

# CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

## Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Yuval Levin, *National Affairs*

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### **I: *National Affairs* (0:15 – 13:45)**

KRISTOL: Welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. Our guest today is Yuval Levin, policy analyst, policy practitioner, a former White House staffer. And among other things, now editor of the very fine journal, *National Affairs*. What is *National Affairs*? Why *National Affairs*?

LEVIN: Well, thank you. *National Affairs* is a quarterly journal of essays on domestic policy and political thought – political ideas. It tries to sit at the intersection of policy – concrete policy – and political theory and political thought.

It exists really because in the wake of the 2008 elections, after a series of conversations among people on the right, including you, among others, we came to the view that one of the things that were missing on the right was a venue for people to think out loud in a serious way, both about policy ideas where the policy agenda seemed to be a little empty, and about political ideas about how, about what conservatism should mean in the 21st century and how that might apply to people's lives.

And we had a clear model. The model really was *The Public Interest*, which had run for 40 years and which had shut down about five years before that. And so one of the things that kept coming up in conversation was sort of, "Gee, I wish there were something like the *PI* for us to think this through," whether it be healthcare, education, or to understand Obama's approach to public policy. And so it sort of became obvious sitting around those tables, well, if we need something like that, we kind of know what that looks like and how it works. And so we started in the fall of 2009, and it's published quarterly. We've just published our 20th issue. So the fall of this year will be our fifth anniversary.

And the magazine has tried to open up a space for policy conversation on the right, in general. But also to advance a way of thinking about public policy that's directed to contemporary problems, that tries to be engaged with 21st-century issues and to apply conservative ideas to them, to be a home for a kind of applied conservatism that's come to be known in some quarters as "reform conservatism." The idea being really what do these ideas that in 1980 meant supply-side and a certain approach to economic policy and social policy, what do they mean given 21st-century problems? The same principles, the same starting points – what might they mean now?

A lot of what we've tried to do in our pages is think through those ideas. Some of what we've published has become real policy proposals and legislation, like a tax proposal from Mike Lee or healthcare proposals from Orrin Hatch and others. Some of it is still out there waiting for a champion. And a lot of it is just thinking through big problems, big-think pieces about how we should understand freedom in this moment, how we should think about the family, what conservatism might mean in this way or that way. It's more explicitly conservative than *The Public Interest* was, in some respects, but in an open-minded way, it has a point-of-view but not a party line.

KRISTOL: I think it's been great. As an editor of a weekly magazine, I think we need something like that. Because the truth is, weekly, I mean, you have a lot of pieces, of course, and hopefully, some that are very reflective and thoughtful, but still do tend to much more commenting on the issues of the moment. Or if not, maybe it's a feature piece. But to have 8, 9, 10 of them in one issue that people can read –

LEVIN: We really push against the logic of the Internet age in opinion journalism. We not only publish only quarterly so that issues are three months apart and a lot happens in the interim. We also publish long essays – 5,000-, 6,000-word essays. To the extent we have anything to look at, they're going to be charts and not interesting pictures. It's very simple in the way that it's laid out, both in print and online.

And we think there's room for kind of sober, almost boring – but only *almost* boring – policy writing. And there seems to be an audience for it, obviously not a mass audience, exactly, but a larger audience than we would have imagined, certainly.

KRISTOL: What surprised you about the reaction and about being online as opposed –

LEVIN: Yeah. It's a way in which we are different from *The Public Interest*. We really have used the Internet for the beginning, obviously, since we started in 2009. An average essay of ours gets read in the course of, say, the year after it's published by about 80,000-90,000 people. And it's a lot for a long essay on public policy. It obviously doesn't compare to the mass publications, *The Weekly Standard* and others. But given what we write about and given how we write about it, I've been pretty impressed with the number of people who are willing to get to know an issue in that way.

KRISTOL: And substantively in terms of conservatism, I mean, are you cheerful, optimistic, depressed? It's 5 years in. Is it fresher than – it was kind of exhausting, I suppose, after – near the end of the Bush Administration and the crisis of '08?

LEVIN: I think one question we came in with was whether we would find writers and find subjects. And there were a mix of views about that, I would say. I spoke for example to James Q. Wilson who had been one of the big players in the *PI* circle for all those years. And he was very pessimistic. He thought there were no generalists in the academy and that we were going to have to find the right kind of – the right kinds of specialists and then translate them into English. And, of course, that is some of what we do. And it's true there aren't generalists like him, like Daniel Patrick Moynihan, almost no such people. But at the same time, there weren't that many back then either. If you want to talk about the great generalists of the *PI*, you know there weren't more than 10 of them for 40 years.

So I would say that I've been pleasantly surprised with how many writers there are who want to do this. Especially once the magazine got known a little bit, people come out of the woodwork. There were people doing some interesting work at universities, certainly in the think tank world, which is where we sort of naturally draw on. There are a lot of people doing interesting work who want to write in longer form.

What we offer our writers is access to policymakers. We're read on Capitol Hill. We're taken seriously as a kind of source of ideas on the right. And what they offer us is a real engagement with what's going on in social science, in economics, in the law. So connecting those two worlds, I think, is an important service. And it is something conservatism needed in that moment. And I think we've got a lot better at it, even in

the course of these five years. There's a lot more ferment on the right, and hopefully we've been some part of that.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I think so. I think a journal like *National Affairs* or *The Public Interest* are often ahead of the curve. I mean, they do try to experiment with new ideas and have the luxury of doing so in a way that a sitting politician sometimes doesn't. And so substantively, what would you say? I mean what has – how is conservatism doing? What are the cutting edges of the conservative agenda? What's changed in the 5 years since *National Affairs* began or in the 10 years since you started working at the White House?

LEVIN: I think that part of what we've tried to emphasize is an engagement with middle-class concerns. There's a way in which both political parties now – the Republicans and the Democrats – function as kind of vehicles for checking off items on a checklist that they got from somebody else many decades ago. In many cases, they've forgotten why they ended up the list that they have, they just know they have to finish it.

And so conservative economic policy sometimes has this feel to it. Almost everything that happens on the left now has this feel to it. It's not very well connected to 21st-century realities. And things are changing in some important ways. I think one way to think about that broadly is that American society is going through a kind of decentralization where if 40 years ago you would have thought of American society as governed by large institutions – big government, big business, big labor, big academic institutions, big media – working together. And great success meant navigating these institutions in a successful way.

Now, people think of themselves as belonging to much more dynamic, smaller networks, rather than big institutions. And the large institutions just don't run the country the way they used to. Our government has not caught up with that.

And in a way, both the left and right still think in the old ways, and not only think in the old ways, but are really driven by a nostalgia for those old ways. What they think the problems are are the ways in which those big institutions have faded away, and they want to get back to some form of that.

I think that's just a mistake, and it's especially a mistake for conservatives because this more decentralized way of living is well-suited to how we think about society and how we think about government. It obviously presents dangers and problems, too, especially on the social side, on the side of the state of the family, the state of society, social institutions; all this has to be thought about. But it has to be thought about in a way that's related to contemporary realities.

And that's part of we've tried to do. I think what's come to be known as "reform conservatism," which *National Affairs* has tried to be a part of, is about that, is new in that it tries to apply conservatism to contemporary problems; it's not new in that it's a different kind of conservatism. But it's just applied conservatism in the 21st century.

KRISTOL: So give me an example of the decentralization. I'm interested by that. I don't think the big institutions necessarily think they've faded away. Harvard or *The New York Times* or the federal government –

LEVIN: The idea that you would now graduate from a university, get a job and then retire from that company 40 years later is preposterous to anybody graduating college today. No one thinks that way. So no one understands themselves as navigating big companies.

If you think about how research and development works in our country, it really used to be that there was Bell Labs and there was the Defense Department and there were large universities, research universities. They worked together, and I wouldn't want to describe that as some kind of lumbering, horrible bureaucracy. They actually achieved amazing things. They did innovate but that's done, that's no longer

how things happen, and it's certainly not how innovation happens. That system inevitably ossified, and all of that kind of thing now happens in an incredibly decentralized way.

I think even the way people understand their place in society and how they relate to other Americans, a lot of it is different now, it's much more smaller, dynamic networks of people because of technology, because of the way people think about their careers and their education.

We're just less a nation of large centralized huge institutions. And that's good and bad. But our politics has not caught up with that. We still have a government that wants to be the government of that society, and, so, looks at the society that it's trying to govern as just a mess, just a huge mess that it needs to clean up. And that's a mistake. We don't need a government that cleans up the mess, we need a government that let's us prosper amidst the mess. It's not going away.

KRISTOL: Right. And liberals, I take it, they're pretty committed to the model of cleaning up the mess, though, I think?

LEVIN: Yeah, I, I would say so. I mean they're especially drawn to these large institutions. In part, they have a different way of thinking about how to solve social problems. It's much more consolidated technocratic way of thinking about society. And so they do want to manage. They want a government that helps them manage society.

And of course, society is becoming harder and harder to manage. And the liberal welfare state shows it. It's not managing to do some of the basic things it needs to do. The problem with that is that it's impossible to go back to that state of things. It's just not where we are and where we're going to be.

KRISTOL: And I suppose this decentralized, middle-class focused agenda, on the other hand, is somewhat different from a pure libertarian agenda or simply anti-government agenda?

LEVIN: Yes, certainly. It's different in a few ways. It thinks of society not in hyper-individualistic terms. And I think in this sense, it's different from both the left and the libertarians. It is conservative.

That's what conservatism really means, fundamentally, is to understand society not as just individuals and government, but to think of it in terms of everything happens in between. That huge space between the individual and the state is where society actually is. And that's where families are, it's where communities are, it's where the market economy is.

And all these – all these are going to be much better at solving problems that arise than the government standing outside. And conservatives think about government as protecting that space, enabling that space, and allowing people to benefit from what happens there. So there's a role for government, but it's a supporting role, it's not a leading role.

KRISTOL: And this has been well-received, you think, by Republican officeholders, staffers, possible presidential candidates and so forth? I mean, what's the –

LEVIN: You know, on the whole, yes. My expectations were low, but I think it's been a mix. It's been well-received in the sense that – and this was really our instinct from the beginning that the people involved in trying to advance these ideas are not fighting another faction on the right, we're filling a vacuum, really a vacuum. And that means that there's a sense among the politicians that they have this vacuum, that when you give a speech, you want at the end of it to get to a place where you're saying, "This is how I'm going to help fix things." And there's not been a lot for Republicans to say lately.

And by the way, there's not a lot for Democrats to say, either. You know, the Democrats are going to need some kind of reformed liberalism sooner or later because they also need to think about the 21st century.

But what we're trying to apply conservative ideas in ways that speak to these problems. So, today's problems are not high marginal tax rates and high inflation. They are cost-of-living issues that have to do with health care, with higher education, with the payroll tax and not the income tax. Conservatives have to think about what their principles mean in relation to what people are actually going through.

## **II: Working in the White House**

KRISTOL: So, you're – it's December 2004 as I recall and you're how old then?

LEVIN: I was 27 years old.

KRISTOL: And you're appointed Special Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy. Sounds very grand.

LEVIN: The titles at the White House work backwards. So the more grand sounding, the least grandeur.

KRISTOL: So how did it happen, and what was it like?

LEVIN: Well, I was certainly asking myself the same question that day. I ended up at the White House having worked at HHS for the President's Council on Bioethics a few years before. I worked there for Leon Kass, who was the President's advisor on bioethical issues and ran the Council, which was a commission that advised the Administration on those kinds of issues. Cloning, stem cells, a variety of bioethics questions.

I had been a student of Kass at the University of Chicago. Previous to that, had worked on Capitol Hill in Washington. So Kass asked me to come and work for him at the Council, when he was named by President Bush in 2001. And in the course of that work, I got to know some people at the White House and got involved in some of the work they were doing. And when there was an opening, they offered to me. It was a junior job. I think you're supposed to say it's a middle – it's a mid-level position.

KRISTOL: Don't short-change yourself there.

LEVIN: It's what they call a junior job. But it was sort of three tiers down in a way. The way the White House basically works is on the policy side, there's a domestic policy advisor to the President in the case of domestic policies. It's the same with national security, with economic policy.

Beneath him, there's a deputy. Beneath him, there are sort of subject-matter experts and a staff of people. And I worked on healthcare issues largely and on some of the kind of bioethics, culture of life, and related issues that fell into the health portfolio.

KRISTOL: So you worked for the domestic policy advisor and he was senior staff?

LEVIN: Yes, he was senior –

KRISTOL: He'd attend senior staff meetings –

LEVIN: His day started at seven, so my day started very, very early.

KRISTOL: Did you actually have to get there before seven?

LEVIN: Not every day but often.

KRISTOL: Because you have to brief him on what he had to brief senior staff or the President on?

LEVIN: On what was going on that day and what to expect. And you know the work is basically you're – a lot of it is moving information in both directions. You're in charge of helping coordinate the decision process at the White House, organizing decisions so that they reach the President in an organized way that allows him to know what he needs to know and to think through what he needs to decide.

And at the same time, to move information in the other direction, to make sure that his decisions are carried out, and that his policies are being carried out by the bureaucracy. So the White House really sits between the two. And my job at meetings was to know the most and say the least, which was a challenge but was very interesting.

KRISTOL: Sounds interesting, yeah, yeah. So you would write – so if the President had to make a decision on whether the Administration would support a particular piece of healthcare legislation or should propose something or if the Secretary of HHS wanted to give a speech, all that sort of stuff would come through you?

LEVIN: Yeah. Often there would be if there were a decision about supporting something or proposing something, there'd be a kind of policy process that would start by bringing people in from the agencies that are relevant. That would start at my level.

There would be a sort of meeting that I would run. It would then move up to my boss and his boss. And eventually if it needed to, would reach the President in the form of a kind of decision memo.

There would be a meeting that I would have to organize getting the right people in the room. Generally only very, very hard decisions reached the President, especially in the areas that I worked on. I didn't work in national security and the things that the President would want to run really day-to-day. So if I was sitting in front of the President, it meant that I had basically failed to do my job and hadn't gotten a question resolved and it had to be decided by him.

And that meant really formulating the question as a decision question: "Here is what needs to be decided, here is why we haven't agreed at lower levels, here are the basic – here is the basic information you need to know." There's a meeting. You'd sit in the Oval Office for an hour so and talk it through and the President would make a decision.

KRISTOL: And this would be a meeting with the Secretary of Health and Human Services and the Director of the Office of Management and Budget and other relevant senior people?

LEVIN: Yeah. Generally, an empty chair for the Vice President, though occasionally he would. He didn't have a great interest in –

KRISTOL: Fascinated by your issues, yeah.

LEVIN: Oh, usually, yeah. But, yeah, these were generally Oval Office meetings. There were not a huge number of them. I mean, my job was basically to avoid such meetings, as I said. So it didn't happen every week. But those kinds of things were on issues that either there was disagreement among Cabinet secretaries, or there was a question that was prominent enough that the President ought to either know what was happening or really make a specific decision.

KRISTOL: So what would surprise people on the outside who haven't had the privilege of working in the White House or sitting, invisibly sitting on an armchair, watching these meetings happen or just watch TV shows which maybe don't capture these meetings?

LEVIN: Yeah, the TV shows don't do you a lot of good, as you know. I think one surprising thing is how small the White House staff is.

This is less true on the national security side. But on domestic issues, the domestic policy staff at the White House when I was there was about 12 people, it was divided among subject-matter experts. And, of course, there's a huge bureaucracy in the Cabinet departments under that. So if you needed expertise, you could draw on it. But the actual White House staff is quite small.

KRISTOL: We say White House staff but you're physically in the –

LEVIN: In the Old Executive Office Building.

KRISTOL: Which is sort of across the alley or small road from the White House?

LEVIN: Yeah. Right next to the White House. My boss would be in the West Wing so it's a lot of going back and forth between the two. But most of the White House staff is either in the Old Executive Office Building or in the New Executive Office Building, it's a little further down the street. Most meetings happen in one of those buildings. The White House is very small.

KRISTOL: The agencies come to you? I guess, that's Cabinet level, maybe?

LEVIN: Not a Cabinet secretary, no. I would go to him. If I was meeting with the Secretary of HHS, I would generally go there. But almost anybody else. And they prefer it. You know they work at FDA, they kind of think it's kind of neat to come to the White House, so that was never an issue.

And, yeah, a lot of what happens are just meetings. There would be nine meetings in an eight-hour day on very different subjects. In every case, there's a kind of moving process. You're either responding to some kind of crisis. I worked in the second term, so a lot of it was responding to things that had gone wrong, rather than starting new initiatives. But sometimes you were sort of thinking through what could be done about this or that? There's also a kind of process above all that that feeds the State of the Union every year in the budget process. That starts in the summer.

And you kind of think through what could the President propose this year in the budget and talk about in the State of the Union? You throw together a lot of ideas. One or two of them might get through. And then there's a long policy process of turning that into a presidential level proposal and getting it into the budget. And that shapes a lot of the policy side of what the White House does is that kind of calendar pointed towards the State of the Union address.

KRISTOL: I remember being surprised when I came to Washington and worked in government, first, in a Cabinet agency and then in the White House. I don't know why this surprised me, but somehow as a professor it hadn't really occurred to me: how much of what you have to do is coordination and information-sharing?

I mean, if you know something about some issue, legislative affairs has to know about it because someone has to go up and represent the President's point-of-view to senators and congressmen. And the media, the press, the Press Office, Press Secretary, has to know about it. I mean –

LEVIN: I'd sit there and try to think about how the job I had could have been done before email. And of course, it was, not all that long before.

KRISTOL: That's right. I was there before email.

LEVIN: All of this – all of this information exchange happened over email in a way that made it a lot more manageable. But it's true. There's a kind of list of people in different parts of the White House and in different parts of the administration who just have to know everything that one another knows. And a lot of it is coordinating information, having meetings so that everybody is on the same page and making sure that information moves up and down in a reliable way.

KRISTOL: And I remember other people sort of who have to know. I remember when I first showed up, I thought, okay, I'll meet with my boss, then Education Secretary Bill Bennett and other people. And he'll decide something, and then we'll just go out and do it. And you don't really think, well, there are people on Capitol Hill in your own party who think they might have something to say about what the Republican education agenda is. And then are people in other agencies and, et cetera. I mean, it's –

LEVIN: Yeah. You know, the White House is often in the middle of that kind of chain and so you've got to inform all kinds of people about things they're not going to like to hear and that's a lot of the job, too, just passing information and seeing to it that people aren't surprised when something big comes down. It's a fair amount of what you have to do.

At my level, it also was a matter of making sure that the President is aware in a basic sense of what's happening in my area so that significant things are not a surprise to him. Every night, he would get a book. A lot of it was memos for the next day's meetings and some of it was just updates on what was going on.

KRISTOL: And you would write those memos or you would draft them for –

LEVIN: Yeah, I would draft them. There's a staffing process. You know, a memo for a presidential meeting for an actual Oval Office meeting has to be approved literally by 30 people, and it has to be done in like a two-hour process, and there's a Staff Secretary's office in the middle of it that has to make sure that everybody agrees and that what's coming before the President is the considered view of everybody around the table. And if it's not, they have to note that. It's a formal, structured process. A lot of information back and forth.

KRISTOL: And if it's more of a heads-up: "Gee, there's controversy at the Veterans' Administration."

LEVIN: Right. At the back of his book, there would be just kind of this happened today, this might be in the papers tomorrow. And he may or may not look at those things, but you just want to make sure that they're flagged.

KRISTOL: And how structured is it? So would, if the President or the Chief of Staff or the Deputy Chief Staff or someone at the really top level was alarmed about something, would any of them pick up the phone and call you or would they call your boss and –

LEVIN: You know, in the Bush White House, that sort of wasn't supposed to happen, but it happened a fair amount where –

KRISTOL: Go right to the person who knows the most.

LEVIN: Yeah. There'd be a meeting. Somebody would come and talk to the Chief of Staff about something and he'd be worried about it and he would just call right through, rather than go through a chain of people who he knows would just end with the individual who would have to do it. So that would happen a fair amount. Now and then, I'd get a note from the Chief of Staff's office with a little piece of that morning's *New York Times*, and the President will have circled something and written, "Is this true?" And, you know, there goes my day.

KRISTOL: Top priority is telling the President, right?

LEVIN: He just noticed it at breakfast, and it may or may not have anything to do with anything. But that kind of thing was rare, but it happens.

KRISTOL: And speeches. I know in my day, again pre-email, this was, of course, a very paper intensive process. I guess we had a bunch of employees who did nothing but – this is true, actually – carried papers around from one office to another. I guess it's all done by email now.

LEVIN: Yeah, email helps a lot there. It's not used for everything. Email is discoverable in real time, and on sensitive things, there's a tendency to try to avoid email. A lot of meetings, frankly, happened because they're about things that you don't want to email about in the White House.

But the speechwriting process begins with giving the speechwriters an outline on substance of what a speech could involve. They inevitably think it's terribly boring and want to say something else. I would say a fair amount of policy was done in the course of trying to frame a speech. It's unavoidable. But you get to a place, especially in big, prominent speeches, a State of the Union or some big event where they would say, "Well, the President has to say more than *this* about that question." And suddenly you find yourself creating policy again, starting a process to see if we can do something bigger so that he can say something bigger. You always want to avoid that but it happens.

KRISTOL: Would people on the outside be pleasantly surprised or horrified, or where on the spectrum in between by how the serious the policy process is? That is, do people really weigh pluses and minuses, or is it sort of, "This is the headline, we've got to do something, let's propose some initiative to get the press off our back?"

LEVIN: Yeah, it's a mix. I would say people would probably find more serious than they might expect. That's my view of Washington in general, by the way. The more I've seen of it, the less cynical I am about what happens here. I think it's actually quite serious.

And certainly the White House policy process tries to be serious and thorough and consider options and things. But there's also no question that sometimes you just want to be able to say something so you do in order to be able to say it. You know, sometimes, I mean, the very first Oval Office meeting I was in – I'd been at the White House for two weeks – I was in charge of organizing it. I was stressed beyond belief about it. But to everybody else in room, it was the least important thing they were going to do all week.

KRISTOL: So this what, the end of '04 or the beginning of '05?

LEVIN: This is at the beginning of '05.

KRISTOL: Newly reelected President.

LEVIN: Right. It was a meeting about a relatively unimportant subject, something that had to do with the FDA at the time, there was going to be an appointment of a new FDA Commissioner. And after the meeting –

KRISTOL: FDA, I guess, Food and Drug Administration?

LEVIN: Food and Drug Administration, right. After the meeting was over, the President, everybody gets up to leave and the President says, "Well, if I have all of you here, let me just ask you something." And he says –

KRISTOL: And this is how many people?

LEVIN: This is about six, seven, maybe eight people.

KRISTOL: In the Oval Office?

LEVIN: In the Oval Office.

KRISTOL: And you'd never met the President before?

LEVIN: Well, I'd met him for a second but this was the first real meeting I'd been. And Mike Leavitt had just been confirmed to be HHS Secretary and the President says to him, "Mike, everywhere I go, people talk to me about obesity. What are we doing about obesity?" And Leavitt wasn't ready for it, and he basically recited something that had been in his Senate confirmation hearings, papers or some such. And I'm sitting there frantically, you know, obesity, underlining 3 times. And the President can see that. And he says to me, "I'm not saying this is a priority, I'm just saying people ask me about this, so I want to know what to say about it."

And, of course, then started a policy process focused on childhood obesity and it began because somebody asked the President something and he thought it was something he didn't know enough about. That kind of thing happened. It's a nightmare, that's not what you want to do. An organized White House policy process should work very differently from that but –

KRISTOL: But even then I suppose you organize it in the sense that –

LEVIN: From that point on, you try to make –

KRISTOL: You task the agencies to what are we doing and what do we know, what's the science?

LEVIN: So a few weeks later, he got a memo and he probably wondered, "Why am I getting a memo about childhood obesity?" and so on and so forth? But –

KRISTOL: I think people would be surprised on the outside how President-centered it is. I mean, most people have the sense that it's a big, the White House is maybe a little bigger – they think it's bigger than it is – or they think that the Chief of Staff is running things or the domestic – but my sense is that decisions really do go to the President.

LEVIN: Yeah, I think it's right. Decisions that reach the White House that aren't just obvious at the agency level, a fair number of them will reach the President. And even those that don't, there's always a sense of sort of, "This is the direction that's been set." And it is ultimately, of course, understandably, all about the President. Absolutely.

KRISTOL: And, so, George W. Bush, the President you served, anything about him that you'd like to say?

LEVIN: I was very impressed with him. I thought he was – I thought he was on the whole a good manager of the process that I saw. He was very good at reading people. In meetings, he would always – he would make fun of the person who was a little too confident and he would be awfully nice to the person who was nervous to be in the Oval Office. He had a kind of natural ability to read people.

The fact is the President wasn't very interested in the issues that I worked on. And that was fine. You know there was a war going on. He wasn't going to spend his day thinking about health care policy. And so an important part of my job was making sure that he wasn't bothered by things that didn't need to reach him. And a fair amount of it was trying to get decisions made at lower levels that we knew were in line with his general policies and could then come to him as decisions having been made, rather than as difficult questions. But I always found him very engaged in the details of a question that did reach him, and I was impressed with him.

### **III: Battling Bureaucracy**

KRISTOL: Conservatives are very distrustful of the federal bureaucracy, the career bureaucracy. Are they right to be?

LEVIN: Oh, yes. The federal bureaucracy is a nightmare. The part of it that I saw, the parts of it that I saw really were HHS and the Veterans Administration. HHS is much better run, but it is a very, very liberal bureaucracy and left to itself, it runs wildly to the left on whatever issue happens to be there. If not left to itself, it'll do as told. You know, people aren't making policy on their own. But you'll just find things happening that are beyond belief. And for a Republican administration, it's a constant effort to keep the bureaucracy from running away. I don't think –

KRISTOL: Is that the Cabinet secretary's job mostly? I mean, you can't do it from the White House, right?

LEVIN: People under the Cabinet Secretary, really. Yeah. There are people in the individual agencies and people in Secretary's office, those appointments are extremely important.

KRISTOL: The political appointments at the agencies?

LEVIN: The political, right. It's just a thin layer of political appointees above the career bureaucrats at the agencies. And they're at war at all times. At least in the – at least in HHS and in a few other agencies, the State Department and places where the bureaucracy just wants to be doing something else. And there's an intense struggle always to keep people focused on the President's priorities and to make sure that they're doing what they should be.

KRISTOL: And you found the political appointees were able to do this mostly –

LEVIN: Generally, generally. It's a struggle. And again I was there in the second term where some of them had been basically going to war every day for four years. And there's a certain exhaustion that sets in. But, yes, on the whole, I think people are – people were committed and did what they could.

KRISTOL: Having been in an agency – well, I guess you were at the Council, but you never really were quite in a department, right?

LEVIN: Yeah, we were under HHS, but we never really felt like part of HHS.

KRISTOL: You were a small Council, the Bioethics. I will say, having been Chief of Staff of a department, the phone call you don't want to get is the 7:15 am phone call from, I guess, the equivalent of you, now that I think about it. It was a long time ago.

“What is” – you know, they've seen something in the newspaper. Education Department launching – announces X, or Deputy Secretary gives speech at Omaha and says Y, and suddenly it's contrary to Administration policy or angers the local senator from Nebraska who calls up the legislative affairs person in the White House who, I guess, calls you and says, “What are they doing over there?” And that's – you had to make those phone calls, I suppose.

LEVIN: Yeah, that's certainly part of the job. You know, if it was going to be a call to the Secretary, it would have been my boss who makes that kind of call. But if it's sort of staff to staff. That happened a fair amount. Just to figure out what was going on. They try to avoid that by keeping the White House overly informed about minutiae, and then saying, “Well, we told you that 3 weeks ago in that endless memo.” And you know that's what they have to do. But it happens.

The worst thing is a surprise like that. You know, for the White House staff, you always work with a sense that you're kind of trying to control things. And, of course, all the time things happen that have nothing to do with what you're trying to do and let alone actual huge crises. I mean, I was there during Katrina and that sort of thing where it just everything breaks down –

KRISTOL: Oh, were you involved in some of that?

LEVIN: Very tangentially in just trying to keep the hospital system going in New Orleans. But I saw a lot of it without having to be involved in a lot of it. It was in one sense impressive. The federal government has enormous resources to pull out in those kinds of instances.

And as much of a failure as it looked like at the time, if you step back and think about what happened around Katrina and the enormous – I mean, it was the largest most successful movement of people outside of a terrible crisis zone certainly in human history. They took out the entire population of the city in a week or so. But day-to-day, minute-to-minute, it was just a nightmare. And there was a sense that things were just out of control; it was beyond the ability of the systems in place to manage. That kind of thing, at least from where I sat, was quite rare. But it did happen.

KRISTOL: And Congress. What's your impression of? You said outsiders might be favorably impressed – I agree with that – by the seriousness most of the time of an Administration's decision-making process.

In general, lots of professionals, and they actually run these programs ultimately so there's a way in which you don't propose things usually that you don't want, you don't actually think would be a good thing to do. I'm not so sure that's so true of Congress. They have no idea when they propose things most of the time how it would actually work and what the actual real world –

LEVIN: No particular interest in that question. It's true. I had worked on the Hill in very sort of junior capacities before working at the White House. I went to college in Washington at American University, and all four years, I first interned and then worked on Capitol Hill for a member of Congress and then for the House Budget Committee and then ultimately for the speaker, for Newt Gingrich, when he was speaker.

The Congress is very, very different. The experience of congressional staff basically involves no responsibility whatsoever, at any point. No one person is responsible for very much. There were very few senior staffers in the committees kind of James C. Capretta types who just write the budget.

But most people, you know it's a young culture, you feel like you're running things, but in fact you have absolutely no responsibility. It's a bizarre thing. And the Congress is very dominated by certain personalities and so people who have some idea will start to push it and suddenly there's a piece of legislation and no one's really thought about exactly where it's going to go and what it's going to mean.

Before it goes somewhere, it does go through a process. And so it does go through people who will say, "Well, this can't work that way; this can't work that way." That used to happen a little more when the committee system actually functioned, which was still the case in the 90s. I think it almost doesn't happen now. The Congress now doesn't really do anything, and when it does, it's almost always leadership bills, it's very rarely an actual full committee process.

But at the same time, I would say, to me, the Congress was also more impressive than I expected, because it's not cynical. It's not people who are there for reasons of financial gain or telling people what to do, or this or that. Members who run, run because they care about something. And generally I would say the politics of the place is a little reassuring. If you come in as a conservative and just assume all of this is just – you know, it's just a mess, it's just corrupt and there to destroy the country, that's not, of course, true.

And what happens on the Hill can be impressive. I would say, right now, our system is so dominated by the executive there's just not much happening on the Hill. A lot of members wonder what their job is supposed to be exactly. That, hopefully, is a passing thing, but we'll see.

KRISTOL: It's probably good that you worked on the Hill, don't you think, those summers? I mean, I'd say for me coming to Washington, probably the thing I was most surprised by, caught unawares, by and

probably made some mistakes in my first months, maybe after that even, because of, was the lack of Hill experience.

I just didn't understand how it worked, the degree of sensitivity on the Hill. The fact that you cannot if you're the Education Secretary – to go back to my particular little sandbox – you can't propose something in education without running it by the education experts, the education committee, the people who feel they should have a say on it on the Hill. And you can't just call them two hours ahead of time, either.

LEVIN: The turf mentality is the most important thing, I think, to understand about Capitol Hill, is that people own certain parts of the budget or of the policy process and they just need to be a part of it. And so if the President really wants to do something, it's just essential that they have ownership of it, too, or at least that they feel like they've been some part of it.

This Administration, the Obama Administration, I think has been particularly bad at involving Congress in things, even including Democrats in Congress, it's not a partisan thing. They just don't think that way, and, which is odd since the President was in Congress.

KRISTOL: And the Vice President was in Congress for 40 years. I mean, yeah?

LEVIN: But I think it's true. There's less of an involvement of Congress in those kinds of decisions. In the Bush White House, and I think this has been true generally, any policy process, you always think about who are the people on the Hill who need to be on a list if this is going somewhere? And that conversation happens pretty early.

KRISTOL: Well, let's just run through the other institutions, just because we're both political scientists. Political parties, I guess, I would say, I'll just say what I thought and then you can give me the update 15-20 years later.

I guess, I was surprised by how dominant it is – what party you're in. I mean, that is the first thing you need to know about someone if you meet someone at a function in Washington, is basically, Democrat or Republican? Not in some metaphysical sense of what is his worldview, I mean just in a very practical sense – does he work for a Democratic senator or a Republican senator? Is he part of the Bush Administration or the Obama Administration? It just colors his network of friends, associates, you know.

Sort of there's the team character of party politics is kind of. When you're on the outside, of course, you know about it a little, and it's more publicized now than it was when I got here. But you sort of think, well, there are conservatives, there are moderates, people all over the place. But it doesn't really feel that way when you're here, right?

LEVIN: I think that's true. It sort of seems natural to me maybe because by the time I came in, it was totally so. I think it makes sense, you know, these debates are divided in fairly coherent ways now between left and right, more so than they used to be. And so yeah, absolutely, people at least, at the very least, you're on one side or another.

And I think it's just the case now that it tells you more to know if someone's a Republican or Democrat. You know what they think almost certainly about the budget, about education, about energy, about a lot of things, social issues. You almost just know it all by knowing what party they're in if they're in Washington.

KRISTOL: And the networks seem to be very much divided – so the conservative healthcare policy analyst and then the liberal ones. And they debate each other occasionally, but –

LEVIN: Yeah, you know each other. I mean, I would say in the health care world, you know the liberals in the health care world very well. But there's definitely a conservative network and a liberal network.

KRISTOL: And intra-conservative debates and intra-liberal debates. Yeah. What else is there? Parties, the media? What was your sense? You hadn't really been – well, you knew the media, of course, but you hadn't yourself been in it really?

LEVIN: No. I hadn't. I got some basic media training that they give when you start at the White House. They sit you in front of a camera and ask you hard questions and critique you. I didn't have to do much of that. I did a fair amount of radio, which at the Bush White House mean very, very friendly, to just kind of explain the President's decisions on one thing or another.

KRISTOL: How about media coverage? Would people be surprised by how distorted and simplified everything is, or are people kind of getting somewhat of an accurate picture?

LEVIN: And I think that's the case, whoever is in the White House. I had this experience even working on Capitol Hill. So I worked for Newt Gingrich around the time of the Clinton impeachment and I would ride into work on the metro and read about how congressional leaders had these plans to move this and that and the other and get to impeachment. And then I'd get to the office, and, of course, no one had any plan, it was just a complete fiasco and total chaos.

And almost any time that you read in the press about something you know very well, you see that it's wrong, in some meaningful way. And yet you then turn the page and read about things you know less about, and you assume you're getting an accurate story. I think there's no way around that.

It was certainly the case in the White House where almost anything that I would read about something we were doing struck me as just profoundly wrong. And the Press Office had a much greater tolerance for this sort of thing. If they're not lying and if they're not getting us into huge trouble, that's good, that's a good story. And so I think when you're close to issues that are covered in a big way, there's no way around that and everything seems like it's distorted and off, even when it isn't necessarily so.

I didn't have a huge amount of contact with the press as a White House staffer. Now and then, on issues that were going to become big or if something had happened, maybe they'd have me talk to a reporter. But that was, at my level, that didn't happen very much.

KRISTOL: And the interest groups, I guess, the activist groups. You worked with some of those, obviously in healthcare and also the social issues, I assume?

LEVIN: Yeah, yeah, very much so. That's an important part of the job at the level where I was. Keeping friendly activist groups involved and informed and hearing from them and –

KRISTOL: Now, there were people who were supposed to do that more particularly then you, right?

LEVIN: Yeah, there's an Office of Public Liaison at the White House. Their job is really to organize meetings, and then the meetings are basically the policy people talking to the interest groups. The interest groups, they vary, of course, but they know a lot. Generally they would consist of people who have been working on the issues that I was fairly new to for many, many years, and they were very, very useful sources of information. But they're also very pushy and they know what they want, and their job is to never be happy with you so that there's no such thing as giving them good news. And so their job is to put pressure on you, and they put pressure on you.

KRISTOL: And just the actual work experience, did you have weekends off at least?

LEVIN: No. It was very, very intense. I think I would find it difficult to do now with kids, with young kids. There were certainly people in the White House who had kids and had young kids. And it was impressive that they managed it. The days are very long, and they're intense because there's always a sense that

something is – that what you’re dealing with is significant. It’s not world-shattering but at least there’s a sense that if it goes wrong, it will be embarrassing.

KRISTOL: And in your world at the top. In Education, I would come home and tell my wife, “It was really a busy day today. You know, a couple of big-deal, big things almost went off the rails.” Really, at the Education Department, what big thing is – you’re not running anything! I mean you know, what big thing is going off the rails? I think the schools are going to open tomorrow morning throughout America, regardless of what you do as Education Department Chief of Staff. But nonetheless, of course when you’re in the middle of it.

LEVIN: Yeah, but when it’s you. You know, I had friends at the National Security Council and we would sort of talk about how busy things are. And then I would think, you know, they’re dealing with Iran, and I’m dealing with something that’s never going to go anywhere. But it just feels that way, when you’re in the middle of in it, it certainly feels that way.

KRISTOL: And the White House, I guess it is just so it’s such a small staff as you say dealing with, with so many different players and agencies –

LEVIN: And things that reach you are problems, if they get to you, they’re basically problems. And so everything does feel like it could be a crisis if it’s not handled. And so there’s a fair amount of – especially when you’re young you just haven’t done it before, it’s not easy to tell what’s important and what’s not important, at least at the beginning.

KRISTOL: And so coming out of that, you left the Bush White House in –

LEVIN: I left the Bush White House at the very end of 2006 and went to the Ethics and Public Policy Center, which is a think tank here in Washington.

KRISTOL: Which you’ve been at since then. And if you had not gone to the White House and just gone directly from the Bioethics Council to the Ethics and Public Policy Center and started *National Affairs* earlier. I mean, do you feel like the White House years were important? You learned a lot.

LEVIN: Absolutely. I mean, just to learn about what’s possible and what government looks like from the inside in a way that you can’t learn on Capitol Hill, yeah, I think it made a huge difference. It also made me a little bit more of a generalist.

And what I do now, especially in running *National Affairs*, which is a generalist domestic policy publication, it’s important to be able to tell sort of good advice from bad advice and to get a handle on complicated issues fairly quickly. That’s what’s involved in working at the White House and it taught me a lot of useful things. No doubt about it.

#### **IV: Burke and Modern Conservatism**

KRISTOL: So before you came to Washington, you were a graduate student in political philosophy, really, at the University of Chicago. And subsequently you published an excellent book on Burke and Paine – I want to talk about Burke and Paine and conservatism. How does it all fit together? How much – are these two parts of your life, or do they sort of intellectually and politically, or do they somehow mesh?

LEVIN: For me, they very much fit together. I mean, if I were to describe the sort of area where I try to work and where *National Affairs* tries to sit, it would really be the intersection of political thought and public policy. And I went to graduate school after working for Newt Gingrich for a while, really because it seemed to me that I hadn’t gotten enough of an education in that side of things: in political philosophy and political theory and what underlay our politics.

If you think about domestic politics and look at all the different issues, there's an easy way to see it as just a bunch of technical jargon. It's all about how to manage and how to turn the dial and sort of you have to understand all the details of how this program works and that program works and get really good at reading spreadsheets.

All that is very important. But there's a reason why at the end of day people who agree with one another on what to do about the deficit seem also to agree with one another on how to think about public education. These things do not seem obviously connected and yet it can't be random that there are these two parties in our system. And it's not just because the system is designed to create an opposition of two. There's a difference of political philosophy at the core of our politics.

And I went to the University of Chicago really with two kinds of questions about that. One had to do with the limits of the social sciences, with the limits of the technical side of looking at public policy, and the other had to do with the question of the family in a liberal society, which is a complicated question for the liberal society.

If we try to understand ourselves, as we often do, as a society whose idea of government is grounded in this idea of individual right: John Locke tells us we come from the state of nature. Individuals form society. How do we deal with the fact that in fact such a thing has never happened? There's never been a society formed that way. People come into the world in a family and in a society, and in a place, in a community. How can we understand the tension between individual rights and liberties, on the one hand, and the actual sociology of the human experience on the other hand?

I went in not sure if these questions were related to one another exactly and came to the view that they are very much related to another, that, in fact, it is wondering about these things that explains why I had been a conservative before I quite understood that; because these questions are really, on the one hand, about the sociology of conservatism, and on the other hand, about the kind of epistemology of conservatism, how we think about knowledge in the world.

I thought that I was going to write a doctoral dissertation about Tocqueville, who takes a great interest in the question of liberalism and the family in just this way, who tries to think about what it means to think about society in a hyper-individualistic way. And his worry is that it leads to society breaking apart, tearing down all its institutions, leveling everything and treating people purely as individuals. I came over time and with help from some teachers, especially Ralph Lerner, who was my kind of advisor at the University of Chicago, to see that what I was looking for was really in Edmund Burke, that Burke thought most deeply about this question, and that he also saw how it was related to the second question, how it was related to the way we think about, what we know about society.

Burke was very worried about technical ways of thinking about public policy. He was a politician and a statesman, and sort of scientific ways of trying to understand what society was, which he thought left out almost everything that was most important about what society was. And at the same time, he understood the structure of society in a way that was built around the family, that tried to start from how people actually enter the world, that tried to start with some respect for the given world as it is, rather than treating politics as a way of advancing toward an ideal that could never be real.

And so I ended up writing a dissertation about Burke and Thomas Paine. Paine, his great radical opponent, who brings out a lot of the deepest things in Burke and also really highlights the alternative, the other way of thinking about what the liberal society is. For me, these things are very deeply connected. I think politics really is rooted in political philosophy, is much better understood when it's understood in light of political philosophy. And that a lot of the policy debates we have make much more sense if you see that people are arguing about two ways of understanding what the human person is, what human society is, and especially what the liberal society is. The left and right in our country are both liberal, they both believe in the free society, but they mean something very different by that.

KRISTOL: And is it indicative though, one could say, that you know you had to go to Great Britain to find your great conservative spokesman? That America is more of a liberal nation and believes more in – is more individualistic. I mean, does that –

LEVIN: Maybe. I think that I would say this, first of all, saying that Burke and Paine are where we can find the origins of left and right is not to say that today's right is what it is because of Burke, because we've read Burke and understand him in a certain way. I don't think that's true at all. It seems to me that these two dispositions arise inevitably, unavoidably in a free society, that they really are two ways of thinking about what a free society is, that begin from different kinds of expectations, from optimism and pessimism, from a kind of disposition about politics.

So they arise inevitably, arise in this country, they arise in Britain. I think Burke and Paine because they were almost the first iteration of that kind of debate, show very clearly what it's about and really thought very deeply about what it was about. But I think it applies to American life almost as much as it would have to – as it would to Britain. Obviously, being Americans, we conservatives are conserving a tradition that begins in a revolution, and that's got to tell us something. We're not simply Burkean conservatives, but Burke has a lot to tell us about where our dispositions come from, where our views come from.

KRISTOL: And so we *can* be Burkean American conservatives, even if we're not simply Burkean conservatives?

LEVIN: Exactly. I think that means thinking about community and not being hyper-individualists. It means having low expectations of human affairs, not assuming that politics can solve all problems, being impressed with what works in society rather than just being outraged at what doesn't work in society. And it means having limited expectations of what technical mastery can do for us, especially in politics. So, absolutely. I think there is a Burkean conservatism in America but there's also a different kind of conservatism, a more Jeffersonian radical conservatism. They live together, and they help each other.

KRISTOL: It does seem to me that your, the reception of your book on Burke, which was good and taken not just seriously but a lot of people welcomed it and read it, I think. It surprises me – not in the sense it doesn't deserve that good reception – but in the sense that I would have worried, I'd say, that Burke, when I was younger, a lot of conservatives looked to Burke – I had the vague sense that maybe over the years, it became harder to do that. Maybe you've helped regenerate that, which would be great. But I don't know, have you been a little surprised?

LEVIN: Well, I'll tell you. I think that the way people look to Burke in the middle of the 20th century in America was distorted somewhat by an attempt to make Burke useful for a kind of almost agrarian, anti-political conservatism that thought politics was a distraction from the good life. And to me, that's not actually Burke's teaching at all.

First of all, Burke was not an agrarian. He loved city life and you know he never quite said that he detested the country – he had a rural constituency – but he sort of did. More importantly, Burke was a politician and really believed in the place of politics in advancing the human good. And so I think we were left with a kind of Burkeanism that saw itself as opposition to an emphasis on politics. I think what Burke has to offer conservatives is different than that.

I think that Burke in himself offers (A) an approach to public policy that tries to solve discrete problems rather than to try to treat society as a whole as a problem and transform it. And that's something that's very important for us to be thinking about. It's also a cautious disposition in not getting too arrogant about what can be achieved by public policy, but not being too dismissive about politics at the same time.

I think there's a kind of balance to Burke, and it's all grounded in a deep conservatism, in the sense that's what's most important about society is what happens between the individual and the state, in that space that he cared about so much. I think conservatives now have to care about that space. It's under assault

in a lot of ways, and it's a way of connecting some of our economic views and our social views. So I think Burke is very useful to contemporary conservatism.

KRISTOL: I agree. The Burke that I encountered sort of reading stuff as a teenager and then even college – not so much from my teacher, Harvey Mansfield, who had a correct understanding of Burke, to say the least – but from others, I just sort of read in journals and what I came across was kind of a Tory Burke, sort of –

LEVIN: Burke was a Whig.

KRISTOL: And Burke was a Whig. People forget that, yeah.

LEVIN: Russell Kirk who knew Burke extremely well and certainly knew what he was doing, tried I think to pull him, responsibly but meaningfully, in the direction of Russell Kirk, in the direction that tried to steer American conservatives away from liberal politics. Burke himself was a politician and thought that was important.

KRISTOL: I think one thing you've really done is, again, for my generation, apart from Burke that was anti-political, there was also a real utility to Burke. I mean, one was so struck reading Burke – when I did as a young college student – by the anti-utopianism of Burke. Everyone else, I mean this was the Cold War, Marx was alive and well, the 60s were alive and well. In fact, they just happened.

And so Burke was such a wonderful corrective to that kind of silliness – dangerous silliness or just silly silliness. I think what you've done though is rescue another side of Burke, which is a more positive side. It's not just that Burke is a splash of cold water on all this, which certainly he was, and he was right in predicting how disastrous in certain respects the French Revolution would be, at least in the short and medium term, but the kind of positive, you might say, teaching of Burke, which really was a reform conservatism.

LEVIN: Yeah, Burke was a reformer. He loved that term more than I do.

KRISTOL: Is that right? I forgot that. So the actual term?

LEVIN: Oh, yeah. Burke distinguished reform from revolution. It was how he talked about his kind of politics. And he always loved it. Burke started a newspaper as an undergraduate at Trinity College in Dublin that was called *The Reformer*. It still exists. I think it died away and came back. He thought that was the right way to think about politics. And what he meant by that is that there has to be a limit to our sense of what can be achieved, but there also has to be an understanding that politics exists to solve problems.

That ultimately policy is problem-solving. And it can't solve ultimate problems, but it can solve practical problems and it has role to play in allowing society to function well, to be its best self. And so Burke was a reformer. He was a reformer of the criminal law, he was an opponent of slavery, he was a reformer of Britain's institutions, its economy, its budgets. He certainly saw himself as a kind of policymaker.

And I do think that's very important that in a way the excess we fight against now is not exactly utopianism, it's a kind of technocratic arrogance, the sense on the left that this kind of wonk chic where if you get the right charts and get the data right, it's all going to work out. Burke says to that, no it's not, these are human beings, it's a human society, it's very complicated. The knowledge that society possesses is contained in the structure of its institutions; it is not technical knowledge, it's not going to be possessed by anyone. And so what we need to solve problems are institutions that work from the bottom up, that allow us to use dispersed knowledge. Institutions like markets but also like civic organizations like families themselves that address problems from the bottom up as they confront them. And

government's role is to empower them to do that, to enable people to do that. I think that has a lot to say contemporary conservatives.

KRISTOL: I think one of the biggest gulfs, don't you think, between liberals and conservatives is modern liberalism, progressivism, views – problems keep emerging and we should just keep solving them. And we should solve them however the best scientific research suggests we should solve them. And that's kind of what politics is, just the endless solving of problems.

Burke, as the term *reform* really suggests, I think we're so much more concerned about the institutions and that it's that you cannot have – you'll go crazy just endlessly, it would be like living somewhere where you're just every day changing the décor of your room because you decided today you'd like a little more purple on the walls and then you'd like a different kind of chair. And you can't live that way. You have to have certain semi-stable forms, which can be reformed, but you can't just have this attitude of sort of it's like a scientific experiment.

LEVIN: I think – one of the big differences you find when you look at Burke and Paine along these lines is that Burke looks at the world and is very impressed by what's working, by what's succeeding, and thinks the default condition is chaos, is pandemonium and war. And if you have peace and prosperity, you need to realize that that is a rare thing and has been achieved by a more complicated set of circumstances than you can be aware of. So the first thing to do is to preserve what you have that's working, to preserve working institutions, working arrangements and build on them, to fix what's wrong but building on what's right.

Paine has higher expectations. He thinks we can do a lot better. And so he's not first impressed by what's working. He's first outraged by what's not working. He approaches politics in an outraged way and doesn't look at society as a thing to be preserved but as a thing to be rejiggered. Burke is more like a physician addressing a patient, and Paine is more like a technician working on a kind of machine. And the difference makes a huge difference. And it's one of the ways that this kind distinction helps you think about contemporary policy disputes.

If you think about what the healthcare debate is about, for example, it's about this kind of difference. Do we solve a complicated social problem by consolidating and managing from the center, or do we solve it by decentralizing and allowing people, from the bottom up, to find incremental improvements by putting power between the individual and the state? That's a deep difference that makes itself apparent in what otherwise seems like a very technical disagreement.

KRISTOL: It sometimes feels to me as if one is swimming upstream, if that's the right, running uphill, trying to make the Burkean case against this effort of scientific control, rational control, scientific manipulation. That does seem to come more naturally to the modern mind, or at least the modern American mind, or at least the modern American social scientific, academic mind.

LEVIN: Well, yeah. The social scientists want social science. That's natural enough. I don't think that it's necessarily the default way that Americans think about their society, or it doesn't have to be, especially when the welfare state does not seem to be working very well.

In a moment when things do seem to be in hand, and there was a moment like this in the early 60s. In some ways there was a moment like this when Obama was elected and it led to a similar kind of intellectual movement on the left where it just seemed like this was the new, this was the energizing thing, this was the exciting thing, this management of society.

Generally speaking, Americans don't really think that way and don't expect that to work. But there has to be an alternative, an actual concrete alternative, that says, "There is a problem. It's just that this is not the solution to it, and there other ways to try to find that solution."

KRISTOL: And how much do you think, how important is it that the solution be bottom-up and decentralized and so forth?

LEVIN: Well, look, it's not always possible, but I think that is important. It's important both because it's more likely to work. Just given the nature of the problems we face, it seems to me that a process that lets people experiment on the ground and lets them evaluate what's working and what's failing and lets them decide what to keep and what to throw out is going to work better than somebody at the center saying, "This is the answer, let's implement it."

So when conservatives approach education policy, for example, again the difference between left and right there, is that difference. Conservatives say, "Give families the choice, let them decide what's working and what's not." Liberals say, "We've got mountains of social science about works; we just need to make it happen."

The practical difference comes down to a philosophical difference about how society really works. And I do think where it's possible, it's certainly preferable to have decentralized solutions, bottom-up solutions, trial and error, and not imagine that we start out knowing all the answers and we just haven't gotten around to putting them into effect. That's just not true.

KRISTOL: I guess the irony is you need, though, to win a centralized election or a decentralized, right, you need a sort of strong President to take on the institutions that have accumulated so much power in Washington?

LEVIN: It's one of the ways, people say Burkean conservatives should be in favor of defending existing institutions, so why do they want to throw over the welfare state? But of course, the welfare state, the liberal welfare state as we have it, in large part, is an embodiment of a kind of technocratic approach. And so to fix it, you really do have to make some pretty dramatic changes.

So I think a Burke-minded conservatism now isn't all that different from a more energetic, more radical conservatism because you do have to make some major changes. The question is what you aiming at instead? And I do think there's a place for government as an enabler of civil society. It's just to get from here to there would take some major change.

KRISTOL: I suppose it would be non-utopian. However energetic the change, it wouldn't –

LEVIN: Yeah. You can't expect the problems to go away; that's just not the human condition.

KRISTOL: I guess, President Reagan liked to quote Paine, right? That was funny for an American conservative.

LEVIN: Well, yeah. You know, he quoted Paine in the context of calling Americans to do great things again. He love that line that, "We have it in our power to begin the world over again." It's really it's the least conservative thing that anybody's ever said, and so it is odd that Reagan chose to say that to the Republican Convention in 1980. But it was always in the context of, "We're a great nation, we can't just assume that these problems are bigger than us." I certainly think that's true. I don't think Reagan was calling for the overthrow of society and the end of religion, as Paine was.

## **V: Political Philosophy and Politics**

KRISTOL: So you came to Washington in 2001, or came back to Washington, to work for Leon Kass at the Bioethics Council but, of course, you had studied with Leon Kass and many others in Chicago. I think you were in Chicago at an unusual moment when it was really a great Committee on Social Thought and political science department. I suppose a lot of people to study with if you're interested in political philosophy and the kinds of issues we tend to be interested in.

LEVIN: Yeah, absolutely. Chicago was an extraordinary experience. I went there after being in Washington, after being a college student in Washington and working on Capitol Hill for a while, but really to get a grounding in political theory and political philosophy.

I went to an extraordinary program there called the Committee on Social Thought, which was a kind of multidisciplinary graduate program that combines the classics and political philosophy and economics and literature, and you can almost do anything you want with it. It's a very Chicago idea. What I made of it was a kind of political philosophy degree. And, you know, my teachers were really Leon Kass and Ralph Lerner and Nathan Tarcov, who are wonderful teachers of political philosophy and also let me figure out what I wanted to do in a way that was just extraordinary.

What I found there was a real university, something that if I'd only been told about it, I wouldn't have really believed it. I mean, Chicago, even undergrads at University of Chicago, you'll find the library packed on a Friday night and there's just one bar in the neighborhood in Hyde Park. It's a very serious place, it's a very intense place. And among the graduate students I met there, were just extraordinarily impressive people, most of them heading for careers in the academy. I came in knowing that's not really what I wanted to do.

KRISTOL: Is that right? You didn't really think you'd end up –

LEVIN: Yeah. I was open to the possibility but I didn't think that I wanted to be a professor but rather wanted to come back to Washington with a different background, with a different background, better prepared to try to work at that intersection of public policy and political thought.

And it was a great education. I mean, Leon Kass is just an extraordinary teacher and Ralph Lerner and Nathan Tarcov, each in different ways, wonderful teachers and scholars.

And when Kass became the chairman of the Bioethics Commission, he asked me to come and work for him. And the Commission was a wonderful kind of halfway point, really, between graduate school and Washington. It was in Washington and very much of Washington. It dealt with very controversial political issues at the time, though oddly they've kind of disappeared since then. But it was also a collection of 18 professors who would come together to advise the Bush Administration. We produced reports and books that are kind of academic texts in some respects. So was a great in-between kind of mode between theory and practice.

KRISTOL: I think people who know of Leon Kass from his public life mostly know about his work on bioethics, but I bet none of the courses you took with him Chicago –

LEVIN: The first course I took with him was called "Science and Morals, Friends or Foes?" which was a very interesting course. But Kass is not a bioethicist; he's a philosopher, really, I think it's fair to say, and a teacher above all.

KRISTOL: And what did you study with him? I'm curious.

LEVIN: Yeah. I took his wonderful Genesis course. And I was actually his research assistant on the book that he wrote about Genesis. So did a lot of work with him personally, directly, on chapter by chapter working through that book, which is an extraordinary book called *The Beginning of Wisdom* that everyone ought to read.

I took a variety of courses with him and he taught an odd variety of courses. He would teach courses on Plato's dialogues, a two-quarter course on the *Symposium*, which is a very short dialogue, but you know you pull it apart and you think it through. It's a very Chicago way of doing things.

And really everyone there, the other great teachers I had, all worked in the same way. They would teach a book, they would work through a whole book, slowly thinking through what it was about, thinking through what it had to tell us, asking questions. Ralph Lerner on *The Federalist*, Nathan Tarcov on *The Prince*. If that's what you like, you really like that. These are great teachers, and it was an extraordinary experience.

KRISTOL: And then you came to Washington for the Bioethics Council. And I remember that well. That was a pretty controversial and interesting few years.

LEVIN: Yeah. The Council was created right after President Bush announced his decision on funding embryonic stem cell research, deciding to fund existing lines of cells and not fund the creation of new ones and not fund the destruction of embryos. As he announced that – and Leon Kass had been involved in helping him reach that decision –

KRISTOL: This was in August of 2001. And it was such a big issue at the time. Headlines, modern science, real genuine bioethical dilemmas. And then a month later, it was 9/11.

LEVIN: The first speech that Bush gave to the nation as a new President was about stem cell research, oddly enough. And, of course, things were quickly overtaken by 9/11 and everything that followed. But the stem cell debate remained extraordinarily prominent if you think about it throughout the Bush Presidency. It was a huge issue in the '04 election, for example, and remained an important question throughout his term.

It raised a lot of crucial questions, it raised a lot of crucial questions in ways that both were very important substantively, but also ways that the Democrats found especially useful. They thought it got at some of the abortion questions in ways that were better for them. It's harder to make the case for saving an embryo than for saving a 20-week fetus. And so they thought they saw an advantage there. They pressed it very hard. You had Democrats making bizarre promises about where the research was going.

And, of course, the research has not gone very far. We're now a decade and a half after those days, and there's not been a great stem cell revolution. The science is proceeding but it's an exploratory science, it's not solving every medical problem we have. I think there's a lesson in that in general about kind of what we can expect of science, and how we should think and talk about science and public policy. But it was a very interesting set of subjects to be engaged with in that time.

KRISTOL: And some of our friends and we all work together on a lot of these issues, we're on the same side, basically, are depressed about the outcome of that. And they just think it shows how hard it is to in any way slow down progress, the alleged progress of science, medicine, because of any ethical concerns; that just if you promise that this will create a cure, suddenly respect for the embryo or the dangerous slippery slope we would be on if we started creating embryos for the sake of experimentation or destruction – that stuff seemed to get overwhelmed. Do you do share that sort of worry?

LEVIN: Yeah, I think that's a deep, deep problem. I think medicine is a trump card in our politics. You just have to look at the history of the federal budget over the last half century.

The federal government is increasingly just a health insurance company that has a Navy on the side, and it's getting more and more that way all the time. And there's a reason for that. It's hard to say no to that. And our system in particular has a lot of trouble saying no. Understandably, healthcare, you know it's a great good and if you're going to spend money on something, that's not a bad thing to spend money on.

But we did find in those debates that when there are other important principles and values that come into conflict with the progress of medicine, it becomes very difficult in our liberal society to make the case for those. And there's no doubt that – I mean, I certainly left that experience thinking that we need alternatives, we're not going to win the debate by saying we need to prefer this to medical advances,

we're going to win the debate by saying there are other ways to advance medicine that don't require us to choose between our principles and our commitment to science. I think that's true, I think there are such other ways but if we find ourselves in a circumstance where there are not, I would not count myself optimistic about how that turns out.

KRISTOL: And do you expect those issues to sort of come back? It seems that they were so big as you say for several years, they have sort of weirdly faded into the background. I mean, not weirdly but they certainly have faded. Do you expect them to come back? I mean what do you, what would your –

LEVIN: They were big when they were particularly convenient for some people in our politics. And when it seemed like the science was going somewhere very, very quickly, which it doesn't seem like anymore. But, yes, it could still happen.

You know, once people talked about, "Is human cloning around the corner?" And we've stopped asking the question. But it sort of is around the corner. And there has been progress made toward that, including in our country. And so I do still think that's going to happen at some point and it will force some questions. We saw with the cloning of Dolly the sheep – the first successful cloning of a mammal in '97, suddenly cloning became an issue really out of nowhere. And the President had to deal with it and all kinds of things in the Clinton years. I do think that would happen again if we find ourselves with that. And some of the thinking done in the last decade will be helpful there, but it'll present some great challenges.

KRISTOL: Yeah, it'd be nice if all the politicians could take courses at the University of Chicago in science and morals and how to think deeply about what humanity is. That's probably too much to hope for, right?

LEVIN: I would think so.

KRISTOL: Generally speaking, did your experience in the Bioethics Council make you more or less sort of impressed that ideas can make a difference in real politics? I mean, it was such a wonderful Council. You read the reports today, and they were so serious. I remember going to some of the meetings, and there were actual discussions of philosophic texts and literary texts.

LEVIN: You know the premise that our work started with, and I would say Kass's premise, was that these ideas were not going to move politics immediately – that it was not going to be possible, whatever we did to just shake the debate – shape the debate. And so with that in mind, what the Council did was try to produce things that would last. That when something does happen, if someday we are confronted with the question of human cloning, there's a document out there that has done serious work in trying to think through what our society should think about.

And so the work of the Council was extremely serious but it was also mostly disconnected from what was actually going on in the debates at that time. In some ways it wasn't, there was work done on alternatives to embryo destructive research that actually became relevant very quickly and became influential at the end of the Bush years. But for the most part, I think we started from the premise that we weren't going to change the world with that kind of work and that what mattered was that someone looking in library years from now would find something worthwhile. And I think that is worthwhile.

Politics in the end is moved by arguments. The intellectual work does matter. I think it does absolutely shape outcomes. But it happens in a way that relies on a kind of food chain. Things have to move through our intellectual world and it doesn't move directly from that kind of work to policymaking; there has to be some time to digest, to think it through. I think that happens on a lot of important issues in our politics. So I am impressed with how ideas move politics but you know it's not a direct process. Not a simple one.

KRISTOL: And I suppose part of it is getting the ideas out there and developed in a way that makes them accessible and then something happens that forces political figures to suddenly address an issue.

LEVIN: Yeah. A lot of the way that *National Affairs* thinks about what it's doing, that I think about what I'm doing, what a lot of people in think tanks do, is that you're doing work that will be there when it's time.

Whether when someone is running for President and decides I need to have a policy on how to change the tax code or when something happens and we need suddenly to think about how Medicare is structured, a lot of the work that's done in the current universe that I work in is doing the preparation so that when politics calls, the work is there. The thinking is there. There are ideas to call on. And I think it makes sense to think that way. It does happen.

KRISTOL: And I do have the sense that there are a lot of younger Republicans running for office, in office, being elected to office, on the federal and state level, and some Democrats as well, who are open to these newer reform ideas. I have the sense that in that respect, I think the reformed conservatism movement you're associated with is hitting at the right time, not just because it's needed intellectually, or even politically. It just happens there's also a crop of politicians who have come along who are open to it.

LEVIN: Yeah, I think these things are probably connected. And the Democrats are much more ossified now than the Republicans. They're an older party in terms of their politicians. They have a very, very thin bench because they've been in power for a while and it's hard to –

KRISTOL: I think it's amazing that you say that. When you think about it because just six years ago, they were the party of Barack Obama and youth and hope and change after Republicans had been in power with a somewhat older, considerably older nominee.

LEVIN: Yeah. It's not easy to think, it's not easy to imagine, what the Democrat running in 2016 will run on. It's much easier now to imagine what the Republican will. And that is a change.

KRISTOL: That's a change for which you should take some credit. So now all you have to do is make the 2016 election come out well, and we'll have another conversation in 2017. And if it doesn't come out well, we'll have a conversation from Australia or something like that. Thank you very much.

LEVIN: Thank you. Appreciate it.

KRISTOL: And thank you for watching this CONVERSATION.

[END]