

Naisbitt turns lust for life into mega book career

By Edward Iwata
USA TODAY

John Naisbitt, the 77-year-old author of the best-selling *Megatrends* series of business books, hasn't always been a globetrotting sage.

Naisbitt grew up in Glenwood, Utah, amid conservative Mormons and sugar-beet farmers. Eager to explore the world, he dropped out of high school and joined the Marines. In boot camp, Naisbitt read Irving Stone's novel *Lust for Life* on painter Vincent Van Gogh.

It was the first book the young Naisbitt had read outside of school. On duty in the Pacific region, he pored through many more books, launching a lifetime of intellectual voyaging that has never ceased.

"I had such an innocent eye and an insulated life," said Naisbitt in a recent telephone interview from his home in Vienna.

"In the Marines, I was stunned, absolutely stunned, at everything around me, at what the world looked like."

Sixty years later, Naisbitt, a former marathoner, is still going strong. His new book, *Mind Set! Re-Set Your Thinking and See the Future* — published by Collins, a division of HarperCollins — will hit bookstores Oct. 3. It's Naisbitt's seventh book on global business and cultural trends, and foreign rights have been sold in 37 countries.

In *Mind Set*, Naisbitt makes several 21st-century forecasts, including some unexpected ones:

► **Next Big Thing?** Naisbitt believes there will be no Next Big Thing for decades. Instead, the world will stay busy fine-tuning the basic technology discoveries of the 20th century. The same historical pattern has held true from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution, he writes.

► **Economic domains.** Industries are becoming worldwide "economic domains," adding more to the global economy than to national economies. eBay's revenue, for instance, belongs to a global technology domain, not the U.S. economy. One day, Naisbitt writes, the "world domestic product," or WDP, will be the only economic number that matters.

► **China's future.** While China's economic growth since the 1980s has been extraordinary, the world's most-populous country may never reach global business dominance, as many Westerners fear. It will take China 40 years just to match America's standard of living — if that ever happens, Naisbitt notes.

► **European decline.** Europe will remain plagued by political battles, high taxes, restrictive labor laws, failing exports and poor productivity.

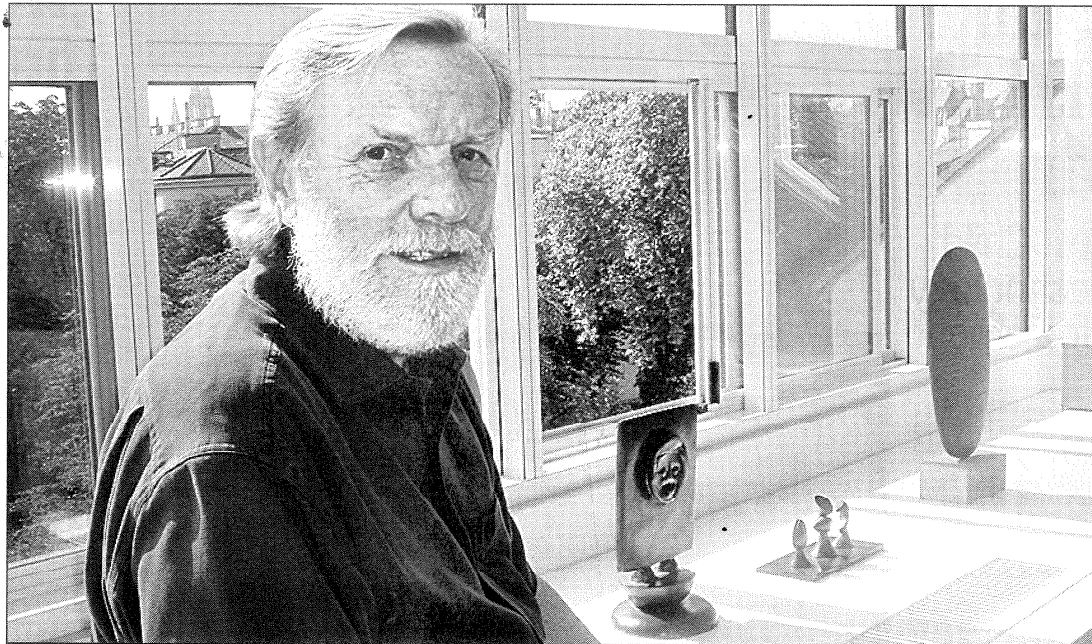


Photo courtesy of Naisbitt family

Author: John Naisbitt's new book, *Mind Set! Re-Set Your Thinking and See the Future*, hits stores Oct. 3. In it, he makes some 21st-century predictions.

It will end up a "History Theme Park" for American and Asian tourists, Naisbitt forecasts.

Mind Set also looks at Naisbitt's passion for learning and his mental tools for forecasting trends in a complex world. Joseph Tessitore, the president of Collins who signed Naisbitt at the Frankfurt Book Fair, says *Mind Set* is the author's "legacy book" and a "culmination of his insights acquired over a lifetime."

So what are Naisbitt's prophet-like secrets for spotting trends?

Steve Rhinesmith, a management consultant and former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union who met Naisbitt during glasnost cultural exchanges, says Naisbitt sees many hidden patterns that others don't fathom.

"Part of John's genius," he says, "is his ability to look at vast amounts of data, find the connections and pull out big-picture concepts that contradict the current wisdom."

Family and friends say Naisbitt has boundless curiosity about people, cultures and organizations. He scans

hundreds of newspapers and magazines, from *Scientific American* to *Tricycle*, a Buddhism magazine.

"When he's locked into his work, you could set off a bomb and he wouldn't notice it," says daughter Claire Schwadron, an arts administrator whose early childhood memories include clipping newspaper stories with her father.

Naisbitt's son, David, an Air Force lieutenant in Afghanistan, says his father's probing questions on politics, economics, the arts — even military history — always challenge him.

In an e-mail, David Naisbitt writes: "As I now get to travel the world, I see how keen his insights have been."

A modern-day Marco Polo, John Naisbitt travels at least 100 days a year.

"He has been everywhere and has done so many things," says Doris Naisbitt, his third wife, an Austrian and former head of the Signum publishing house. "John's domain is the entire world."

In the 1980s, Naisbitt and other corporate gurus pioneered publish-

ing's lucrative genre of business books. *Megatrends* sold 14 million copies in 57 countries, while books by Tom Peters (*In Search of Excellence*), Alvin Toffler (*Future Shock* and *The Third Wave*) and Kenneth Blanchard (*The One Minute Manager*) also became best sellers.

More best sellers

After *Megatrends*, Naisbitt spun out several more best sellers, including *Reinventing the Corporation* and *Megatrends for Women* with Patricia Aburdene, *Megatrends 2000* and *Megatrends Asia*.

"Those were breakthrough books," says Warren Bennis, a leadership guru and business professor at the University of Southern California. "They gave authors and publishers the license to write and sell major books" in the genre.

The original *Megatrends* in 1982 was especially prescient, forecasting everything from the rise of a global economy to the explosion of a knowledge society.

Some critics have blasted Naisbitt's work as simplistic. *Time* magazine called *Megatrends* a "megamuddle." And a recent review of *Mind Set* by *Publishers Weekly* called Naisbitt a

"crotchety grandpa" complaining about technology and coasting on his reputation.

That's rubbish, Naisbitt's colleagues say. His agent, James Levine of the Levine Greenberg Literary Agency, says armchair quarterbacks find it easy to criticize futurists, even when many of their forecasts "have proven to be true."

The son of a bus driver and a seamstress, Naisbitt worked as a senior education official in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Then he left government and launched a consulting firm and a newsletter called the *Trend Report* that analyzed issues and trends. The newsletter formed the foundation for *Megatrends*.

While older readers recall *Megatrends*, Naisbitt's publisher also hopes to attract new fans, including young professionals who must keep pace with the fast-changing global economy.

For Naisbitt, intellectual discovery transcends age.

"You try to figure things out, write about them and hope it's useful," Naisbitt says. "The teacher in me says, 'That's good.' The student in me says, 'Keep going.' Learning how to learn is the most precious thing we have in life."

Naisbitt got his predictions right

When John Naisbitt's *Megatrends* was published in 1982, the international best seller was hailed as a road map to the new century.

Naisbitt, a corporate consultant and former education official in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, had sketched a blueprint of 10 far-reaching business and cultural trends that continue to influence the USA and world today.

Twenty-five years later, it's clear that nearly all of Naisbitt's forecasts were dead on, although a couple partly missed the target:

"From an Industrial Society to an Information Society."

While policymakers and business leaders sought to reindustrialize America, Naisbitt realized the USA already had evolved from a blue-collar manufacturing power into an information economy of white-collar and high-tech professionals. He was right.

"From a National Economy to a World Economy."

Globalization had been a buzz word for years in academic and business circles. But Naisbitt foresaw the big picture: The USA was slipping in worldwide economic dominance and would need to become more "interdependent" with Third World nations and economies in trade, manufacturing, technology and finance. He was right.

"From North to South."

Naisbitt believed that business and political power and millions of jobs would move from New York, Pennsylvania and Illinois to the Sunbelt states of California, Texas and Florida. He was right.

"From Hierarchies to Networking."

Naisbitt predicted that companies and other organizations would dump the hierarchical, command-and-control structure, while adopting more collaborative management models based on networking. Decision-making power would rise from the workers' trenches to the boardroom. He was partly right.

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