

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Elliott Abrams, Council on Foreign Relations

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KRISTOL: I'm Bill Kristol. Joining me today is Elliott Abrams, who has held senior positions in the State Department in the Reagan Administration and the White House in the George W. Bush Administration.

I: Scoop Jackson Democrat (0:26 – 13:28)

KRISTOL: Did you expect to serve up 15 years in the State Department and the White House when you first came to Washington?

ABRAMS: I didn't. I came and effect to Washington to work for the late Senator Henry M. Jackson – Scoop Jackson – in the Senate and to go home, which was New York. I thought I'd be here for you know a couple of years and then leave town. So, it – and I actually did spend more than four years in the Senate. But then Ronald Reagan got elected.

And, you know, when I came here I thought of Ronald Reagan as a sort of movie star. The idea that he'd be President and I'd work for him was not in my mind.

KRISTOL: Well, tell me more about that. So you came – you worked for a Democrat – two Democratic Senators?

ABRAMS: Well, I was a Democrat. I was raised as a Democrat in New York City, and I was a Democrat and I would say a hardline Democrat, a hardline foreign policy Democrat in, as we thought, you know the tradition of Truman and Lyndon Johnson.

And in fact in 1968 when I was still in school, I was for Humphrey for the Democratic nomination for President, not Gene McCarthy or Bobby Kennedy. But I had actually worked in the 1972 embryonic Scoop Jackson campaign.

KRISTOL: One of many successful political endeavors –

ABRAMS: – up at Harvard, and I think that's where we met.

KRISTOL: That's where we met. Yes.

ABRAMS: And I told Jackson then, "If you run in '76, I want in," and he did run in '76. So, I was by then out of law school, and on board, let's just say, with the practice of law in New York. And, so I made the decision on my birthday, I'm out of here, and told Scoop I'm ready to come down. This was in 1975 – to work with him in the Senate but with the notion that this was preparing for the '76 campaign.

KRISTOL: And did you stay on the Senate staff in the '76 campaign –

ABRAMS: I did.

KRISTOL: – or did you actually work on the campaign?

ABRAMS: No, I stayed on the Senate staff. He was chairman of the permanent subcommittee on investigations, which is where he kind of set me for a while. And then I worked on his personal staff. I think I worked on the campaign for a week. And then Scoop said, "No, no, no, I want him in the Senate."

So, I was on the Senate staff. Jackson's campaign ended on April 27, 1976 with the Pennsylvania primary. I remember it. I was up in Philadelphia for – we hoped – a party. It was a wake.

He pulled out, and we all supported from Scoop on down the guy who was supposedly the most conservative candidate left, a guy named Jimmy Carter.

KRISTOL: Did you vote for Jimmy Carter? You don't have to answer that, it's a secret ballot –

ABRAMS: Happily voted for Jimmy Carter. But I stayed with Scoop right on through 1976. I wrote a number of – we should go back and check – I thought excellent Bicentennial speeches for him to give at colleges in Washington State, but then in November a guy named Daniel P. Moynihan got elected Senator from New York.

KRISTOL: So you moved over, and worked for Pat Moynihan for how long?

ABRAMS: I worked for Pat for two and a half years.

KRISTOL: That must have been interesting.

ABRAMS: So that was two years Scoop, two years Pat. Yes, I mean, it was interesting, it was difficult as you know because you knew him. Moynihan was a brilliant man and a great public servant and impossible to work for.

I actually think – to put it straightforwardly – he was ruined by the United States Senate in this sense – when you think of him – the *Moynihan Report on the Negro Family*, you think of the Moynihan as the UN Ambassador, these were the greatest moments in his public life.

As a Senator he was a politician in a liberal state where there was even a New York State Liberal Party. And I think that as time went by he became less and less the great Moynihan that we knew and more and more a Democratic Party politician whose ability to act was limited by New York State politics.

KRISTOL: And I do think Moynihan's contributions that people now read about him are much more what he wrote in social science and what he did at the UN probably than any particular accomplishments in the Senate, don't you think?

ABRAMS: I think that is right. In fact, if you think of his Senate career, what do you think of? He opposed Bill Clinton's welfare reform, which is probably the best thing Clinton did.

So, I think – I don't know what Pat would have done had he not gone into the Senate where he was for 24 years, but there aren't many great contributions, and I think it's because of the contradiction between his own views and the political situation of the New York State Democratic Party.

KRISTOL: Come back to Scoop Jackson for a minute, since I think you admired him very much. He died too young – in 1982, I think. What was he like? People don't remember him as much as maybe they should today, you know; it's been a long time.

ABRAMS: Scoop was, unlike Pat, was not a sort of dynamic individual, and was obviously not an intellectual, certainly not in the sense that Moynihan was. He was a great Senator.

First of all, he was a great politician. And – you know from Washington State – and a great politician in a couple of senses. One the oldest fashion, baby-kissing sense, that is people would come in from the state and say, "Hi, we're the Johnsons from some county or city," and he'd say, "Oh, the Johnsons, your uncle was county attorney in 196– " I mean it was like that. He had an amazing memory.

He also had the ability to work with the Senate. He was a great master of the Senate, and that is a talent that I think a lot of academics and intellectuals don't understand. I mean, I can remember that we would say to him – he'd say, "Well, I'm going to get this bill passed and I'm going to get this amendment passed."

And we'd say, "How could that possibly" – and he would say, "Well, I told Russell Long that I would vote for this if he would vote for that, and he said he would for that if Senator Magnuson would allow his son-in-law to be the U.S. attorney for – but that would only work if then up in Maine –" I mean and this was kind of a Rube Goldberg device with 18 moving parts that nobody else could follow.

But he – in that sense, he was a great Senator. His – much of what he achieved was literally in the Senate. Of course, then he became a national leader on foreign policy opposing, initially, the Nixon-Kissinger détente foreign policy and then the Carter foreign policy.

KRISTOL: One forgets – people today don't even know that a good chunk of the opposition to Nixon-Kissinger détente was from the right and from Democrats, Scoop Jackson but also in fact from Pat Moynihan when he was UN Ambassador, he served under Kissinger in a sense in that job, but also clashed with Kissinger, I believe. It really wasn't – the Democratic Party was awfully different than. That was the Democratic Party you signed up for, that you came to Washington to work for. Right?

ABRAMS: Well, it was changing. I mean you know it starts in 1968 over the Vietnam War, Johnson's resignation, McGovern's nomination in 1972 – and it looked as if there was going to be a change back to a kind of Johnsonian/Truman, real strong foreign policy with Jimmy Carter who had run in a way to the right of Gerald Ford for President. And Jimmy Carter having – you know Navy Captain.

But it didn't turn out that way. It was striking to us in the Jackson camp that when Carter became President, our group was absolutely excluded from the Administration. You know, it didn't matter much to me – I was very young. I wasn't going to get some big job anyway.

But there were people of the right age to get significant jobs. . . . Nothing.

KRISTOL: And Scoop and Moynihan opposed Carter on some things very early right, in 1977?

ABRAMS: Well, I think part of it was the personnel question. That is, on the one hand, we're excluded. I mean, one of the people in the Jackson neocon camp – we didn't use the word "neocon" then, but let's just say hardline Democrats, hawks, Cold War Democrats – was named the President's special negotiator for Micronesia – there were talks about the independence for Micronesia – and I said at the time, "We didn't even get Macronesia; we got Micronesia."

That had a lot to do with it, I think, the sense that, "Wait a minute, they've made a decision. We don't want you." Who did they want? If I remember correctly, Moynihan's first speech, certainly his first

significant one, on the floor of the Senate was opposing the nomination of a man named Paul Warnke to head the Arms Control and Disarmament Administration.

What was that all about? It was about détente and Nixon and Kissinger. And it showed you where the Carter Administration was going, and it was exactly what Jackson and Moynihan in supporting Carter had thought was not going to happen.

KRISTOL: And when you left the Hill in '78, I guess it was, or '79, and you left working for –

ABRAMS: When did I leave? '79.

KRISTOL: Did you realize, basically, you were probably going to leave the Democratic Party, or the future was with Republicans? A and B, I'm curious what people like you, you know – people already active in politics, cared a lot about foreign policy – what did you think about Ronald Reagan?

At what point did people start to realize that Reagan – I mean, as I remember I was a little younger – still he was former Governor, he had lost in 1976 – people were dubious that he was going to be the leader of America during the 1980s.

ABRAMS: Well, we were – first of all, none of us knew this guy, right. We were Democrats, and most of us were from the East; he's the Governor of California. I don't think Reagan was such a big figure in our minds then. The question was within the Democratic Party.

We formed the – one of the many you know, NGO-type organizations, this was called Coalition for a Democratic Majority, that had a bunch of conservative Democrats. We were still fighting in the Democratic Party, but the question became, "What to do in 1980 about the reelection of Jimmy Carter?," remembering that he had gone, in our view, way off on foreign policy. Andrew Young as UN Ambassador meeting with the PLO, saying that the Cuban troops in Angola were a force for stability, a bunch of incidents like this.

We were asked to meet with Carter. Who's we? You know, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Norm Podhoretz, Midge Decter, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, Max Kampelman, conservative Democrats, hardline Democrats – were invited in by Mondale.

My memory is this is about May 1980, and the campaign, of course, is going –

KRISTOL: Carter's already beaten back the Kennedy challenge in the primary, I suppose?

ABRAMS: That's my memory, and Reagan is more and more clearly – he is the Republican nominee, though not officially yet.

And Mondale called us in. When we met – we went to the White House, which, of course, is a big deal. And we met in the Cabinet room. And Mondale came in and he was terrific, I have to say. Basically, you know, pulling on the heart strings, "You're all Democrats, come on, you're not going to support this actor from California." He was very – he did it well.

And after he spoke and chummed around for 20 minutes, in comes the President. Again, a great honor for us and we had agreed one of us, Austin Ranney, who was the head of the American Political Science Association, would speak.

And he spoke for about ten seconds, before Carter cut him off. Because he started by saying, "Oh, Mr. President, we – everybody here voted for you, we want to support you, and we –" In essence, he said, "We like your *new* foreign policy."

What was new? After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, it got a little tougher. And Ranney said, "So we like the new foreign policy, if you will, the second foreign policy," and that took about 15 seconds to say and then Carter interrupted him and said, "I don't have two foreign policies. I have one foreign

policy. My foreign policy has not changed.” As I remember, in that tone, too.

And he then went on for a few minutes, and by the end of the meeting, everybody in the room was for Reagan, including me. I mean, all of us listened to this and said, “Wow, it’s as bad as we feared. There’s no change in the foreign policy. It will be four more years.”

And I think – I don’t want to say everybody in that room voted for Reagan. Certainly, the majority did. A number of us then worked on the Reagan campaign and went into the Administration.

II: Congress and Political Education (13:29 – 23:12)

KRISTOL: Yeah, I’ve often thought I didn’t learn certain things by not working on the Hill. You know, it was always kind of a mystery to me when I was in the Executive Branch dealing with Congress. You have a better feel for it I am sure, but do you recommend it to young people? Is it good to work on the Hill?

ABRAMS: Yeah, absolutely, I mean, I recommend it to all of them, including people who come and say, “You know, I’ve got a job offer from this doofus congressman and not what I wanted” – take it.

And the reason I say that is it’s unique. Everything passes before you. You know, in the State Department, you’re doing foreign affairs, and in the agriculture department, you’re doing that. You work for a Congressman or a Senator literally everything comes before you. You’ve got to vote on everything. And you’re an ombudsman.

So, you’ve got to deal with constituents’ problems with the Social Security Administration, the Veterans Administration, you name it. I don’t think there is – maybe except for being President of the United States – there isn’t another position where literally the entire Federal Government is before you.

And I think for a young person it’s fantastic to see that – A. B, politics – and there is – there’s the politics of the state, the nomination for Congress, who’s in the next district, how do two Senators relate to each other, same party or opposite parties? How do the Senators relate to the Congressional delegation from that state?

The fact of the Congress and the outside world – that is, if you’re a Senator, you know, the most important other 99 people in the world to you are Senators. I mean, they’re the people who you see every day on the floor, in the gym, in the hallway, who can make your life miserable or enable you – because you know you don’t need the President’s vote in a sense. You don’t need Margaret Thatcher’s vote, Ronald Reagan’s vote, going back to those days. You need to vote of those other 99 people.

So, watching a politician – and remember we’re talking about people that – here who are, we hope, statesmen, who are, we hope, great public officials, but the one thing they have in common is they’re politicians. So, I think particularly if you view yourself as a policy intellectual that’s a fantastic education.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I was recommending to young people also to work on campaigns, which I sort of got into by accident. I worked a little bit on the Moynihan in the summer of ’76, for the Senate in New York, and then ran actually a losing Senate campaign in Maryland for a Republican in 1988. It was a hopeless campaign, and, you know, not that pleasant an experience when you know you’re going to lose and you’re trying to raise money to get a few ads up on the air.

But I always thought I learned more about America – I mean, I always think it was a very good experience to have actually to have to be part of a campaign. And do you also agree with – I guess you worked – well, you worked in effect on the Jackson campaign and not as a – you were on the Senate staff and then you helped Reagan in 1980 –

ABRAMS: And I did work on the Jackson campaign in 1976 –

KRISTOL: ’72?

ABRAMS: '72, rather, when I was in law school.

Yeah, I recommend it. I think again particularly for people whose – for whom electoral politics is not going to be their life. It's an exposure, but there's something else one has to say, too, that I'm constantly telling young people, college students, you know, Washington is a place with two teams.

You need to choose a team. You cannot play this sport until you're on a team. So, whatever your interest is – let's say it's foreign policy as mine was – which team are you on? Choose up, get involved in the campaign, choose sides in Congress and you really can't move back and forth – maybe once in your lifetime – we're all not Winston Churchill.

So, maybe you've got one ability to do it. One opportunity in your life. That's another reason to get on a campaign. I think there's a tendency on the part of people who come up you know through college, grad school, law school, magazines, NGOs, to overlook the central activity or central activity for Congressmen, Senators, Presidents – is politics. They got to be elected first.

KRISTOL: Right, no, I've been very struck by that, too. I mean, that you really – people come into government from universities, from magazines, from think tanks sometimes fail to see the centrality of politics.

ABRAMS: I remember a time when George Schultz called in Robert Strauss, we're talking about late administration of Ronald Reagan's, probably '86-7 –

KRISTOL: Bob Strauss, senior Democrat, you know –

ABRAMS: Very senior – Democratic wise man at that point, of course, out of the government in the Reagan years – and Strauss advised him, "You need to go up to the Hill, and you need to see these leading Democrats."

And what was interesting to me was what I failed to do – just to show you don't learn all the lessons you need – we found out really, really angered who – the senior Republicans. Because what Schultz should have done was to realize this is a political game above all. I'm on a team. Strauss is probably right, it's good to see the Democratic leadership after.

So, even if your goal is a narrow foreign policy goal and you need to get this done, "I need your support," the political exposure particularly on the Hill political exposure where you realize the extent to which teams matter – that is, it's not all encompassing.

But I would say it's much more – it's much closer to all-encompassing now. It's one of the changes. I – you know, sounds like I've been in Washington for 100 years, but I did start on the Hill decades ago, and I think there was a lot more cross-party activity.

I think people were able to deal with each other as individuals and in the story I told, you know, Jackson's maneuvering with this Senator that Senator, I'll support him if you – party was less important in that kind of situation.

I think that's changed. I think the sense of being divided into two opposing teams, two teams that really cannot get along, find it hard to work together, there was a lot less of that. And it's a lot worse, which is one of the reasons you see Senators quitting after a term or two.

KRISTOL: They can't work across the aisle, cut deals, liberate themselves from their own leadership, I think, as much as some would like. I mean, did Scoop Jackson take orders from – who was the Senate majority leader then?

ABRAMS: In the earlier days, it was a guy named Lyndon Johnson. And then after – Mike Mansfield, who was not a dictator. I think a big part of the problem here – TV. When I got to the Hill – in fact, I remember my first day. Jackson's foreign policy advisor, the late Dorothy Fosdick, said to me, "You know, what you

could do for us – today – your first day – go cover the markup of the committee on this or that.”

Now, I didn't know what markup was. I had never heard the term before. What was a markup? In those days a markup was the place where Senators and staff would sit in a closed room and make the deal. They would literally mark up the draft legislation – mark it up with pens and pencils, come out with a deal.

KRISTOL: And it was closed?

ABRAMS: Literally closed, so that you could say –

KRISTOL: No reporters, no TV.

ABRAMS: Yeah, one Senator could say to another –

KRISTOL: I mean, you could get in because you were a Senate staffer.

ABRAMS: Staff, right.

KRISTOL: No outsider.

ABRAMS: No outsider, no lobbyists, no TV, and they would do deal and they would say to each other, “Okay, look it says 30 million, I know you're asking for 40, but, come on, that's just lobbying crap. What do you need? I can do 30, too.” You could make that kind of deal.

But markups are now open to not only the lobbyist, to the press, and there are cameras. Just as there are now cameras on the Senate floor. Warren Magnuson was the other Senator from Washington State, along with Scoop, and let me put this way, he was real fat. He was slovenly.

You don't have that anymore. I mean, people of Washington State didn't care that they had a fat Senator because he was a great Senator. He was a really effective legislator, Magnuson.

And as I think back to the Senate when I got there, the last quarter of the 20th century, before TV, you had a lot of Senators who were old, who had bad haircuts, bad suits, overweight. It didn't matter. It matters now, because you have cameras everywhere now and you got a lot of guys who spend apparently a very large amount of time having their hair done. The John Edwards effect, you know.

KRISTOL: Right, right, right.

ABRAMS: This is not improvement in the quality of legislators, legislation, or the activity of the body. And you know, it's open government, right? Why do you have closed markups where people can't get in to see what's going on? It's not an improvement. They were actually governing better then, I would say, where they closed markups where deals could be done.

KRISTOL: Yeah, no, it's – it is remarkable. I mean, by the time I got here the markups were already opening up, or maybe had opened up and that – you read about that old Senate but it really changed quickly don't you think by the mid to late 80s it was already a different institution.

ABRAMS: Yes, I agree with you it changed, and, you know, after 200 years, it changed in five years. And you – there aren't very many of those old-style Senators. And it's much tougher to get work done.

III: Ronald Reagan and Human Rights (23:12 – 31:30)

KRISTOL: So, tell me about Reagan and the – So you helped out on the campaign in 1980? You were back practicing law for a while?

ABRAMS: Back – actually after leaving Scoop, I stayed in Washington. Practiced law here. Found it as boring as practicing law in New York.

KRISTOL: We should cut this part out for the prospective lawyers out there who are you know cramming for their second year law exams or whatever.

ABRAMS: I do always tell people I thought – I thought and think law school is a terrific intellectual experience. That doesn't mean you have to practice law for your whole life.

But I worked on the campaign, and there's no question I wanted to go in. I mean, I wanted – I had had enough practicing law, and I wanted to go back to government, and I hoped Reagan won. I actually worked on the campaign with the American Jewish community. And spent some time in Florida.

And when we won – this is really – sounds like a bad movie, but I had worked for two people who were very influential in the campaign. One of them, William Casey. I believe he was campaign manager, actually, officially, and, then, of course, head of the CIA.

And the thought was, "Okay, you worked on the campaign, we won, now I get something, right?" And I actually went to see Casey who – my memory may be playing tricks – but as I recall said, "What do you want?" And I had figured out what I wanted by then and asked for it, and remarkably enough got it.

You know, I had no area of expertise. I couldn't say, "I'm a great Asia specialist, I'm a great African specialist," but Moynihan had after all been Ambassador to the UN so I thought I'd go work in the UN Bureau in State, International Organizations Bureau.

Of course, when I worked for Moynihan, he was a Senator so – one thing had nothing to do with the other – but I knew that people would think it did. And, actually, I went to see Pat Moynihan to say, "This is my thinking, and therefore I think that I will go to see Casey and the other couple of guys and say, 'I'd like to be Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs.'" And Moynihan – we were having lunch and a few drinks – and Moynihan said "*Deputy Assistant Secretary, deputy?*" And I said, "You mean I – you think I should" – he said, basically yeah, ask, ask to be Assistant Secretary.

So, I went and saw Casey and I said, "I want to be Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs," and he said, "Ha, oh, yeah, that sounds – okay yeah, that sounds good. I'll talk to Haig."

KRISTOL: Who was – who had been nominated to be Secretary of State?

ABRAMS: Right, Haig who I had never met. And I got a call saying, "General Haig would like to see you." And I went and saw him, and he offered me the job. So, yeah –

KRISTOL: Is that right?

ABRAMS: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And weren't you like – weren't you the youngest, I don't know, Assistant Secretary of State at that point –

ABRAMS: I was. I was 32. And I think nobody – at least at that point, nobody had been that young.

So, I went in the Administration –

KRISTOL: You got nominated, you got confirmed without a problem –

ABRAMS: Actually I worked on the – I should say – at the time I was working on the transition team, which, of course, Reagan like everybody else set up after his victory. And when I went into the State Department building as part of the transition team, presumably around Thanksgiving of 1980, that was the first time I had ever set foot in the building.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

ABRAMS: Yes.

KRISTOL: That's crazy.

ABRAMS: I knew where it was, but I had actually never been there.

KRISTOL: You've driven past it, yeah?

ABRAMS: And by the way you say you've driven by it. How did you get to the State Department – sign of change in Washington – the State Department has a semicircular driveway, so you take a taxi and the taxi driver would drive into the semicircular driveway, which is good in case it was raining, you know you'd walk –

KRISTOL: Right.

ABRAMS: Of course, the whole street is now closed since 9/11, but in those days you could drive right up. So, I was nominated, I think, right away. Haig did all his nominations. And this is another change. The speed, I – my memory is I was confirmed in April, which was two months after the President comes in – unanimously.

So, I did that job. Although, actually, I only did it for seven months or something –

KRISTOL: Yes, so give us – you spent eight years – the entire – basically the entire Reagan Administration – in the State Department in which jobs? And –

ABRAMS: Well, I started in this UN job –

KRISTOL: So that's Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization –

ABRAMS: International Organization Affairs, where you –

KRISTOL: You supervise –

ABRAMS: You supervise the UN in theory – the UN system, and it's not just New York because there's UN Geneva, there's the IAEA in Vienna, there's environmental stuff in Kenya. The problem is we have a think called UN Ambassador who is often a member of the Cabinet – Jean Kirkpatrick was – but always a big shot.

And it is always the case that the Secretary of State and the UN Ambassador clash. And Haig and Kirkpatrick did. And in that little clash, in the middle is the Assistant Secretary for IO getting crushed.

KRISTOL: That's good. It's a good introduction to government though – 32 years old, caught between General Haig and Ambassador Kirkpatrick.

ABRAMS: After a year, they were not speaking.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

ABRAMS: Messages had to be carried by people like the then-Under Secretary of State Walter Stoessel or me. Staffs were conspiring against each other and these were – remember, we don't have big ideological differences here or party differences, and we're all in love with President Reagan – it's bureaucratic, it's people fighting over the same piece of turf, and I was crushed in the middle.

What happened was that for my benefit was that the Reagan nominee for Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights could not be confirmed, the late Ernest Lefever. In fact, Haig contemplated eliminating the position, which he couldn't do without legislation – very foolish.

But the Deputy Secretary asked me to think through what should we do with this position and who should hold it and –

KRISTOL: Was that the guy who had been invented by Carter or the human rights job?

ABRAMS: Invented by Carter and there was some talk among Republicans to try to get rid of it – dumb politically. I saw my escape hatch here. So, I went back to the Deputy Secretary and said, “I have a candidate for you, suave, handsome, you know, well dressed, brilliant.” And he said, “Okay fine, yeah yeah, you really want to do it.” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Write it up,” and I did and wrote a memo about what would a Reagan Republican, conservative, rightwing human rights policy look like. And they liked it. That is, the Deputy Secretary Clark liked it, the White House liked.

I got that job in December of '81 and kept it through the first term, but toward the end I thought, you know, I should try something else, Reagan's going to be President for eight years. And I thought, “Maybe I'd be Ambassador, that would be great.” Ambassadors get big houses and staffs, and we have three little kids. So, that sounded good.

But the work I had done was largely – probably more about Latin America than any other region because in that period the Latin countries were with only, I think, two exceptions military dictatorships, which we were trying to move toward democracy.

When the Assistant Secretary for Latin America told Haig – Shultz by then – Haig only lasted a year and a half and then George Shultz was Secretary. He told Shultz he was going to leave and go back home to Alaska. I had a call from – actually, my number two – my deputy had a call from Shultz's assistant saying, “Does Elliot speak Spanish and does he speak it well?” and my deputy said, “Yeah, actually he does, why?” He says, “Well, nothing.”

And you know a day later I got the call saying, “We want you to be Assistant Secretary for Latin America.” And I did that for the rest of the administration.

IV: George Shultz and Ronald Reagan (31:30 – 46:33)

KRISTOL: So you were Assistant Secretary of State for three years under President Reagan, and people forget now but that – human rights had been a Carter initiative really and almost introduced it, you might say, to America foreign policy, at least in those terms, made it a huge focus of his – criticized by a lot of conservatives. I think you played an important role in somehow making human rights a conservative doctrine or policy priority of a conservative administration, the Reagan Administration. Talk about that.

ABRAMS: Well, we – you're absolutely right that we – a lot of us on the Republican side – or let's say the hardline side, because in those days, I was still a Democrat.

KRISTOL: You were still a Democrat in the Reagan Administration?

ABRAMS: I actually was. I was in, officially, Democrats for Reagan during the campaign, and then I was not asked to change party, nor was, say, Jean Kirkpatrick until, I think, the second year. The second job – I think when the second Assistant Secretary of Human Rights – as I recall it, Lyn Nofziger, the director of politics in the White House said, “Would you be comfortable doing this?” and by then the answer was yes, so I did it.

Our criticisms of the Carter human rights policy was that it was human rights policy as kind of foreign aid. That is, 13 guys were arrested so we'll try to get the 13 guys out of prison, not a systematic attempt to change a dictatorial system into a democratic system, first.

Second, the heavy pressure was hitting our allies, pro-western people, not, for example, Fidel Castro in Cuba, but rather people in places like South Korea and the Philippines and Central America.

And in Iran I mean – 1979 was the year in which the Shah of Iran fell and the Somoza dictatorship in

Nicaragua fell, both of which you know was fine as long as they were replaced by a more democratic regime and, of course, that did not happen in either case. So, we thought, “How is this a gain for human rights?”

So, our – we developed a kind of conservative human rights policy, which called for systemic change and which also called for helping laying the foundation for a democratic follow-on regime.

Because what happened we thought in Nicaragua in 1979, Iran '79, was what happened in Cuba in '59, which was that you had a vacuum. And into that vacuum the best organized, other forces – the Communists in the Latin cases and the Ayatollah Khomeini's forces in Iran – jumped. They jumped in and they took power; they seized power. Once they seized it, very hard to get it away from them so we had to prevent them from seizing it by helping moderates be ready.

That was the critique. And, so I thought, you know, well, “Why should Republicans, why should conservatives take the position we're against human rights?” Haig made a terrible mistake early on in the administration saying in a press conference, “What human rights was for the Carter Administration, fighting terrorism will be for the Reagan Administration,” which was really, first of all, I think, not true, but secondly, silly to say even if it were true, because it just riled people up.

I would have to say to be candid that Secretary of State Haig never really got this argument about human rights and was not interested much in it.

When you're in a weak – in the State Department – I should back up ten seconds – there are regional bureaus – Africa, Asia, Latin America – those are the dukedoms, they run the world. They liaise with the ambassadors and the embassies, and they're big shots, and they are what called – what are called functional bureaus, like the economics bureau, the human rights bureau, and they're much weaker, because everything that happens really happens through the regional to the embassies.

So, if you are Assistant Secretary for Human Rights, everything depends on the Secretary. When you go to the Assistant Secretary for Asia or Latin America and say, “We need to say X, and we need to protest Y, and we –” you know, he or she can basically say, “Go back to your office, please.”

Not if the secretary is on your side. And early on, Shultz –

KRISTOL: So, you become Assistant Secretary of Human Rights under Haig, and there you are a young guy, your second Assistant Secretary-ship, a weak bureau, kind of tainted by the sense that it's a Carter leftover, and you don't get that far under Secretary Haig –

ABRAMS: It's hard.

KRISTOL: How do you operate as a young political appointee in that kind of environment?

ABRAMS: You operate by making non-ideological arguments. Guatemala is a good example. Because I remember when we cut off military aid to the Lucas García regime – this is 1981 – it really – it deserves the terms – fascist murderous regime in Guatemala.

Nobody wanted to hear the argument that we should be purer than pure, and this is, you know, for human rights reasons, we have to cut them off. The winning argument was, “No, no, no, there's going to be no military aid to Guatemala. Either we cut it off or Congress will cut it off while screaming at us for human rights abuses. So why is that smart? We should cut it off, and then we'll get kudos.”

And people went around the room and sort of said, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, I guess that's right.”

KRISTOL: So, Shultz takes over in the summer of '82 as Secretary of State. How does that change your plight? We'll talk about human rights policy – but, in general, how to – what – you're Assistant Secretary of State, there's a new Secretary of State, what's that like?

ABRAMS: Well, I didn't know Shultz at all, you know, he was sort of helicoptered in, though he had obviously great career before that – a Cabinet member. And I met him as Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and, you know, was just hoping – I mean, it was perfectly plausible that he would want somebody else in that position. But we got on well, and he really appreciated what was being done.

And the test of it, interestingly – and it was more of a test later – the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile. That was a test because Shultz had been dean of the Graduate School of Economics or the Business School at the University of Chicago. He had trained a lot of the economists who were doing a fabulous job – a fabulous job in Chile – and he was very admiring of the job they were doing.

But there were a lot of human rights abuses. And when I went to him with them and said, "We have to protest this publicly, we have to condemn this." He would shake his head. Reluctantly, we have to do it, but yes, we would do it.

And he was – as he looked around the world at, you know – it's easy to be against the Castro dictatorship in Cuba, Communists dictatorships and things like that, but he was sympathetic with the view that a human rights policy be credible meant that if you think back to those days, that you had to be critical of the apartheid government of South Africa and of the generals in South Korea and for the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines, one could go on. There were an awful lot of military dictatorships in those days.

So, Shultz was really a hundred percent behind this human rights policy, and it changed life in the human rights bureau a lot. It meant that if I went to the Assistant Secretary for Asia, Africa, Latin America, and said, "We need to do this, we need to say this," they could not say, "Go home," because I had the ability to elevate the dispute to the Secretary and I might win. That meant they had to bargain with me. And they did. And therefore the bureau actually became a bit of a player.

KRISTOL: So, you're Assistant Secretary of State of Human Rights, human rights becomes a theme of the Reagan Administration, and then in the beginning of the second term, you're asked to move over to become Assistant Secretary for Latin America?

ABRAMS: Yes, it was, let's see, 1985. I think I was sworn in July of 1985.

KRISTOL: So, now you're in charge of one of these powerful dukedoms that actually control the whole region of the world and people forget today but a region that was extremely important to the Reagan Administration because of the fights against communism in Central America.

ABRAMS: Yes, I mean, there was concern, first of all, about stability in Mexico. There were all these military dictatorships that we really did want to get rid of. And there was this battle in Central America, and for that matter one should add Grenada. People forget there was actually American military action there.

Furthermore there was Noriega in Panama that ultimately led in the year after Reagan – George H. W. Bush – another invasion, so it's a real hot spot.

For me, it was a huge difference because as you just put it really running the thing. And I think the number was 38 embassies – ambassadors reporting to me. I would say I was very fortunate that I did this in my fifth year in the State Department because – had I been tossed into this – in the beginning I would not have known how to do it. But after four years of watching and being in the building, I thought I knew how to run a bureau.

But you have much more power, for example, personnel power. You have the ability to say, you know, "Jane should be Ambassador to Peru, not John." It changes people's lives, it changes the foreign policy of the President because a lot does depend, even now, on an ambassador.

So, it made me a bigger shot in the building that's for sure. And we were – you know, we were on the front pages an awful lot in those days.

KRISTOL: I'm just curious, on the managerial side you got a whole bunch of Foreign Service officers, career civil servants, a few political appointees, I guess, but fewer than people think, I think, is that right? How much of challenge is it to make your own bureau do what you want it to do, and what the Secretary wants it to do?

ABRAMS: You're right, it was very few. I mean, as I remember I think I had four political appointees in a bureau of about 250 people in Washington and then all the embassies and their staffs.

My – in only one case – well, two cases, I think – would I say there was a kind of rebellion by Foreign Service officers who were just not following the President's policy. For the rest, my thought – and comparing notes with other regional Assistant Secretaries, I think this really a fair thing to say – if you make the policy clear, the Foreign Service officers will generally follow you if they think there is strong leadership that will, among other things protect them, by the way, because there will be criticism.

And as long as it is possible for a Foreign Service officer to say, "I don't make the policy, the President makes it, Shultz makes it, Abrams makes it, I'm just carrying it out as best I can," they will carry it out.

And I found, you know, if you brought them in and said, "Look, here's what the President wants, how can we do that?" Shultz was particularly good about this. Haig, you – you know, why did Haig lose his job after a year and a half? Because he was fighting the White House.

I was shocked sometimes when I would have conversations with him alone, at the insults he would throw at the White House and the people there, because, you know, after all, I was at this point 33 years old, and he didn't know me very well, and he shouldn't be saying this to me.

Shultz used to say – if you're at a meeting, say – somebody would say, "That policy is just awful. What is the President doing? This is completely wrong, this is not going to work for the following 12 reasons." Shultz would listen; he was a great listener. He would hear you out.

And then he would say usually, "You know you may be right. You may be right. What you need to do is to get elected President. But since Ronald Reagan is President, we're going to do what he wants to do." And there was never, you know, a sort of sense of rebellion at the White House. Shultz would push back. But the way he would push back was face to face with the President.

There was a moments that's actually – the documents are out – when the President – talking about Pinochet and Chile – and the President said, "Well, maybe we should get Pinochet here, and I'll talk to him about human rights." Just think about having this fascist dictator – and Shultz at this NSC meeting responded to the President, "No way, no way." So, he would push back, but he would do it the way you push back loyally, which is face to face.

So, I ran this bureau – I should actually tell this story because, you know, Schultz took a risk, right, when he appoints this young guy who is still pretty young to be an Assistant Secretary – particularly a regional one.

There was an earthquake in 1985 in Mexico City, huge earthquake. And I never handled a natural disaster before. And I didn't know – what does an Assistant Secretary have to do with a natural disaster? So, there was a dinner that night, some black-tie dinner, I went to it, and there was a team being formed at the State Department to handle this.

And I get beeped – in those days we didn't have cell phones, we had beepers. The Secretary wants to talk to me. So I call in and he says, "You're on top of this, aren't you?" "Um . . . um . . . sure . . . Yes." And he said, "Alright, well just make – you know, make sure you are." And I thought, "Aw jeez." So I said my goodbyes at this dinner, and I rush back to the department, it's around 11:30 or something like that at night. The Assistant Secretary arrives – me.

There was big operations center set up in the State Department that know how to do this. They've dealt with earthquakes before. They give me a full briefing, for like 20 minutes, go all the way around this huge

room. These are the people trying to get communications. These are the people dealing with hospitals. These are the people – at midnight, the Shultzes arrive, Secretary and Mrs. Shultz. He was at a different black-tie dinner.

And what happens, the new the young Assistant Secretary is – greets the Secretary and he says, “What’s going on?” So, of course, I regurgitate. I take him around the room, and I tell him, “Okay, this is what we’re doing here, and this is the communications, these are the hospitals, this is this, this is this.”

It made a big impression on him. Clearly, that, you know, here’s this young – he’s really – this guy’s good, he’s really in charge. I don’t know, I suppose the lesson here is there’s no substitute for luck. Because if he showed up, and I had not showed up, God knows what impression he would have formed of me, but in any event it helped.

Being a regional Assistant Secretary is different in that way and also, of course, as we found out in Iran-Contra in that the buck has to stop someplace, and one of the places it stops is with you.

V: Politics at the State Department (46:33 – 1:06:33)

KRISTOL: Tell me a little bit about – people I think are very curious – and I am – even not having worked in the State Department. If you’re Assistant Secretary of State, how often do you deal with the Secretary of State? A. And, B, what is it like dealing with the White House, the Defense Department, or the other agencies? It’s a complex job to have. You’re reporting up, you’re reporting sideways with the other agencies, the department the same, administration, and then, God knows, this Congress and the media and foreign governments and everyone else you have to deal with. I mean –

ABRAMS: This is a very good description. One of the key tasks is to figure out what is Assistant Secretarial – if I can put it that way – because if you take everything that comes before you to the Secretary – what do I do about this, what do I do about that? – of course, he doesn’t have time for this, he’s got too much to look at. But if you don’t go to him then you run a different risk.

Pat Buchanan, the columnist, did a very, very tough, pro-Nicaraguan Contra editorial one day – I think it was in *The Washington Post* – almost accusing the opponents of aid to the Contras of disloyalty. And it infuriated Shultz. And I remember him saying when he called me to his office –

KRISTOL: Buchanan was then at the White House?

ABRAMS: Buchanan was the White House – yeah. And Shultz called me and said, “How did this get in *The Washington Post*, who approved this?” And the answer was me. So, I said, “Well, I approved it.” And there was a kind of silence for a moment and Shultz said, “You approved it. Well, why would you have asked me? I mean, I’m just Secretary of State.” So, there was an error in figuring out what was Secretarial and what was Assistant Secretarial. But that’s a critical thing.

You know, I think different Assistant Secretaries are going to have a different method here. One thing is sure, staff is critical, you cannot do it all yourself. So, you need to be reacting with, liaising with, whatever is the right word, the military, the U.S. military, both the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the uniformed military and the CIA and the White House, of course, and the Congress constantly.

The State Department doesn’t have a good institutional relationship with Congress so you have to build it yourself. Each team has to build its own. And with the White House, it’s the NSC. And the question is who’s there and what’s – you know what’s – we didn’t have a good relationship.

One of the things I learned in Washington is that where you stand does depend on where you sit because one of the critical things I thought I had to do as Assistant Secretary of State was to keep the NSC Latin America staff from knowing or doing almost anything.

Then, of course, when I was on the NSC staff in that case with the Middle East I thought, you know, this is the President’s policy and we need to make sure the – who cares what the State Department thinks?

KRISTOL: But under Reagan, I think, Shultz was such a strong Secretary of State that you guys did dominate policy. Isn't that right?

ABRAMS: It is right, and it is because Shultz was – first of all, he was a great executive. You know he had been Secretary of Labor, he had been Secretary of the Treasury, Bureau of the Budget in those days – he knew how to run an agency.

He was you know extremely smart, and he managed personally his relationship with the President and, no small matter, Mrs. Reagan, so that it was always close. And he managed his relationship with you know the White House Chief of Staff.

KRISTOL: How much does someone like you deal directly with the President or the White House Chief of Staff?

ABRAMS: Not too much. I mean, he – I would go with him to National Security Council meetings.

KRISTOL: Go with Shultz?

ABRAMS: I would go with Shultz.

KRISTOL: If it was dealing with Latin America or Central America?

ABRAMS: Right. Or I would see the President when, you know, the President of Brazil visits, President of Honduras visits. Then we would have a meeting in the Oval Office, then we would have lunch. So, I'd be with the President then.

When I was nominated as Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights I only met the President in, you know, gatherings of 200 people or something. When I was nominated for Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America, we had a briefing of the President, some, you know, Latin America President was coming and they included me in.

And I remember Shultz introducing me and saying, Mr. President, you know, this is Elliot Abrams," and turn to me and say, "Elliott, you know the President." And I thought, "Actually I don't know the President, but it's a nice introduction. Now, I know the President."

I would see him only on those occasions, plus a few others; for example, I remember once making what we call a kind of fact-finding trip to El Salvador and then returned to the Oval Office to make a report to the President on what I'd seen.

Later when I was a member of the White House staff in the Bush Administration, it was much more constant. But as an Assistant Secretary in those days, I imagine I saw the President only about once a month.

KRISTOL: It's so different from being on the White House staff where you really do work for the President, I mean, through the National Security Advisor. Right?

ABRAMS: I mean, the difference is of course I would see Powell – Powell – I would see Secretary Shultz all the time. When Powell was Secretary of State, I was on the White House staff, I wouldn't see him all the time, but, for example, we had a morning staff meeting.

KRISTOL: So, there was a morning staff meeting that the Secretary personally ran?

ABRAMS: Secretary personally ran.

KRISTOL: With all the Assistant Secretaries of State –

ABRAMS: Senior staff. Right. I would say 25 people roughly, all the – there was one deputy, there were

three or four Under Secretaries there, I don't know, 15 Assistant Secretaries of what kind or another. And we would meet – if the Secretary wasn't traveling, we would meet with him every day.

And then in addition to that you could ask to see him about a particular issue or problem you had. And then there were visitors. You know, again these people were coming in. And not only would you be with him when he say – in my case, a Latin American President – but if a foreign minister was coming, that foreign minister would not see our President, they would see their counterpart, the Secretary of State.

And, so, I – you know, I guess I did average about once a day with Secretary Shultz.

KRISTOL: I'm just curious, most people always ask me this too, and so – and your dealings with foreign governments – if you're the Assistant Secretary for Latin America and you have an issue with Guatemala or Chile or any place would you go through the ambassador, do you personal call up the foreign minister of Chile? How does that work?

ABRAMS: Well, because it's the United States, to be the Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America, to be the senior official for Latin America is a very big deal. You know to be the Assistant Secretary, assistant minister for Latin America of, I don't know, Peru, it's a little bit different. But for America – I certainly dealt with foreign ministers when I would visit those countries, I would see them and the President. Any – and not just in – if you'll pardon the expression, dinky little country – you know, if I went to Brazil, I would see the President of Brazil.

I would not – the instructions to the U.S. embassies – this is a technology question – we didn't have email – we had secure phones and they were awful. And they were almost a comedy routine of screaming into the phone to try to be heard. You'd lose the conversation half way through. So, cables were critically important.

Nowadays, it is much, much easier to – for an Assistant Secretary to give an instruction by secure phone or by unsecure or secure email and kind of run your little empire that way. I would be in touch with our ambassadors frequently. They would visit Washington several times a year. I traveled a lot in the region.

My deputies – you know, I had a deputy for Central America, a deputy for South America, a deputy for the Caribbean – were going out – so it was – there was a lot interchanging.

KRISTOL: There was a fight that was sort of famous, dispute, I guess – debate among conservatives. You were sort of the leader of one camp. I think Jesse Helms, the Senator from North Carolina, conservative hero at the time and subsequently, was the leader of the other on how to deal with, I guess, human rights concerns and friendly dictatorships, but I think particularly with Chile, as I recall, and Pinochet. I vaguely remember it. But I mean it was an interesting moment, I think –

ABRAMS: It's true. You know one should connect this with the conservative critique of Carter policy, the loss of Iran and in this region Nicaragua. And this was a view that Jeane Kirkpatrick largely shared. It was the totalitarian/authoritarian distinction. The view was we could work with authoritarian dictators who are basically pro-Western. And we can make them improve.

But if a place goes totalitarian, it's there forever and we should prevent that, because that meant it would be aligned with the Soviet Union and we're in the height of the Cold War here.

You know, I thought there was a lot to that, although in retrospect, one has to say that, of course, even the totalitarian Soviet Union turned out not to be invincible, but we thought – I would say, I thought Shultz thought – that the answer is not therefore to support any authoritarian dictator who is pro-American. It is rather to try to figure out how to support moderates, pro-American centrists as the alternative.

We thought that that kind of authoritarian rightwing government with tremendous human rights abuses was a gift to the Communists, and it was critically important for the Reagan Administration to take this view. Because what were they saying, these guys, it's me or Communism.

So, for Ronald Reagan to say, “No, actually it isn’t; nobody’s more anti-Communist than I am but you could be leading down the path to Communism because people are going to be so angered and offended by the human rights abuses.”

In the case of Chile we thought – Shultz, the State Department – what’s going to happen if Pinochet falls?

KRISTOL: And Pinochet having taken over, what in ’73, I guess?

ABRAMS: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And having been very successful economically – And had been a great ally of the US.

ABRAMS: But increasingly brutal dictator. And the feeling that Senator Helms had was it’ll be a Communist dictatorship –

KRISTOL: If Pinochet were to fall?

ABRAMS: If Pinochet falls. He’s be looked – don’t you learn anything from Nicaragua? Our view was we know what comes after Pinochet, the Christian Democrats. And, you know, name names – we could name names, because these were people who visited us in the State Department. I saw every one of them.

Shultz would sometimes come down to my office and see others of them and socialists as well. We thought these were democrats, and they’re not Communists, they’re not pro-Soviet, and in the end it came to actually a crunch when – because Pinochet was supposed to have at the end of the Reagan Administration, 1988, a referendum on whether he continued in office.

And it looked as if he might lose, so he didn’t want to hold it. A lot of Reagan Administration pressure to hold it. And in the last days of that referendum, Pinochet wanted to scrap it or declare martial law, because he saw he was going to lose.

And not only did we tell him don’t do that, we told him and we told the Chilean military, going around him, to the Air Force and the Navy and we went through the British to do this as well, because they had hundred years of ties to the Chilean Navy, “You will lose all western support, you will be a pariah state. Don’t let Pinochet do it.”

And Pinochet actually had on that fateful night – it’s very dramatic – make a great movie – it was made into a great movie actually – he had the military leaders, head of head of the Air Force, head of the police in the Presidential palace and said, “We’re going to do this, we’re going to declare martial law,” and they said no. And I do believe one of the reasons they rebuffed him was the pressure from the Reagan Administration: “Don’t do this.”

KRISTOL: How much trouble did you have getting conservatives in the U.S., in the Senate and the House, to support you or enough of them to support you that you didn’t have a big rebellion on your hands? President Reagan was fine with this policy?

ABRAMS: President Reagan had to be persuaded by Secretary Shultz that we all along – we know what we’re doing here. This is not a policy that will work for 100 countries, it’ll work for Chile. And the President I think – certainly by the end – I mean, first of all, he was fully briefed all along.

When it came to scrapping this referendum that had been promised and essentially destroying the rule of law in Chile – the President was 100 percent on board, this cannot be permitted to happen. Just as he is the person who sent one of his closest friends, Senator Paul Laxalt, then to see the dictator Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines to say time’s up.

So, the President had to be persuaded that this was not going to lead another one of these “the dictator

falls, but a Communist dictator takes over.” I don’t think we had, as I recall it, this huge conservative rebellion on this. We had alarm, concern, and we had Senator Helms who was never persuaded and Secretary Kissinger, of course, then long out of office – but was never persuaded and was quite worried and thought the Communists were next.

But you know what got us a lot of confidence I think was the sense it’s not going to do anything that’s going to lead to a Communist takeover of any country. And we’re in a period now where we’re fighting a Communist takeover in Central America, so we had a tremendous amount of credibility on this.

KRISTOL: I mean it is amazing in Reagan’s second term people forget – obviously he laid the groundwork for the collapse of the Soviet Union. He fought the Communists in Central America, Nicaragua, El Salvador, but also the transitions from dictatorships to democracy among our allies were pretty startling and pretty fundamental. No? I mean, Philippines, South Korea, Chile –

ABRAMS: South Africa.

KRISTOL: South Africa, big countries.

ABRAMS: Chile, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Central America – the progress was really quite extraordinary, and we supported it and in some cases – I think Chile’s one and, as I have, said the Philippines is clearly another – presidential pressure was critical.

KRISTOL: And I do think that changes American – the history of American conservatism and American foreign policy in a sense of really subsequently to – I say subsequent to 1988 – even though not every participant in either the first Bush Administration or the second Bush Administration was fully on board with this kind of democracy doctrine, that really was kind of at the heart of American foreign policy generally, probably, but certainly, Republican and conservative foreign policy thinking.

And that’s a pretty big transition. As you say, in the early 80s people were very skeptical of human rights and very much thinking, you know, look the democracy stuff is very risky and look – we talked about it in Iran and look what happened, et cetera. It’s an under-reported, it seems to me, side of what happened.

ABRAMS: Yeah, it’s under report because people on the left don’t want to give Reagan credit for this, and they don’t give Reagan credit for this.

But another piece of this – I think it’s worth saying again is we didn’t do this human rights as casework. It wasn’t about getting three guys out of jail. Because they can put them in jail faster than we can get them out, it was about systemic change and the ultimate case, of course, is the Soviet Union, which then collapses early in the George H. W. Bush administration.

KRISTOL: So, Reagan’s second term, I think, a great success, historians will think, and we all thought so at the time, the fall of Communism is imminent, democracy and the defeat of Communists in Central America, the rise of democracy in Latin America and, really, Asia, people forget how stunning an achievement that is – South Korea the Philippines, Taiwan and, of course, the big countries in Latin America – I guess marred by the Iran-Contra scandal, which you would get unfairly dragged into. What was that like, any reflections on that, I mean –

ABRAMS: Reflections on it – well, it certainly cemented my loyalty to the Republican Party, which I had only been a member of at that point for, you know, for a few years, a couple of years.

Scandals are a thing that happens in Washington, and it’s hard to explain to somebody who’s coming to Washington, you know, out of law school or grad school or something – Pat Moynihan always used to have *The Washington Post* rule, that is don’t do anything that you wouldn’t want to see written up on the front page of *The Washington Post*.

So, this was a huge scandal, you know, which had a lot of Democrats saying, “Impeach, impeach, impeach,” and had select committees and had criminal convictions. I mean, it was by any standard a

major scandal, and it was for me and my family it was awful, I mean, to go through this, to read the things people were saying about you, to face the possibility you're going to be prosecuted. People are trying to send you to jail.

I mean, that's the thing that is –

KRISTOL: And not for anything you had done in office, right? But for testimony to Congress that you had willingly given?

ABRAMS: Right.

KRISTOL: And truthfully given as far as you realized at the time.

ABRAMS: One of the things that happens is – of course, fairness goes out the window. To a certain extent, law goes out the window. Because I was finding, for example, that I would go testify in secret and everything I said would be made available to the press immediately thereafter. It was as if people were running out instantly calling reporters.

Why? Because there was partisan advantage against a President who was otherwise very popular. That is a crime, by the way, that's classified information. So, the rules are in suspension. And it's – it's awful. There's a sense of every man for himself now and will the President protect you or will he protect himself and, you know, does the White House – are they going to back you or would they rather that you leave?

And, so – I mean, you know – let me put it this way, you sure find out who your friends are very quickly in a situation like that.

I have often been asked, sometimes in law schools, "Do you have any advice about this?" and I answer, sort of half-jokingly but only half, "Don't take any notes." I had elaborate notes of – a little notebook of all the meetings, and so forth that I had attended, which was immediately seized by the prosecutors, lawfully or not, I don't know.

But I didn't have a notebook like that in the Bush Administration, because it can be turned against you.

So, it's an awful experience and I don't – I'm not so sure that there's any way of preparing somebody for it except you really have to have a strong marriage – is the thing I'll say. Because, you know, there are moments when you feel quite alone, and you're not sure of, you know, the guy in the next office or the guy in the Oval Office, so you better be sure of your home.

KRISTOL: Good advice. Good advice. So you survive that, you're out of office for the Bush Administration as many Reaganites were – for all the continuity of Vice President Bush taking over – there was a certain sense, I think, of changing the page, Secretary Baker comes in. I don't think he keeps anyone, really, from the State Department.

ABRAMS: No, and you know, I think – almost every President thinks that his predecessor and the predecessor team were a bunch of morons. And party doesn't matter, really, I mean, as we found out in the George H. W. Bush case, just get those people out of here.

VI: President George W. Bush (1:06:33 – 1:21:48)

KRISTOL: So, you're out and you run a think tank and you write books and you come back in. So, let's talk about your eight – I think it's almost the entire George W. Bush Administration. Is that right?

ABRAMS: Yes, I was in from the first day to – actually, not the first day. It was a couple of months. Oddly enough, at this point, I was the chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, which I had been put on in, I think, 1999.

KRISTOL: Which is a part-time –

ABRAMS: It's a part-time thing. Right. Unpaid and so forth. And as chairman I went to see the new Secretary of State Colin Powell, whom I had known from Reagan years; and, Condoleezza Rice, who I had never met, who was now National Security Advisor.

And both of them, after we got finished talking about international religious freedom offered me the job. And I took the White House job, because, you know, I had spent eight years at the State Department, and I thought this will be new and exciting. How can you turn down the White House, you know? So I said yes.

KRISTOL: So this is the National Security Council, just to be clear to people, and Condi Rice is the National Security Advisor, and she has a team of what 70 people?

ABRAMS: Oh, it's probably more than that. You know, they're hidden on different payrolls in every administration – yeah, 150, maybe, is kind of closer –

KRISTOL: And you work in the White House or next door to the White House in the – within the White House complex?

ABRAMS: She hired me – the job that was vacant – they could not seem to find anybody they liked to fill – was Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director of the National Security Council for Democracy, Human Rights, and International Organizations. So, of course, they looked at me and said, "This guy did this stuff, so let's hire him."

So, yeah, your office is in the Executive Office Building right across that little alleyway from the White House, and I had never worked in the White House before. Of course, it's very different because it's not a bureaucracy, that's the thing.

If you think back to being Assistant Secretary for Latin America, you have four or five deputies, you have a couple hundred people working for you in the building, you have 38 embassies, it's a bureaucracy.

They were there before you, they're going to be there after you. At the NSC, you work for the President and the National Security Advisor, nothing bureaucratic about it. If they want to hire you, you're hired the next day. And it's very personal.

What does the President want? You have to protect the President. You want to know what the President's policy should be and who are we protecting him from? Well, in no small appropriate, the State Department. I mean, it's also the press, the Democrats, the Hill, and the other agencies, I mean State, Defense, CIA, all of which had their own institutional interests.

And the greatest mistake you could make would be to assume that all of them – you know on January 20th, the new President comes in and everybody is now going to do what he says, they know what he wants, they know what he means and they'll follow that path.

This is not true. And the purpose of the NSC staff really is to guide this huge bureaucratic structure. What are we talking about here? We're talking about millions literally, if you count the uniform military – millions of people on the federal payroll – and shepherd them into doing what the President wants done.

KRISTOL: And it's always struck me that it's just a few dozen or 150 or something people trying to guide, as you say, this massive structure with persuasion and some ability, I suppose, to crack the whip, but a lot of it is persuasion. Right. I mean, you don't have line authority over the Assistant Secretary of Defense for this or that or –

ABRAMS: Well, the significant – you're absolutely right; you have line authority over nothing.

KRISTOL: Your own staff.

ABRAMS: Yeah, I mean I had – in that particular job, I had three people working for me. Later in the

more significant job of Special Assistant, Senior Director for the Near East, I had – we went up to four people working for me.

KRISTOL: So just quickly, what jobs did you have in the White House? You're first – you're Senior Director for Democracy, et cetera, then you take over the Middle East –

ABRAMS: That was the first two years. And then for the second two years, I took over the Directorate of Middle Eastern Affairs, called Near East and North Africa. And then in the second term was elevated to be a Deputy Assistant to the President, Deputy National Security Advisor with supervision over both of the directorates I had previously led – Democracy, Human Rights, UN Affairs, and the Near East one.

And there, you know, for example – now with the technology I had the ability to call secure or email secure any U.S. ambassador and give them instructions. But, of course, I'm not allowed to do that. Instructions come only from the State Department.

The most – what I could do and did do would be to write an email – let's say, Ambassador to Tunisia, copy the Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East and say to the ambassador, "I really would like you to do X. Obviously, you don't take instructions from me, you take them from the State Department, but I hope you would get that instruction from them." And then usually – fortunately, the Assistant Secretary, you know, feeling a little bit of pressure would send a follow-up email saying, "Yeah, Joe, that's a good idea, why don't you do that?"

Now, of course, on the phone, he may have said to the ambassador, "These idiots at the White House what are they doing? Let's play along." But it is mostly cajoling, persuading, arguing. And again there is the elevation question. That is there is the sense, you know, if they say, "No, drop dead," there's always a chance that the National Security Advisor raises it with the Secretary or that you go to the President.

And I give you an example, David Petraeus, he was the U.S. military leader in Iraq and there were lots of jihadis coming into Iraq from Syria. Petraeus wanted to go to Syria, he wanted to go to Damascus and see Assad.

Well, what – I thought this was a crazy idea, horrible idea. I blocked it, I delayed it as much as I could. "Well, you know, why don't we wait until after Christmas, or you know there's an NSC meeting in two weeks, why don't we wait until after that meeting?"

Finally, of course, you know, you can't delay and I can't give instructions to David Petraeus. So, he said, "I'm going," and it is at that point that Steve Hadley, second term National Security Advisor actually took the issue at my request to the President and said, "General Petraeus wants to go to Damascus," and the President instantly said, "What? No four-star general of mine is going to meet that butcher." So, no trip.

And one of the lessons here – one of the things you need to do is you need to know your President. Because if you're pushing a line and you're pushing hard and you're pushing generals and you're pushing people in the State Department, then you need to know that you're going to get backup from the Oval Office. And they need to know it, too.

They'll steamroll you unless they think, well, you know, "This guy – not so dumb, he probably has the President behind him." So you got to or else you're useless.

KRISTOL: I want to get to the substance, obviously, of Middle East policy, which was so important under President Bush, which you played such a key role in and written a very interesting book about – but let's talk a little more about the bureaucratic fights and so how it works in the White House.

You come in and you're working for Condoleezza Rice, and you hadn't really known before much –

ABRAMS: Right, one phone call.

KRISTOL: And George W. Bush you didn't know at all, presumably?

ABRAMS: I had never met George W. Bush; I had never spoken to George W. Bush; I'd never been in the same room with George W. Bush until a meeting – the first meeting I attended was actually about immigration policy and it was a meeting in the Oval Office. I was invited, God knows why, but I was.

And I was – two things happened of interest to me. One, he recognized me, which wasn't necessarily the case. I walked in and he said, "Very glad to have you on board," which of course, saying it made my day was an understatement. This is in the first year of the administration, probably the summer of 2001.

And there were a lot of stories about how Cheney's really running everything and he's really the Prime Minister, and I was shocked by this meeting, because why I not believe that? It was in the newspapers, right? There was nobody else in the room of importance except the President. There was Condoleezza Rice, there was Dick Cheney, there was the Attorney General, the Secretary of this and the Secretary of that, it didn't matter.

The Attorney General started the meeting, "Mr. President, we're here," – boom – there came Bush. "I want to do this, I want to do that, I don't care about this. I do care about" – so totally in charge that it, you know, blew away any notion that this was anything but George W. Bush's administration. And this was before 9/11, 2001.

KRISTOL: Let me ask about 9/11 for a second and get back to – I would love to hear more stories about the work with President Bush, especially after you were put in charge of the Middle East. 9/11, you were there?

ABRAMS: I was there. I was in the Executive Office Building and we had – just as Shultz had a morning staff meeting when he was Secretary of State, Condi Rice had a morning staff meeting as the National Security Advisor every day at 8, if I remember.

And, so I get up out of my office, you know, it's a four minute walk from the Executive Office Building and as I'm leaving one of the four staff people I had says to me, "Look at this," points to a TV we had. "Some idiot crashed into the World Trade Center." I thought I've seen that movie, 1930s, Empire State Building.

We go to the Situation Room in the basement of the White House and –

KRISTOL: That's where the normal NSC staff meeting –

ABRAMS: And Condi starts the meeting as usual, we go around the room, you know, there's a UN vote on this, there's the President of Bolivia –

KRISTOL: Wasn't something happening the next day? I seem to remember the President was going to give a speech.

ABRAMS: The President was going to the United Nations; this was his first year as President and his first speech to the General Assembly, 9/12/2001.

KRISTOL: And you would have some responsibility for this?

ABRAMS: Yes, for the speech and we were going to go up in the morning. You know, Air Force One goes to New York and everything was all – this was all sort of set in motion and a few minutes into the meeting, somebody comes in and hands Condi Rice a note. This happened once in a while, the President wants to see you or something.

And she opened the note and said – she didn't remember this – I told her this later – "You are dismissed," and got up and left the room. Now, Condi is the most courteous person in the entire world and for her to say, "You are dismissed," we all thought, "What the hell's going on?"

We go back to the office, and I was in the office about a second when the second plane hits. And then the Secret Service told us, "Get out of the building," because we thought the plane that ultimately was

brought down in Pennsylvania might well be going for the White House.

And what is striking in my memory is – we had fire drills all the time – the Secret Service guys when we reached the ground floor were saying, “Run, get out of here, run out of here, run.”

My secretary who had – was a CIA career secretary – quit. She said, “I don’t want to work for a place like this anymore. I can’t take this kind of danger and pressure.” So, not so long after, she said, “I’m done.”

But it was very memorable. When the Secret Service guys were telling you, “Don’t walk – run out of here,” and for several days after that the access to the White House was extremely difficult and there were, you know, all the way up Pennsylvania Avenue, there were checkpoints and another checkpoint and another checkpoint.

But it was, you know, obviously a day that changed not only the country, but for our little world, it changed the Administration.

KRISTOL: You knew right away this was going to be – it changed everything, right?

ABRAMS: It changed everything. I mean, you could see, all you had to do was watch the President’s interviews, the President in New York and the famous incident with the bullhorn and the President at Yankee Stadium.

And if you were dealing with him face to face, it was also true – you know, there were kind of two administrations, pre-9/11 and post-9/11.

KRISTOL: And the Middle East becomes awfully important post-9/11, and then you have responsibility for the Middle East?

ABRAMS: It does. I mean, I didn’t for the first two years. I was in this other position.

KRISTOL: But you still had some influence because the democracy, international organization portfolio dealt with so much –

ABRAMS: I did. Right. In fact, in my life, it is a bizarre replication of what happened in the State Department where I didn’t have the area of expertise, but I was doing a lot because of human rights with Latin America. So Shultz turned to me.

Same thing happened with Condi. When the person doing this left, I had talked to her a lot about human rights and democracy in the Middle East, and some I had talked to her about actual – what you might call Middle East policy.

So, she invites me to take this job, which I was happy to do, December 2002. After that, I had, of course, more exposure to her and a lot more exposure to the President.

KRISTOL: So say a little bit about the substance of the policy – Bush’s Middle East policy was different from his predecessors and, I guess, his successor. And, you know, how did you all decide that? Who drove that? Was that him, was that Condi, was it the world?

ABRAMS: It’s George W. Bush in a number of ways. One of them is human rights. Bush tries to explain to himself after 9/11, what happened? Why did nine Saudis drive planes into the World Trade Center? And there was a handy implantation that did, in fact, begin to come over from the State Department. “They hate us because we support Israel, that’s why they hate us.”

So, if we were to distance ourselves from Israel, this kind of thing wouldn’t happen. He rejects that. He rejects it completely because he notices that what concerned these Saudis – indeed, what’s Bin Laden writing about? Mecca, Medina, Riyadh, Jetta – he’s talking Saudi Arabia.

So, Bush has a pro-Israel policy, and 9/11 actually cements that policy rather than destroying it. He also has a pro-democracy policy.

KRISTOL: The administration is not entirely – the rest of the administration does not exactly get cemented into that. Is that not right?

ABRAMS: That's right, the State Department never truly buys in, and Bush, in his memoirs, says he often thought the State Department was pursuing a different line. I actually think that Powell never adjusted to 9/11, and that his star began to wane, even as early as 2002. And by 2003 Condi is in charge of Middle East policy.

We have a couple of summit meetings on the Middle East in 2003, she does everything. She does all the preparations. We on the White House staff do all the preparations; Powell is in truth – though, of course, he doesn't look that way in the pictures – he's a marginal figure to this.

Bush also came to believe after 9/11 what people are concerned about, what they're fighting about, what they're bitter about, what they're committing acts of terrorism about, comes from the closed nature of their Arab societies. No political freedom, no economic freedom, no social mobility, and so this leads him to a series of speeches, one of them being the Second Inaugural, about the expansion of freedom in the Middle East.

He's the only source of this. It is in the air in the Middle East, but I think that he – I think that historically he will – certainly, if people are fair – get a lot of credit for helping expand this idea – that that's what's wrong in the Arab world – not the American support for Israel, which, of course, gets closer partly because now we're both on the frontline on the war against terror. We're both fighting terror.

VII: Tested by Zion (1:21:48 – 1:36:57)

ABRAMS: And on that basis Bush, who did not have a close relationship with Ariel Sharon, the Israeli Prime Minister then, forges that relationship.

KRISTOL: I'm interested in hearing about that in more detail. I mean, how does that work? So there you are, you're running Middle East policy, President Bush wants to be a strong supporter of Israel, also wants to have changes happen in the Arab world, he's also fighting a war in Iraq and elsewhere to which countries in the region have opinions about and we need their support and all that, and there's a lot of pressure, I am sure, to keep the peace process going. So, Sharon's already Prime Minister of Israel?

ABRAMS: Yes. Sharon became Prime Minister essentially when Bush became President.

KRISTOL: Do they get along right away or not particularly –

ABRAMS: They didn't get along very well right away. There's a generational gap for one thing. Sharon is literally a generation older. Sharon's English was not great. Condi Rice had the brilliant phrase one time that Sharon was the only person she had ever met who spoke English better than he understood it.

It didn't seem possible, but she was right, meaning that he spoke in kind of catchphrases that he knew. You tell me the subject, terrorism, settlement, Palestinians, Egypt – he knew what he wanted to say, because he said it before. But if you were chatting, he might not fully follow. And if you were George Bush, and you were chatting in a language called Texan, a lot of colloquialisms.

You know let's – are we going to saddle up, that sort of thing. Shultz would often – Sharon would often have to turn to his minister and say in Hebrew, "What, what did he just say?" And then the conversation could go forward.

And they had some arguments toward the beginning. Particularly, the President thought sometimes Sharon was going a little bit far in his antiterrorist activities. He surrounded the Palestinian headquarters, the Mukataa, in Ramallah, and the West Bank, for example, with Israeli troops.

Whenever they met, Bush would always say to Sharon – when Arafat would come – because Arafat – Yasser Arafat at this point is still the Palestinian leader until his death in November 2004. The President would always say to Sharon, “Ariel, don’t kill him, do not kill him, do not – don’t you do it.”

And Sharon would never promise not to do it. He would either shrug or grunt, but, in fact, he didn’t. And after Arafat’s death of natural causes, at the next meeting when Arafat’s name arose, Bush interrupted and said, “Ariel, I just want to say, thank you for not killing him.” And Sharon replied, “Sometimes, God helps.”

So, they got along – they got along partly – Sharon saw Bush was absolutely a man of his word, so in most cases, for example, when they would conduct an antiterrorist exercise, and there’d be a lot of criticism not only from Arab states but from Europe – and the White House would say, “Israel has a right to defend itself.” For a long time, by the way, the State Department said, “We must stop the cycle of violence,” which used to drive me crazy. What cycle of violence? It’s a terrorist act.

So, they protect themselves, they fight back, what do you mean cycle of violence? Couldn’t stop it until 9/11. After 9/11 in Afghanistan, the U.S. invasion, we are fighting, we are hitting. And it was ludicrous to talk about cycle of violence, we’re in it, right?

To say that the Israelis should not try to kill Hamas leaders, terrorist leaders, when we’re trying – what we are trying desperately to do is kill Bin Laden. So finally we managed to assert the White House’s control of the State Department and say we’re not saying cycle of violence any more.

Sharon appreciated that kind of political, diplomatic, moral support for what he was trying to do.

KRISTOL: So, Bush is dealing with Sharon, but not every day or even every week, presumably?

ABRAMS: No, probably every month, maybe.

KRISTOL: And you’re dealing with your counterpart, I suppose, in the Israeli government or several counterparts. And that’s – and it’s a close ally, which has freedom of action. One the other hand, we’re trying to coordinate. It must be almost constant – the communications.

ABRAMS: Condi, in the time that I worked with her, so two years in the NSC and four years when she’s Secretary of State – I counted 38 trips to Israel and the West Bank, which is a lot and that’s not counting their visits here, Sharon and others at the top of the Israeli government, civilian and military.

And, of course, then there’s the phone. Technology improves. By the time I’m in the second term, at some point I get a secure phone that is Internet-based and I have a button, you know, that’s connected to the Prime Minister’s office and I talk to my counterpart the diplomatic advisor to the Prime Minister, I wouldn’t say every day, but probably four times a week.

KRISTOL: Just directly?

ABRAMS: Just directly.

KRISTOL: No State Department, no Ambassador?

ABRAMS: And this sort of –

KRISTOL: Sensitive matter.

ABRAMS: Look, the relationship – this is true now, I think it’s true in every administration, the relationship is between the Prime Minister’s office and the White House, the key relationship. The others count, but that’s the key relationship.

So, that – for example, something would happen, I’d push the button or he would on his end and, “Okay,

what are we going to say about that event?" Or Israel issues a statement, how is the White House going to react to that statement? The closest possible coordination. Yeah. I can't tell you what the people were doing who were handling, you know, England or France or something, but on Israel it was really, really close in an effort to smooth things out and be sure that – President Bush at one point said, "I don't want daylight publicly between the United States and Israel." Anything we have to say we say privately. And then that's how we managed it.

KRISTOL: But there were still tense moments, I am sure, even in the first term, quite a lot in the second term when Condi Rice becomes Secretary of State, and I guess there's a little more tension sometimes with the Israeli government. But even with Sharon there?

ABRAMS: Oh, absolutely. I mean people forget, for example, at one point the Israelis are in the West Bank surrounding Arafat and Mukataa. President gives a public statement in which he says, "I want Israel to withdraw from the West Bank now, and when I say now, I mean now." I mean, that's pretty tough language, especially to use toward an ally.

He was willing to push back and he did. I remember a meeting, this is in 2003 with Sharon, and Sharon two or three times brought up the question of America's commitment to Israeli security and after about the third time, President Bush said to him, "Ariel, if you doubt my commitment to Israeli security, let's just end the meeting now and you can go home."

Pretty tough. So – not that he wasn't equally tough, by the way – he was with lots of other nations – but he was tough with Sharon. What changed is that, really, we handled Israel out of the White House, particularly in the first term.

Once Secretary Rice becomes Secretary of State, a lot of the handling goes over to the State Department. Doesn't change much in 2005 or the beginning of 2006. But after the Lebanon War in the summer of 2006, Condi begins to put more pressure on the Israelis, pushing toward a – what she hopes will be a comprehensive negotiated peace settlement with the Palestinians and then tensions do begin to build.

KRISTOL: And you're not really on board that State Department initiative?

ABRAMS: I'm not. And, so I have a difficult dance. I'm on all these trips. I'm in all the meetings and, you know, I owe the President honesty and loyalty, and we get into a situation where I'm going to Israel, say, with Condi or I go alone and come back and tell the President, "There's going to be no comprehensive deal here. Not going to happen."

And the President says, "Well, I just talked to Prime Minister Omert" – this is after Sharon's stroke forces him out of office – "Omert's quite optimistic and Condi tells me she's quite optimistic," and I'm left saying well, you know, "Mr. President, all I can do is give you my best judgment here. This is not going to happen."

We reached the point where, I remember, meeting with the Foreign Minister of Kuwait or the Sheik of Kuwait where the President was asked by him, "Is the President optimistic?" And I remember the President replying, "Well, I am somewhat optimistic and Condi's somewhat optimistic, but Elliott's not very optimistic."

And, you know, unfortunately that proved to be true. We didn't get there.

KRISTOL: How much of the – I'm just curious if you were reading the newspapers online every day diligently, how much would one see? I mean, one always hears about all the secret stuff behind the scenes. You had secret meetings, I think, didn't you? You went incognito to Rome, as I recall? There was a meeting with Sharon?

ABRAMS: It wasn't incognito, but I did go completely unannounced to see Sharon in November 2003. He was on a state visit to Italy. It was a great thing because –

KRISTOL: How does that work? Did you suggest that, they suggest that?

ABRAMS: No, we had a conversation.

KRISTOL: There was some issue you guys had to work out?

ABRAMS: In the spring of 2003, we forced Arafat – we had these summit meetings in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt and Akaba, and we had a new Palestinian Prime Minister the guy who later became President, Mahmoud Abbas, and we were – we were really putting Arafat in the corner and limiting his power so that we could get a peace negotiation going.

Because the President had said “Arab democracy,” right? So, you want – he didn’t want the Palestinian state until and unless it was going to be a democracy, not another corrupt dictatorship.

KRISTOL: To say nothing of a terrorist state?

ABRAMS: Right, so you had to get rid – Arafat had to go. This was a key judgment that George Bush made, which not only do all the Europeans disagree – but remember that the foreigner who made the greatest number of visits to the Clinton White House was not Tony Blair, it was Yasser Arafat. I mean, it’s amazing to think of. But we think after these summit meetings in June 2003, Arafat’s in his box, we can move forward.

At the end of the summer of 2003, Abbas, the new Prime Minister, quits because, in fact, Arafat is not in his corner. Arafat is still controlling everything. We were dead in the water. We have no peace policy any more. The chief of staff of Sharon comes to visit us, and we talk about a meeting with Sharon. Sharon can’t come right then. I think it was either – I think, it was he actually, not Condi – why doesn’t Elliott come see us in Rome, because Sharon’s in Rome for a state visit?

So, I go to Rome, fly under my own name and I go to the –

KRISTOL: Commercial air?

ABRAMS: Yeah, commercial air. Check into some hotel and walk over, it was close to the Rome Hilton, which is where Sharon was staying. Some Mossad guy meets me downstairs and escorts me up, you know, back elevators and so forth to his suite.

And I’m thinking this is exciting. He’s going to be in the Presidential suite, he wants me to have dinner with him, going to be the best Italian dinner ever. Right? Because the Italians want to impress him with – we sit down in the dining room in the suite, formal dining room. And in comes some Mossad guy because, I guess, he was the food taster of something, with a plate of cold cuts. Literally, cold meat to serve Sharon, giant slabs of meat.

And Sharon who is a great eater, immediately starts to cut and carve the piece closest to him, which is by the way round and pink, and I said to myself, “We’re in Italy right, it’s got to be ham, I don’t eat ham. Sharon doesn’t eat ham, right, would he, what?”

So, as he’s beginning to chew it, I said to him, “Prime Minister, what meat do you think that is?” And he stopped chewing momentarily and said to me, “Elliott, Elliott, sometimes it is better not to ask.” So – and he continues to chew.

That’s the meeting where he told me he had decided to pull out of Gaza. That was how the U.S. government found out about this, that he was in fact going to pull out. But that was, by the way, his decision, not something that President Bush forced on him.

But we maintained contact, you know, at sort of all levels at all times. The – the change in that policy really was – began at 9/11, and the President’s support for a Palestinian state, but only if and when it was going to be a non-terrorist, peaceful, democratic state.

Then, Sharon decides to get of Gaza, and we spent two years supporting that. And then the last two years, but particularly the last year, we're trying to get this comprehensive deal.

How much of this is in the newspapers? What was not in the newspapers is the tension that is growing between the U.S. and Israel over this. Because we are constantly asking in my view for Israeli concessions, to kind of oil this mechanism of peace. And the Israelis are getting tired of it. And they think, you know, this is not the way an ally should act. Bush is kind of above this with the Prime Minister, so this is really Condi with the Israeli cabinet and the Prime Minister.

After that Lebanon War in the summer of 2006, as I said in my memoir, we really didn't have Condi, did not have a good, meaning non-tense, relationship with the Israelis. We really didn't have a non-tense, tough meeting with the Israelis. This is not in the newspapers.

The American Jewish leadership, the tippy-top leadership, that is, the president of the American Jewish committee, the president of AIPAC, knew this, partly because they were able to meet with the Israeli Prime Minister and hear this privately. Nobody thought it was useful to the United States, to the President, to the Secretary of State for this to be in the newspapers.

The President knew about it. How do these things happen? You know, it's weird. The President agreed to speak to the 100th anniversary of the American Jewish Historical Society. So I went. And I didn't want to stay for the dinner. It was at some location here in Washington. So, I went for the President's speech and then walked out.

And as I'm walking out, he is walking out and getting into his limo to go back to the White House and the President saw me and waved over, you know, I'll give you a lift back to the White House – it was nice. And in the back of the limo, he said to me, "So how are things with the Jewish community?"

And I said to him, "Well they're not so good, there's a lot of tension." And he said, "There's a lot of tension? Tell me more." And I said, "Well, you know, people are beginning to hear very quietly, very privately from the Israelis much, much more tension in the relationship with Condi." So, he knew about, but we – you certainly never saw it in the press.

The Syrian Nuclear Reactor (1:36:56 – 1:48:56)

KRISTOL: In 2007, you discuss this in your book, this very interesting series of very secret meetings, which I don't think get into the press at all about the Syrian reactor that's being built there.

ABRAMS: This is an example of how close the relationship to the Israelis was. Because what happens in the spring of 2007 is the head of Mossad comes to Washington, the Prime Minister calls and says, "I want him to see the President, we have something important to show the President."

So, Steve Hadley is the National Security Advisor, and I meet with the head of Mossad because, you know, you don't have some guy walk into the Oval Office without knowing what he's going to say to the President.

And what they showed us was photos and other material that showed there is a North Korean nuclear reactor being built in Syria. I mean, North Korean – you know, I was not an expert – but if you looked at the Yongbyon North Korean reactor and this one, it's the same reactor. I mean, it's literally the same reactor.

KRISTOL: And we did not know about this?

ABRAMS: We did not know about this. We did not know about this with all our satellites and everything else – so the Israelis tell us and we – that is to say the White House – we then say to the CIA, "True, confirm?" And they do whatever they need to do to fully, fully confirm it. It's a nuclear reactor being built.

And we then have lengthy discussions, internally U.S. Government, basically White House, State, CIA,

Defense Department. What are the options? The Israelis say to us on day one, "This has to go away. We're not going to let Assad have a nuclear reactor." So, we canvassed the covert possibilities, the covert possibilities, the diplomatic possibilities alone and with the Israelis. We agree there is no –

KRISTOL: With other allies or not so much?

ABRAMS: No, no, at this point, it's two governments involved. We – period. And there's no leaks. There's no covert option. It's just too big a deal to – huge nuclear reactor – so it's military or diplomatic. The diplomatic is obviously a farce, in my view. And to my great amazement, the President chooses it.

The State Department, Secretary Rice, with the support of Secretary Gates at the Defense Department says, "Let's take this to the IAEA and the UN Security Council," and the President, after a lengthy series of meetings – I must say the preparation was great. We had scenarios, we had papers, we had – I don't know – dozens of interagency meetings at my level, but also meetings with the President – by the way, over in the residence part, the East Wing of the White House, so that nobody would see all these people gathering in the West Wing and say, "What the hell is going on?"

KRISTOL: And these happened without being reported upon? That is pretty unusual.

ABRAMS: Nobody knows. Nobody knows, and we keep all these meetings secret. I think we called it the "library group," and papers were not allowed to move. I kept the papers in my safe. That is, you could read a paper, but then you have to give it back to me.

And we meet with the President in his living room over the East Wing, and what's interesting to me about this is fabulous preparation. It was really was the best interagency cooperation ever.

KRISTOL: Case study for public policy school?

ABRAMS: Case study for – and then the President makes the wrong decision, in my view, which is go to the UN, which the Israelis, of course, you know, with their relations with the UN, it's obvious to me that they're never going to go for this. I thought that the Israelis should bomb the reactor. The Vice President thought we should bomb the reactor. But –

KRISTOL: The Vice President makes this case?

ABRAMS: Yes, the President said, "What do you think everybody?" We had one of these series of meetings in the President's living room called the Yellow Oval Room.

But the – in the end the President decides to try diplomacy, which means the next morning he has to call Prime Minister Omert of Israel and tell him this. And I thought Omert would say, "I have to think about this, I'll call you back." But to my surprise – I'm in the Oval Office listening to this call –

KRISTOL: Tell people how that works. When I got to the White House as Vice President Quayle's Chief of Staff, I was sort of amazed that when a President calls another President or Prime Minister, it's not just like us having a conversation on the phone.

ABRAMS: Absolutely right. I mean, let's say the President is calling the Prime Minister, so the National Security Advisor is there and I'm there.

KRISTOL: Well, that's set up ahead of time, I suppose to make sure most – usually, right, to make sure they're both free?

ABRAMS: Exactly and because of the – you get a request, let's – or we'll make a request and we used to do these because – think of the time zones in the Middle East, very early in the morning, like 7AM we would do these calls.

KRISTOL: Our time?

ABRAMS: Right, so it's midday there. And you'd set it up and everybody would be in the Situation Room when we set up the call and then the head of the Situation Room, usually a military officer, would be in the Oval Office as well and he would say, you know, "Please put the Prime Minister on," and then he would say, "Mr. Prime Minister, the President of the United States." The President would get on and say, "Ehud, how are you?"

But Hadley and I, and often the White House Chief of Staff, would be there listening on the other end of the Oval Office with a speaker phone, of course, muted and with the sound low. Because we were going to have to follow-up on this call, we needed to know. And, of course, there are people listening on that side, as well.

I do remember –

KRISTOL: And there are people taking notes to make sure –

ABRAMS: Yes, in the Situation Room downstairs in the White House basement. They were taking notes. *Not* a taped transcript. They're just taking notes.

I do remember a call with Putin one time when the President announced that his daughter was getting engaged. And Putin said, "You like the young man?" I remember the President laughing and saying, "That's a hell of a question to ask. There's probably 50 people listening to this phone call."

KRISTOL: But Putin can take care of the 50 on his side, they would not talk.

ABRAMS: That is not a problem. And the President, for the record, did and does like his son-in-law. He's a great guy.

So, I'm listening to this phone call and I'm certain that a troubled Omert is going to say, "Well, that's disappointing, George. Let me think about this and call you back." And that is not what happened.

Omert immediately says, "No, George, we told you from the beginning the reactor has to go away. So, you're saying you're not going to make it go away, so we're going to make it go away. I – you don't want to know anything more than that. I'm sure you don't want to know anything operational, but this is going to happen."

So, now I'm thinking listening to this, whew, the President just said, "We're doing diplomacy," and the Israeli Prime Minister said, "Oh, yeah, no we're not." Now is the President going to be angry?

The President says in effect, "Well, you do what you have to do. If you think your national security demands this, I'm not going to tell you –" phone call ends and the President turns to Hadley and me and says, "That guy has guts."

And he then instructs us, make sure this remains completely secret and that no one in the United States government does or says anything that could limit or obstruct the ability of the Israelis to have – to do what they want to do, which is blow up the reactor.

It is actually two months until they blow up the reactor and –

KRISTOL: Is that right, so this phone call is two months before? Was it early September –

ABRAMS: September 4th.

KRISTOL: Right after Labor Day.

ABRAMS: So this is early July, maybe six, seven eight weeks. It doesn't leak. It doesn't leak at their end, and it doesn't leak at our end, which, you know, in this day and age is a pretty good thing. I've often wondered if the President actually thought that was a better outcome, didn't want to tell his Secretary of

State and Defense, “No, you’re wrong, and I’m going to tell them to bomb it,” but was actually not unhappy when the Israelis said we’ll take care of it.

KRISTOL: What happens when they do take care of it? When do you know that there’s a military operation about to happen or happening or just happened?

ABRAMS: Well, the Israelis, of course, don’t – we don’t want to know. It’s not our operation. Their own green lights and red lights – we said that to them.

KRISTOL: They don’t need U.S. anything?

ABRAMS: They don’t need U.S. anything. So, we don’t want to know in this case, unlike say, air power in Iraq, we’re right in the neighborhood. We’re not operating over Syria at that point.

So, what happens is actually the President’s in Asia – if I remember right, he’s in India that morning – and we get a call from the Israeli Prime Minister’s chief of staff saying –

KRISTOL: You do, or Hadley does?

ABRAMS: Hadley does – saying it just happened. We then – of course, we’d have known anyway from satellites because now we’re watching it. So, we then call, I guess, DOD to say, “What are you seeing?” and they say, “Yep a little seismic activity there, something got blown up.”

KRISTOL: And you don’t know ahead of time?

ABRAMS: We do not know ahead of time, and we don’t want to know ahead of time. For one thing, this is now a military operation, so leaks become a matter of life and death.

KRISTOL: Generally speaking, about leaks, how much of a problem is that to running a competent and serious foreign policy for a great power like ours? There are times when you think how can we do anything when stuff’s on the front page of the *Times* and the *Post*, though we do seem to be able to do a fair number of things so?

ABRAMS: You do, and there’s a sense of responsibility about certain things including, you know, things where people agree lives are at stake. But what is called politics is very broad now and includes what used to be, I think, regarded as policy.

There are a lot of leaks. There are a lot – there are some – look, there’s two kinds of leaks. Right? The ones you want and the ones you don’t want. Every White House leaks. Maybe leak is the wrong word. Every White House puts out stories to the press. When we think it’s helpful.

But there are negative leaks. There are leaks by people in the bureaucracy to protect themselves or their department or their leadership against the White House, and I would have to say frankly in 2002, 2003, 2004, there are for example endless leaks from the Powell State Department and from pretty high up in the Powell State Department, defending the Secretary, defending the State Department against what they view as wrong U.S. policy.

I have to tell you this is partly personal. That is, people defending themselves, but it’s also partly institutional. I remember a day when the President gave a big speech one night – maybe it was even a State of the Union or something, but he gives a big speech anyway, and it seemed to resolve a particular policy issue. And then there’s a meeting in the Situation Room the next day and a guy from the State Department and I are walking out together.

And he said, “God, there’s a lot to figure out.” And I said, “At least, we don’t have to figure out that thing, because the President, you know, set the policy last night in a speech.” And the guy said to me, unforgettably, “No, no, policy is not made in a speech; policy is the product of the interagency process.”

And I remember thinking, “Oh, Jesus, can you – this guy’s got to go. He should be gone today.” Of course, he’s probably still there. But think of the bureaucratic mentality – that a Presidential speech doesn’t set policy. Only sort of 40 meetings at the Deputy Assistant Secretary – oh this is crazy. But that’s what you’re dealing with at least with some people.

And in some cases, you know, look they’ve been there forever. Therefore, they have relationships with covering the department for the newspapers, with people covering those subjects in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, House Foreign Affairs Committee of both parties and in the NGOs and the think tanks.

And they’re going to use them if they think you’re doing something wrong, which, by the way, they may – genuinely, it’s not even politics. They genuinely think you’re going off the deep end, but you know one has to go back here to the George Shultz view: “Yeah, but he got elected President.” He gets to make the policy, even in a lousy speech, he gets to make the policy.

IX: Policy-Making 101 (1:48:56 – 1:52:56)

KRISTOL: You spend eight years in the State Department, then eight years in the White House – conclusion about – if you were advising the next President and setting up the administration where should the center of policy be? Where would you – obviously, you’d want some balance and all that – but it would be nice if everyone got along – but at the end of the day – I mean –

ABRAMS: Well, at the end of the day, the President has to be the center of any administration. I think the President needs to understand though his cabinet members – this is not a matter of personality – his Cabinet members are in a bureaucratic sense his enemies.

They have a life, right? They may have a future, they might want to run for governor, senator. They may be protecting a reputation. They may believe in a policy that he doesn’t believe in. They want to lead their department.

So, you need to set up a system – I think this is probably the lesson – or one of the key lessons – a kind of nervous system. There’s an organization chart of the U.S. government, right? And you can look it up online. There’s got to be a separate one of loyalists. There’s got to be a kind of nervous system of people who really work for the President.

Maybe they worked for him previously. Maybe they worked in his campaign. But, by the way, they can’t just be a bunch of politicians, because that means they won’t necessarily know how to work the bureaucracy.

But there’s got to be a loyalist team throughout the government that really does believe in the President and his policies and want him to succeed and will not be loyal, frankly, to the building they happen to be sitting in. But loyal to him over there at the White House.

If you don’t have that system, you’re going to lose control and of course in a two-term presidency this begins to happen anyway after the election, because people begin to look to their own futures and you begin to be a short-timer.

So, having that system in place, I think, is absolutely critical.

KRISTOL: The National Security Council has to be strong to really shape foreign policy?

ABRAMS: It does and it needs to be strong intellectually and bureaucratically. I remember asking George Shultz a few years after he left as Secretary of State, “What does it take to be a good Secretary of State?” Very interesting what his first reaction was. He said, “Well, it helps to have some ideas.” That’s a really interesting response. And you wouldn’t get it from a lot of Secretaries of State. Shultz was both a fabulous bureaucratic and intellectual. He believed in the power of policy ideas – the perfect Secretary of State for Ronald Reagan.

So, you need people in your National Security Council who are good bureaucrats but who also have ideas or – and/or believe in your ideas. You need people who are, you might say, policy intellectuals and policy entrepreneurs – you need a mix, I guess, because nobody is going to have everything you need.

But you need that at the NSC. You're not going to get George Shultzes very often. That's just luck. You need people who can carry this policy through and who actually understand and agree with policy. And again it's hard. Because if you think about it at the top level, a lot of the staff of the NSC actually comes from DOD, CIA, and State.

At that level of people who are interacting with the President, the Special Assistants or Deputy Assistants, we are talking about maybe 30 people trying to control through them and their small staff, four or five people each, this massive bureaucracy. And, so you need people with government experience and sort of aptitude for bureaucratic work, but who also understand what the President's about. What is he trying to do, what is he trying to achieve here?

If you don't have that, your ability to control the policy will be limited, and your second term will start to, I think, disappear.

X: George W. Bush, the Man (1:52:56 – 2:05:08)

KRISTOL: And George W. Bush, you worked for eight years. I mean, I met him a dozen times probably and almost always in groups, like one lunch right near the end – just about three or four of us there in that nice little room off the Oval Office. What would people be surprised – what's your judgment – you have a high judgment of him, of course –

ABRAMS: I do.

KRISTOL: But what would be surprising to people about Bush?

ABRAMS: I think the first thing is just how smart he is. I mean, the press during the campaign and after tried to – happens to conservatives and Republicans sometimes – trying to make out that he's dumb. Really, really smart. And omnivorous reader, which I think people didn't quite recognize.

KRISTOL: Of material that you all produced for him, memos or –

ABRAMS: Well, both. I mean, books, for example. I'd be on Air Force One, I remember reading Michael Oren's book about the Middle East that had just come out and the President is walking by where I'm sitting and turns the book to see what I'm reading and says, "Just finished that."

KRISTOL: Is that right?

ABRAMS: But it's also anything you sent – I mean you'd go – I would go to the Oval Office, let's say to prepare for a meeting with the President of Egypt, let's say, and we have written five talking points and the President would say, "Good morning" – he'd say, "I don't agree with your third talking point, and I'm not going to use it."

Obviously, he had – we sent up – the stuff up the night before and he went through, you know, he did his homework. But he also had a – you know, a very broad network of information.

So very smart, a very good executive in terms of handling people and I think this is – another thing people don't realize – after 9/11 the whole country depends on this man for its morale. How do we react to this horrifying attack on us, the first time since Pearl Harbor but this is even worse, it's the mainland. And he sets the tone for the country. We bounce back, Manhattan, Yankee Stadium.

You know as the administration wears on into six, seven, eight years, again he carries this – we've got the Iraq War. We've got thousands of Americans dead. It's becoming an unpopular war. Prior to the surge, it looks as if the war is being lost. He carries the country and he carries the staff.

You know, we're allowed to get down in the mouth. We're allowed to get pessimistic; we're allowed to get tired. He's not, literally not. That is, what happens to the whole machinery of government if you have a National Security Council meeting and a White House staff meeting and the President is tired and depressed?

Those waves go out to the world. He doesn't let himself do it, ever, at least – maybe he does with his wife. But he does not with the staff ever, which – I mean, talk about character.

I think character in the White House flows always down from the top. This was a very gracious White House. This was a White House where you knew if there were backbiting by one staff member against another, he'd get fired. That was not allowed. We were on a team here. We had to treat each other decently.

So, graciousness, decency – I mean, work ethic beyond belief, but high, high level of intelligence and political understanding.

KRISTOL: I was struck by how carefully he thought this – one occasion where I was really struck by this – how carefully he thought about what the effect of what he said publicly would be, domestically and abroad. I think this was the surge – I was one of those pushing hard for the surge in Iraq, very critical of Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, and I think when he decided on the surge, he had then had a bunch of us in, you know, columnists types, some foreign policy think tank people.

And he was briefing us but then he – we got a chance to say something – and I think I thought it would help him politically here in the U.S. to make clear that he had made a pretty big break with prior policy, to say that we sort of went down a path that was understandable but turned out not to be right in '05-06 – and now we're really on a different path and this was early in the surge in '07 when public support was not there yet and it wasn't clear that it was going to work.

I remember his saying – this really struck me at the time and it impressed me – “I can't say that, I can't say that because of the families of those who fought and who died and got wounded in '05-06 – I'm not going to tell them that somehow, you know, we've messed it up and that's – you know, their sons and daughters were over there fighting, and that, you know – in a cause – but we've now fixed it. That's not fair, and I'm just not going to say that, and it's not fair to the people who acted in good faith within the administration to try to execute the policy that I set. It's not that I'm not willing to admit mistakes myself, but it will be demoralizing, I think, to the country, and I'm just – we're making the changes, and, of course, the people could see the changes, and David Petraeus is over there, and Donald Rumsfeld is gone.” But I'm not going to emphasize the change, even though it would have been to his advantage to do so politically, no question.

ABRAMS: For one thing, he paid a lot of attention to language. I mean, that is, you couldn't give him a statement that he would then read, he would take the statement, you could prepare it, you know, on cards for him to read like in the Rose Garden – he would wordsmith it. He would – this sentence doesn't work, this doesn't sound right, this doesn't sound like me, this is not the right word.

He made a major speech on the Middle East in June 2002 that went through 30 drafts. And in some of the drafting sessions, which would be kind of at my level in the Situation Room, the President attended the meeting. And the President actually talked through – “We want this tone, we want that tone, that's not right, I want this in, I don't want that in.” So, he paid a lot of attention to what he sounded like.

I think the other point you make is quite right, also; he's very clear on a lot of issues, Iraq, of course, first. There was a point at which, I believe, in the 2006 elections he was told by Republican leadership on the Hill he would need to do certain things or we could lose a lot of seats.

And his reaction really was, “Too bad.” The national security interests of the American people and the people we have put at risk over there come first. And again that – you know, that message immediately suffuses the White House and it's great to think that that's the way your leader is in terms of character.

KRISTOL: Any particularly – you’ve already discussed a couple – but memorable moments, you know, personally with the President in the Oval Office or in the residence that would be striking to you, to reflect that character, any funny moments in meetings? He had a sense of humor, right?

ABRAMS: The President had a great sense of humor. I don’t know if people know that or not. But for example, I think probably the best, most fun moments in the Oval Office – these phone calls. You have translators on the line for a lot of them, obviously, not all of them.

But that could make it long. After all, if you think about this, let’s say the President speaks for two minutes, even one minute, the translator has to translate another minute. Then the guy has to answer. That’s another minute. Then it has to be translated back. So, I mean, three minutes, four minutes sitting there. It’s a long time.

What the President used to do very often –

KRISTOL: And half of that time you can’t understand, it’s translated into the –

ABRAMS: Right, it’s being translated.

KRISTOL: – foreign leader’s language and then from it, so you don’t –

ABRAMS: So, the President would get up and take a fly swatter and go around killing flies. There were – perhaps, the Obama Administration solved this – these horse flies.

KRISTOL: In the Oval Office?

ABRAMS: In the Oval Office, which were there when we got there. The President – the first time I was in a meeting there, told me they were Clinton holdovers. And he would go around, you know, and you’re listening to the phone call – somebody jabbering in a foreign language and the President is not sitting at his desk any more, he’s walking around the Oval and he’s like whap with his fly swatter. He was very good at it too. He got a lot of them.

But somehow or other the doors would open from the Rose Garden and in they would come. And he made a lot of jokes. I mean, if the foreign leader was going on at too great a length, the President would you know put the phone down on his desk, put his feet up on the desk and go – and it just – so, he was very funny and he appreciated jokes, too, of a certain kind. Not disrespectful ones, no bad language. Not in the Oval Office.

By the way, there was a coat-and-tie rule in the Oval Office. Very respectful of the office. If you were coming in –

KRISTOL: So you kept your – you put on your coat?

ABRAMS: I mean, it didn’t matter during the week, but if you’re coming in on a Saturday or a Sunday, let’s say, you had been out playing some sport or you’re out in your garden, you go put your coat and tie on before you go into the Oval Office. He would not allow it.

That didn’t apply to the residence. I guess, one of the most memorable moments for me was – we were doing a phone call on the weekend, and so I was told where to go. You know, the White House butler lets you in, and there’s the President in his sort of private office over the residence dressed for biking, you know, sneakers and shorts and everything and with a cigar and ready to call the King of whatever.

I think the humor was a part of it that I remember, but also the toughness at times with foreign leaders. The willingness to say, as he said to Sharon, “Now means now,” or to raise with Mubarak as he once did, you know, “What comes after you?” something nobody wants to hear. The discussions with foreign leaders about human rights questions which are always difficult, the toughness of – you know, we’re talking to Arab leaders about Israel, for example, and with the Saudi – at that point, Crown Prince, now

King, who said, you know, “Call Sharon, and tell him to do this or that.”

And the President said, “No, I don’t – that’s not the relationship I have with the Prime Minister of Israel. I don’t call him and give him instructions.” So, it’s this combination, I think, that in my view made him a very effective President.

But it was – particularly I come back to this character question, because, you know, the problem with being President is unlike almost anything else you can’t have good moments and bad moments. They’ve all got to be good moments. You know, you’re on camera so much.

And when you’re not on camera, where are you? You’re – you know, you’re so much with your party’s governors or senators or you’re even with your own staff – and again he had to carry on his back the morale of the staff at all times, the morale of the country. And I think people don’t recognize that enough.

And when you’re at war, a war that you seem to be losing for years, that’s an immense burden. And I think here’s where for him religious faith came in, and it mattered.

I mean, he could be humorous about that, too. I remember when – I won’t mention which country, but there was an Arab country, the leader was coming to see him and we always have – while the President has lunch with the leader – the First Lady gives lunch or tea to the leader’s wife.

The problem he had in this case was that that particular Arab leader had four wives. So, we had, “How many wives does he get to bring?” This is actually a great question of state. I remember saying to the President, “We have a problem, he’s got four wives. You only have one wife, so how many wives does he get to bring?” And the President says, “No, this is America. When in America do as the Americans do. He gets to bring one wife.” I think he solved it by not bringing any wives.

But the President’s relationship with his wife is a great tower of strength to him and his religious faith, and when the President said, you know, “We’re praying for you,” he meant that. The President once said about China and religious freedom in China, that one of the great differences between their leadership and ours was – he said, “I know that after 9/11 I had 300 million Americans praying for me. And that lifted me. They don’t have that.”

So, it meant a great deal to him, I think, in being able to carry these almost inhumanly great burdens for eight years of terrorism and war and economic trouble.

XI: Politics as Vocation (2:05:08 – 2:10:34)

KRISTOL: Yeah, that’s interesting. And for people who aren’t going to be President but might aspire to be Assistant Secretary of State or Deputy National Security Advisor, or maybe, first of all, people should aspire to be President – what is your general sense about elective office? Do you encourage people to think about it or do you say, “It’s a horrible life and better off to follow the appointed path?” Did you ever think about running? I can’t remember.

ABRAMS: Not really. I just didn’t. And, you know, once I got into the government and became a Republican, and I was from New York. Where would I run? You know, I was living in the District of Columbia then; Republicans do not have a strong party.

I meet some fantastic young people who are running – who are elected – think of people like Tom Cotton, who is a new member of Congress who is an Iraq War veteran. There are people. So, anybody who’s willing to do it – I think it’s a very hard decision to make from a family point of view – you live in two places, the strains are very great.

But, you know, the democracy we have doesn’t work unless we have members of Congress who are pretty terrific. I think that’s a very personal choice. The more sort of easier one is to get into foreign policy in government, and I do encourage people to do that, and I tell them, you know, that Congress is a great place to start.

Just get up on the Hill. Don't look for – you know, yes, right, you're 25 and you've just gotten your law degree and you would now like to be chief of staff of the Foreign Relations Committee, it's going to be tough.

Get up there. You'll hear about the next opening from there, you know, not from the want ads in the newspaper. Write, which is now much easier to do, because there's so many blogs and you can do that. Even if you're in school you can do that. Just write, publish, get your thoughts out there, and you'll find if they're interesting, people start referring to them and emailing them around.

Join organizations. And I always tell them also, "Look, politics is a team sport in Washington. Don't think that you're going to arise above politics and become the world's most respected foreign policy expert." So, no, it's not the way it works. Choose a team, help that team, volunteer for campaigns, get involved.

When the White House personnel system kicks in, because your party has won an election, it matters a lot whether your file says you worked on a campaign or didn't. It doesn't really matter all that much. Nobody expects you to be campaign manager as a young person.

Did you volunteer, did you try, did you give your time? The answer has to be yes. So, do it.

But I encourage people to do that – I do tell them I'm very lucky. I've been in the government in the years that I've been out of school – out of law school for little over 20 years – you may get unlucky. You know, your party may have a stretch of defeats, what are you going to do? And even if you're lucky, what are you going to do when you're not in power? You can't be in all the time.

There has to be an answer to that question unless you, you know are very wealthy, which you know – in which case good luck – but if you're not, you're going to be a lawyer, you're going to be a consultant, you're going to be a professor, what are you going to do? You go to Wall Street?

There has to be an answer to that question for your sake and the sake of your family. Recognize that people concentrate – if they want to be a so-called in-and-outer – on getting the best things when they're in, and sometimes they don't think enough about how do you live when you're out and provide for your family and for what may be not just years, but decades.

So, I really urge – in fact, I recently told one young man this and said, "My advice to you, knowing you a little bit, is what you should do now is go to law school," and he said to me, "Aw, man, you sound just like my father." I said, "Sorry, but it's good advice." You know, you got to build a life that consists of the government part and the out-of-government part and just hope you get the time in that you seek.

I do not say to people, "It's a dirty game, stay out of it, you'll get investigated, the press will come down on you, it's not worth it, Washington is broken." There's an element of truth in all of that, but the system does not work when many of the smartest and best people say, "Okay, I'll dedicate myself to making money and having a happy family life."

Both of those are important and should be part of that what 40 years, let's say after school, 50 years after school. But I think people should not be so cynical. And I had, you know, in many ways, horrendous experience, right, for a couple of years in government, the Iran-Contra scandal and prosecution.

Nevertheless, I would say it is still worth it, because your opportunity to be part of a team, led by a President you believe in, that is really trying to do something good for the country, for the world, for the interest of the United States and the world for our beliefs in the expansion of freedom – is, I think, more satisfying than anything else you will do outside of your own family life. And it's worth dedicating years to.

KRISTOL: That's a good note to end on. And thank you for that service and thank you for joining us today.

[END]

