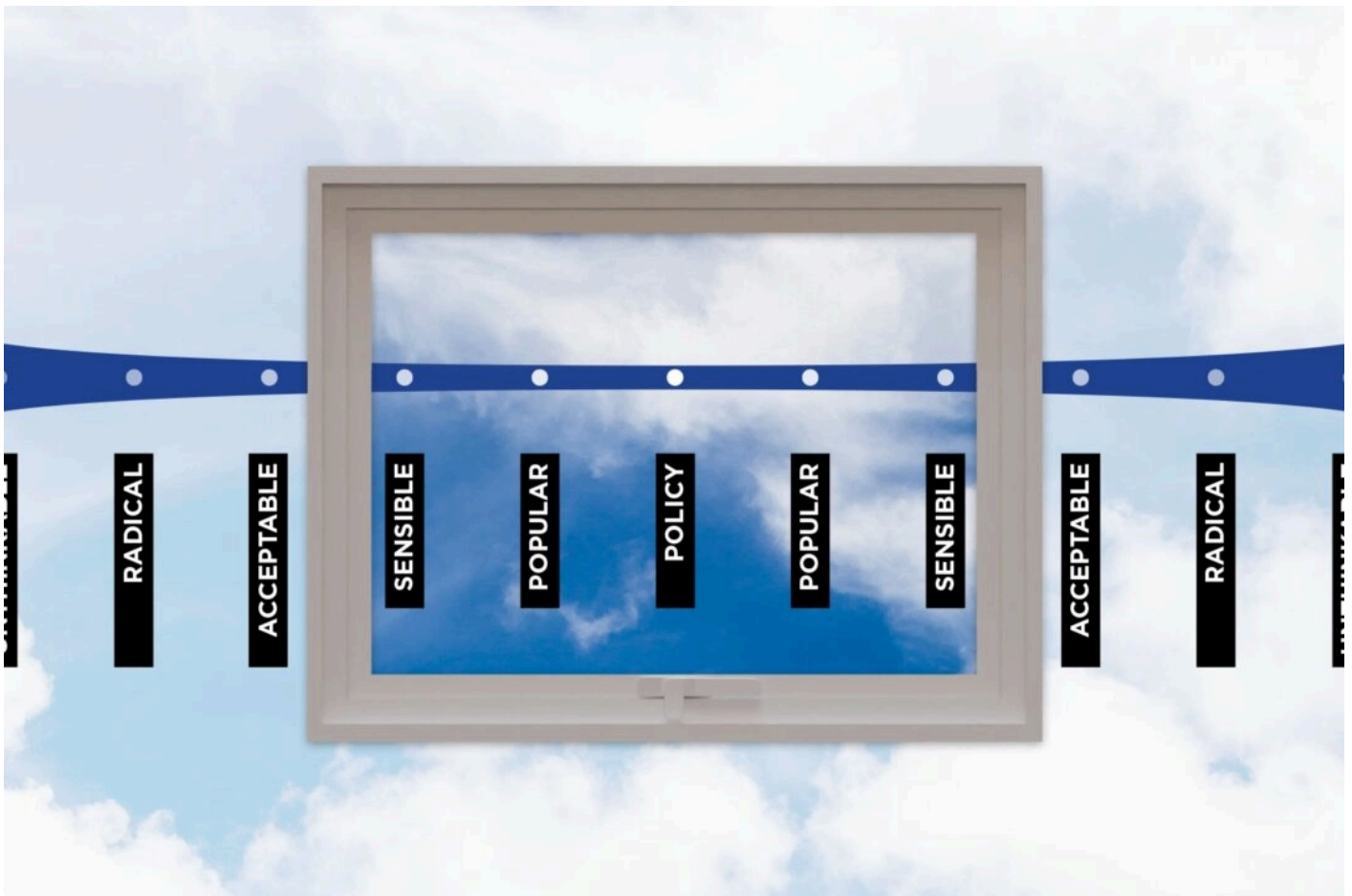


Who Was Joe Overton of Overton Window Fame?

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By Lawrence W. Reed
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Commentary

On Oct. 28, 2024, on his social media platform “X” (formerly Twitter), the well-known entrepreneur Elon Musk [asked this question](#): “Ever wondered about the Overton Window?” His query was accompanied by a “retweet” of a post by Jash Dholani, who included a photo of Joe Overton and stated that the “Window” concept that bears his name is “the best mental model for understanding how political change ACTUALLY happens.”

This was just the latest Overton Window reference. They surely number now in the tens of thousands, from all over the world. A few years ago, the concept required an explanation, but it is now so ubiquitous, so much a part of our political lexicon, that it’s routinely used as though everyone knows (or *should* know) what it’s about. It has its own [Wikipedia page](#), as does [Joe himself](#), and Joe’s Window was the focus of a New York Times [article](#) in 2019. Any search engine brings up countless citations of it.

Simply put, the Overton Window posits that at any given moment, politicians can only operate and get re-elected when they take positions within a narrow framework shaped by prevailing public opinion. Shift the window by changing popular ideas, and you can thereby make what’s politically unpalatable today into a mainstream view tomorrow. If you are unfamiliar with it, or want some examples of it in action, click on these links and learn more from Michigan’s Mackinac Center for Public Policy, where Joe first formulated the idea:

- [An Introduction to the Overton Window of Political Possibility](#)
- [“Now it’s simply referred to as the Overton Window, as if everyone knows what it is”](#)
- [The Overton Window of Political Possibility](#)

Joe Overton was a humble man, but I assure you he would be both proud and amazed that his name, barely two decades after his untimely death in 2003 at the age of 43, is approaching the status of a household word.

But how many people could tell you who Joe was? What was he like? The world should know more about the man whose name is invoked so often in political and social discussions these days, and I may well be the most qualified living individual to tell you about him. Why?

Joe was my best friend, and both of us said so often while he was alive. I was Best Man at his wedding when he married Helen Rheem in March 2003, just three months before he was killed in an ultralight plane crash on June 30.

He and I journeyed to 21 countries together, including China, Poland, and Singapore. We even undertook a dangerous, clandestine visit to Mozambique in 1991, where we lived for two weeks with anti-communist rebels during the country's civil war.

As president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, I hired Joe in March 1992 and soon thereafter promoted him to senior vice president. Along with my successor and Mackinac's current president, Joe Lehman, and a superb staff, we built the operation into one of the most effective state policy-focused think tanks in the country. And in 28 "leadership conferences," we trained more than 600 staff and executives from other "free market" organizations from dozens of countries.

So yes, I knew Joe very well, and I still think of him almost every day.

Born on Jan. 4, 1960, Joe was a native Michigander. From 1965 until his passing in 2003, he lived in the town of Midland. I moved there from my home state of Pennsylvania to teach at Northwood University in 1977, but it would be another decade before I met Joe.

In September 1987, we were introduced not in Michigan but at a conference in Seattle, Washington. I told him that in December, I would be opening an office of a new think tank in our town of Midland because I had just accepted an offer to serve as its first president. He was an electrical engineer and project manager at the Dow Chemical Company, as well as a staunch libertarian. He immediately volunteered to help us at what would become the Mackinac Center for

Public Policy. He knew engineering, but his passion was freedom and free markets.

By 1992, our fifth year of operation, the Center was becoming influential in Michigan and even beyond. A new governor, John Engler, had put many of our policy recommendations into law. I asked Joe if he would relinquish his job at Dow, change his career completely, and come to work full-time at Mackinac. He said yes on the spot and never looked back.

I remember telling Joe, “Your first task is to put in place the nuts and bolts of sound management of our operation, freeing me up to pontificate and raise money.” His engineering and management background coupled with his love of liberty proved to be a potent combination. It helped attract top talent and ensured we got maximum bang for our donors’ bucks. We grew from four employees to more than 30 under Joe’s watch. I was on the road much of the time—at news conferences, speeches, and donor meetings—but I never worried for a moment about what was happening back at the office.

In our tenth year, Joe even supervised a major construction project: the transformation of an old, abandoned Woolworth department store in downtown Midland into Mackinac’s new headquarters. It was just a block away from our original office, so it was easy for Joe to spend time every day on the new site. His motto during this time was, “You *expect* what you *inspect*,” meaning he felt obligated to monitor every step of the construction process. He even contributed ideas that later won us some notable design awards.

Oh, and by the way, he somehow found time during these busy years of the Mackinac Center’s growth to go to law school. He earned his J.D. degree from Thomas Cooley Law School in Lansing, Michigan, and passed the bar exam on his first attempt.

Whether in organizational management, construction, or political philosophy, Joe was that rare kind of person who understood both the big picture and the intricate details that composed it. He was fond of telling a story of three workers laying bricks at the site of a new cathedral. A man walks by and asks one worker, “What are you

doing?” The worker answered, “Laying bricks.” The man walks a little further and asks a second worker, “What are you doing?” The worker responded, “Building a wall.” When the man approached the third worker with the same question, the worker said, “I’m constructing a cathedral.”

All three bricklayers were doing precisely the same thing, but it was the third one who truly grasped the significance of the project, though the task of the moment could seem rather menial. Joe saw everything we did at the Mackinac Center—even taking out the garbage—as “building a cathedral.” And largely because of his obvious competence and admirable persona, that’s the way we all thought of it.

To Joe, the most important policy issue of our time was school choice. He saw it as a civil right, a righteous cause worth every effort we could muster. Children belong to parents, not to the State, he believed. Joe devoted much of his professional career and most of his personal time to advancing that cause. He even devised a “Universal Tuition Tax Credit” that, by variations, is on the books now in multiple states.

More than anything else, what I learned from Joe in our 16 years of friendship was the importance of personal character. He possessed it by the boatload. He was a Christian, above all else, and he lived his faith and its teachings as well as anyone I have ever known. In an [essay](#) for these pages a few months after he died, I wrote:

“Through his example, his mere presence in a room would raise everyone’s standards of speech and conduct. As a consummate administrator he taught us the importance of continuous organizational improvement through Total Quality Management. He was able to do that effectively not just because he knew the nuts and bolts of the subject, but because he practiced it in his personal life as well. I heard him say many times, ‘You cannot impart what you don’t possess.’

“Joe Overton was the straightest straight shooter I’ve ever known. Not a speck of deception, guile, conceit, or hidden agenda in him. He said what he meant and meant what he said, always. You never, ever had to

wonder if he was telling you the truth. He kept his word as if it was an indispensable and inseparable physical appendage like an arm or a leg. Like so many others, I came to place total, unqualified trust in him. So did others who came to know him. Never underestimate the importance of truth and trust to a free society; if we cannot deal with each other on those terms, we will resort to the ugliness of brute force and political power.

“... Over and over again, people were attracted to his work because of the sterling character of his persona. Friends marveled at his consistency and self-discipline. They were impressed that he not only preached the virtues of civil society; he practiced them in his own life through endless volunteer efforts, quiet philanthropy, and ceaseless counsel to those who needed good advice.”

One of Joe’s hobbies was flying. He owned two ultralight aircraft—one was a two-seater, the other built for one. On the afternoon of June 30, 2003, he asked me if I wanted to go up with him that evening in the two-seater. I declined because of a summer cold. So, he went up by himself in the other one.

I was sound asleep when my phone rang later around midnight. It was Joe’s brother Scott (1965–2016). “Larry,” he said in a voice choked with emotion, “Joe was killed this evening when his plane suddenly lost altitude and fell to the ground.” I was more than a little stunned with disbelief. I was struck to the bone by the awful feeling that the world had lost an extraordinarily good man, that the liberty movement had lost a widely admired and irreplaceable leader, and that I had lost the best friend I ever had. To this day, I have never experienced personal trauma as deep as what I felt at Joe’s death.

At the Mackinac Center in the weeks after the crash, we were deluged with unsolicited tributes to Joe. As well as I thought I knew him, there was so much more to the man than any of us knew. In keeping with the Christian calling, it turned out that Joe, in ways big and small but always quiet, was helping somebody all the time. The testimonies we published by the hundreds on the organization’s website were mind-blowing: “He saved our marriage.” “He gave me a check to get through

a tough time.” “He went out of his way to give me a hand.” The man I thought was outstanding in every way was more exceptional than I ever imagined. Twenty-one years since he died, I still shed tears when I pause to remember him.

So the next time you hear of the “Overton Window,” please understand that the concept itself is valuable and appealing, but the man behind it deserves to be remembered every bit as much.

Additional Reading:

“[Joseph P. Overton: Character for a Free Society](#)” by Lawrence W. Reed

From the [Foundation for Economic Research \(FEE\)](#)

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Lawrence W. Reed

Author

Lawrence Reed writes a weekly op-ed for *El American*. He is president emeritus of the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE) in Atlanta, Georgia; and is the author of “Real Heroes: Inspiring True Stories of Courage, Character, and Conviction” and the best-seller “Was Jesus a Socialist?”



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