

# CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

## Conversations with Bill Kristol

**Guest:** Bill Bennett, former U.S. Secretary of Education

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### **I: Reflections on Public Life (00:15 – 42:57)**

KRISTOL: Welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol, and I'm very pleased to be joined today by my friend, Bill Bennett, my boss, the man I came to Washington to work for. And here we are 30 years later, and we're both still in Washington and still fighting the good fight, I guess.

BENNETT: Still talking anyway.

KRISTOL: Exactly.

BENNETT: Talking, writing, you bet.

KRISTOL: You've had so many interesting jobs, obviously. Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, then Education Secretary, Drug Czar. Very important books, *The Book of Virtues*, an incredible hit. The talk radio show. Which of all these things, when you look back now, have you enjoyed the most, which surprised you the most? I'm just curious.

BENNETT: Surprised by a lot of it. But, you know, I was told early on growing up that this really is the land of opportunity and if you work hard and study hard and keep your nose clean – is that Bill Clinton's line – but you could be a success. And I'm proud of what I have done, I guess, with the help of a lot of people and the opportunity the country has offered. To say which is the best, I suppose – I suppose *The Book of Virtues* will probably be the thing that may last the longest because the book continues to sell.

KRISTOL: Tell people how that happened because that was – I mean that was a surprise to all of us, right, I mean. You had left government, right?

BENNETT: Right, I had left – I had left government, I had left the Department of Education job. And I had visited the schools, you remember when I became Secretary of Education, my wife, Elaine, said, "Why don't you go visit schools and then make your pronouncements?" I said, "Because I'm the Secretary of Education, I don't do retail, I do wholesale." She said, "Go visit schools."

So you remember I did about 120 school visits. And when I was in the schools, I'd talk to people and they'd say, "Well, you were interested in ethics, you're a philosophy guy, how do we teach these kids moral values? They're so different, they come from diverse backgrounds, so many ethnicities and so on." And I remember I said the first time I heard it, I said, "Well, do you have kids who like to have their lunch money stolen, do you have girls who like to be grabbed, you know, against their will, do you have boys who like to be bullied and beat up?" I said, you know, "I don't care about their color or their nation or origin or their religion. There are certain common values that are virtues, we used to call them." And they

said “Well, what are they, where are they?” I said, “Well, it’s all over our literature, it’s all over our history, our tradition.” They said, “Well, it’d be useful.” I remember a couple teachers said it’d be very useful if you could put something together for us. So it was originally written for teachers. And so it became *The Book of Virtues*.

KRISTOL: So you left education in ’88.

BENNETT: I left education in ’88.

KRISTOL: When the Reagan Administration ended. Then, you came right back in to be Drug Czar. So the book came out after that –

BENNETT: After Drug Czar, but I was working on it after Education, started to work on it gathering material, and of course, didn’t have the Internet in those days. Had a colleague named John Cribb, and he would go to the Library of Congress, and we’d Xerox – it used to be a verb, right. We used my young staff here at the radio station, they’re 25 years old. I talk about mimeograph machines and Xerox and they look it up.

KRISTOL: Faxing.

BENNETT: You’re faxing it. I remember the first time I faxed, I said, “Now, keep an original.” You know it was a generational problem. But anyway we’d copy all these stories from all over the world, and history about the virtues – honesty, courage, compassion, integrity, so on. And we’d get these stacks and we’d just review them.

And so I started to that work and read and cull and then I became the Drug Czar, director of drug policy, so didn’t finish the work till the early 90s. It came out the end of ’93. But the interesting thing about the book was that we had trouble finding an interested publisher. I finally persuaded my publisher, Simon & Schuster, to do it but I got no advance, not a penny. And a lot of people said, “Who would read this book, who would want to read this book?” Turned out to be a big best seller.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I remember it coming out, and you sent me an inscribed copy, and I remember thinking, “This is great.” But I can’t remember—I mean, when did you know it was going to be big? So it comes out, this is what 600 pages with introductions by you of stories, history?

BENNETT: It’s actually 666, we had to change that because it’s the devil’s number.

KRISTOL: Yeah, good point.

BENNETT: Anyway, it was this huge book.

KRISTOL: And it comes out. And when did you sort of know you had hit a chord, when did you know it was taking off? I’m just curious how that works when a book comes out. I mean so –

BENNETT: It zoomed. I was in Asia at the time traveling with Ed Feulner, the Heritage Foundation, I was a fellow at Heritage then, and my research associate was looking at *The New York Times* list, that’s how you did it then. You had to call *The New York Times*.

KRISTOL: Pre-Amazon, I think.

BENNETT: Right, pre – all that. And said, “No, it’s not on the list – oops, it’s number two.” And then it stayed there for 88 weeks, for a very long time. It was a word of mouth. There was no advertising for the book. It was word of mouth, it just got around and it was successful. I didn’t have a good book tour. I remember Charlie Gibson on the ABC morning show said, “What’s the point of this? He held it, “What’s the point of this big book?” And I said, “Well, it’s to remind people what the virtues are.” And I think the most important thing about the book is we had – I had written it with the hopes of getting the teachers to

use it and reminding people of these stories. You know, the Midas touch and other stories like that. But it turned out it wasn't a reminder in a lot of cases, people had never heard the stories or a generation had never heard these stories. So it filled in the gap and it still sells some.

KRISTOL: And I have the impression parents really became the market. At least, the people I talked to they were giving it to their kids and giving it to other parents when they had kids or for bar mitzvahs if they were Jewish or confirmations, presents, and what not. More than teachers do you think?

BENNETT: Yes, teachers. It was adopted in a few school districts. A lot of teachers used it. Not a lot of teachers, some teachers. But then the politics of education. Someone said it was the book of conservative virtues. Well, virtues aren't political, they are what they are.

KRISTOL: Right. And the people whose stories who you quoted aren't mostly political – American history and George Washington and Shakespeare and –

BENNETT: And then Martin Luther King and, you know, all sorts of people. Anyway, but it was bound to be a political attack. I mean, I was used to being in government. Working for Ronald Reagan, I remember one story I used to tell was before I joined the Reagan Administration, I had something, like, 32 honorary degrees from colleges and universities. After I joined the Reagan Administration, for the next 20 years, I got two honorary degrees.

So the politics of it, people were just going to view it through a political lens. But it was explicitly not a political book. And someone told me they saw Ted Kennedy on a plane reading the book but he had a magazine over it so people wouldn't see what he was – I don't know if it's true or not. But I think some liberal parents secretly bought it for their kids.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I hope so.

BENNETT: Hope so, yeah, me too.

KRISTOL: And any reaction to parts of the books that struck you or any virtue? Did people, were they particularly grateful to have you rediscover one particular virtue or did any part hit a chord more than another, is that do you have a sense?

BENNETT: I don't think so. I think, you know, I arranged the book so it was easy stories to harder and so people took it at different levels. Some people just read it to their young children, other people read the first parts to their young children and then had the children as they got older read the stories on their own.

But if I go somewhere today – the book came out in late 1993 – if I go somewhere today, people come up with, you know, dog-eared copies of the book and ask me to sign it. That's why I say, I mean, I love my jobs but I suppose in terms of an impact, it may be that. I remember talking to Jesse Helms and he said, "I'm going to step down and you could take your residence in North Carolina, maybe you'd like to run for the Senate." And I thought, you know, I've got these work projects and what matters to me in the future, and I decided my books mattered to me more. It might have been a mistake. But maybe time tells us things turn out well in the end.

KRISTOL: And it's interesting that the book came out of your government, being in government –

BENNETT: Yes, yes, from going to the schools, yes, absolutely. No. Government was good to me. Is that a heresy? But, I mean, it was good to me in that it was an opportunity to do what I do now in a different way on the radio show but to have a conversation with the American people.

KRISTOL: Well, let's talk about government, since I think that was one of your distinctive contributions to American conservatism that, of course, we want to limit government and reduce it and restore it to its rightful place. But you also always had the view that government had a role to play and as Secretary of

Education, even though we wanted to cut the Department of Education, when I came to work for you, you were submitting budgets to cut it by what, 25%, and of course, they never went anywhere.

BENNETT: And getting some resistance from budget people in the Reagan Administration, you remember that, we had to fight back sometimes. But not from the boss himself.

KRISTOL: But you thought there was a role to play obviously in terms of encouraging people and encouraging the reform movement. I mean, talk a little bit. How does a conservative who sort of comes out of a movement that's sort of anti-government work in government? I mean what did you –

BENNETT: If I could, the first job, the Endowment for the Humanities because right there, I got in and I looked at the grants that this organization was giving and they were almost all going to the Left, and I realized taxpayer money was funding propaganda films. There was a film about the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and your mother, Gertrude Himmelfarb, happened to see it and said, "This is socialist realist propaganda." Well, it was a wonderful turn of phrase that Gertrude Himmelfarb had. And so when I was asked what I thought of this film by *The New York Times*, I said, "Social realist propaganda." I think that was my first front-page.

KRISTOL: Yes. I remember reading about that when I was –

BENNETT: Yeah, you were in diapers. College or graduate school. Anyway, I said, "This has to stop, you know, this is taxpayer money, you can't fund this kind of political stuff." And then I put a stop to a series of other things, said we've got to have a fair review process. Now, you may or may not think there should be a National Endowment for the Humanities, but if there is one, it shouldn't be in the propaganda business, it should be in the humanities business and it should play fair.

There was some question about whether I'd be confirmed actually because my nomination was put on hold by the two senators from North Carolina, John East and Jesse Helms, who had heard that I was a liberal. They'd heard that I was a liberal because Pat Buchanan had written a column saying, "This guy went to Williams College and Harvard, you know he's a philosopher, he can't possibly be conservative." But indeed I was.

Anyway, you can – you know somebody said, "Don't just do something, stand there. You can stand there, and say this shouldn't be happening." As a result, it started a conversation about the role of government, taxpayer funding, and so on. That later got to be a very dramatic conversation about the National Endowment for the Arts with some of the things that it was funding. Then I didn't submit my goals and quotas for the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission, and I got a nasty letter from the head of the EEOC. You remember who that was? Yeah, well, he's on the Supreme Court now.

KRISTOL: Oh, Clarence Thomas.

BENNETT: Clarence Thomas.

KRISTOL: This was the first term of the Reagan Administration.

BENNETT: That's right and he said, "You need to submit." And I said I wouldn't. So that was another, another fight we got in. Was I looking for a fight? Maybe but I was more looking for a good fight, and it was a way to take a position consistent with what Ronald Reagan stood for, which is, you know, there's a lot of waste, there's a lot of ideologically packed stuff and we can resist it.

KRISTOL: But it seems to me, in your years in government, you were always very good at picking fights intelligently that had, a) you often could win sometimes. You didn't win all of them but they always made a broader point, so you really tried to not just fight for the sake of fighting or fight on all fronts at once.

But you were good at figuring out sort of what mattered. And some stuff, honestly, you couldn't really fight so if the Senate wanted to appropriate, if Congress wanted to appropriate money for some fairly pointless educational programs, it wasn't worth falling on one's sword for every little program.

BENNETT: But you could broaden the conversation. I mean, that is that old idea of the bully pulpit. And I mean, if I picked good fights, I did in large part because of the quality of the people around me, including yourself. Full disclosure. You were there. When you were Chief of Staff, we had –

KRISTOL: We spent a lot of time thinking about that. I mean, I think people don't understand that part of government. You've just got to show up at work, and I don't like this, so I'm going to object to that. Well, that's actually not the most prudent way to do it.

BENNETT: No. That's right. We'd sit around and say, "How can we do this, how can we advance the issues we were interested in? Remember the three C's – content of the curriculum, choice, character – how can we talk about these, how can we advance this in American education and then tell the truth about what was going on in the schools?" And we did this by way of visiting the schools.

You'll remember one of those visits. I remember going to Chicago and saying, "These are the worst schools in the country," and the guy said, "Why?" and I gave him the numbers and he said, "Oh, I just added them up, we're not the worst, Detroit's the worst." I said, "Oh, good for you."

And so we at least part of the dialogue, sometimes a central part of the dialogue about the things that should matter in education. Ronald Reagan said to me when we talked about the job, he said, "I'd be just as happy to abolish this department but if I can't, maybe you could go there and make some sense of it." And that's what we tried to do, as you remember.

KRISTOL: I think people would be fascinated to hear – I would be, I've sort of forgotten, I wasn't with you yet. So you're chairman of the National Endowment of the Humanities, it's a small – small by huge federal government standards, about \$150 million. So you do a good job, picking some fights, funding a lot of good things, getting a lot of praise for running the place well. Also, I think you were a good manager, there were no scandals or anything like that.

And you used the career bureaucrats well. You didn't sort of pick fights with them unnecessarily, which I think some conservatives do because they come in assuming every single person in the government is a liberal, which isn't quite true. And then so what happens? How does the President – you're at the end of – Reagan gets reelected, you're sitting there, you're still head of NEH. Who calls you and says are you interested in being Secretary of Education, how does that work?

BENNETT: Presidential Personnel called me and said that several people had recommended me because we had a heavy educational emphasis at the National Endowment for the Humanities. I remember took away – they had a fellowship program for journalists in Aspen and other luxurious places. And I said, "This ridiculous, we should make this fellowship program for elementary school teachers, people who really teach, we should work with them on the *Federalist Papers* and on Shakespeare and other things."

Anyway, so we had a strong education bias, if you will, at the National Endowment for the Humanities. So I think I was getting known as something of an education guy. And that was indeed my interest. So then it came down to – I don't know if you remember this – but came down to two finalists. It was myself and John Silber, the President of Boston University, my former teacher and a tough irascible guy. And *The New York Times* ran a story about the two of us being the finalists. And I called him up and I said, "John, you know, no matter how it turns out, it's great, you know, teacher and student." He said, "Get out of my way, I'm getting this job, who do you think you are, kid?" That was very typical Silber kind of endearing and off-putting response. But I was lucky enough to get the job, and that was a great opportunity and a great job.

KRISTOL: And how does that happen? So, at some point, you're called in to meet with the President. I mean, does he sort of interview you, does he ask you what you want to do? Is it more – well, he knew you already, of course you'd worked in the Administration –

BENNETT: He knew me a little bit. Yeah, but he, I remember he called me in, and I went to see him and Jim Baker was there.

KRISTOL: He was Chief of Staff.

BENNETT: To police me, you know. And I took – started talking to the President about Dixon, Illinois. My very best friend comes from Dixon, Illinois. Reagan is from Tampico. We started, and Reagan, the President, started to tell stories. And I remember Jim Baker said, "Mr. President, we have business to do." "Oh, yeah, yeah, now about this job." So that's when he said, "I would just as well abolish it but if I can't, can you make sense of it?" I said, "Well, I'll sure try." So I did the job.

And he was, you know, this wasn't his top priority, obviously, nor should it have been. It was take down the Soviet Union, the evil empire, restore American greatness. But he took enough interest that he would occasionally call me. He'd read something, he'd read or hear a story. This was the way Ronald Reagan took it and put it out, stories, narratives. And he'd say, "I just was reading this, can we do anything about it, can you find out something about this?" And I always did, of course. And then he'd say – "Bill, I was just remembering this great poem called 'Teacher' by Clark Mollenhoff, a journalist at Iowa. Do you know the poem?" I said no. He said, "Well, I'll get—I'll write it out for you and send it." I said, "I'm sure we can get somebody to copy it, you know." And the next day, I get this handwritten thing on yellow paper, the President has written this thing from memory. And so I then would ask him on special occasions to do things like go with me on a school visit, go to an assembly, go to a place where they were doing a good job to pay them a tribute, to pay them an honor.

But early on, the real formative experience for me, the one that ties me to Ronald Reagan forever is I was kind of speaking my mind. You will remember this; you were helping me. It was said once of Bill Bennett, Secretary, and Chief of Staff Bill Kristol, "The problem with that place," said a journalist, "is they have no brakes, it's all accelerator, everybody's just pressing on the accelerator." And so I was saying some very critical things about education, about teachers' unions, about performance, about tenure. And there was a move to get rid of me, and I got a lot of bad press. The President came into Cabinet meetings, carrying three folders, one of them said "Bennett." And he opens up the folder –

KRISTOL: So you're all sitting around the Cabinet table, and the aides are at the back of the room.

BENNETT: Right, and the President starts reading these headlines – Bennett must go, Bennett is the James Watt of the second terms. James Watt was the guy who created quite a fuss on a lot of fronts and ended up going.

KRISTOL: So the President is reading these headlines while you're sitting right there as the kind of relatively new Education Secretary.

BENNETT: Right, and the chairs are drawing away.

KRISTOL: The Secretary of State is right there and Secretary of Defense.

BENNETT: George Shultz, Casper Weinberger. Chairs are pulling away. And I said, "Man, I have blown it." You know. The President put the – closes it and said, "Well, that's what Bill Bennett is doing to shake things up. What's wrong with the rest of you?" Wow. Yeah, wow. You know, he put his arm, figuratively put his arm around me and said, "Stay at it." So, boy, I stayed at it.

But I had wonderful times with him. If I could tell one other story. We were – I asked him to go to Missouri, to Columbia, Missouri, because we noticed there were an awful lot of award-winning schools

there. Turns out the reason there were was because the superintendent was smart and spent most of his time thinking about hiring good principles.

This is Administration, his personnel, his personnel. So I asked the President to visit Columbia with me, so we took Air Force One. We land 30 miles outside. We get in the limo, and the President starts talking into his little microphone that he has. You know, there's loudspeakers on the side of the limousine so he can say, "Hello, hi, everybody." So he says, "Will you guys pull over, I don't think this thing is working?" So he says, "Let me get outside. You guys talk to me." And the Secret Service – "Mr. President, you can't get out of the car." "Alright, Bill, get out of the car."

So we're out there in a big cornfield. So I get out of the car and he says, "Can you hear me?" I said yeah. It's like the commercial, you know, "Can you hear me now?" You go a little further – you know what's coming. So I go 150 yards in the cornfield, and the President takes off in the car. Yeah, yeah, practical joke. The President of the United States playing a practical joke on the – I'm standing there alone. And they sent a car back for me. But that playfulness, you know, that was part of Ronald Reagan, too.

George Bush, Herbert Walker Bush did the same thing to me when I was Drug Czar. We were coming into San Francisco, and there was a demonstration of these local San Francisco unusual people, shall we put it that way. And there were signs up, anti-Bush signs but there were more anti-Bennett signs. They called me the "Drug Bizarre" and, you know, the "weird Drug Czar." And the President said to the Secret Service, he said, "If I let Bennett out of the car now, what are the odds he'll make it to San Francisco alive?" So it's nice to see Presidents are still – can be – still be real people and have that sense of things. And that kind of time for a guy who grew up in Brooklyn, New York, you know, a scholarship student sitting in the limo with the President of the United States, having the President of the United States play a practical joke on me – I mean, what a place, what a country, what a deal.

KRISTOL: You know, I remember when I became your Chief of Staff in, I guess, at the very beginning of 1986 how astonished I was that we would occasionally get these little notes from President Reagan. Sometimes he would clip something from a magazine or a newspaper. This was a different era. And he would actually do it personally, he didn't even have like his secretary or the staff do it, and write a little note on it. It was something like, "The federal government is funding some terrible thing."

BENNETT: "Do we really fund this?"

KRISTOL: And then, of course, it's we're funding something which was funding something which was funding this, usually. And we'd always, of course, write a memo back since it was the President asking. But he had a real personal interest in education. I think he really thought it was important for the future of the country.

BENNETT: We did an event at the White House about reading and memorization because we had some good words to say about rote learning and memorization. And I said, you know, "You were an actor, you had to memorize lines. Do you still remember them?" He said, "Sure." I said, "You know, we could do a little memorization thing here. You know, I've heard you do the poem, you know, Sam McGee." The staff said, "No, no, no, no, no. Stay with the script, stay with the script." So I walked away, and the President grabbed me and said, "Let's do it, let's do it."

So we went in the East Room, wherever it was, made the presentation. And I said, "You know the importance of memorization, don't you, Mr. President? There are strange things done in the midnight sun." And he said, "By the men who toil for gold. The arctic trails have their secret tales to make your blood run cold." I ran out of lines. I forgot it, and he finished, he finished the whole thing. The staff was looking at me. The guy is a pro, he's not going to say do it unless.

But there were other, you know, there were other moments because there were a lot of trials during the Reagan Presidency of, you know, the press didn't like him. Iran Contra, I remember calling him. I got your advice on it, I remember, and, you know, I had a good relationship with him. And I just had this feeling somebody had to say to him that it was fine about accepting responsibility for everything that goes

on in your Administration but that the press here wanted to humiliate him, you know, they wanted an apology as they always do from Republicans, conservatives – oh, I was wrong. And I called him and I told him. And I said, you know, “Take responsibility, it’s admirable, sir.” I said, “But, you know, don’t humiliate yourself. They want you down on your knees saying how sorry you are.” He said, “Oh, I know.” I said, “Mr. President, this is a big game, this is Rock Falls.” I knew the Dixon High School –

KRISTOL: It’s good that you were so up on –

BENNETT: So he said, “Not Rock Falls, Sterling.” He corrected me, I’ll never forget that. But I was able to do that. You’ll remember I was able to do that in a very sad circumstance. You and I were in Chicago or I was in Chicago when you called me. This was about a nomination to the Supreme Court, and we have the judge who had smoked marijuana with his students and it was a tough situation.

KRISTOL: And we were in a big anti-drug campaign at the –

BENNETT: We were in a big anti-drug campaign and the –

KRISTOL: And the President and the First Lady were very involved.

BENNETT: Nancy Reagan owned this. And the issue wasn’t so much having smoked marijuana as a young person, having smoke marijuana with his students.

KRISTOL: When he was a professor.

BENNETT: He was a professor. And that was serious. And, you know, I called the President about it. I remember I talked to Ken Duberstein who was working for the President and he said, “Oh, boy, this is too hot, you better talk to the President yourself, are you concerned about this to him directly?” I said, “No, of course not,” so I talked to the President. I said, “I just heard a guy on the radio saying, ‘How am I supposed to tell my kids, you know, that this could hurt you, this can harm your career if a guy who’s smoking dope with his students gets to the Supreme Court?’” And he said, “I understand.” The problem was this was a very good guy, an extremely good guy. But, you know, this happens in life.

Anyway, this kind of opportunity to see the President up-close was an amazing part of these jobs. I – but George Herbert Walker Bush, I’ll never forget this. We were in Portland, Oregon to dedicate a memorial for slain police officers. And it was early in the morning –

KRISTOL: You’re now Drug Czar?

BENNETT: I’m now Drug Czar, right. And I – the President and I used to jog together. Hard to believe now that I used to jog regularly with the President, and he set a mean pace. But when he traveled together, he liked to do that. We were – I went to his room about quarter to six in the morning, you know, with my jogging stuff on and the Secret Service said, “We’re not going to do it, Mr. Secretary. The President would like to see you anyway.”

I went in, and he was looking out the window. We weren’t going to do it because there was this huge demonstration. And they were burning the flag. And George Herbert Walker Bush said – I’ll never forget – he said, “This is what really makes me sick.” He said, “You know, I fought for that flag. I can’t stand this.” He said, “It makes me so mad, I’d like to go down there and just give them a piece of my mind.” I thought, “Boy, go down there and give them a piece of your mind.” But the Secret Service, you know, held him back. But you see these moments and then you see what it is that makes some people President, you know, that deep passion and conviction. And it was a great thing to behold.

KRISTOL: Yeah, no, it’s really great things about being at the high levels of Washington and seeing other people that, even the President and your colleagues, I mean that’s really. How did you become Drug Czar?



So you had left the Education Department a little before the end of the Reagan Administration. You were working on *The Book of Virtues* and other projects to help influence and save higher education, something we should come back to, since that still needs to be done. And then who called you, I mean, how did that –

BENNETT: John Sununu.

KRISTOL: Who was the incoming Chief of Staff.

BENNETT: Right, John Sununu. This would have been – well, when did Sununu take office? I can't remember.

KRISTOL: Well, I mean he came in as the first Chief of Staff in January of '89. But I mean he was announced to be Chief of Staff, so I think he would have been calling you in November or December, I suppose of '88.

BENNETT: He just had a notion that I would be the right guy for the job. Outspoken, doesn't mind a fight, this sort of thing.

KRISTOL: This would be the first – the job had just been set up by Congress.

BENNETT: Yeah, yeah and that's right. And so he called me and said, "How about it?" And I said, "Well, this is a very different kind of job." I said, "I don't know a lot about it. Education, I felt very comfortable with, been doing it all my life." He said, "I don't think it's that complicated." He said, "We'll get you the expertise you need around you." And so it was a real challenge. And, of course, it was such a big issue.

Cocaine then particularly – a big issue today, still. I've got a book coming out about this in February. And so I said yeah. And it was probably the most riveting job. I mean, it was you know it had the pace of what you'd think the Drug Czar job was like. There was a movie that was out years ago called *Traffic* with Michael Douglas and it was a kind of—they modeled it to some extent on my travel and my work, although they didn't admire me at all, didn't like me at all. And they would try to suggest the futility of the war on drugs. But it was very dramatic.

I had very good people. I had U.S. Marshal protection all the time. They had these big guy marshals around me so that they—I said, "Why do I have big guys?" They said, "So if we land on your body, we cover all of it." You know, so and I was thrown to the tarmac in airports a few times because of death threats and so on. But it was – but we got some stuff done. I remember when I took the job, there was a story about the four heads in the international drug cartel's asking whether they were the most powerful people who had ever lived, the most powerful criminals. And I said, "Yeah, but we're going to get them all." It was a bit of bravado when I said it. But after two years, we did get them all. Us and the Colombian people, some very brave people, Colombia police, a little group called Delta Force. And you know when the United States sets its mind to something, decides it really wants to do something and commits like Hamilton recommends, like Hercules, you know, to the task, this is about waging wars and fighting, there's very little that can't get done.

KRISTOL: And drug use, teenaged drug use went down.

BENNETT: Oh, yeah, went down, yeah. No, all the indices went down. But it wasn't me. It was a national campaign. It was the country was ready to turn, it needed a spokesman, I was one of the spokesmen. But the country turned against use and the notion that you couldn't get it down – drug use went down by half. The price of cocaine went up because we were pushing hard on the supply.

John Walters, our friend who later became Drug Czar, did such a good job here. I had a psychiatrist named Herb Kleber from Yale who was our treatment expert, a Republican professor of psychiatry, if you can believe such a thing. And he was, he did a wonderful job. And, yeah, things got a lot better. This notion that you can't do anything about this problem was wrong.

KRISTOL: And that job was different just in terms of the actual job because when you ran the Education Department, that's a big department, it's already set up. Drug Czar was coordinating a lot of agencies on the particular issues. An unusual job, sort of a really senior White House staff job almost.

BENNETT: Almost, yeah. I had Cabinet level, so sometimes I'd send it to the Cabinet table, sometimes I sent it back with the staff. I didn't care about that. What I wanted was authority, and in Washington, authority meant budget authority. So as each department developed its drug budget, what it was spending on drugs, I had the authority to approve it or not. And that's power in Washington.

KRISTOL: Were there many disagreements and fights?

BENNETT: There were a few, and there was an early one with the Department of Defense and our friend, our mutual friend, Dick Cheney, and Colin Powell, folks like that. And we had an argument that was a personnel issue, and I remember I talked to Brent Scowcroft who was working for the President. And he said, "I don't know if Defense wants this, so, you know, they're Defense and you're just the Drug Czar."

And I called the President, President Bush. I said, "I've got to win this one," I said, because the President had said at a Cabinet meeting right after his speech, his inaugural speech, he said, "We're going after this drug problem and I need, Bill Bennett needs your help and cooperation. When he calls on you, you need to help him out." I said, "Mr. President, people know I'm having this argument with the Defense Department. I need to win this one." And I said, "It's not on its merits that important but it's important that we win it so people know we've got to be taken seriously." And he came out down on my side. And I didn't win them all. You know we had another idea to knock out all the cocaine processing plants in Colombia, and I lost that one. But that's for reasons I probably shouldn't get into.

KRISTOL: And the drug issue, generally, which has, of course, flared back up. It does, it seems to – is it winnable, people – I just gave a talk the other night and someone was saying, "Oh, that war is hopeless, it doesn't look good." And I tried to say, "Well, it keeps an awful lot of kids from drugs, and you know, it's not great to have 15 percent or whatever the right number of is of 18 year olds maybe using drugs once a month but it's a lot better to have 15 than 30 or 45 or 60." But it's hard to get people to see that we have accomplished something over the years.

BENNETT: No. When you push down – the history of drug use in America is pushing down and getting the problem, improving the problem, and then letting up and the problem gets worse. When I was Drug Czar, people said, "Well, let's let a state or two try legalizing and see what happens." I remember I said, "Not on my watch, we're not going to do this." Well, now we've got in the country, you've got Colorado and now you've got the state of Washington had these recent ballot initiatives this past November, suggesting other states will go in that direction. So now we will see. And I have spent some time in Colorado studying it very closely. And Democrat Governor Hickenlooper said it was a reckless decision to do this. The returns aren't all in but as they come in, I think the people of Colorado are going to say, man, what did we do, what did we unleash? If you talk to doctors particularly, you talk to educators, they will tell you this has been very bad, very bad.

KRISTOL: What's your basic argument to our – against or back to our libertarian friends who say, "Oh come on, we – it's a free country, as long as they're 18 years old, alcohol is legal, why shouldn't at least marijuana be legal?"

BENNETT: Well, there's nothing to the 18-year-old argument because unless you think no one under 18 has ever smoked or had alcohol or beer. You can't keep it from the kids. The two things that I'd say now that I probably couldn't say in 1990, one is that the public opinion is softer and softer on this issue, more permissive.

But the research is overwhelming of the damage done, a lot of it irreversible. You know, smoke once a week at 16 for the next four or five years, lose eight IQ points, lose eight IQ points. Who can afford to

lose eight IQ points? That's one thing. But there has not been a major article in a medical journal in the last five years that hasn't pointed out the harm and danger that it causes to motivation, to focus. We're doing all these things as a society. You know, no more football because it gives you concussions and, you know, pregnancy tests so the fetus is healthy, protect the brain, protect the child, and then you take and ingest this harmful substance.

Second, the tetrahydrocannabinol, the THC, the content in marijuana today is five times what it was in the late 60s. So when people our age say, "Hey you know – I was watching a commercial that ended with a reverie to Woodstock the other day – hey, this is fine, I had dope, it didn't matter." This was 3 percent THC, it's now on average 14 to 15 percent. Imagine your beer multiplied times five.

When people do the alcohol analogy, they need to realize that you don't have the opportunity to litigate that one again. If you did, we might come out with somewhat different rules. But I mean that's a settled question. But do we really need another way to get ourselves into trouble? I'll quote Governor Jerry Brown who said, "We've got a lot of challenges in America, a lot of challenges in California, I'm not sure a half-buzzed population can really meet them." Do we really need to limit the capacity of our children and our young adults by putting this into the mainstream? I just think it's nuts.

KRISTOL: And do you think the greater permissiveness and sort of libertarian, of the sort of popular culture makes it possible to win this argument, even if it's right on the merits? I mean, some of the people on our side on this issue are a little fatalistic that –

BENNETT: No, I know, that it's over, it's done. Yeah, no, I don't think it is, I don't think it is. Do a fair counting, do a fair assessment in Colorado and the states that have done this. Count everything. Notice that you haven't gotten the revenues that you said. Notice that you still have a black market. Notice the accidents coming back from Kansas and New Mexico and the neighboring states. Count it all up, and then think about it. I think a lot of states will pause over this when they pour over all the data. I don't think it's lost at all. When you're talking about our children and the future, you've got to be able to take a second look at this. I don't think it's gone.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I think the Denver, Colorado thing could be a bigger issue than people expect in a year or two, too, even the Presidential level.

BENNETT: Yes, yes.

KRISTOL: It's a national – I mean, we can say let the states experiment, and they can to some degree but, of course, there are national laws on the books.

BENNETT: Well, that's a crazy thing, too, because it's a violation of federal law and yet the states are doing this. Of course, this Justice Department has decided not to enforce it. So.

KRISTOL: Where are you on this interesting debate among conservatives about prisons and prison terms, and are too many people being locked up for –

BENNETT: The numbers – the numbers are very small. There's virtually nobody in prison because of possession of marijuana. People plead down in some cases, in many cases. People who are convicted of marijuana possession or marijuana distribution are usually truly guilty of something much larger. You don't go to – you don't go to jail for this.

But there are states that have done a variety of things, experimented with a variety of ways of dealing with it that have been effective, which is, you know, you lose your driver's license. One place they play hardball, they list people's names in the newspaper. Employers don't like to see this, more drug testing. There's a lot that can be done and should be done. But it's amazing the difference that making it legal is between not having it legal. A doctor I talked to, a child psychiatrist in Denver, said that the parents come in now with the kids, the kids are eating the candy that's marijuana laced, and say, "You know, your kid is

stoned, your kid doesn't have a decent attention span, no memory is going." They said, "Well, it's legal, it's legal." This really does matter to people. It's form of permission.

KRISTOL: Yeah but you can't – I know some people want to say well, it's legal, but we can still discourage it. But that's hard.

BENNETT: Legal, legal takes you over the other side.

KRISTOL: And then some people do move from one drug to another, right, so it's not as if it gets confined even to the –

BENNETT: Yeah, the gateway argument is a funny argument. People say, "Well, if you smoke marijuana, you don't necessarily move on to other drugs." That's correct and maybe even most people don't move on. But almost everybody who moves on starts with marijuana and then the way it works in the brain, you need a bigger hit, you need to stimulate the pleasure center more. And so people have a problem 10, 20, 30 percent of people do move on.

KRISTOL: There was an event in conservatism in Manhattan actually and sort of libertarian types, intelligent people. One of them was sort of chastising me for being – having these old-fashioned views that we should keep drugs illegal and fight the drug war. And I said to him, "Well, what about heroin, are you for legalizing that?" "Well, no, that's different." But really if you're really a libertarian, why not? So I mean, then it does become a question of where do you draw the line and how firmly and how do you enforce it and so forth.

BENNETT: I'll tell you this experience I had. I went to Boston. I remember I went to Boston's Drug Czar and visited a classroom and the politicians, the elected people heard I was going to be there, so the classroom had me in it in the front and in the back was Senator Kennedy and Governor Dukakis and some local people. And it was a white working-class neighborhood and the kids were very tough on drugs and so on and thought drug dealers should be punished severely. The liberal politicians in the back of the room were upset.

Then, we went through inner-city neighborhoods and the question I got there, as I almost always did was "Can't keep you keep these distributors, these dealers off the street? Can't you lock them up? It's not safe for our kids, we're trying to protect our kids." That night, I went to Harvard, your alma mater and my alma mater, and all I heard was "Let's legalize drugs." I never heard the argument for legalizing drugs in Roxbury but I did hear it in Cambridge.

KRISTOL: Yeah. That's powerful. It's a liberal elite by people who think they can manage it. Maybe they can't, incidentally, if you talk to people about –

BENNETT: Well, that's right. I – look, I was a proctor at Harvard and I had a dorm with freshmen and this was '68 and, you know, I had five or six kids who were totally blowing their educational opportunities by just toking up all the time.

And we had a major bust in my dorm. I came back from spring break; I was in law school. And one of my freshmen was waiting outside my door and he said, "You gotta go in there." I said, "I can't go in there. It's a room of another freshman." I said, "It's your room. You can bring me in."

And then he brought me in and there were two freshmen at Harvard on the floor dealing drugs – bennies, stimulants, marijuana to local kids, 13-, 14-year-old kids. And I went nuts, and it was quite an incident at Harvard, and Harvard decided to get tough and suspended them for three months. That was it, that was it. Selling drugs to 12- and 13-year-old kids. Yeah. But it was everywhere. It still is everywhere.

## **II: Education Reform Today (42:57 – 1:11:10)**

KRISTOL: The drug war is one issue that has to keep – we have to keep on fighting. I look forward to your book on that. What about educational reforms? That had begun a little bit before you became Education Secretary. The *Nation at Risk* report was in the first term of President Reagan. But you obviously elevated it and focused the discussion on two or three key issues. And, I mean, how do you feel, what is it almost 25, 30 years later, I guess, on that, especially on the K through 12, you know, on the elementary and secondary. We can talk about higher education too, that has its own set of issues. But I guess our main focus was the elementary and secondary education.

BENNETT: Yeah, yeah, the debate goes on. And that's probably where we had – well, the most disagreeable conversations. You know, the teachers' unions and so on. I remember – I think when I die, they'll write something in the Chicago paper about my visits to Chicago. I remember going to Chicago and saying, you know, "These are the worst schools in the country." And the spokesman from the mayor's office said, "Why?" And I said, "You have a 50 percent dropout rate, and of the kids who remain in school, 50 percent of them score in the bottom 20 percent of the country." And the guy did a couple calculations and he said, "Oh, we're not the worst. Detroit is the worst." And I said, "Well, do not be guilty of low aspirations."

And so we told the truth. Actually, the first thing that was said when I said these are the worst schools in the country, I'll never forget it, the guy said, "What do you mean by that?" And I said, "That's a perfectly clear sentence. The worst is the worst." And they weren't used to that kind of talk but I said a lot of this about our system. You test our kids in math, science, which is a special interest of mine in the elementary grades particularly, and our kids do pretty well, top third, top quarter. By the time they're in middle school, they're in the middle. By the time they're in high school, they're toward the bottom, So –

KRISTOL: An international comparison.

BENNETT: International comparison. So the longer they stay in school, the dumber they get relative to kids in other countries. That's crazy. But the elementary school proves the point. It's not genetic, it's not in the DNA, otherwise, our third graders wouldn't be doing pretty well. It's the system that doesn't have the expectations, doesn't have the accountability. We spend a ton of money. Higher education is another category, kind of in its own world, totally in its own world. But we just have to be doing a lot better because we're getting our brains beat out internationally by kids from the Asian rim countries and elsewhere.

KRISTOL: And what would the key – there are so many things that could be effects and what's been most encouraging to you over the years you've been fighting these fights, what's the toughest obstacle, what's the best leverage point do you think for improving education?

BENNETT: The toughest part is the organized resistance, and that's still primarily the teachers' unions. Not the members of the teachers' unions, there's a lot of good teachers. The teaching force is in 70 percent adequate, 80 percent adequate, I would say. But the failure to police the 20 percent that isn't is almost criminal.

KRISTOL: I remember you saying this when you were Education Secretary. I think the most – I mean, it's nice to reward the best teachers, obviously they should be, if possible, rewarded more. The unions make that harder. But getting rid of the worst is really maybe even more important actually.

BENNETT: The research, Bill, shows that – shows that very clearly. The 5 or 8 or 10 percent of the teachers who aren't up to it really do a lot of harm. I mean, what else do you need to know? The research done by the Milken Institute, backed up by other places, take a kid in the 50th percentile in the 4th grade in math, give that kid an excellent teacher for two years – that child will be in the 80th percentile. Give that kid a teacher ranked as poor by his peers, his peers and the principal, for two years, and that kid will move from the 50th to the 20th percentile. What more do you need to know but to encourage the good teachers and to get the poor teachers out of the classroom?

There are some other problems with the system. I mean, we don't reward success. You remember when we visited schools and you were with me on some of these trips, people would tell us, "We fudge our data in terms of our failure rate and our kids who need special education because we get more money from the federal government the worse we are." This perverse system. But we, the good news, you know, we went, we made a point of going to places where they were doing a good job. The (INAUDIBLE) of the world, you know the great teachers, the schools that were succeeding against the odds – and there are such places in Chicago and everywhere else.

KRISTOL: And school choice, vouchers, charter schools. Do you feel that that's still –

BENNETT: It's still a big thing. It's not the solution but it's part of it. It's competition, which is a good thing. Content, which was one of the things we talked about, remains, I think, paramount, and there is – it's gets a little complicated, a little inside baseball. But there are two kind of competing theories of learning and education in the early grades. One of them is the purpose of schools is to teach children how to learn, the other one is the purpose of schools is to teach something, is for children to learn something. And I'm in the second camp.

The first camp are the formalists. But you have to start by learning something. And that means it can be math, it can be biology, it can be literature. But content reigns, content is what really develops the mind, the brain and gets kids to be able to take interest in another subject. I've been doing a lot of research on math education lately. Ability in math predicts interest in math. That's fair enough. If you're able to do it, you tend to be more interested in doing it. But it's reciprocal. It also turns out that interest in math predicts ability. So if you can encourage by good teaching an interest in math and science, you can get more kids going in this direction. And the way you do that is by teaching the content.

KRISTOL: You produce books of content and also online material and through various enterprises. How hopeful are you about – there's the Khan Academy, all these other things – how hopeful are you that the schools maybe ultimately aren't going to be entirely fixed but that parents can take advantage of other resources, and in way the whole country can do better even if the school system remains a bit of a problem?

BENNETT: It's a great – it's a great question. And the Khan Academy is a good example. I think technology can change the whole ballgame because you can bypass the poor teacher. And you can utilize the talents of the great teacher. And you're seeing this in lots of places. And the resistance, interestingly, is coming more from higher ed on this than elementary and secondary. Look, the kids are there. These are digital babies that were digital natives, digital babies, that we're talking about with their cell phones. Take advantage of it. The technology is infinitely patient. The technology can take the child as far as the child can go.

This makes home schooling not just parents sitting in a corner with crayons and coloring books but parents sophisticated in the ways of the Internet and with materials to teach and to use able to take their kids step by step through an educational program and then later being able to leave the child alone to work the educational program himself, bringing in a teacher or a parent as the case may be when needed. I think technology can change it very much.

KRISTOL: And I think home schooling really – we defended it when we were at the Education Department and helped to get it going a little bit. But I had sort of not focused on this but someone thanked me the other day actually and through me thanked you for defending their right to do this in the mid-80s when it was still very controversial and under assault by the states.

But it seems to me it's really, I mean, there are a couple percent of the kids who actually are home schooled full-time but it seems to me the distinction is almost breaking down between home schooling and organized schooling because the parents – technology does allow the parents to take so much bigger role, maybe pull your kid out of the school one year and educate him or her on certain things and then go back in the next year.

BENNETT: I'll give you a term – blended learning, blended. Okay, this is a term they're using now. But no you know, structured education for some reason, for some purposes, for some subjects and preformed for other. But yeah, this is what's – this is what's possible now. And the level of sophistication of the technology and of many people, parents with the technology makes all this possible. It's very exciting, you know.

We should, I think, be pretty explicit about what we want in terms of an end, an end result but leave the means to parents, thus school choice, home schooling, the distinction between home schooled-kids and other kids I think breaks down, it ought to break down at many points. Some places, you want the structure. For example, home-school parents want their kids to play on sports teams, you know, want to participate in the chess club. And smart schools are availing themselves of that. Also, smart schools are availing themselves of the skills of parents. And so that's another breakdown.

KRISTOL: Somewhat more encouraging in K through 12 education?

BENNETT: I am.

KRISTOL: You are, right.

BENNETT: I am more.

KRISTOL: I am sort of too, yeah.

BENNETT: Yeah, yeah I think so than I am on higher ed, for example.

KRISTOL: You're sort of optimistic, and I am, too, actually about K through 12 education, I think they have the possibility of reform, the parental involvement makes it maybe easier to push for reform, the international comparisons. What about higher ed? You've been in that world for a long time, in and out of it and –

BENNETT: Yeah. Less optimistic. I have to first acknowledge my debt to education at all levels. I got a good education. I started in high school with Jesuit high schools and reading books and having teachers giving me lists of books, which I read, which I still use, I still draw on. And, you know, you make a reference to a book, you come up with a quote from a book in this town and people think you're some kind of genius, you know.

KRISTOL: But you do have an uncommonly good memory for those things, I would say.

BENNETT: Well, you know I keep a commonplace book and recommend that, by the way, to young people. Things that strike you as good, well-said, write it down. Mine is now about 120 pages of quotes, you know, just from people. You're actually in there a couple places, yeah. Anyway, it was good to me. I majored in philosophy and literature, two relatively useless majors as you think of the world in pragmatic terms.

KRISTOL: At Williams, which you got to how? From, you were at a Jesuit school –

BENNETT: I was at a Jesuit high school here. A complicated story but I asked the Jesuits, "Where do you want me to go, Boston College or Holy Cross?" And they said, "No, you're in a contrary mood, and we want you go to one of their schools."

KRISTOL: So you can rebel against them instead of against –

BENNETT: Right, right. So I had to look where the money was, the scholarship. I was admitted to Princeton and Williams, and Williams gave me \$200 more a year than Princeton, and that was the difference. Amazing how you make a decision.

KRISTOL: Were they interested in you for football?

BENNETT: Yeah. They were not interested in my mind. Helping to beat Wesleyan and Tufts and Trinity, you know, that nightmare schedule. Anyway, I had a great educational experience there. And you know read a lot of books. And that has been intellectual capital. Again, I remember your mom told me, she said, "You will draw on that intellectual capital, you will find when you get a job in Washington, you'll have no time, if you do this job right, to read books. You'll be reading memos and writing memos." And a lot of that's true. So, readiness is all, Shakespeare says. So do that readiness when you're in high school and when you're in college – read, read, read, and read the good stuff. It pays off.

My optimism about higher education is not there. Take technology, I'm saying I'm relatively optimistic about the uses of applications of technology at the elementary and secondary level, but tremendous resistance at the higher ed level. I'm on the advisory board of a group called Udacity, it's a Stanford professor who teaches computer stuff and invented a robot, robotics and all that. Anyway, he puts courses online.

This is Sebastian Thrun. And he was working with the universities to put courses online. Why? In California, you've got 300,000 students waiting to get into the community colleges. By the way, when they get in, most of them have to take remedial courses because the work wasn't done. He said, "We can educate a lot of these kids through the technology." Well, the philosophy department at San Jose State said, "We'll have no use, we have no use for this technology." The faculty at Amherst voted against using technology to teach courses. What are they talking about? What are they in the 13th century, opposed to the printing press? I mean, it's happening, folks. So accept that.

But you know the problems in higher ed remain the same. In the humanities and social sciences, just the hard ideological control of the agenda. I mean, it's laughable. You do these surveys of the politics of professors. In my field, philosophy, I think self-identified conservatives are zero, far left like 30 percent, you know, moderately left 40%. So this guy said when I left the philosophy department at Boston University, that was it, there were no longer any more conservative philosophy professors. Well, Harvey Mansfield, I guess, he's in the politics department. So there's that and I think it does contaminate the process. I can't improve better, improve any more on what Allan Bloom wrote and others have written on this. But it is a contagion and it's a stain.

Plus the abandonment of the best purposes of higher ed, the idea of a core curriculum. I don't want to confuse this with the common core debate, which is something else right now. But the notion that there are certain things that every educated person should know. I went back to your alma mater, Harvard, for its 350th. I was Secretary of Education and I blasted them, actually. I said, you know, no one – you know, you guys aren't as good as you think you are. Of course, no one could be as good as Harvard thinks it is. I mean, just to be fair.

And then I got into a debate about this whole idea of the core and they, you know, the Harvard faculty voted in its wisdom that students didn't need these core studies because they were smart and sophisticated enough already. No, they're not. You know, they don't know these books, and these books, these ideas are worth reading. And so I was carrying forth on the stage there – Sanders Theater maybe – and the President, Derek Bok, got upset and asked if he could come up on the stage and challenged me. And so we had this back and forth. He said, "We do have a core." I said, "You don't, no core." "Yes, we do, yes." At the end, the Harvard students showed their great brilliance and sense of humor by giving me a case of Coors Light. And they said, "Here's your Coors."

But it's a shame. Now these young people will succeed anyway because they're bright and they'll educate each other and they'll get around to some of these books. But so much more could be done. It's just a shame. It's awfully expensive to go to a lot of colleges. Everybody knows about the debt now. It's one of the first topics that comes up. And our college graduates now, half of them are unemployed and 50 percent of the remaining 50 percent are in jobs they didn't need to go to college for.



So what I'd like is truth, truth from the colleges – what does it really cost, what are your job prospects, what do people make? I did a book called *Is College Worth It?* And we had the temerity to put in this book the ROI, the return on investment by going to various schools. And it's pretty dramatic. I'm not one to believe that the purpose of higher ed is simply to get a job and make a lot of money. Wouldn't have majored in philosophy, you know, if I had, if I did believe that. But it is true, you know, petroleum engineering, South Dakota School of Mines, when you graduate, as the President of the University of the School of Mines said, you'll make more than I do when you graduate. Yeah, yeah, they'll graduate in petroleum engineering and make, start at 85 or 90,000 dollars in the fields.

KRISTOL: Yeah. And that's one of the reasons that we do these conversations and do websites and so forth because you just worry that students don't have much access to good material through – when they're in college. They have – it's politically correct, it has the disciplinary focus, and a kind of weird combination of political correctness and professionalism, which the one thing they don't really – they aren't really encouraged to do is to think broadly and necessarily read the people they should be reading. Maybe the Internet can help there, too, though.

BENNETT: Right. Read broadly and read deeply. I mean, I find the things that I come back to or the things that I come back to, the things that last, you know, the best things, the smartest things, the things in my commonplace book and they keep coming up and there's really no substitute for that. I do a lot of advising of students, kids about life, career and so on. And I said, "You know, this is the time in your life when you can stop and pause and read this stuff and have the all-night bull sessions about the meaning of life and is there a God? And that's good and you know don't waste it by being wasted all the time or drunk all the time because this is a great – this is a great opportunity. And there's stuff that you will have the opportunity to confront with a chance for a good educational that you probably won't have later on."

KRISTOL: And what about the culture as a whole? I mean, some of our friends, conservative friends, are extremely pessimistic and think it's – patriotism is no longer there and discipline is no longer there, and Western civ is going down the tubes. And of course, sometimes you pick up, you wake up in the morning and go online and read what's happening and you think maybe that's true. But, so where are you on this?

BENNETT: I wish things were better. I think we have lost a lot of the cultural war and cultural ground, frankly. But I'm not despairing. First of all, you're not allowed to despair, you're not allowed to surrender. And once, you know, there's certain kinds of surrender that's not to be tolerated in the presence of the young, and one of them is you don't surrender your country and you don't surrender your culture.

Look, I think there are some signs that the culture is fighting back. We see it through politics. A recent election was encouraging to me. But Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a friend of yours and your family's and the man who introduced me for my jobs before the Senate, said, you know, culture is more important than politics, that politics can influence the culture. The things that bother me that are real, I think, and I like you, instinctively, want to counter the negativity, the things that are real are the 76 percent of Americans who say they don't think their kids will do as well as they did. I mean, that's bad, that's, you know, a lack of hope about the future and about your own children. They have some grounds for that. You know, I mean, there's some declines here going on. And we're not keeping up in a lot of ways.

I'm worried about the education system. There was a great *Wall Street Journal* editorial a few weeks ago – you probably saw it – by Don Kagan about patriotism. I don't think we teach this love of country, this thoughtful and enlightened and critical love of country. And I think that's very bad because this is the last best hope of earth, this country. And we need to teach it in the right way. It's patriotism is kind of regarded as a kind of down-market commodity. You know, you're kind of dumb and unsophisticated. What's the Latin – *Odi profanum vulgus et arceo* – I hate the vulgar crowd. You know, if they like it, then I don't. That kind of elite attitude. And so that I think is worse.

You have a son in the Marine Corps. I have a son in the Marine Corps. So proud of these guys and the people you meet, their friends. But they're a special group kind of apart. And they're not part of American society in a way they used to be. You know, that's the argument, one of the arguments for the draft – you might not have as professional an army but everybody is integrated and understanding their role and that

they have a job to help defend the country. I remember when our son made this decision. You know, he came out of Princeton, he had opportunities. Your son came out of Harvard. There were people who said, "Why are you doing this, are you crazy?" What kind of reaction is that to people who are doing this kind of service? At least, the Left has learned to, at least, speak respectfully.

KRISTOL: Right. That's a big change.

BENNETT: And that's – right, you don't say loathe the military anymore. You know, and that is a big change. But it would be better if the virtues, if I might say that of the military ethos were more prevalent in American life. So there's work to be done.

Look, what do I want to do? I mean, if I could spend full-time and make a living at it, I would work to improve the teaching of American history and civics in the schools. I mean, I really think it's our worst subject. You know, we talk about our math and science – it's our worst subject, knowledge of America. Yeah. And who's going to tell these kids that they live in this great country? That yes, as Moynihan said, we've done terrible things but are we embarrassed to speak for our less than perfect democracy? No, we're not. You know, how do our people find out about the terrible things we do? They read it in the newspapers, they see it on television. We correct, we self-correct. How come everybody wants to come here?

You know, I'll go back to my school visits, Bill. And you accompanied me on a lot of these when I was Secretary. And there was this high school near San Diego. And the girl said, a young girl, senior in high school said, or junior maybe, "You really love this country. Why do you love this country?" I said, "Well, a lot of reasons." I said, "But you know every country has gates. And one test of a country is when you raise the gates, which way do people run – do they run in or do they run out?" I said, "When you raise the gates here, they run in." Even if you don't raise the gates, people run into America, they pour in every chance they get. Not a laughing matter. But it tells you, you know, that people want to be here. So appreciate that. And I don't think people do. And I think it's a very important thing to carry on in life, the notion that you live in a worthy place and it deserves your attention and care.

KRISTOL: And it has to be taught a little more consciously, I think.

BENNETT: Consciously and –

KRISTOL: We sort of assume that everyone just picks it up and but –

BENNETT: Well, a lot of the teachers – this I learned from going to the schools – a lot of the teachers assume that the immediately preceding level taught America and America is a great place, and I'm going to tell you the truth, it's not such a great place. So, now that's down to the 4th or 5th grade where, you know, we're getting revisionist history now in some places. So, yes, it needs to be done quite explicitly. And this is another reason for the growth of things like alternative schools, charter schools, home schooling. Most of the people I know who pull their kids out of public schools didn't do so because of the academics, they did it because of the ethos, the spirit, the values, the moral and morality of the place.

KRISTOL: I mean, one thing that strikes me and I think we've discussed this, there's clearly a popular yearning for this. I mean, the best-selling biographies of the Founders, of Lincoln, the degree to which Americans are willing to pay real money and spend time – they're busy, they're working, whatever, to read a biography of Alexander Hamilton or Washington or whatever.

This is, of course, scorned in the academy where they're doing social history, and it's very hard to find actual professors at Harvard or Princeton or anywhere who are writing an old-fashioned biography. But, obviously, the public has a sense that they maybe wished they had learned more when they were younger about these men and women or the interest in the Civil War and visiting Gettysburg and that sort of thing. I'm struck by that but –

BENNETT: Well, the stories are unmatched. I mean, you think of the stories that make America, they're unmatched. They're – you know, it's a tapestry, it's Joseph's coat, it's amazing. And it turns out to be a country, you know, where for an awful lot of people, dreams actually do come true. And yes, people want to read these – read these stories. Why can't we tell these stories at a younger age? You know, when I was visiting the classrooms, in the 4th grade, I used to tell the kids a story about George Washington with his eyeglasses. You know the famous story.

KRISTOL: Well, tell the story.

BENNETT: Yeah, well, toward the end of the war, the soldiers were not getting paid and they wanted to go to Philadelphia and march on the Congress and, you know, at bayonet point and get their money. And Washington was opposed to it, and he had written down a few thoughts, and he pulled a scrap of paper out and pulled out his spectacles. When he pulled out his spectacles, you could hear the gasp from the soldiers. They hadn't seen him with his glasses on. He said, "Oh, excuse me, gentlemen." He said, "But I have become not only gray but almost blind in the service of my country." It's a great story.

It's a great story about getting old. I set it up, you know, Socratic style with the 4th graders. I said, "Is it a good thing or a bad thing to get old?" And they said, "Oh, it's a terrible thing to get old, you get cranky and crinkly and creaky." And I said, "Well, but sometimes you can get better." And made the fundamental distinction between, if you will, the physical good or the material good and the moral good. And the kids – the kids got it.

But endless source of stories and inspiration, the story of this country. There's no story quite like it – an intentionally designed country that has worked and that has been, you know, the last best hope. I tell people, I end my speeches by saying, you know, whatever you may think, if you live in some poor immiserated, god-forsaken part of the world where some dictator has his boot on your throat. And you see a group of men coming over a hill toward you and they're carrying a flag, your prayer is that it's the American flag because they're there to help you – not to take your money, not to take your oil, not to take your land, not to pillage your village and rape your wives, take your children. They're there to help you. And almost everybody in the world knows that. You know, why is America the favorite country of people in the worst and most beleaguered places in the world?

KRISTOL: Well, that's a good note to end on. And thank you for your service to the country, honestly. And you've taken some blows and some arrows and slings and arrows – is that the phrase? But you seem to have survived them very well, well and still fighting the good fight.

BENNETT: Thanks. Someone said to me, you know, you really, it wasn't high principle for you men, you're a certain kind of Irishman, you know. Irishman walks down the street and sees a fight going on and says, "Is this a private fight or can anybody get in on it?" You've got a little of that Irish, too, Mr. Kristol.

KRISTOL: I guess somehow, I don't know.

BENNETT: Or the Irish –

BENNETT: Thank you.

KRISTOL: Thanks a lot, Bill, and thank you for joining us for CONVERSATIONS.