

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: General Jack Keane (Ret.)

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I: The Surge in Iraq (0:15 – 28:18)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to have with me today General Jack Keane, who retired in 2003 after a very distinguished 37-year career in the Army. Welcome, General Keane.

KEANE: Great to be here.

KRISTOL: So you retired in 2003, but then in late 2006, I think when we first met – maybe we met once before – but when we met and spent more time together, you were in the middle of planning a surge in Iraq. How did that happen three years after you had left behind your heavy duties after a very distinguished career?

KEANE: Well, everybody recognized we had a very successful invasion in Iraq in 2003, it just took actually a matter of weeks. And then very quickly, an insurgency developed and we developed a strategy to deal with that and frankly I was on active duty at the time and I knew that the Army, the Marine Corps, the ground forces in particular, were ill-prepared to deal with that kind of war. We hadn't fought a war like that, going all the way back to Vietnam. And while we were successful in defeating the insurgency in Vietnam, given the way the war ended, I know the Army purged itself of the lexicon of everything to do with counterinsurgency.

So none of our officers and certainly none of our generals had any skill-sets to deal with counterinsurgency and that's what was beginning to develop in 2003, it got worse in 2004, and by 2006, actually Iraq was heading towards a failed state; the new government was fractured before it got started. There is a bloodbath in Baghdad. Hundreds of people were being killed every week. In fact, there was hundreds of unclaimed bodies in Baghdad. The children were not going to school; no services rendered by the government; no one was working.

And it was a despicable situation. And I was watching testimony that summer of 2006 and General Abizaid and Secretary Rumsfeld were providing testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee. I had been traveling so I couldn't sleep when I got home, and I was roaming around the TV.

KRISTOL: And you're a private citizen at this point? You're doing some stuff in the private sector and whatever?

KEANE: That's correct, yeah. And I'm watching it, and I noticed the senators were almost about to come over the table because they were so frustrated by the answers that Secretary Rumsfeld and General Abizaid were giving them. They kept telling them the strategy was working, that everything was okay. And obviously any casual observer of what was taking place in Iraq at the time knew it was not. So it occurred to me that they were not going to change their strategy, that they were going to let Iraq go off the cliff. This is Secretary Rumsfeld and General Abizaid, and that we would suffer a humiliating defeat. So I got up early that morning after a few hours of sleep, took out a long yellow tablet and wrote down what was wrong with the current strategy, what did we need to do to fix it and what really would be a new strategy.

And I called Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and read it to him. He was a – he knew me very well, and I gave him my thoughts – and Henry Kissinger and also Newt Gingrich. I called all of them that day. And I guess Dr. Kissinger wanted me – he said, "Well, we've got to bring this to the President." And I said, "That's not my lane." I said, "I was a member of the Defense Policy Board, so we all worked for Secretary Rumsfeld." So I said, "I'm going to bring this to Secretary Rumsfeld." So it took me about a week –

KRISTOL: So the Defense Policy Board is a group of civilians and –

KEANE: People appointed by the President but really recommended to the President by the Secretary of Defense and –

KRISTOL: It's a part-time. I mean, it's occasional advisory.

KEANE: Yeah, it's part-time and right. Advisory board and had some military people like me on and mostly some civilians who had, who brought special skills and background to the table. But I did see Secretary Rumsfeld, and I took him through the entire strategy. The meeting lasted for about an hour. And I told him what was wrong with the current strategy and what we needed to do to fix it. I told him that he had to remove the generals who were in charge and put new generals in charge of it.

And to accompany the strategy, we needed probably about five to eight additional brigades to go to Iraq. There was, he had a sense of resignation about what I was saying to him. He was not going to remove the generals but I knew he listened. He asked a lot of thoughtful questions. I think he was sort of frustrated with some of things I was telling him, to be frank about it.

But nothing happened as a result of it. I took the same briefing to Chairman Pace who was the Chairman of Joint Chiefs. He did put together a study group to take a look at the current strategy to see if it was working. That group—and I had recommended a couple of people to be on that. So I was pretty well-informed on what happened. They did validate that the strategy was not working. They did come up with some options but the Joint Chiefs made a decision not to make any changes.

And I thought it was over and then the week before the first week in December – this was September/October of 2006 – the White House called, and they said the President was going to have a meeting with some people who may have some alternative thoughts on what to do with Iraq. So I was one of five that went in there to do that. I called Newt Gingrich and told him, "Listen, I'm going into the Oval Office." I've been there before and I had briefed, I had briefed President Bush before but I didn't have a working relationship with him nor a familiarity with the Oval Office, only having been there a couple times.

And Gingrich gave me some good advice. He said, "Look, Jack. Most people go in the Oval Office, even people who go in there a lot, have a tendency in front of the President of the United States to always leave something on the table." He said, "Don't leave anything on the table." He said, "You're going to get

about 15 minutes at best and put it all out there. And when you walk out of that room, feel good that you got it all out there.” So that was sound advice, and I did put it all out there.

Interesting enough, the other two generals did not agree with me but the two think-tank academicians who were in there did agree with me. And that night, I got a call saying that from someone who was in the meeting, he had his entire national security staff in there, to include his political advisor and communications chief, etc.

KRISTOL: But not the Pentagon leadership?

KEANE: No Pentagon leadership whatsoever. This was all his staff.

KRISTOL: That’s pretty unusual for a President to have a meeting like that with, with outside – He must have sensed very much that things had gone wrong.

KEANE: Yeah, I think so. I mean I think most people in the country knew there was something terribly wrong in Iraq at that time, and there was a clarion call from Senator McCain and others, “We need to put more troops in there.”

But putting more troops was really not the issue; the issues was the strategy was wrong, and if you gave General Abizaid and General Casey more troops, we’d continue to fail because the strategy was flawed. So what we had to do was change our strategy, which did require more troops.

And so the President, I got a call that night from somebody who was there and they said that, “We believe the President is going to do this, and you, in fact, may get a call from one of the two principals who were there.” Now, the two principals were the President and the Vice President. So the next night, I got a call from Vice President Cheney, and he asked me if I’d be willing to put my uniform on and go fight this war.

And I had left the Army because my wife had contracted Parkinson’s and the situation was more exacerbated, and I told him I really couldn’t do it. And then he said, “Well, would you come into the White House and oversee both wars full-time?” And I had this unbelievable sense of frustration, and then I told him just, I said, “Mr. Vice President, this is the most difficult conversation I’ve ever had, other than a loss of life of people that I love.” I said, “You’re asking me, one, to fight a war, and, two, to help oversee a war, based on some confidence you have on recommendations I made to you, and I’m stiffing you.” And I said, “I really can’t do it full-time but I could do it more than part-time and if you accept the recommendation that we made that General Petraeus should be your man, and there’s reason to go to a retired guy, anyway – it’s kind of an act of desperation – I’d be more that willing to help him.”

So I did go into the White House, I did help them put together the plan and how to execute it and then General Petraeus in a few weeks moved over to Iraq and he asked me to come over and begin to help him, and I did that for about two years on and off.

KRISTOL: And you knew Petraeus well from –

KEANE: Yeah, he worked for me three times, and we had a great relationship, and he got shot accidentally, standing right next to me, and I had to fight to save his life. He had a hole about the size of a quarter in his back and is gushing with blood, and we stopped the bleeding and got him on a helicopter and got him to a surgeon and so we were sort of bonded ever since that time.

KRISTOL: I can imagine, I can imagine. That was an accident, right? That was not –

KEANE: Yeah, it was a soldier, a training accident. When Petraeus tells the story now that he actually, this soldier was actually – the Petraeus version of it. The soldier was aiming at me, and Petraeus saw that and jumped in front of the soldier and saved my life. That's the story he tells.

KRISTOL: I like that. That's very good. As I recall, while you were on this track of moving the White House so effectively, Fred Kagan and his team here at AEI were trying to work out in consultation with some people who had worked for you and for Petraeus of how that surge might work. And at some point, you and Fred linked up. The very end of December or early –

KEANE: It was the weekend prior to the briefing to the President, and I had not met Fred but I knew Chris DeMuth who ran AEI and he said, "Would you come over and take a look and see what these guys are doing?" And I said, "Yeah, sure." And I was absolutely stunned because I had been thinking about it quite a bit, and our thinking was so similar, even though we had never spoken.

And they had incredible resolution on what the enemy was doing. I had resolution of what the enemy was doing because I had classified briefings on a regular basis. I had all my top-secret clearances. They had none of that but they had remarkable resolution and also what to do about it.

So as we moved towards that week where I was going to go see the President, the day before that, the Vice President called and asked for Fred Kagan and myself to come over and talk to him on the same day I was going to see the President. His office did not know about the President's meeting yet, it had not made his schedule. So after we finished the meeting with the President that day, I met Fred in a waiting room and we both went to see the Vice President and we gave him a very detailed briefing.

Actually, Fred gave him a very briefing very well done on what the strategy would look like and how we would implement it. The Vice President was very interested in it and asked a lot of questions, and I think that certainly made a contribution. And a report came out that Fred wrote that was widely circulated in the government that reflected that recommendation and why we were failing, and also, I know for a fact it was widely read over in Iraq by the principals who were there as well.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I remember those months pretty well and I had tried to push in my very limited way for a surge of troops without really having any knowledge or understanding of what the exact strategy would be but Fred was advising me.

And of course, I think Cheney was a key player because he was so close to Rumsfeld and it was a big – and Rumsfeld was pretty much, pretty resolutely not interested in this, it seemed to me. And then when the President fired Rumsfeld, I guess the day after the election, right, in November of 2006, I had the feeling the Vice President felt he no longer had to sort of defend his old friend, the Secretary of Defense, and was more open to fresh thinking.

But there were people in the White House who were thinking about it even in September/October, I suppose?

KEANE: Oh, I think so. I think that summer, there were a number of people who were thinking that there's something wrong here – what could we do? And certainly there were thoughtful people in the White House who had that view. I think the only thing that I really brought to the table is I operationalized it from a military perspective so that the President could actually see what this would look like on the ground.

What we had done in the past is we operated from behind from these very walled forward operating basis we had with towers and protection, and we would run patrols out of there in Humvees on a regular basis. And of course these patrols would get attacked quite a bit by IEDs, and we had a lot of soldiers wounded and killed in doing that.

And what the new strategy called for was to bring everybody outside those walls and have put them in neighborhoods and have them live in the neighborhoods in platoons and company size.

A platoon is about 40 people; a company is about 130. And then they would patrol mostly on foot day and night and protect the people. So this is classic urban counterinsurgency doctrine where you protect the population as job one. You don't run after the enemy as job one, you protect the population as job one. And then in time as the population sees that you're willing to risk your life to protect them, they actually give you the enemy. They begin to tell you where is the enemies' weapons, where is the enemy hiding. When you run the enemy out and he comes back in, which was always a problem we had in Iraq, they would immediately tell us because it was in their interest to get rid of these terrorists who were so intimidating their lives and where the children had no quality of life whatsoever.

So that was the psychology of it and the military principle involved. And within a matter of months, it began to work.

II: President Bush and His Generals (14:43 – 28:18)

KRISTOL: Well, let's talk about that. Let me go back first to the meetings. I'm just curious about President Bush. I mean you knew slightly, you'd been Vice Chief of Staff in the Army, obviously you'd been some sessions with the President but probably not intimate as you say, the kind that you ended up having in the Oval Office that day. And you saw him subsequently, I guess, during the last two years of the administration since you were very involved in helping General Petraeus.

Impressions of President Bush? I mean, especially in that key meeting. I mean, was it anything different from what those of us on the outside, like with, I would suspect.

KEANE: I was always struck by, being around him is the sort of casual informality he had with people. It would always sort of take you back. He would talk to you in a casual language, not in a very formal language, kind of like you would have with a guy that you just met and you're going to have a beer together. That was kind of the relaxed style that he had, which was wonderful because anybody being around a President is going to be somewhat intimidated by it, and he certainly would put you at ease.

The other thing I liked about him, he asked good questions. And when it came to the war in Iraq, I mean his frustration was very noticeable and so was his concern. I would tell you that I think the—my sense of the White House and meeting the people— the fear was palpable because they knew this was failing miserably and they weren't certain about what to do about it, you know, could they really turn this around?

KRISTOL: It was hard for them to change, that's what struck me so much. From one side, it seemed pretty obvious to me as a total amateur that they should be calling in people and changing and he was very – for some good reasons I would say and maybe some not so good reasons – very reluctant to let on in any way that the strategy might require new thinking.

KEANE: That's a great point because one of the conclusions I made about the President was I thought he was too deferential to his generals. I think it may have been some counsel he got from his dad who was President and said, "You know, trust these guys, and they'll do what's right for you."

But you know anybody that knows American military history knows that the American military, actually, in most wars, gets off on the wrong foot, and we sort of figure it out because, intellectually, we're very adaptable and then we become operationally very flexible as a result of it. And it's true in just about every major war we've fought with some exceptions.

So here we are again with a failing strategy for three years. The President is not truly challenging that strategy, I think, the way it could have been, and he was deferring to General Abizaid and also General

Casey and obviously Secretary Rumsfeld, who had a very close working daily collegial and cooperative relationship with them. And anybody looking at this and on occasion just saying, “Okay, what’s our strategy, what are we trying to accomplish here and show me how we’re doing it at accomplish that?” it would just surface that something was wrong.

KRISTOL: He was personally loyal in my sense, too. I think he liked General Casey and respected him, and he didn’t like the idea of the kind of embarrassment, you might say, of being removed or replaced or –

KEANE: Yeah, well, actually he left that war and went to become Chief of Staff of the Army and the – we did the same thing with General Westmoreland who had a failed strategy in Vietnam for three years and when he left, we made him Chief of Staff of the Army, so I guess there’s some kind of pattern here.

KRISTOL: I remember objecting to that – not that it was any of my business – but objecting to that at the time in a meeting with Steve Hadley where they briefed a bunch of us on what was happening and I said, “It’s not a good signal. I think he is a fine person and had served his country admirably but you’re rewarding someone in a sense who had a failed strategy and had a real investment in it.”

But he said, “No, look, the President, he wants to show that he’s not sort of throwing him you know under the bus.” Scapegoating him. Bush was really loyal in that way, maybe to a fault at times.

But was it hard for you? I mean, the community of tight knit – it’s pretty tight knit, isn’t it, of Army generals, Army four-star generals? Was it hard for you to go in and say that two of your friends and colleagues were pursuing a failed strategy?

KEANE: Well, it was very hard. I knew both of them. I knew General Abizaid better than I knew General Casey but at the end of the day, I put the personal aside because of what was at stake.

I lived through the humiliating defeat in Vietnam. I was a platoon leader and company commander there, a paratrooper. So I was down at the fighting end of that war, and like all wars, there’s a lot of human suffering that takes place. And we thought we did a very good job, frankly, while we were there and felt good about it and then the ending was horrible in 1975 when we lost the war, and it sort of invalidated everything that we had done. And the Army went on a roller coaster as a result of it, psychologically and emotionally, to adjust to a humiliating defeat like that.

Some of our good people left, others stayed. I was one of them that stayed. And we kind of put the Army back together again over time. And the Army that was in Iraq was exceptional – much better than the one that I was a member of when I was a young officer – and a very competent and very proud – and I had them on my mind as well. We’ve got to get it right for all of them and all the sacrifices that they’ve made, and we’ve got to fix this thing, and there still was time to fix it.

But a lot of the senior generals did not want to change. The Joint Chiefs, by and large, were comfortable with the status quo. That very week, later that week, I think we saw the President on a Monday, he went over to see the Joint Chiefs, I think, a Thursday of that week and he asked them, “What do they think should be done?” and by and large, they were arguing for the status quo and not for any escalation of the war. And the President said, “Well, I disagree with you. I still believe we can win this and I intend to win this and I’m going to try a new strategy. I’m going to ask you all to support it.” It was quite a moment.

KRISTOL: That is a huge moment.

And the strategy itself. Let’s just take a minute on that. So then the next two years, Dave Petraeus and Ray Odierno in Iraq and you were close to them, obviously and –

KEANE: We had two great generals. General Dave Petraeus was overall in charge, and General Odierno had just arrived in Iraq in November, and he was very familiar with the problems and knew that something had to change, and the combination of both of those was quite remarkable. We happened to have those two great generals at the same time serving at such a pivotal time when we were changing the strategy.

I actually – I was with General Petraeus when he spoke to all his commanders for the first time. He let me speak to the a little bit myself. And I went down to see the first unit that we put into Baghdad that was going to sleep in the neighborhood, eat in the neighborhood –

KRISTOL: This is the counterinsurgency strategy that became so famous.

KEANE: And I hung out with this platoon leader and company commander there. I just wanted to see proof of concept. And they were in such great moods. I said, “What’s going on?” And he said, “Well, sir,” he said, “We’ve only been here a couple days but every tip that we’ve received from the people has been a hot tip.” That meant it was solid. “And the people are already starting to respond to us.” Now, it took some neighborhoods, it actually took us weeks to get the people to move in our direction. So that happened to be pretty fortuitous there.

But the concept as far as I was concerned was proven. And when I came back for another visit a couple of months later, I actually began to see some changes. And I remember telling General Petraeus then, “I think this thing is going to work,” because he was looking at the data every single day and the needle wasn’t moving. The needle didn’t move to our favor actually until we got all the five brigades in by July, and then in August was the first time that the data started to change in terms of the level of violence started to go down.

KRISTOL: And you had been worried – and I think Fred, too – that five brigades might not be enough. Hadn’t you – that was on the low end of your recommendations?

KEANE: Yeah, we really thought eight to ten was about right but the Army and the Marines just didn’t have them. But what General Odierno did is he maximized everybody who was a fighting soldier. You know, about 22 percent of the Army points weapons at people and shoots them. The rest of the 70-plus percent support them in one way or another. So you had to maximize those fighters. So anybody that was on convoy duty, anybody that was protecting something was removed. If they could put security, private contractors doing some of that work and get these fighters or infantry guys out in the streets, that’s what they did. So they did a very good job of maximizing what they did have.

KRISTOL: In an interview late in 2008, I remember you said, at which point the surge had very clearly succeeded, the violence was way, way down and communal strife was way down and it looked like the government was being somewhat inclusive and Iran had been pushed back, the Shite militias and Anbar totally flipped the tribes, with our help, and kicked out al Qaeda basically in Iraq. And you said, “Well, if we just stay the course, keep some troops on the ground, don’t turn our back on the place, we’ll be okay.”

And so what do you think now six years later? I reread that recently, and it was a little haunting what you said because it does seem like we did walk away after winning.

KEANE: I don’t think it occurred to anybody that we would ever wind up with no troops in Iraq. I mean, anybody that is aware of post-conflict understands that after World War II in Germany, Italy, Japan, after the Korean War in South Korea, in Bosnia Herzegovina, in the Philippines – we always left troops to deal with post-conflict. Sometimes for security reasons but also to be a lever to help develop the political system. So we brought the level of violence down quite remarkably in 2009 in Iraq some 90 percent and so that what was left in some episodic terrorist bombings that would occur – you didn’t need 130,000 troops to deal with something like that.

And that was well within the means of the Iraqi security forces. But here's what we did need. We needed our counterterrorism forces – this is our JSOC forces, Deltas and Seal Team Sixes and Rangers, to stay there with their full intelligence suite so if the al Qaeda raised its head again, they would pounce on it immediately and not let them put their infrastructure back, which we systematically destroyed. They had 50 or 60 VIB – IED factories and logistic networks, and we took all of that down over time.

And so you needed that to stay and the intelligence picture with that is as critical as the shooters are. And then the second thing is we needed to leave some forces there to continue the growth and development of the Iraqi security forces. So there was – it was a shock. General Austin who was a subsequent commander to General Odierno who took over from General Petraeus had recommended close to 25,000 troops to stay. And the President's personal envoy, Brett McGurk, put 10,000 on the table as the President's recommendation.

Maliki's negotiators knew that was not a serious proposal, they were very much aware of the 20-25,000, he knew that he would be politically embarrassed by such a thing. So at some point during those negotiations, he threw out the immunity for our soldiers to be removed. He knew that there is not a single place on the planet where the United States has troops that our soldiers do not have immunity. He knew that was inviolate but he threw it out there because it was a way for him to go back to his parliament and to his cabinet with saving face. And that's how we wound up with nothing because I think the proposal initially was so inappropriate for what the task was.

KRISTOL: And the proposal was from the White House, and it was not the general on the ground's?

KEANE: They had overruled General Austin's recommendation of 24,000, unfortunately.

KRISTOL: Well, hopefully we can recover from that yet again, though you hate to dig yourself in this kind of hold and then have to fight your way back to where we were.

KEANE: I think by the time we put it back – I mean, I know the President is very reluctant right now to put so-called boots on the ground but the advisor numbers are going to go up, we're going to have to – eventually, we'll put our special operation forces back in there even though right now we don't want to do that. I think the number will get pretty close to 10,000 by the time we put this back. Right now, we're sitting around 1,400 but it will inevitably grow.

III: A Military Life (28:18 – 55:27)

KRISTOL: So let's go back to the beginning. And the Army, how did you come to join the Army and why?

KEANE: Well, it came as a result of attending Fordham University. I was a first-generation college student. My dad was a World War II Marine and most of the men in the family had – not most, all of them had participated in World War II, virtually all of them were enlisted guys, draftees. Some fought in the Army, Marine Corps, Navy. And one guy was in the Army Air Corps. So that was as a backdrop. But at Fordham, the ROTC –

KRISTOL: Which is in New York. You were a New York kid, right?

KEANE: Yeah, I grew up in New York City, and I had attended Catholic grade school, Catholic high school. And Catholic high schools were really prep school to try to get young Catholic kids into college.

So attending Fordham Jesuit School was a transformational experience because of the Jesuits and the way they teach and the way they force you to use your mind. You know, they're not very interested in regurgitation of information, they're more interested in challenging you about how to think properly. And they really won't let you out of there till you prove to them that you can do that, and you have to be able to write back to them coherently and talk back to them coherently or else you're going to stay for a while.

KRISTOL: I wish colleges still had that attitude.

KEANE: It was an intellectual crucible, you know, at least for me, at least. But the point was ROTC was on the campus, and my friends and I started to look at it and we said, "Well, maybe we would go in the Army as officers as opposed to enlisted guys like our family did." There was a draft; there was a war so we all knew we were going to go in the military.

KRISTOL: These were the early years of Vietnam.

KEANE: Yeah, this is the 60s. So I became – I got involved in ROTC and like General Colin Powell who went to school down the street at CCNY. The gung-ho guys in ROTC were called Pershing Rifles, we were kind of like a military fraternity, and I joined that at Fordham and I really began to like it.

I can remember philosophy was the course that I actually loved the most. It was, I think, the most probably challenging academic subject I've ever had. So we had – at Fordham, you had a minor in philosophy, they didn't give you a choice. Yeah, so it was pretty demanding to have four years of it. And I can remember my philosophy teacher – I was getting ready to leave and I knew I was going in the Army, I knew I wanted to be a paratrooper. They didn't have Rangers in those days or special forces or anything like that. Paratroopers were the best infantry guys we had, and that's what I wanted to be a part of.

And he was saying to me, he said, "Jack, what are you going to do when you get out of school?" I said, "I'm going in the Army." He said, "No, no, no. What are you going to do after the Army?" And I said, "Well, I'm thinking I may stay if I like it and so forth" – he wouldn't even let me finish. "Jack, you're not going to stay in Army." He said, "You know, you have so much to offer, you don't want to stay in the Army."

I said, "Father, how much do you know about the Army? Have you ever been in the Army?" And he said no. I said, "Do you have fellow priests who have been in?" "I don't have a close fellow priest who was in." Not too many Jesuits were chaplains. And anyway, I said, "Well, listen. I think it's maybe different than what you think it is. There's a lot more freedom than you think. It's America's army, so it's kind of a reflection of the American people. It's not a robotic organization, obviously they have orders, but I think you can grow and develop in it. And I'll see. I may not have the skill sets to do it anyway so we'll find out."

So I did find out. Very quickly after becoming a paratrooper, I volunteered to –

KRISTOL: So you were commissioned when you graduated I suppose?

KEANE: I was commissioned at Fordham and went into the 82nd Airborne Division.

KRISTOL: And that was what '65?

KEANE: '66 and then I volunteered to go to Vietnam and you got to pick the unit you wanted to be with if you volunteered so I volunteered to be with the paratroopers. It was the 101st who was in Vietnam.

And I was married, and my wife was from New York City as well. And I remember telling her that we had liked everything we saw so far and maybe we would stay but to be able I'd have to be effective at combat or else I couldn't stay, and I realized this isn't for everybody and combat isn't for everybody, but I would have to prove this to myself as well as my soldiers that I'm leading that I can really do this and do it – I said, "I just don't want to be okay at it; I want to be really good at it or I won't stay."

So I did find out that I could do it and be effective, and it gave me a lot of confidence as a result of that. But war is a very humbling experience because of the human suffering that takes place. And I think there's exponential growth for someone who goes through an experience like that, and I became a zealot

when I came out of the war experience as a platoon leader and company commander. I didn't think we had been prepared as well as we could have been in our training program for what we were dealing with. And I wanted to make certain that something like that wouldn't happen again.

KRISTOL: So you both led a platoon and then commanded a company in Vietnam?

KEANE: Yes, and then came home and just went on to a normal life of assignments in the Army, always staying around and being a paratrooper, loved jumping out of airplanes and having that kind of fun, doing that sort of thing.

And, you know, General Gavin who was the commanding general of the 82nd Airborne Division may have said it best. He was, after they had a successful jump into Normandy and they accomplished most of their objectives, he was having a little bit of a respite, and he was at a press conference and all the tough questions had been over and one of the guys just threw a softball at him. He said, "Hey, General. You like jumping out of airplanes?" And he didn't answer it right away, he paused and he said, "To tell you the truth, I don't. But I sure do enjoy the company of those who do." It's a great answer because jumping out of airplanes as anybody who has never done it or would think about doing it, is a terrifying experience and you wonder why anybody would want to do that, particularly doing it on a regular basis.

So the camaraderie that is in organizations like that and the closeness and the people that are attracted to doing that kind of thing, just as Rangers or Seals or people who want to be around that and want to be around other people who have the skill sets and the will to do that sort of thing, the gratification of being in a group like that and that association is just quite remarkable. And I always appreciated it and I think it's probably what kept me in the military more than anything is the quality of the people I was associating with.

KRISTOL: And some of your peers, as you said earlier, got out after Vietnam. And very disappointing the end of that war to those of you who had fought there and seeing so much sacrifice yourself and seeing so much sacrifice.

But you stayed in and decided you could – that was your career and you could help change or improve the Army. I mean, how much was that in people's minds in the mid-70s, already that –

KEANE: Well, we were in bad shape in the 70s, there's no doubt about it. And we were trying to build, work our way out of it.

You know, my wife loved the Army as much as I did and we had an odd thing happen to us. You know the Army is a big bureaucracy, and in those days, we had two promotions, we had a regular Army promotion and a reserve promotion, and it's complicated and I don't want to get our viewers too much involved in it.

But for some reason, I was left off a promotion list, and it looked like I was not going to be promoted to major and I called the personnel center in Washington and they said, "Well, you were not selected." I didn't know that I was just left off inadvertently. And I said, "What does that mean?" And they said, "Well, you probably have about six months and you'll have to separate."

So I left work because it was really quite an emotional experience and I went home and I'll never forget it because I told Terry, you know, what was happening to us and she got upset, she just started to cry, she said, "Jack, I love the Army. I don't want to leave it. I love it." She said, "It has to be a mistake." You know, so I said, "Well, I'll call back." And I called back and I got this woman on the phone, she said, "Keane. Let me look at this." And she said, "Oh, my God. You were left off the selection list. We just made a terrible mistake." So I was able to provide –

KRISTOL: This was not some deep psychological test of you to see the toughness to overcome the bureaucracy?

KEANE: But I've never, as much I felt so bad about having to separate, I never forgot how Terry – And you can't really do that.

The reason I bring that up so that people would understand. I'm just not in the Army, my family is and it's a very different life. We moved 27 times, and I had a son who was in four different high schools in a four-year experience. And that's not fair to him. The lifestyle is challenging, and you have to want to do this and you have to have a spouse who is as committed as you are and really receives joy and feels her own growth and development is taking place as a result of this lifestyle that she's a part of.

So I was blessed to have somebody like Terry who was so much a part of it. And I had friends who were not, where their spouses had difficulty adjusting to this. And that's certainly understandable, it's no criticism. And they would leave because their wife was unhappy and you can't go through a 30-plus year experience like that if your spouse is not committed to it.

KRISTOL: And what were the key points in your career where you really felt – I guess, which promotions are key, or what level did you learn the most at or really feel that you were becoming –

KEANE: Well, I was blessed. I got selected to most of these ranks earlier than my peers. So obviously I was receiving feedback that I was doing okay.

I think the assignment, other than combat and you know as a young officer, that was most pivotal for me was the battalion command because that was the first time – that's about 800 soldiers, five companies inside of it – but it's the first time you actually have a staff. So you're a lieutenant colonel, you're about 38 years old. And so you have more resources to be able to do things, and you can take this organization and really help to shape it.

And the way I ran an organization is I mean you have a lot of authority, obviously, but you don't run an organization based on your authority; you actually run it on motivating and inspiring the people that are in it and getting them to participate willingly and trying to increase their own personal growth as a result of being a part of your organization. So I delegated a lot, I shaped a lot, I taught. I was a teacher as well as a leader. And I think the organization was known as being highly trained, highly disciplined. We had a very high level of contentment in it.

So when I saw that and I could see that in relationship to others – I think we had 42 battalions on this military base at Fort Lewis, and I could see how it, this organization, compared to others. I knew then that I grew a lot from that assignment and in terms of confidence of how to run an organization. And then your responsibilities increased. That moved from an 800-man organization to a brigade of about 4,000. And then as a one-star, I ran an organization, a training center of about 10,000, and then I became a division commander of the 101st, that was the unit I was in combat with, so it was a real honor to go back there and command it. And that was close to 25,000.

And then I became a corps commander of the 18th Airborne Corps, and that was all the paratroopers, so I was – it was a huge déjà vu experience. I commanded the 18th Airborne Corps and Fort Bragg. That was the first assignment that we reported into out of Fordham University as a second lieutenant. And to go back there as a three-star general and be in charge of all of that was really quite an honor.

And there was 96,000 troops in that organization and that was our largest war fighting organization and they were always on alert and they received a lot of resources to be able to do the nation's work. So, but that battalion command experience was the one I realized that I could use personal leadership but also some strategic leadership and begin to move organizations in the right direction, even though they became more complex as the years went by.

KRISTOL: Any superiors or mentors who were especially important for you as you moved up and you admired or imitated the most or taught you the most?

KEANE: Yeah, I mean, there were World War II guys that I didn't know. George Marshall, I read a lot about him and really admired his tenacity, the mental toughness that he had. He was just unrelenting in terms of trying to achieve a stated goal.

Certainly, everybody respected George Patton as a fighting general and what he was able to achieve. I like Douglas MacArthur also. I remember I lived in a city housing project in lower Manhattan and it was in the 50s, and all I knew is my mother took us out to the East River Drive and we stood up by the East River Drive and there was other people standing there. And it was Douglas MacArthur was coming back to the United States after having been removed from his assignment in Korea. And all I remember was her saying, "A very important man."

KRISTOL: That's interesting.

KEANE: Later on, you know, I caught up to the details of that story and really appreciated what had happened. And he had a ticker tape parade, if you remember, in New York and the rest of it.

KRISTOL: Spoke to Congress famously.

KEANE: He had quite remarkable. But anyway –

KRISTOL: But when you were on active duty, were there people, particular bosses that you or superiors that you really thought were – helped shape you and were models for you?

KEANE: Yeah, I had the – I had a general by the name of Bob RisCassi. Our audience probably won't recognize the name but he retired as a four-star general, was just a great guy.

I had another one by the name of Bill Carpenter, he was all All-American football player at West Point, he was called the "Lonesome End" because he never went into the huddle, he stood outside and they used foot signals to signal to him. But he was an All-American end and just a great, dynamic personal leader and a man of great integrity. And he would always speak his mind, and I loved the way he would never back off an issue if he believed in it.

So, yeah, you have people like that that certainly have some impact on you, as you would expect given the kind of life that we're leading in the Army and the amount of time we spend at what we do. You know we go off – in a peacetime Army, you're constantly training and you do this for weeks and weeks at a time and you're having a 24/7 experience with not only peers and subordinates but also with superiors.

So the amount of time you spend together is exponentially greater than what it would be for a normal work environment that's outside the military. You get to really know people and you see them under pressure quite a bit and you know who's real and who's not real, and you know who's going to really stand up for their people and fight for them and do the right thing. And you get to understand pretty quick who the guys are that are in there for themselves where they come first above all else, they're chasing a promotion and that's what's most important to them and their reputation and the rest of it as opposed to just doing the best thing for their organization.

I always felt if you ran the organization right, you just focus on it, don't focus on your boss, focus on the organization, the organization will take care of you. That's the byproduct.

KRISTOL: That's the way it should work, yeah. Yeah, it does work that way sometimes, which is good.

It sounds like you had the bulk of your career was not – was out in the field in command of different levels of units. Had you been in Washington much before you came back?

KEANE: No. I only had a very brief assignment in Washington for a couple years and as a major and they brought me back as a four-star, which is sort of –

KRISTOL: That's amazing. So you had no Pentagon assignment between –

KEANE: From the time I left Washington to the time I came back, I was in operational units for 20 years except for – except for going to military schools. And so there was no one else, actually, who could make that claim. I was pretty proud of it.

And I didn't say it much to anybody because I didn't want somebody sitting in Washington to sort of get frustrated with me and then give me some staff assignment some place. "We're going to take care of Keane right now, his big mouth," you know so proud of the fact that he's been in all these operational units.

But they did get me. I mean, I really was going to compete to go to Central Command as a four-star, and I was a three at the time. I'm not suggesting I was going to get it but I was going to be on this short list. And that's what I wanted to do. And this is, of course, before 9/11 and they said, "No, no, Keane is coming to Washington." So they put me in there as the Vice Chief of Staff, and then I thought I'd be able to get out –

KRISTOL: So that was what around '99 –

KEANE: '99, yeah. So General Shinseki had a lot of Washington experience and he would have made him the Chief of Staff, and they thought it would be a nice combination to have a guy like him, he's the Chief, and then a guy like me who had all this field experience would be good for the Army at large and for the both of us. I could learn the ways of Washington a little bit from him, and I knew a lot about that field Army out there.

KRISTOL: And how much of a shock was it to come to the Pentagon, after not being there for what 20 years, I guess, right, and at such a high level?

It's such a black box to those of us – I was in government for seven years and then the White House before but I've got to say the Pentagon was, you know, if you haven't served and if you haven't served in the military or been a civilian over there, it's an awfully confusing place.

KEANE: Well, there's 25,000 people that go to work there every day and until they built the Sears Tower in Chicago, it was the largest office building in America in terms of the number of people and the amount of square feet that was in it.

Obviously, it's a horizontal building versus a vertical building built very quickly during World War II. But the fact of the matter is, yeah, there's a complexity there. It's a strange place because I've never had quite an experience like it. I was the kind of officer that would never go to my higher headquarters unless called. There would be no reason to go to a higher headquarters unless somebody up there wanted you to be there. There's no reason to go up there nosing around trying to impress somebody; you've got too much other stuff to do.

So here you sit in the Pentagon and your higher headquarters is in the building with you. You know, so you have the Secretary of Defense, he works right down the hallway from you. Not only that, between your headquarters and his, there's about 40 to 50 media people who work there every single day and they're always trying to figure out what's going on. And that was all new experience.

So you're dealing with the media, you're dealing with Congress on a regular basis. And, quite frankly, your ability to succeed in dealing with the Congress and also dealing with the media is a skill set that you have to develop and some don't and I think as a result of it, they cause problems.

But I can remember the two three-stars who obviously were working for me. They said, "Sir, we know you haven't been in this –" you know, the Pentagon is called The Building, a term of endearment, I think. They said, "You haven't been in The Building in years, so we're going to remind you how this place works."

So they took me down to a conference table in one of the three-star's offices and so these two three-stars laid on the conference room table the planning, programming, budgeting system, PBBS system, that McNamara put in many, many years prior during the 1960s, a systematic way to do advanced planning, to program your resources and to budget your resources, that in sum is what it's intended to do but it's very complicated.

So they would take me around the table. We would walk all around the table. And they would take the planning process and then the programming. So once around the table was the planning process. But it'd take you 20 minutes to get around the table. So after the first 20 minutes, and they started on the programming process, I said, "Guys, stop. Stop. There is nothing, nothing on this earth that is as complicated as you're making it out to be. I am not going to spend any more time on this. I am just going to go do it."

And I said, "Guys, at the end of the day, it's not the system that's crucial; it's who's in that system, the people that are in there. I'm going to spend time on the people and my personal staff will get me to what meetings I've got to go to. I don't need to understand all the details of all of that."

And that really turned out to be pretty true. It was about relationships and understanding what your boss and the Secretary of Defense are trying to accomplish. He's part of an administration, they have a certain bias of various things and you have to realize they have an agenda certainly, and how can you help them with that agenda and what they can do to help you with yours?

KRISTOL: So you came – I think people are interested, I'm interested in this. I mean, you're a senior officer, a four-star, you came at the end of a Democratic administration, the Clinton Administration, I guess Bill Cohen was Secretary of Defense, I suppose?

And then, of course, you were there in the same job for George W. Bush and Don Rumsfeld. How does the system kind of chug ahead slightly regardless of all this, or is it a big shock to the system or how do people adapt and –

KEANE: Yeah, it's quite a shock actually. The – I had never seen it before and some people who serve there don't get to see a government actually transition and particularly transition from one party to another.

And the – I was at the end of the Clinton Administration, I saw two years, so they, many of them had been at these jobs for a long time and they were very experienced. So in terms of making the system work, they clearly were good at it. And then we have an incredible process for getting people into government.

So Secretary Rumsfeld shows up literally the day after the inauguration and he meets the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs on the steps, General Hugh Shelton. But his other appointees don't show up for months because they can't get – they have to be vetted by the White House, approved by the Congress, they have to get a security clearance or there's no sense of even walking into the building because you can't go to a single meeting without a top-secret clearance.

So Secretary Rumsfeld is there with no staff except some holdovers from the previous administration, who we kept in place just to kind of keep things working. It was awful to see that system take place. It really ill serves the country that we don't have a better process than that. You can transition something like the Pentagon, and not have his entire staff together.

He still – just think about it, I mean, we're talking January 2001, we're arguing over what the resources should be in Quadrennial Defense Review in that summer, and he still doesn't have his entire staff together. And then two months later, we have 9/11. And it took him that entire year to get all the people that he actually needed. Just a terrible, awful system.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that really needs to be fixed, it should be fixed. I don't know why it's – I mean, well, the whole security clearance thing has gotten so out of hand also, I think. And then the congressional confirmation, obviously.

KEANE: I've been getting security clearances for 40 years. I still get them. And they go around asking the same stupid questions they've been asking for 40 years. Asking my neighbors, "Does he beat his wife?" and all this sort of nonsense.

IV: 9/11 at the Pentagon (55:27 – 1:09:13)

KRISTOL: What, 9/11, where were you? You must remember that vividly.

KEANE: I was in the Pentagon. It was a horrific experience. My Sergeant, Penny, ran into me. We all have cavernous offices, you know. She ran into my office and across the hall, across the length of the office and I had a television that was behind some closed doors and she opened it. She said, "Sir, something terrible is going on in New York."

And I looked at it, and the first plane that hit, I being a New Yorker, a clear, blue-sky day, I mean, I sensed it instinctively what had happened, that this was a terrorist act. I called down to my operations officer and told him to bring the Army Operations Center up to full manning. His name was General Peter Chiarelli; he eventually goes on to be a four-star general sitting in the very desk that I'm at.

And then he gets into the Operations Center, and we're having another conversation, and the plane hits the Pentagon. The second plane had already, obviously, had hit in New York, and I asked him, "Did you hear that?" And he said no. He's five stories down. The Pentagon is actually a 10-story building, five up and five down.

And so my office shook and some stuff fell down and I told Pete, I said, "Pete, that plane just hit us." And I went out to my people and I told them, "Look, call your homes right now and make sure everybody knows you're all right. And then I want you to all to leave the building immediately."

The – during the conversation that we were having before the plane hit the building, it was a pretty unusual conversation because Pete was telling me – he's monitoring screens down there, big, wide screens – and he says, and he was monitoring the FAA net and he said, "Listen, I've got, there's an airplane that has come up from I95 south towards Washington, DC, and it turned east and went back down and they're tracking it." He said, "I think this airplane was out in Ohio someplace and it turned around. It's probably where they took charge of it and they haven't been able to get ahold of it."

And so we're having this conversation, obviously, concluding it's heading for a building someplace in Washington, DC, and we're having this conversation and I'm saying, "Well, what's the plan to evacuate buildings in Washington?" He said, "I've already asked that question." I said, "Well, what's the plan to evacuate this building? Why isn't it being evacuated?" And as we're having that conversation is when the plane hit the building, right during that conversation, the plane hit the building. It was quite amazing.

So the – I got, you know we all work out in the Pentagon, so I had some – I have a bathroom in my office, so I got some T-shirts and I told the guys, I kept my aide with me and my executive officer who's a colonel, everybody else, I dismissed. I said, "Let's get these shirts, T-shirts and let's get some water on it, let's go on down there and see if we can help some of these people." So we did that for a while and then one of my colonels said, you know and appropriately so, he said, "General, look, you've got to take charge of the Army, so let's get to the Operations Center. We'll leave the recovery to other people."

And he was right, it was the right thing to do. But it was hell what we were dealing with there and the amount of human suffering that was taking place. It was quite extraordinary. Something people don't know about that Pentagon is that we were renovating the Pentagon and when they built in the 40s, there was a steel shortage so there were no rebars in the pillars that held up the building, it was just cement without that steel inside of it. So when they rebuilt the – when they were renovating it, they had only done one wedge and that wedge had the rebars in it, the rest did not.

Now, he hit that wedge, that terrorist airplane hit that wedge and what that did, the next morning I went down to see it, the chief engineer was down there, the fire marshal, etc.

KRISTOL: How far was that from your – your office was –

KEANE: Mine, it was about a football field around. And so I went down to see it and what had happened is the Pentagon had collapsed, the upper floors had collapsed down and you had this huge gape in it. The plane had come in on the ground level.

The Pentagon is a series of wedges. So you have the outer wedge has windows on the outside and then inside of that it has windows with an alleyway, then there's another wedge with windows outside, windows inside. And we call them the E Ring, the D Ring, the C Ring. So the plane had gone through the E Ring, the D Ring, and he showed me it went all the way to the inside of the C Ring and just punched a hole in the wall.

And we were looking at something that I can only describe to you as like a parking garage that was completely seared black with debris all over the place. And I said, "Where is the airplane?" And he said, "Sir, it was consumed by a 1,000, 2,000 degree heat." I said, "Where are all the desks and the computers?" He said, "Sir, all consumed." And I said the obvious, "The people?" He said, "Sir, we're walking around, we're walking over all of them."

And so he took me to the inner wall and he showed me where the nose had hit and he said, "This is the only thing I have left of the airplane inside the building." And it was the strut that held up the fuselage. So it was a piece of iron, of course, it had no rubber associated with it, that had all been consumed.

And he said, "Sir," he said, "you've got to understand something." He said, "This structure held here for 40 minutes before it collapsed and as a result of that, the people on the upper floors, I am convinced most of them got out of that building." And that's some of the people we were helping. And he said, "The people where the plane hit, most of those people died immediately because of the concussion."

What happened to the occupants is they had the initial shock of the blast, so you had a blast like an explosion followed by a fireball and then black acrid smoke. And that's what was coming down the hallway to us. Smoke did fill our offices before we left and then as we would move down to help the people, that black acrid smoke was getting worse and worse. But that building held.

Now, just think. He said we had, we only had put 2,000 out of the 5,000 people in there because we didn't have all the furniture for that new renovated wedge. So I said, "Well, what if he had attacked someplace else, what would have been –" He said, "If he attacked one of the other wedges, we would have had about 5,000 people in there, the upper floors would have collapsed immediately." He said the casualties would have been on a par and comparable to what took place in New York City.

Of course, we didn't know the scale of New York City at the time until later where 3,000 people had been killed. So as sad as all that was, I lost 85 people that day, and I think attended somewhere around 40 funerals, which was just absolutely remarkable.

But the stories of heroism. I left my guys that night at around 11 o'clock and I had gathered them together in the Operations Center and I said, "Let's just put together a work plan for going to war and what kind of schedule. I want to take one step towards this enemy tonight, given what they did to us." I said, "This is – we're going to go to war. We're going to go after the al Qaeda, they're going to be in Afghanistan. Let's just make that assumption and how we're going to support Central Command from an Army perspective. Let's just take a step towards that direction tonight."

The – I went out to see the wounded in the hospital and they were spread around Washington, DC. And I ran into these three women who were laying in a hospital bed, and I said hello to them and I was about to leave and one of them said, "You can't leave until you hear our story." So she told a story about this lieutenant colonel who was a woman of about 5 foot 3, 5 foot 4, slight frame, and she was with her.

And what had happened, they'd had the blast, they had the fireball. The fireball came into their offices. She wound up on the floor, she was on fire. And the other, the lieutenant colonel was not and she put the fire out on her and that woman is heavy. And she – you couldn't see because of the smoke, it would kill you to stand up but she tried to move her anyway. And she couldn't move her, so she actually put her on her back and crawled with her down the hallway.

Now, down the hallway is black, and there's all sorts of debris in the hallway. And she goes somewhere in the neighborhood of about 75 yards till she's clear where she can breathe. She takes her computer and smashes the window and pushed this heavyset woman – this is on the second, second floor – pushes her out on the ledge and then shoves her out. And she breaks her leg.

But she heard another woman when she was moving in that direction who was whimpering in her office. So, now this is, she probably wouldn't have been decorated, in and of itself, for the first event, but she was decorated, for sure, for the second one because she was breathing fresh air, she knew she was going to live. Now, she decided to go back and get the other woman. Then her life was absolutely in danger at that point – I'm not living. So she went back and got that other woman, pushed her out too. She did break her leg. And then she jumped out, and she didn't break anything.

And so I saw three, those three women in there that night. I had a ceremony about three weeks later because I had recognized, just as in New York and it was so wonderfully captured with the first responders and how brave they were, we had similar acts of bravery that day. And so I told the military historian to bring some people over here and document, one, this history of what took place. I said, "This is the first battle of a war, it happened to be in our headquarters and so let's capture this." And then also when you come into acts of bravery, let's get it documented properly, and we'll recognize those who should be recognized. And no general officers will be decorated. I said that's – just leave it at that, their rank is enough, they don't need that kind of personal recognition.

So I had a ceremony. It was the strangest thing I've experienced, and I'll never forget it. I had somewhere of 50 to 60 people being recognized and when I went out there to look at it, I mean, obviously, I had seen the list of people ahead of time but when I saw the visual that was in front of me, it was an absolute representation of what worked in the building. So here in front of me, I've got old people and young people, I've got civilians and military, I have active duty military, National Guard and Reserve, I've got people in great physical condition and I've got people who are overweight.

I had everything that was – that worked in the building was represented out there in terms of bravery and it reminded me that courage – personal courage, willingness to give up your life for somebody else is what we're talking about here – it doesn't have a sex, it doesn't have a race, it doesn't have an age

group, it's just, it's something that's in your heart. And that's what I was doing that day. And it was an overwhelming experience for me.

I have decorated soldiers for heroism before, and it was always such an honor to do it. And I never felt more honored than to be at that ceremony and decorate those people for what they had done for each other that day. It was a – it was a day that obviously nobody in America will forget and certainly we who lived it so vividly could never forget it either.

V: A Continuing Threat (1:09:13 – 1:30:37)

KRISTOL: So it's 13 years after 9/11. We just actually had the anniversary and the ceremonies. How are we doing as a country do you think in dealing with its implications and dealing with the world, the post-9/11 world?

KEANE: Well, frankly, the world is as dangerous as it's ever been and maybe possibly more. We've had great success against the "9/11 al Qaeda," so to speak. I think not only have we killed their leaders, we took away what they were trying to accomplish and that is establish a caliphate.

You know, it was debated at the top leadership rung of the al Qaeda about attacking the American people. Bin Laden had strong feelings about wanting to do it. He thought it would break us psychologically and emotionally. There was such a feeble response from the United States in 1998 to the blowing up of the two embassies in Africa. I think that was three years prior to 9/11, and I think it convinced him that he could have their way with us because we did not even – we weren't even willing to shed our blood to do something about the killing of 400 people who worked in those two embassies.

KRISTOL: The USS Cole had been attacked in October of 2000, and we still hadn't responded by September of 2001.

KEANE: But you know because we captured some of his leaders, not the least of which is KSM or Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. We got a lot of information from them.

There was a debate going on and some of them thought it was a huge mistake to attack the American people because if you did, if you did that, they would come for us. And bin Laden didn't think so, but others who knew America better knew that we would come for them. And as a result of that, they lost control to a certain degree over their movement. They lost their operational reach to be sure, and they were largely bent on defense for 13 years.

Now, we do know that bin Laden continued to provide instructions to his organization as they decentralized and moved throughout the world but their – the al Qaeda 9/11, I think, is a mere shadow of its former self. But nonetheless what has happened to us is a radical Islamic movement has grown in size and scale and it's quadrupled over what it used to be, and at the same time, the United States policy is to disengage from the Middle East. It's an unstated policy but our actions are clearly doing that and it's giving a rise to radical Islamist groups with not much countermoves against them.

And it is really sad to see what's happening. And I don't think ISIS, which is our number-one radical Islamist threat that we're dealing with today, would be anywhere near the shape or form that they're in today without U.S. policy decisions that helped to contribute to it. You know, when you think about radical Islam, it is an ideology, it's similar to Communism in that sense, and we just have not fashioned a strategy to deal globally with radical Islam.

As a matter of fact, this Administration has been minimizing it and is trying to separate it from its religion. In fact, the President made a speech last week where he said it's not Islamic. When anybody who has studied the radical Islamic movement knows that part of its core belief is Islam. And now they have their own interpretation of it, which is contrary to most modern Islamic interpretation of it, to be sure, but

nonetheless this is their ideology, this is part of their belief system, it's part of their recruiting tool. They are operating and recruiting inside the religion, which is the drawing card to get them to lead a purposeful and meaningful life and be able to sacrifice for the sake of that.

So the fact of the matter is we have not come to grips with this ideology. You know we beat fascism, another ideology, with brute force. And I think we beat Communism through strength but also with better ideas – democracy and capitalism—helped contribute to the collapse of that ideology. What's going to take this to beat it is a combination of both brute force, you have to hold this horrific behavior liable, which means you have to kill them.

But also that will not in and of itself defeat the movement. That is going to take change in the region where there's so much political and social injustice and economic repression which gives rise to it. And I think once we recognize that this is a long-term strategy that we need to work with, it's probably going to take up frankly the first 50 years of this century dealing with this.

So al Qaeda actually began significantly in the early 90s. And if we say that we finally had marginalized them, we've had a 20-year experience with them – ISIS actually got started in 2004, that was al Qaeda in Iraq, so we've had a 10-year experience with them already and it's going to – we're going to spend a few more years dealing with them.

If we don't fashion a global strategy to deal with this, then there will be another one after ISIS that we'll have to cope with and we'll keep going from one of these to another. And I'm frustrated by the fact that the Bush Administration as well as the Obama Administration never fashioned a comprehensive strategy to deal with radical Islam. And that I think is the number one threat.

The second major issue out there is nuclear proliferation and, certainly, having radicals get their hands on those weapons but certainly a rogue state like North Korea who has those weapons and another rogue state like Iran who's desiring to get those weapons. These are game-changers in the world. And we should not permit anything like that to happen.

The Iranians have been killing us since 1980 using their proxies. It's a brilliant strategy. They want regional hegemony, for sure. Nuclear weapons preserves the regime as a guarantor but also they will use that weapon for political gain, to be sure. The rhetoric coming out of them for years has been that they have intention to do two things in the region – drive the United States out of the region and they use proxies to do that by killing us, and to destroy the State of Israel. If you're sitting in Israel and you're looking at Iran with nuclear weapons, it is absolutely an existential threat to their very survival. So these are transformational events as far as I'm concerned.

And then the third thing, I think, that has taken place is the weakness of American leadership. And as a result of that, we have adversaries who are taking advantage of it. So you have China whose growing military is influencing the Politburo in ways that it hasn't in the past because they have greater capability and therefore they're exercising a little bit more muscle inside that political organization. And you see them challenging American influence in the Western Pacific, the East China Sea to South China Sea. This kind of adventurism is going to continue and they're convinced that the United States is in a weakened state and how could, how could you argue with them?

I mean, the fact of the matter is we're decimating the Defense Department budget. They read that budget closer than anybody in America reads that budget. They know the Army is going back to 1940's size, they know the Navy is going back to 1950's size. They know the Army right now today has four combat brigades. I mean, that's absolutely outrageous that as we sit here having this conversation that there's only four combat brigades in a superpower and the number one, supposedly, army in the world.

What Putin is doing in designing his new Russia could not be done in my judgment without the feckless leadership that has existed for generations in Europe, and now, what has never been the case is equally

weak leadership that the United States is exercising, and he sees it as what, he sees it as opportunity, and he's taking advantage of it. And he's going to continue to take advantage of it.

I think on the table for Putin and the thugs that are around him – and he is the number one thug – is the collapse of NATO. I think when he thinks about it, he has unbelievable distaste for the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, NATO's equivalent and the collapse of the Soviet Union as well back in the early 90s.

If he can challenge NATO by working up a phony civil unrest in one of the Baltic countries and force NATO not to respond to Article 5 as a result of him taking territory from a NATO country, that in and of itself would make NATO a useless military alliance and force its collapse and it would be a tremendous victory for Putin, and in a sense, it's déjà vu for him in terms of what happened to the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

And I come back to my essential point. He could only be doing this because he believes that the United States and Europe are not going to respond to him in a coherent fashion and he's going to be able to have his way. And the strategy that he's using is brilliant.

KRISTOL: How much of the problem do you think is particular leaders and how much is also – though I think that we haven't really, it doesn't seem like the government as a whole has quite come to grips with the task?

It had after World War II at the beginning of the Cold War; there was this huge reorganization obviously of the government, the National Security Council, there was not just the government but our other elite institutions, higher education, all kinds of efforts to make sure we were ready to fight this long struggle peacefully as well as obviously militarily.

And I do have this – post-9/11, there was talk about this in the first years after 9/11 and some actually impressive things happened, obviously the surge in Iraq was one. But it does seem to me that everyone is back to a kind of business as usual posture. Is that?

KEANE: I think in dealing with the ideological threat of radical Islam, and I've felt for some time that you need to bring together a political and military alliance similar to what we had with NATO where countries are willing to commit politically against this movement and you're willing to share intelligence and training and equipment, technology. And certainly the United States would be helping to grow capacity inside these countries because after 13 years of war, we do have the skill sets to deal with this enemy and we can pass those skills and that technology on to others to be able to deal with it.

But we're not doing any of that. We do it a little here and a little there. We're in Yemen with a very small capability. We're in Somalia with a very small capability. And obviously, now we're going to deal with the situation in Iraq and Syria much more seriously, mainly because of failed policy decisions. But we've got to come to grips, I think, with the entire issue in terms of a political and military alliance.

And then the other thing is we get no help from academia on this problem like we did against Communism and that ideology. We had entire departments devoted to it. RAND, one of our great think tanks, grew up around this issue, as did others. And some of our most renowned statesmen and office-holders spent their academic life in the pursuit of it. Dr. Henry Kissinger, Condi Rice who served in the Bush Administration, Secretary of Defense Gates. Intelligence officers, all with a Soviet background.

But the fact of the matter is not only is there no academic pursuit of radical Islam on our college campuses or in think tanks in a coherent way, it's actually denigrated. If you're going to teach a course on that, you'd have a tough time getting into the syllabus or into the curriculum because there's no appreciation, there's no value added for doing something like that.

So, yes, we've had two Presidents dealing with this and while President Bush made the right decision post-9/11 to no longer contain this threat, you had to confront it and that was a policy change and I certainly agree with that policy change, we still haven't put together a comprehensive strategy to deal with it and to educate the American people.

KRISTOL: How about the military itself? I mean, do you feel that, obviously, it pivoted and did a good job – an excellent job in Iraq, I would say, after given a new assignment, a new doctrine really of counterinsurgency?

It's kind of amazing it seems to me as an outsider how quickly colonels, captains, lieutenants, enlisted guys were willing or able to do that. I mean, they in a way, how did that, it's amazing that that was able to happen. They hadn't really been trained as you said earlier to do that. So that shows a kind of real flexibility and ability to adjust on the part of the military.

But I don't know, would you be a big reformer if you came in now, if the next President calls you up and says, "Should we have a big – do we just need to plus up the numbers," basically the size of the military or would you also want to change certain standard operating procedures?

KEANE: Yeah. It wouldn't be transformational. I mean, the fact of the matter is we have to keep our counterinsurgency skill sets and the fact of the matter is, I think, the military is moving away a little bit from it.

But a lot of the conventional military skill sets we had – this for our audience, what I'm talking about is the Army fights another army, it would normally fight another army conventionally in large groups – so this is battalion, brigades, divisions, combined arms, artillery, mortars, tanks, etc. That skill set has atrophied for many years because of the counterinsurgency campaign.

So we actually – most of what the U.S. military does as the world's number one superpower and having a very strong military is it deters others from using theirs. And this is lost on a lot of people the value that this really has. So everybody has an army. Not everybody has a navy, and certainly, not everybody has a sophisticated air force. But they all have armies. And they have a tendency to use them at times and abuse other people with that army.

So if you have a strong standing Army and Marine Corps supported by air power and they see it and understand it and know it's strong, it is deterrent value added. And so we have to have that. We have to let people see, that and we have to make sure they understand that we're highly skilled at it. And the programmatic for capitalizing that has to be there.

We are cutting back on the United States military at a time when we should be making capital investments after 13 years of war, in air power, and in the navy ships because we have not been able to make those kind of investments. So we come out of 13 years of war actually in dire need of capitalization but we're not doing that. We're actually going in the opposite direction. And the Army and the Marine Corps needs some of that well but not as much as the Air Force and the Navy does. So we're cutting back on size of services, and we're also cutting back on the money to capitalize the accounts and that is really unfortunate.

I do think that what is taking place with ISIS and the commitment we're going to have to make to it and the other challenges I think that will be out there that we're going to come to our senses – we have to. And I would like to think that we'll stop sequestration from happening, which would further decimate the accounts and then begin to invest in the Department of Defense again the way it properly should because if we just stop right now, we're in bad shape. If we have sequestration, we're going to be in dire shape.

KRISTOL: Yeah but the good news maybe though is that it could – I don't know, I'm as worried as you but it does seem like it could turn around maybe faster than people think.

I always think of the surge as an example of that. We were in very bad shape, we were worried – you were worried, I think, that it was too late or that the surge might not work and that maybe it was a little under-resourced. But nonetheless if you can get going the right direction, it can go – things can go faster in the wrong direction than you expect but they probably can go faster in the right direction than we expect, too.

KEANE: We can go pretty fast but the problem we have is we can go pretty fast with equipment and things like that to upgrade ourselves. Now, obviously, sophisticated new equipment is a 10-plus year experience.

But the problem we actually have is with people. So when I was talking previously about a 38-year-old battalion commander, well, that's somewhere in the neighborhood of about 15, 16 years in the making to get to that point. So when we cut back and we let those kind of people go, there's no place for us to go out as there is in the private sector in the corporate world to hire middle level executives. We can't get them. We have to grow them all.

So the sergeants who lead our soldiers into the battle and have the physical and extraordinary daring skills to be able to do that, you know they're 12, 13, 15 years of service and we cut them out. We have to grow that again.

So we become a less experienced force. It's not something that the American people will recognize but it would impact our performance. That's the thing that I'm concerned about. Our performance may not be what it should be. So that's where the risk is when you cut people back like that. We can compensate for some loss in military capability in terms of technology but it's very difficult to compensate for a lack of quality people.

KRISTOL: And with the quality, the experience was earned at such a high price, you just hate to see the country kind of throw that away in a way where a lot of people want to stay in, I think, and now are being urged out or at least being given the signal that there's not much of an upward trajectory left in the service. And so that is going to be hard to fix.

But I guess we've faced that problem – this is the way the U.S. seems to work, right, we always kind of overdo it and then we have to recover a little more than we should but we do seem to recover, so.

KEANE: After every war, we have cut further than we should have. And this is no exception.

KRISTOL: The trouble is we're still in the middle of the war this time.

KEANE: The problem is this is the first time we've ever started the cuts while we're still fighting a war and we're about to start another one. We're sort of adjusting to the terminology.

By the time this is seen, I think everybody will recognize that we really are at war with ISIS, there's no doubt about it. And we're still finishing up our involvement in Afghanistan. And I hope that this struggle with ISIS will convince this Administration that we must leave a residual force in Afghanistan and must not make that mistake again and pull out of there and take away all the intelligence and the ability for a counterterrorism force to pounce on the Taliban if they raise their head or also to continue the growth and development of the Afghan security forces.

If we make that mistake and execute the President's decision, we're asking for a repeat of what has happened in Iraq. That would be tragic because it is avoidable.

KRISTOL: Well, let's hope and pray that we avoid it, and you'll be working to avoid it. And I'm sure successfully. Thank you, Jack, for joining me today. Thank you, really, for your extraordinary service to the country over all these years. And thank you for joining us at CONVERSATIONS.

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