that you wouldn't hire to lead a lot of organizations. And when we're going through a time of massive crisis, I think the problem with the culture of the congress is not so much that people are too power hungry, but that they're pretty addicted to keeping their job.

Ben Sasse: They really like the fame. The old joke that Washington is Hollywood for ugly people, right? Um, one of the best reasons company accepted, I got a black guy, bad teeth, bad hair can't dance, but whatever. Um, there's, there's a sense that um, DC is filled with people who would rather pump power to the executive branch so they can tell their voters aspirationally, I pass legislation that said it was going to do all these grand things, but you didn't net out any of the trade offs and you say to the administrative regulatory state, you net out the trade offs. So I can blame you and anonymous bureaucrat when real choices have to be made in the world. And so I think fundamentally the legislature's made up with a lot of people who like aspirational things but don't really want to do the hard work of helping the American people understand we have some real choices, but before us in a world of shrinking jury duration jobs,

Jeff Goldberg: quick answer to this one, but what percentage of the Senate, what presenters of the hundred, um, do you think, uh, really want to change things and shake it up and seize that power for for good,

Ben Sasse: let's, let's not get it all the way to the level of intent cause that's harsher than I mean to be. But at the level of, do we perceive the magnitude of the moment through which we're living? Very, very few people in the congress see this as an epical economic moment. I think this is, you know, we're entering the fourth stage of economic history. We had hunter gatherers from time and memorial until 11,000 years ago in Mesopotamia. There was an agricultural revolution. And so phase two of the world was agriculture from 11,000 years ago to 150 years ago, Nebraska, the most productive farmland in the history of the world.

We don't do that kind of farming. We do high tech, digital farming. Phase three of economic history is 150 years ago until about 20 years ago. The industrial revolution, the manufacturing era, we're entering a world where we've switched from atoms to bits.

Ben Sasse: We've moved from materials stuff to software and we're headed to machine learning in quantum computing and AI and one of the most basic things that's happening is we are going to live through a day in our lives. We're going to see the end of lifelong work. That's never been true of any people in human history. Hunter, gatherers and farmers, they didn't even have job choice until 150 years ago. Almost everybody in human history had adolescents as merely a biological phenomenon. You hit puberty, you go from being a kid to an adult and now as you went from eight to 10 to 12 to 14 you do more of what mom and dad and grandma and grandpa did, but you don't choose something. You're just chasing a buffalo or you're farming. You're doing what everybody has always done. The industrial revolution created job choice, scared the hell out of people created prohibition, bizarre.

Ben Sasse: Like there was massive disruption in American life 150 to 120 years ago because the assumption was communities won't be stable if everybody is my mobile migrating and having to figure out a vocation, but what happened at the industrial revolution was job choice. One time what's happening for us is going to be the disintermediation of work for 30 35 40 45 and 50 year olds forevermore. There's never been a civilization that's had that level of disruption of mid career people and it's some of why we're living through a massive decline in life expectancy in the u s because we have an epidemic of killing ourselves.

Jeff Goldberg: I want to come to the massive crisis. In a second, I want to throw into that mix. The another change that we don't even realize how big it is, the end of male upper body strength as a salient feature of, of, of life as, as, as the thing that will actually get you something in your family. That's, that's an enormous thing. And you have a chapter in here about drivers. The biggest job in America is driver and it might not be a job category in 10 or 20 years. I want to get to that in a minute. But you mentioned the founders before and I, and, and I want just in order to help us orient your thinking a little bit more, it's a simple, simple, simple question, maybe a complicated answer. Who is your favorite founder?

Ben Sasse: Mm. Madison. Why? Um, because all the really great parts of Lin Manuel Miranda's Hamilton were actually Madison and he just described them. The Hamilton created this composite figure. Um, because I think Madison understood the need for government and yet the essential requirements that, because because men aren't angels, you need government. And because governors aren't angels, you need checks on government. I think Madison walked that razor's edge of understanding how much government after the articles of confederation are we going to need centrally and how do we try to limit it from becoming a place that's, um, eschatological in terms of people's

hope. And I think we're living through a time where people are so hopeless. They're so scared. There's so much disruption, there's such a fundamental collapse in local community. The reason we're projecting so much on politics is not because people actually believe politics can solve all the problems we're trying to ascribe to politicians and politics in Washington DC. But it's because people don't know where else to look. And so they're by default trying to give power and

Jeff Goldberg: whole, that's also a product of secularization, which we can get. If you don't go to church anymore, you're going to look to politicians in a way that you previously didn't. But, but come back to Madison for a second, and this brings us to the massive crisis in a way. One of the thing, Madison was a pessimist in many ways about human nature. One of the things he do.

Ben Sasse: My kids is named Augustan for goodness sake. So run with him. Call Him Brett. Cause complicated for an eight year old to explain it. Little League.

Jeff Goldberg: It's funny, our kids are Cincinnatus and Plutarch by the way.

Ben Sasse: What is their middle names? So it doesn't, I don't know if Aspen ideas festival allows this pumping, but I'm that, yeah, name your the kid plutonic and I'll give you 100 bucks.

Jeff Goldberg: A hundred bucks is not going to get you very far to aspen ideas festival, by the way, noting for the record. I'm from the farm.

Jeff Goldberg: Give us some soy beans and corn. We find the, uh, Madison, uh, is a pessimist about human nature. One of the things he warned against and was worried about, that's why he would, if he came back alive today, he would die from what's going on. He didn't think that the president of the United States should be in direct communication with the American people to Democratic Republic. And now we have, and we don't have to personalize this on this president, but we now have a president who, who tweets directly at the American people effectively in some ways. Um, but we have the, we have a constant back and forth between the president, uh, and the people. We have a social media revolution that, that if it existed in the time of the constitution convention and there would be no constitution, I say frame out the frame out the difficulties of being a senator, um, in the social media age and then take it to the, it's not unrelated to the crisis that you're describing.

Ben Sasse: Yeah. Can we, can we unpack one more thing you said about the, not this president, but the office of the president and the immediacy of it right now, why that would be very perplexing to the founders. They worked hard to figure out what you should even name the head of article to write. Like they were so scared that the head of the executive branch could come to be thought of in a kingly way that they kind of made up this term. The word president existed

before, but nobody had ever really used it. It's just sort of announced of fide shorthand for the term presiding officer. They meant it to be the clerk of the committee of the execution of the government. Right? So article one, quickly, democratically accountable to the people. 435 of the 535 people can be hired within 23 months in 29 days.

Ben Sasse: Then you got a hundred senators. Then you've got a president who by Cincinnatus tradition of George Washington's wonderful farewell address, or as Lin Manuel Miranda has it. I teach them how to say goodbye, um, is elected, but not in any way assume to be directly accountable to the people because it's an administrative role. It's do you fill, carry out the stuff that was given to you by Article One. And the only place that article two was really supposed to be quick is in the case of national security, national security crises. Other than that, it's supposed to be a boring administrative clerical job. And then article three you're wearing black robes and you're not elected because you're supposed to be ministerial, not magisterial, so I just want to underscore the point you're making. Then back to article one, it should be the place where big debates happen and the Senate in particular fancies itself the greatest deliberative body in the world.

Ben Sasse: It's supposed to be a place where we're debating the long term things. It's mostly an institution where people want to get on TV and what's weird about that is to, to the point about how unaware we in the congress are of the revolution through which we're living. We're desperate to get on TV when TV has almost no audience, right? When you, when you think about what's happening in the digital disruption of the way, we don't have shared facts together anymore. The two most watched cable programs in America, cable news programs are Sean Hannity, number one and Rachel Maddow. Number two, 3.2 million viewers, 2.9 million viewers also known as 1% and nine tenths of 1% of the public. The vast majority of people aren't paying any attention to this. There's a big sociological, longitudinal study that came out last September, uh, called tribes. And it said instead of just looking at Americans based on their political ideology on a right to left sort of issues based voting perspective, what if we also added a y dimension, which was intensity of political attention and addiction.

Ben Sasse: It turns out only about 14% of Americans want a lot of politics in American life. 86% don't. The much more interesting dimension in American life is the people who want to move down the y axis, not right to left on the x axis, 8% of the left pretty far left and 6% of the pretty trumpety right. And what's really changed is the 8% of the left has been fairly constant for a decade or so. And the, the, the, the right has 6% of people who are politically addicted is almost a tripling in the last three or four years. But what's common to these 14% 8% on the left, 6% on the right is they're overwhelmingly rich, white, old people. And so what's really happening in America demographically is moving in a direction that's really different. And I don't think the congress understands the technologic plates

moving underneath the desire to get on CNN or MSNBC or Fox tonight talking about the consequences of this short termism we're not, we're not dealing with a longterm tech race with China.

Ben Sasse: We ignore the entitlement crisis. We don't have any conversations about the disruption of work. Let's make sure we do go back to your point about drivers. Um, we're not thinking about what the new federalism should look like. The reality is 320 million people who are really big and desert diverse on a continental nation need differential solutions to a lot of our problems. Nebraska really is the most productive farmland in all of human history were only 1.9 million people. We're number three being producer a were number three corn producer with a number one cattle and beef producer in the, in the u s um, Vermont has farming, but it's like gardening compared to what we do in Nebraska. Right? Like you, you can't have one central theory of ag regulation. And how you manage environmental water runoff in Vermont and in Nebraska because they're just completely different things.

Ben Sasse: We need a new kind of federalism and we should be doing it. This is not in my state's interest, but as a rational matter, we should be doing it around the agglomeration economy. Almost all net job creation in America is happening in a hundred metro regions. There should be lots of diverse policy experiments for transportation, uh, for all sorts of housing policy right now. But when many, many, many cities bridge lots of different jurisdictions, New York City is not one thing. It's Connecticut and it's New Jersey and it's New York. I think almost everybody, not just on my end of the political spectrum, not just relatively far right or center right, but I think center left as well. If you gave people the choice, could you, would you choose a more powerful mayor in your metro region and a less powerful congress and having to pay less attention to the presidency or do you want more attention on the presidency and congress, but have the mayors we have now that almost no have no power. Everybody picks super mayors. So Do I.

Jeff Goldberg: So, so this, this statement leads to the obvious question, uh, which is, um, if you're in the wrong job now the United States Senate. No, no, no.

Ben Sasse: The little felt a little to conclude.

Jeff Goldberg: Yeah. All right. You know, I know you haven't had the conversation yet with your wife. I get it, but it sounds like you believe that the Senate and therefore the job of senator is inadequate to the task of grappling with the, with the list of questions that are facing this country and the planet. Um, eh, sounds like mayors, something that you admire more for its executive ability to, to, to move the needle. Is there where, where are we going to inflect? And there's what job category is there apart from president maybe or, or am I even thinking just too narrowly political? I guess the question is what could you do a person like you do, uh, in the world right now at the peak of your intellectual powers, um, to

really inflect on this university president? I mean, no nation secretary general, I don't know. Nope,

Ben Sasse: no disrespect to you. Or to the question, but I don't think I'm interesting enough for that. But what I do think is clear is that we need different kinds of people in politics. We need a lot more people in the Senate who want to be grappling with these bigger longterm problems. We obviously are going to have a bunch, we have a bunch of crises on our doorstep right now. And so at some point, because we've transferred so much power to the administrative state, we're going to have a president. And President Obama did this in a number of ways and president Trump has obviously been doing it and even additional ways. Um, there's going to be somebody who essentially it looks at the Congress and says, that is a completely impotent body and we've got big problems. And it turns out they've written laws that give me all these superpowers.

Ben Sasse: I plan to use them. There's going to be an actual imperial presidency moment coming. I don't know when, but it's going to happen. I think we're already back in history. Um, I don't think, I mean I don't, I think I don't want to and I hope that I can persuade you. I don't want this conversation to become very much about Donald Trump, but I think president Trump will tell you that he doesn't think about the longterm future. He really loves the moment he is. He is a very compelling person in the moment when you're sitting with them and he wants to do something. He brings all sorts of super energy to the second he's ad but he's not grappling with 10 year out kind of problems. And so I, I don't think that the imperial presidency as, I think it's probably going to come at some point in American future.

Ben Sasse: It's not coming now because he doesn't have a grand design of what he wants to do at a 10 year out policy moment. But because you mentioned the Higher Ed Point, um, let me say one thing about the mayor and then I'll, I'll talk to the higher ed point. The mayor point for me is that what we need is diverse solutions back to Madison in a laboratories of democracy experiment 50 states. Then there are 13 colonies ratifying, but 50 states may all still fail with lots of big regional transportation problems in the post Uber moment. They may all fail, but they won't fail. The same way if Washington DC prescribes a transportation solution to the next decade as we bring AI applications to real test beds in the world, as cities tried to grapple a transportation problems, Washington DC is going to fail and it's going to fail in such a boring way that we won't learn anything from it.

Ben Sasse: It would be much better to have 50 experiments or a hundred cities experimenting in different ways. And so what interests me about, um, the super mayor idea or what I would call a new federalism for the agglomeration economy, what interests me about that is the diversity of solutions will create lots of things. When you think about what's happened with the bike sharing experiment to the scooter experiment in the last 18 months, pretty dang

fascinating. Nobody would have really guessed this two years ago that the bike experiment would fail as badly as it has, but it would accidentally spawned this thing that's working in lots of ways. Lots of people are using scooters and pretty Dang interesting ways and the uberization of the economy is going to pluralize in lots of ways. We're not, we're not all gonna own a crappy drill five or 10 or 15 years from now.

Ben Sasse: We're going to rent a great drill that two times a year we need it for two minutes and that's a problem that's going to have drone delivery to some super lockbox port at your mailbox. I'm not going to own a bad drill and we're going to be the first people in human history that as we get richer are going to have less stuff. That's never happened before. In the past, every time you got richer, you got a bigger garage and you got a bigger dressing room and walk in closet and you've got more and more stuff. We're going to all start shrinking to less and less stuff and we're going to have access to more stuff in the sharing economy that's going to have lots of implications locally and Washington DC won't get it right. So we should experiment. We should figure out how we're going to experiment.

Ben Sasse: And one of the ways to do that would be a new federalism. But to the point of Higher Ed, we have a really, and I say this with all due respect and as a former college president, somebody who's benefited from lots of our institutions of higher learning, we have a really complacent higher ed sector that thinks they're doing a good job when they're not really doing a very good job. Um, when you think about what is happening in the economy with the shortening duration of jobs, average duration for a primary breadwinner when I was a kid in the 1970s was 26 years. Average duration at a firm today is 4.2 years and getting shorter. And it isn't just that people are getting disintermediated out of their job or out of their firm. It's out of their whole industry. And their skillset, they're going to cease to exist at a faster and faster clip because humans are smart and we automate ourselves out of tasks that we can figure out how to routinize.

Ben Sasse: And it turns out that AI is going to help us do this at an exponentially faster rate than has ever happened before. And so we're going to have lots of 35 40 and 45 year olds who don't know how they're going to add value in the world and we need to figure out how to serve those people. And most traditional elite higher ed institutions have no idea how to deal with that. And so we still tend to think of a college student in a romantic way that we all remember. Most of us remember our undergraduate experience, 18 to 22 year old full time student, beautiful residential campus, great football on Saturday afternoons. That picture you have in your head is 22% of all college students in America today. 78% of college students are to pick a median. Our type at 29 year old single mom on her fourth major, at our third institution, going to school less than 15 hours a week and work in full time in a commuter campus with a few online classes. That space is not functioning very well and we need to blow up the supply side of higher education to figure out how we can serve the actual

students that we're going to need to serve, to be a vibrant, not just economy, but a vibrant community in 10 years. Right.

Jeff Goldberg:

Um, there's too much to talk about and we're going to go to questions in a minute. I want to ask you something related to this and related to your actual political career. Um, the, I mean, it's a very interesting book. Uh, the, the diagnosis a lot of problems in society, the loneliness crisis, the, the, the atomization crisis, the bowling alone crisis, um, and uh, and, and the polarization and tribalism crises. Um, all of these things are, are related to each other. Um, Ura positive thinker. You don't go negative on people. You are a, you, you've kept to this idea in Washington that um, you will disagree vehemently with Chuck Schumer, but you, you will find things to admire in Chuck Schumer and say, so, uh, I'm, I'm almost preempting a question that I think would come from the audience in a minute. Uh, you yourself said that you're one of the three or four most conservative, uh, senators, Republican senators by, by voting record. Um, you, uh, came in for some criticism from the center, left and praise from the right when you decided to support judge Kavanaugh in that tumultuous uh, moment a few months ago. Um, how do you square your quotidian life as a Republican and a can small c, conservative thinker and Republican Senator, um, with this goal of unifying a fractured country, how do you think liberals will take to you telling them, these are the things we have to do in order to bring our country together when you're voting record is partisan.

Ben Sasse:

Sure. Um, so let's say a couple things and I think the more important one, but I don't want to duck your partisan voting record arguments. So I'll, I'll start with that. But I want to name where I'm headed. I want to head to the fact that our tribal politics think are an echo of the fact that the healthy tribes are in such rapid decline. So we are tribal people. That's just a fundamentally true thing. We are social animals who want to be on a team working with other people. And so the question is what are the natural and the healthy outlets for tribe? And so let's talk about family, neighborhood, workplace, local board, shipping, community, et Cetera, et cetera. Those things are in collapse and politics are trying to pick up the weight of declining healthy tribes by replacing this crappy anti tribalism. So I want to say saying that, but I'll, I'll say something about my voting record first.

Ben Sasse:

Um, so I am a skeptic of the waters of the u s rule of the EPA, uh, view that sort of something that was clearly an intra interstate distinction when the clean water act was written and has come to be a Washington theory that almost all environmental policy has to be set nationally in a one size fits all way. That doesn't mean by the way that I think all environmental issues could be solved at a local way. You'll have lots of free rider problems inevitably, but there are state compact based ways to tackle the problem. There are ways to just recognize the diversity of the fact that I was with an EPA bureaucrat once a couple of years ago and she was in Nebraska and she told me it was such a, she didn't disclose,

quote wasn't directly to me. She got out of a car with that. Another congressman that I was on a delegation trip with and she said that this was the first time she'd been on a gravel road in 20 years and it was really cool.

Ben Sasse: How could you possibly have any understanding of what kind of problem is being wrestled with when there's a feed lot that feeds 10,000 cows to take them from 900 to 1300 pounds in the last hundred days before slaughter and you've got a giant manure pile and when rain water runs off that pile and it runs down the hill toward somebody else's bean or a corn farm, it turns out there's an environmental issue that has to be dealt with there, but it doesn't have interstate implications. And yet she's setting policies that we're answering that question and she's never there. She doesn't know anything about those actual farmers who are producing the food that y'all are gonna eat tonight. I have been for regulatory reform since well before I ran the fact that Donald Trump has embraced agendas that I already held before I got there and one of the in this isn't the way you framed the question, but one of the strangest ways I get the question a from liberal media outlet sometimes is, well, if you align with Trump on this voting issue, then it means you're a hypocrite.

Ben Sasse: No, it means there's a policy issue. I have an ideological view on it. I articulated it to my voters. I continue to vote the way I said I was going to vote and if sometimes Donald Trump joins my agenda, I'm going to still hold to my agenda. The idea that I would just flip to be anti Donald Trump's is truly asinine to me and more fundamentally has no understanding of the actual voters I represent. So I think that the New York Times, the five 38 columns, distillation of everybody's voting record to where you are on a certain set of issues is a bizarrely shortsighted way to think about policy. But more fundamentally it pretends the Senate is voting on real things. That's not really what we're doing, right? Like if you rank order the 20 really big questions we should be tackling in the country, sometimes one or two of them make the agenda of what gets covered in the Senate.

Ben Sasse: But the much more fundamental thing is our politics are becoming a tribal outlet at a time when what's really happening is a, having a friendship in America since 1990 the average American had 3.2 Aristotelian, 3.2 deep friendships in 1990 the average American today has 1.8 40% of Americans have either zero or only one confidant. That's a crisis average duration at a firm. We talked about a little bit here. Collapse of local worshipping communities. You can go, you mentioned bowling alone, Bob Putnam, uh, on the other side of the political spectrum for me, but one of the most important people, everybody should be reading all the time. Whatever Robert Putnam is thinking about, we all ought to listen. Bowling alone was a great buck 20 years ago. Our kids, three or four years ago, much better buck, much more interesting. Buck. There are two Americas, they are not the John Edwards, two Americas of the 99% and the 1% they're the upper 30% of America and the 70% of America that has so much

instability and family collapse happening that it's almost, you talk a lot about this concept of thinking left and walking.

Jeff Goldberg: Right, and we'll come to questions in one second, but describe thinking left and walking, right.

Ben Sasse: I'm just stealing this from Brad Wilcox, a really great demographer and sociologist of family structure at the University of Virginia. But one of the most interesting things that's happening is, and I don't mean to say this in any kind of disparaging way about the socioeconomics of the people in the room, but the top 30% of America talks more and more and more socially liberal for the last 25 to 30 years. And the lives you actually live are more socially conservative than at any point since 1978. And when you look at what the downstream effects are and family collapse, the number one issue in America in my view, is fatherlessness by far not close. The, the x variable that drives almost everything else is does a kid have a dad? And 40%.

Ben Sasse: I see. I'm again, one of the most conservative members of the Senate. Um, but I sit and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, his desk on purpose, uh, Moynihan as the author of the report on the black family in 1965 at a time when out of wedlock birth rate in America was 6% in the black community, it hit 24%. And he said, America's going to collapse. America won't work as freedom from freedom to government is important, but it isn't the center of life. Your dreams and your hopes aren't going to be solved by government. You want to be free from a whole bunch of bad stuff. Government should help make that happen. So you can be free to love and volunteer and be entrepreneurial and join. The Quantas club and dry design, the next great app, like everything in life that really matters is done by volunteerism and persuasion and love.

Ben Sasse: They're done by community. Power matters. They're bad people in the world. We need to protect the vulnerable. There's a lot of stuff that government needs to do, but it's just setting a baseline so that all the good stuff can happen. Moynihan's argument was if a quarter of black kids in America are growing up without a dad, basic fundamental architectural stuff and their brain is not going to work. He didn't have the Moore's law revolution that we see in neurobiology right now, but Moynihan said something is deeply amiss today out of wedlock birth rate in America without regard to race is 40% for our whole community and much more fundamental in terms of heading scene. Where we're headed is that when you desegregate by the age of mom, if you segment women to over 30 and under 30 there's still a whole bunch of healthy 38 year old woman and stable family structures having their fourth kid, but 59% of children born to women under age 30 right now have no meaningful connection to their father, the baby's father.

Ben Sasse: There's nothing more important happening in America than that. And I think walking left to talking right is another way of saying a whole bunch of people

who are innovating in ways that are creating all sorts of economic large s and good on ya, but able to go to conferences like this have decided it's really good for us to live traditional lives where we're, we have much less marital infidelity again, that at any point since Kramer versus Kramer, late sixties to late seventies American marital practices sort of went on a bender and starting by the early 1980s people started behaving in much more traditional ways and the upper one third but all the conversations, presume we shouldn't ever talk about family structure because that's too paternalistic. But if we don't actually talk about the stuff that's destroying communities, communities are going to be destroyed.

Jeff Goldberg: Uh, let's go to some questions here. There's a question down here and then

Jeff Goldberg: [inaudible]

Jeff Goldberg: thank you for waiting for the mikes. No, no, you're good.

Audience Member: I love the idea that you in particular are sitting at Pat Moynihan's desk. That is poetic. I just want his hair. So, so great. Um, the question I have is about generations. It's been argued this week that, uh, never, uh, in the last a hundred years has there been a more logical time for elders like me to kind of interface with younger generations through mentoring and things that we uniquely can offer just given the lives that we've lived? Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Ben Sasse: Yeah. So there are all sorts of kinds of segregation that matter, uh, and are painful in the world. But one that we don't ever really talk about is that all of us are John Dewey's kids. Like generational segregation is a really terrible idea. And for 110, 120, 130 years, we've pretended it's completely normal to let our kids be raised the majority of their waking hours with people that just had the accident of the same birth here.

Ben Sasse: That's really stupid. Like the vast majority of what's interesting about coming of age is learning executive function and executive restraint and frontal lobe kinds of stuff that you're not likely gonna learn from peers. There is a Moore's law happening right now. I mentioned briefly in neurobiology, but the way we usually summarize Moore's law is every 24 months you can buy twice as fast a laptop for half the price of best buy. Right? So that's a simple way for thinking about the exponential curve of, of computing power. But it's really true across everything in the digital revolution. And right now there's no place that it's more interesting than in neural imaging. We have probably learned more about the brain in the last 19 months than the beginning of time until 19 months ago. And we're learning all sorts of very, very fundamental things. I'm glad we're nearly at time.

Ben Sasse: So I conduct any culture war issues about gender, uh, any of those kinda issues. But at exactly the time that we're pretending there's no biological basis for

gender and there might be 57 genders. And it turns out neurology is showing us that male and female brains are really, really different instruments. Uh, and the most fundamental thing we're finding is that women's brains are actually just a hell of a lot more useful for the world we live in, which is male brains have more front to rear same hemisphere at connections, which stereotypically, and we can qualify this a hundred different ways. So let's say, you know, on the average, et Cetera, et Cetera, but are typically associated with deep, longterm focus and female brains have lots more cross hemispheric connection connections, which are a lot more useful for navigating disruption and complexity. And the world we live in is becoming ever more complex and disrupted.

Ben Sasse: Another thing we're learning is that brains aren't done just because you hit puberty. We used to think that there's sort of nature nurture debates, right? And so everything about you is either the environmental experiences that you have while alive or the things that are true of you in your DNA. It turns out it's not quite that black and white because the environmental nurture stuff actually affects your body as it continues to develop. And the brain is an organ that's not done for a long time. Female brains are probably not done till at least five years past puberty. Male brains are arguably never done. Uh, but in the literature, nobody thinks male brains are done with full executive function. Executive restraint internalized before the late twenties. And so if you leave here and you get back on 70 and you're headed back to Denver this afternoon and some moron goes by you on a motorcycle going 130 miles an hour, two things are true. It's a male and he's under 25. Right? There's no 60 year old woman passing you on a motorcycle.

Ben Sasse: She's not that stupid. And so the generational point, I think it's just that I won't go into social media. Amazing though, by the way. It would be a meme that would live on my Twitter account. He's amazing. But I know we're trying to get more question, but let's just say we should at some point talk about social media as well because the intensification of immediacy for 13 year olds and 15 year olds. We're doing them at terrible disservice.

Jeff Goldberg: The universalization of it. Now they're their, their, their friend group is the world. And so the pressure that comes in, I mean, that's a huge other subject.

Jeff Goldberg: Why don't we go over here and then

Audience Member: Senator, you had a said, please don't let me forget to talk about drivers. I know what this is about and it's fascinating. So please explain.

Ben Sasse: Thanks a lot. The number one and Jeffrey's way of saying it about male Bron. Um, the number one driver job in America by far is driver. Not just long haul, but you know, local ups delivery, uh, taxi cab. Now Uber, uh, pizza, um, w when you put together all the driver jobs by far the number one job in America, but when you dis-aggregate it, it's also the number one job in 37 of 50 states. Most

people make an investments, uh, in Silicon Valley valley would bet that something like 60 to 70% of driver jobs evaporate in the next decade. You think coal mining disruption, uh, in West Virginia was a good picture of the Trump voter. I don't, but to the degree that a lot of people in media have tried to characterize a Trump voter as somebody that's in the past over economy, um, that was a regionally intense focused thing.

Ben Sasse: The driver disruption is going to happen to males in three quarters of our states and have huge political effects and weren't they back to the future of work kind of stuff. We're not thinking about what that means for 35, 40, 45 year olds and for the communities in which they live. And we don't, we're doing a really bad job of still telling males, uh, as 15 year olds that if you keep your nose clean and you finish high school and you're willing to go to work 40 hours a week and you can start a job at 18, everything's gonna work out fine for you. As long as you're willing to work hard enough. We've said that Brown will be sufficient. It's not true. The reality is everybody's brains are gonna matter a lot for the future of work. And right now I think the opioid crisis, while there are all sorts of very important things we should talk about, about specific cross points of entry, drug trafficking on the southern border, that things we should talk about, about Pharma companies and the way they pushed it, ways fentanyl a is produced.

Ben Sasse: But the most fundamental story is we've had mortality data in the u s for just under a century. And right now we are going to have the first ever we just finished uh, the first ever three year decline in life expectancy in the u s truly bizarre life expectancy went down in the u s in 2016 in 2017 and 2018 to just put that in context. No other industrialized nation has this happening. Nobody predicted this 10 years ago. The last time we had a two year decline of life expectancy was 1962 63 and it's just that we had a really bad flu epidemic that lasted five months and bridged October to March. So it drove down the data for two years. We have increasing longevity for 80 year olds, increasing longevity for 85 year olds, declining infant mortality and declining heart disease and cancer deaths by far the two largest killers, heart disease and cancer of everybody will die in the u s and 2019 about a quarter of heart disease.

Ben Sasse: Quarter of the third leading killer will be stroke or CLPD at like five and a half percent. The two biggest killers are down. How do we have declining life expectancy because 25 to 45 year old males are killing themselves in epidemic numbers, opioids, other forms of overdose, liver disease and suicide proper. This is about hopeless. This is about hopelessness. This is about not thinking that you're going to be needed. Arthur Brooks was I think here yesterday, one of the most fundamental drivers of human happiness is the work equation and it's not, do you make a lot of money? It's not does my back hurt? At the end of the day, the thing that drives whether or not you're happy in life is whether or not you have a job where you think you're needed. We need to be needed and it turns out lots of people are going through a moment where we wonder if we're ever going to be needed again and the driver disruption hasn't even come yet.

Jeff Goldberg: Hmm. If time for one more question, I'd like to call over here. Just a woman if I can. Yes. Raise your hands.

Audience Member: I would like to address the comment you just made about 57 genders. I thought it was really dismissive to one of the most marginalized communities in this country. And I would encourage you to be more thoughtful and empathetic to this community in the future when you talk, especially in public places. No question.

Ben Sasse: Thank you. Let me just affirm that I believe in the dignity of every American, uh, and it's not politician's jobs to define worth. Um, I do think though, with all due respect, I do believe we're headed to a place where identity politics are gonna eat us alive. And right now, a lot of the ways we talk are about the immediacy of a mob that is going to say everything you just said, uh, needs to be shut down. And what I actually said was there's a biological basis to gender and it turns out every one of us was produced because an x, x set of chromosomes and an x, y set of chromosomes got together. And so what I was saying is that there is a biological basis to a lot of stuff and we should grapple with that. And so I w I mean that and I don't mean to be disrespectful of any community, so I'm sorry you took that the 57, uh, genders to just Facebook I think now has 57 different categories that people can self identify as. And I'm meaning that we live at a moment where we're not talking at all about some of the really fundamental scientific stuff that's happening. And there are lots of scientists in the lab right now looking at the human brain. They have fascinating things to say and most of them would be scared to write for Jeffrey cause they'd be worried about what it might do to their future. I want to know what they're learning about the brain and I think you probably do too.

Audience Member: I am a geneticists, so I am very interested in genetics. I also think you're completing assessment gender and that is something you should be careful about. Thank you.

Jeff Goldberg: We can take one more and I can't see. So if somebody with a microphone can just pick somebody. Yeah, sure. Sorry, the lights are just

Jeff Goldberg: crazy

Audience Member: Could you talk a little bit more about your position on climate change in how we should address that? Huge problem. I think the Midwest right now is flooding and there's a heat wave in Europe and you know, I don't think we can deny that anymore, but what is your position on it and how can we solve it?

Ben Sasse: Thanks a lot. So I'm, I'm pretty moderate on this issue, which is a, as Jeffrey has joked in another context where we are together, um, being moderate on any issue is a pretty dangerous place to be politically because it probably just means you're going to get run over by everybody, uh, who wants more urgency about

it. So let me just tell you something up front that probably won't satisfy you, that though I'm moderate on this issue, it isn't one of the reasons that I ran for office and so I'm not on one of the relevant committees, so I don't devote a lot of time to it. But I do agree with you that there is climate change and I do believe that it matters and we should be talking about it. Um, but I don't spend a ton of my time. My stuff is future work, future of war.

Ben Sasse: We didn't get to talk to cyber at all. Unfortunately. That's actually what I spend the majority of my actual day job doing. Um, I'm worried a lot about basic civics, uh, for American high school kids. So your issue is an issue that we all need to care about. But in our day jobs, it's not a place that I focus a lot, but I am probably, um, much more to the moderate side of the vast majority of my party on agreeing with you that it's an important problem. But what I don't really understand in our political divide, um, is how many on the left are willing to say and do things that I don't understand chess move to three and four from, because the reality of the models that I've looked at about what could really move the needle on what kind of climate change we've already baked into tend to be really centered on things that are also politically I'm verboten.

Ben Sasse: So nuclear energy would be a really big and important conversation we could be having around climate change. But lots of the people who, in my experience, I don't mean to say this disrespectfully of anybody else who is a researcher or an advocate, I'm working in some other domain, but in my experience, a lot of the politicians in the Senate on the left overwhelmingly, or the advocacy groups that come in tend to want things, which would be symbolically comforting, but on their own models don't actually affect outcomes very much. And so I'm unsure where to weigh in and a debate where I would like to see people developing a menu that has really serious data and math and economics and future planning in it. So we could figure out how people who want to wait into this debate, but some who may be more skeptical than I am about climate change or some who may be more like me that's not on a relevant committee work. We're not going to take any vote that's gonna affect anything on the Senate floor about climate change right now. What's going to have to happen is the energy committee would be actually having to have some meaningful debates. And right now most of what happens tends to be really, really symbolic. And that's, that's

Ben Sasse: the place where I find myself kind of without a home on it. Um, but I agree with you that the climate is changing. I agree that humans are contributing to it. I agree that we need to tackle it, but I think the worst thing we could do is tackle it in ways that are economically destructive to the u s but don't account for the reality of coal consumption in China, in India over the next decade or two because the only way we're going to get out of this is with lots more innovation. And as I read the models, it probably is going to involve a lot of nuclear energy. And so if people who want to advocate that the Senate should be doing more on climate would come into my office and want to make a pitch that also

includes nuclear. Now I'm pretty darn interested because the tables you could show me then would actually matter. A lot of the stuff that people want to do symbolically on renewables don't actually add up to a chess move to three or four that I understand as math.

Jeff Goldberg: Hmm. Um, we could probably literally go on all day. This has been so interesting, but we are out of time. I want to thank you all for coming and thank you.