

## Conversations with Bill Kristol

**Guest:** Paul Begala, Political Advisor and Commentator

### Table of Contents

**I: Governor Clinton of Arkansas**

**II: Clinton vs. Bush**

**III: The Clinton White House**

**IV: The 2016 Republican Field**

### **I: Governor Clinton of Arkansas**

KRISTOL: Welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol and I'm very happy to have with me my friend, Paul Begala, a prominent political operative, a thinker about politics, a commentator on television, and I first met you I think when you were a key operative in the Bill Clinton 1992 Presidential campaign, and I was going down with the ship on the Bush/Quayle campaigns.

BEGALA: That was not your fault. I mean, we can't pin that one on you, Bill.

KRISTOL: You said the right thing there and that was appreciated. Well, let's begin with that. I mean, that was exciting to be part of a winning Presidential campaign. How did you get involved, how does it all happen? I mean, people, afterwards, people become well-known, and they think, oh, you were there forever and you and Carville and Clinton.

BEGALA: It's kind of like anything, though. A lot of it's just word of mouth and it's luck and actually one of my beliefs in life – and I teach at Georgetown and I tell my students this – careers are mostly about attitude and timing. You have to have the right attitude. You have to be willing to move to Kentucky or New Jersey or Georgia or Pennsylvania or all these places I moved to work for very little money. That was the attitude. But then if you're lucky, the timing comes around. Sometimes the timing is wrong. For me, the timing was perfect. My partner and I, James Carville, had a done a run at a campaign for Zell Miller and he won, he was elected governor of Georgia.

KRISTOL: And that was in 1990 –

BEGALA: 1990. Zell was very close friends with Bill Clinton. I had never met him. I didn't know the guy from Adam.

KRISTOL: Been in politics for how long at that point?

BEGALA: I had been – I graduated college in '83. So this is '90, this is 7 years. I was still kind of early in my career. I had, I'd worked on the Hill a little bit and done campaigns all around the country and in between was getting a law degree. But Zell was pals with Clinton. So we had helped elect him and then we left. You know, we didn't want to work in state government in Atlanta. I was not qualified. So off doing the next thing. And Governor Clinton was going around the country seeing his friends and saying – this is 1991 – you know, "I'm thinking about running, I'm going to run." Laying the groundwork as these guys do. He spent the night in the Governor's Mansion in Atlanta with Zell, and they stayed up all night plotting and planning.

And Miller told me the story. He said that, he said, "I'll endorse you," which will help but I'll move my primary up because they were both Southern governors, they wanted the South to have a larger voice than the Democratic Party, so I'll move the primary up. So you'll have a beachhead in case you don't work out in Iowa and New Hampshire. And as kind of an aside, he said you ought to talk to these boys that ran my campaign. James Carville and Paul Begala. Clinton said, "I never heard of them." And Zell said – to his credit – "Maybe that's the problem, maybe that's the good thing is that we should get some new blood." Back then, you know, now I'm an old war horse but back then we were new blood. And just on Zell's recommendation, Clinton called us and we went and met with him and just love at first sight.

KRISTOL: Is that right? So many of the winning campaigns – and I'm struck by this – are people who have come off successful statewide campaigns but are not on their fourth Presidential campaign. In fact, I'd say most of the cases we can think of in both parties where people did their third and fourth campaigns, it was sort of applying 10-year or 20 year-old recipes. You know, there is something about being fresh, isn't there?

BEGALA: Absolutely. That's a problem. People say, people like me, I've got 30 years experience in politics. Well, you know, I've got like two repeated, 15 times is a real risk. I think the far better course is – I mean, it's what I did – is to go out in America, you know, work in places particularly that are either swing states or really tough for your folks. You know, Kentucky is a very purple state, probably more red than blue, I loved working there, I learned a lot. Georgia, the same way.

Other people, they want to come to Washington and you know I'm all for it, I love it here, but they want to start as the intern at the Democratic Party or the Republican Party, work their way up to one of the committees and this committee and that. I just don't think that's the better way.

I think what you learn is how impossibly vast and diverse this country is, and it's really good to have that in your mind when you're sitting in an office building in Washington, DC that well actually there's somebody in Paducah, Kentucky, who's going to take this a very different way, and let's think about her.

KRISTOL: Yeah. So, Bill Clinton meets – did you guys fly down to Little Rock to meet him or did you meet him somewhere?

BEGALA: No, he happened to be in DC and we were at the same time. So we went and had a glass of ice tea and sat. It's the only time in my life, I think, I ever had seriously love at first sight with a politician because – and this is so ingenious – he did not treat us like strategists, he did not talk strategy with us. He didn't say, you know, my wife's from Illinois, it's kind of an early primary, we could do well there and Miller is going to move the southern primary up. I still remember it. I could tell you where we were sitting.

KRISTOL: Yeah, so, where was this?

BEGALA: We were sitting – it was, they keep changing the names of these hotels, it was a hotel on New Jersey Avenue, and it was then, I think, called like the Palace Court or something like that.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that one's changed about 20 times. Yeah, right, I know. On Capitol Hill.

BEGALA: The Washington Court Hotel I think it's called now.

KRISTOL: Not the classiest hotel in Washington.

BEGALA: You know, we were not very well off, and we met him there. And I remember to this day, he talked about his daughter who then was about 12, maybe 11. Talked about how in the far-off future you'd have the turn of the century, what kind of a world would she inherit? And he talked to us, like, as if we were citizens actually who loved our country.

And let me tell you, that's a great strategy. If you want a really good strategist, actually treat them like a patriot and a citizen, which no one had ever done before. We probably would have signed on just

because of his talent anyway as hacks. But boy, we fell in love because that's all he wanted to talk about was his set of ideas. And I remember we walked out there and Carville said, "My only concern is this guy too good to be true."

KRISTOL: Is that right?

BEGALA: And we actually later heard that in focus groups with lots of voters, too, because he was just impressive at first sight. It's hard to remember back to those days but the guy was clearly the class of the field even then.

KRISTOL: And had this New Democrat message, which was different from the Democrats of '84 and '88 Presumably the Mondale-Dukakis Democrats.

BEGALA: I had worked for Zell Miller, who's of course a very conservative Democrat. I worked for Bob Casey who was the Governor of Pennsylvania, his son is now a Senator from Pennsylvania. I had worked for a number of more moderate conservative Democrats. Dick Gephardt who was then a pretty moderate Democratic leader. And one of the things I loved about Clinton is he was very much a part of the movement to remake the Democratic Party.

We used to go to these conferences, and Democrats would sit there and they would, they would first off they'd blame the voters – well, they're just too stupid. You know, the Democratic (INAUDIBLE) is always so much smarter than everyone, which is nuts. So they would attack the voters because the voters were stupid – how could they vote for Reagan? Well, you know, 49 states did, and there's only 50 of them so the guy had something on the ball. And then the second thing they would do is attack you guys. Oh, the Republicans are too mean. Like you're supposed to throw the game? Okay.

And then finally Clinton came along with Miller, Bentsen, Gore, a lot of really influential Democrats – Sam Nunn – and they said actually the problem is us, we've gotten out of step. Here's where I saw it. I was working for Dick Gephardt in his Presidential campaign in 1988, went out to Iowa. And I love Iowa and I love the caucuses but they do tend to bring the most committed people out. And there was a group back then called Star\*Pac, which was a very, very liberal, really a disarmament group, not even just antiwar.

And I was working for Gephardt, but Al Gore got up there and someone challenged him in the audience and they said, "You voted for the flight testing of ballistic missiles." And Gore said, "Well, of course, I did, we have to have them, I mean, we're a super power, we have to have missiles, and so, of course, we have to test them, we have to make sure they work, God forbid we need them, we don't want our soldiers with missiles that don't" – they booed him off the stage. And I thought there's something really wrong with my party. I mean, I'm all for peace, okay, but when you can't even vote to test missiles – they booed him off the stage. And I thought boy, there's something. And Clinton really spoke to that, the need to bring the Party back to the center. And it's really as a political legacy, a really important part of what he did.

KRISTOL: So in '91, how does it work? You went down at some point to Little Rock? You have to be willing to pick up and move places when you're –

BEGALA: Yes, well, we cut a deal. Clinton obviously wanted to base the camp in Little Rock, which was genius. Mostly because his daughter was there but also he didn't want to be trapped in the New York-Washington establishment.

KRISTOL: And he was governor, right?

BEGALA: And he was governor, he had to run the state, and so it made perfect sense. We were about to have a baby and so my wife did not want to give birth in Little Rock, she wanted to give birth where her doc was here in Northern Virginia. So I got on the plane.

Carville, Stephanopoulos, the whole campaign moved to Little Rock, you had to live in Little Rock. And I was one of the rare exceptions because I travelled with the candidate, and that's kind of how we divided it up. Carville ran the war room, I was the body guy on the plane working with the governor to keep him

on message. And I had the way better deal. I know they made a movie about the war room, and Carville and Stephanopoulos got rich and famous. I highly – if you ever get a chance to spend a year of your life sitting next to Bill Clinton on an airplane and traveling a million miles to 48 states, I highly recommend it. He's the most amazing guy –

KRISTOL: And so you start off you don't have your own plane to start with, right?

BEGALA: We started out on Delta Airlines carrying our own bags, yeah. And then these things snowball and it really goes very quickly.

KRISTOL: And when did you think – were there moments you thought you weren't going to make it, when did you think you were going to make it? Did you think you were sort of the favorite from the beginning? I sort of can't remember. Clinton launched in the fall. It was later in those days, right? He waited till –

BEGALA: October of 1991, remarkably late. But that's because President Bush was so popular. You know, he had prosecuted a war successfully. It was the first time since with Vietnam. And so it was, I mean, young people don't remember, you were in the White House then. We had parades.

And I remember when the war ended. I was working on the Hill for the Democratic Majority Leader, and the President was going to come and give a speech about how we won the war. And my cousin fought in that war. I mean, I really like most Americans was really deeply proud of our country. And the only argument we're having is well, we have bigger flags to wave. Literally, the Democrats, like, were looking for flags to wave on the floor where the Republicans waved flags that were bigger. In that sense, it was a great time. But it was a partisan matter –

KRISTOL: And Gephardt and Gore who had run in '88 and done adequately well – they lost to Dukakis – didn't run in '92, I guess, partly because –

BEGALA: Because of Bush. They were too –

KRISTOL: They thought Bush would, yeah.

BEGALA: And even Lloyd Bentsen who was, you know, (INAUDIBLE) a real powerhouse in my party and you're right, Gore and Dick Gephardt and Jay Rockefeller who really could have, I think, made quite a good run, they all stood down. And the thought in '91 was well, somebody's going to be a sacrificial lamb.

And Clinton's gift was to be able to see around corners. And you can go back to that announcement speech – which I had nothing to do with, he actually announced before Carville and I joined so I don't say this with pride of authorship – go back to that announcement speech and you see the whole animating vision of his presidency. More domestic than foreign, more populist, middle-class-based economics, but also a deep skepticism of too much bureaucracy, too much deficit. I mean, it was really exactly what he believed in, which is kind of nice to look back – it wasn't just a stunt, it was his actual vision.

KRISTOL: And he was associated with the Democrat message. I mean, that was pretty – he had done that as Governor and head of that Democratic Leadership Council and –

BEGALA: It was really a big part of him. We went back during the campaign all the way to '74, his first run for office outside of student government, I guess, and he ran for the House against John Paul Hammerschmidt and lost.

But we found – and again you had a populist thing where he was attacking oil companies but you also had a thing where a message there where he was worried and skeptical of bureaucracy. It was – so the guy has had – you know, everybody ticks and tacks and zigs and zags over their career. But for a remarkably long period of time, he's had pretty much the same basic approach to things and that's something I admire.

You obviously see the same thing in Reagan. Reagan started life as an FDR liberal but once he entered public life, you can go back to his – the speech in 1964 all the way to his final speech as President and there's a real consistency. Yes, he raised taxes here, zigged and zagged there, but in the main, he was the same guy.

KRISTOL: Right. Well, I remember vividly being in the White House, and I'll tell the story and then you'll tell me what it looked like from the Clinton campaign side.

And it was the December, the middle of December, and Mario Cuomo, will he get in, that was the huge story and he was a major figure obviously after the '84 convention speech and at that point, what a three-term governor? Beginning his third term as governor of New York.

And I remember he didn't – you know, the plane famously didn't take off from Albany to New Hampshire on the filing deadline date, December 15th or something like that. And I remember there was a little meeting in the White House that evening and great exhilaration. This was in Sam Skinner, the Chief of Staff's office. Well, if Cuomo's out, now it's really going to be fine because we have a bunch of nobodies running against us. And I will say, to my credit, I said, "I don't know, you know, in a way, I think Cuomo would have been easier to beat because he's a New York liberal, a familiar type. Dukakis. And I'm a little worried about Clinton, that New Democrat stuff, he's a very clever politician." "Oh, no, Bill."

This was classic – we've been through three or four of these Presidential campaigns, there's no way there's going to elect Clinton over President Bush who won the war and all this. Now, from your point-of-view, Cuomo, were you guys very worried about that or –

BEGALA: Enormously. You know, but it's like before a fight. We were – oh, we're going to beat him, we're going to, you know. But everybody can look at the tapes – enormously talented orator and thinker. Clinton had enormous respect. You know, Clinton is, I think, a very bright guy, too, so he really admired the combination that Cuomo brought of heart and head. When he didn't run, there was this huge exhale.

And I will say here is the analog in our campaign. The guy Carville worried about the most was Doug Wilder. The only one in the race, in the potential race, right, who had the kind of same base among southern African Americans that Clinton had –

KRISTOL: And Doug Wilder was the Governor –

BEGALA: The Governor of Virginia, first African American governor of Virginia history. He had been elected in 1989. Virginia, then a very Republican state. So not only a Democrat but an African American Democrat.

KRISTOL: But sort of a moderate African American –

BEGALA: A moderate and just, what a gifted politician. And Carville was the one who always kept saying – we were scared to death of Cuomo, okay – but he said, "We can't win if Wilder gets in the race," because that was really our base, was trying to put together a black/white coalition, but our base began with African American voters who were concentrated in the South in the Democratic Party. And if Wilder had gotten in the race with his talent, with the platform of being governor of frankly a much bigger state much closer to the media center as well – Wilder was really intimidating, too. And that was something we didn't talk to the press a lot about. But those were the two moments, I think, when it became apparent to us, at least we had a clear path to the nomination.

KRISTOL: And there were some bumps on the path. And famously in the Clinton '92 campaign, I don't know, what was it like, anything, any particular memorable moments? You were pretty much with then Governor Clinton – on the road.

BEGALA: It was mostly with Governor Clinton. These ups and downs and a lounge singer came out and said she'd had an affair with him and it was – it taught me a lot. One of the things it taught me is something Clinton said then – if we make it about their life, not mine, we'll both be better off. Don't allow yourself to become focused on yourself. You know, like, I love country music, and these new artists come out, and they write about truth and beauty and love and momma and whatever. But by their third album, they're writing about life on the road and how hard it is to bounce around in a \$200,000 bus. And like you know, dude, that's actually not something I can relate to.

Politicians get that way. They get in a campaign and the only questions they're asked are about themselves and they start only thinking about themselves. And what that taught me is Clinton decided to make it about you not me, as he always said. And because he came into the race steeped in a bunch of ideas, he didn't have to create stuff on the fly, there was a kind of staying power to his ideas. And that's what he clung to, that was our life raft. And that's what got us through it and then we would start to hear voters say that. It was, like, okay he's had his problems but a lot of people blamed the media, they did and I think fairly. But they also said he's kind of a young guy with a head full of good ideas that actually cares about me, you know, let's take a chance.

KRISTOL: He's such a charismatic guy, Clinton, and such a good candidate. People forget – I think I was struck by this on the other side – what a policy-heavy campaign it was. And I don't think politicians subsequently have quite picked up on that, which fits with not just that you care about people but that you actually have a very concrete set of proposals to help them.

BEGALA: It's so important. You cannot think from the moment you announce to election night, there's just no time to like really think through how do I want to restructure Social Security – you just can't.

So he had already thought all that stuff through before he began. I think that's really important. We always viewed him as, you know, this great block of marble that we would have to chip stuff away from rather than an empty vessel into which we would pour content. He always had too much content. I used to tease him about that – you have three solutions for every problem.

It was so bad – this is how – the guy is so smart – we were doing a town hall meeting in New Hampshire. He's the Governor of Arkansas. We had no business being up there and, you know, they talk funny and it's freezing cold. And he loved it, and he kept saying, you know, Arkansas is just like New Hampshire and here's why. And some woman got up in a town hall meeting and she said – as I recall, memory is an unreliable thing – she said, "Why did they stop the passenger train line from Portsmouth to Manchester?" And the answer is, "Who cares, lady? I'm running for President" – he knew, he actually knew and he started explaining – well, when the (INAUDIBLE), going through.

I remember I actually went up to him, and I was like can you just pretend once in a while you don't know something just, like, so we can relate to you. That you can't coach, that does not come from a political consultant. You know, and you do see this with some of these folks, that can sustain you, too, when you get in trouble and that's a wonderful thing.

KRISTOL: Did he take advice easily or resist it like a lot of these guys do or –

BEGALA: He, you know it's interesting, Clinton actually didn't like yes-men. He wanted to win people over, that's why he always tried to, you know like Reagan Democrats, Clinton Republicans. So if you were too much – oh, you're so great, you're so great, he'd stop listening to you. He would want advice, very often more in the White House than in the campaign, he would take the devil's advocate. You know, he's really want – because I think he was very worried about the kind of yes-person, yes-man syndrome. But he did.

You know, my job was so easy because all we would do, the people on the plane and we had good people on the plane, it wasn't just me – Dee-Dee Myers, we had Bruce Reed, we had Rodney Slater. We had a really talented team on the plane. And we would just write, like, a paragraph a day, not a speech. He would have his stump speech but he could interlineate so well and modify for different regions so well that all we had to was, like, here's the hit we want today, you know, here's the sound bite, frankly, and

deliver this on unemployment or whatever the issue was that day. And he could do all the rest. So we were kind of spoiled that way.

## **II: Clinton vs. Bush**

KRISTOL: So you won the nomination after Cuomo didn't run and Wilder, and you had a few challengers but none of them was quite up to it ultimately, I guess, right, I mean?

BEGALA: I think they just none of the rest of them were able to put it together in the same way but you know Tom Harkin, Bob Kerrey won the Medal of Honor. Those were the two people actually Carville and I interviewed with as well to work for. Very impressive guys. And, you know, Carville is a Marine, really loved Senator Kerrey, Bob Kerrey because of his war record and just is a remarkable guy.

And then it actually turned out, I guess the ones who nagged us the most were the ones that we didn't begin to think, I didn't think he would be the most – Tsongas, Paul Tsongas and Jerry Brown. But you're right. It wasn't the strongest field the Democrats ever produced. And I think it's because the President was so intimidating.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Isn't that an irony? And then he ended up getting the lowest re-elected President since Hoover, I guess.

BEGALA: Yeah, amazing.

KRISTOL: It's a good lesson.

BEGALA: It's a fickle business.

KRISTOL: It is. People who look a year and a half out and think they have some sense of what the country's mood is going to be or where people – it's crazy.

BEGALA: Well, this I think is something pundits should learn. It's why I like – seriously, I like listening to you – most of these people here in Washington, they think tomorrow will be just like today only more so. Okay, so now we're sitting down, it's February and it's bitter cold. So obviously by July, it will be like 20 below.

No, actually, tomorrow will not – the one lesson in life is tomorrow will not be like today. Now, it's guesswork as to which way it will be different. And that's kind of the art of this thing. But these people who always think oh, you know, you're up by 10, thereby next week, you'll be up by 20 and then you'll get 400% of the vote by the election.

KRISTOL: Did you guys always think you had a pretty good – once you were in '92, though and Bush had taken the hits of the Buchanan challenge and the recession and looking out of touch and all that. And then Perot, I guess. Did you guys think you had a good chance, pretty good chance, sort of –

BEGALA: We thought we had a pretty good chance because Clinton could contest states that had not – I think it really did help a lot that he was a Southerner. It helped enormously, and so he obviously was going to carry his home state. You know, everything changed around the convention. That was only about a 10-day period.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I remember.

BEGALA: Ross Perot got out of the race in the middle of the Democratic convention.

KRISTOL: And was that coordinated? Were you always – Really? How did you hear about it? You just heard about it – Is that right?

BEGALA: Somebody called Stephanopoulos, some news person said that Perot is having a press conference minutes. We were like, quick, turn on the television.

KRISTOL: That was literally like the first day of the convention.

BEGALA: Yes and he said, he actually said as if we'd scripted. I could see why you'd think – he said, "The Democratic Party has its act together." He couldn't have given us a better message because we were the hapless Democrats. We'd lost something, like, five out of the last Presidential elections. And so he got out of the race. Gore joined the ticket.

KRISTOL: Were you involved in that?

BEGALA: A bit.

KRISTOL: Tell us about that.

BEGALA: It was not for Gore. I don't think he knows that, so hopefully he won't watch –

KRISTOL: We'll send it to him.

BEGALA: I was for Harris Wofford. The most important qualification is he's a client of mine.

KRISTOL: Right, but you helped him, Senator from Pennsylvania, a big upset in November '91 in a special election.

BEGALA: Right but also from my – I think wrong but very conventional analysis. Clinton was young, Harris was older. Clinton was a Baptist, Wofford was a Catholic. Clinton was a Southerner, Wofford was a Northerner. Clinton was a New Democrat moderate. Wofford had worked for both Dr. King and President Kennedy from the liberal wing of the party. So it just matched up perfectly.

KRISTOL: And he was an impressive guy, Wofford –

BEGALA: President of two colleges –

KRISTOL: Yeah, sort of older, statesman type.

BEGALA: Yes, and really brought a gravitas.

And, you know, Clinton interviewed him and loved him, thought he was great. As soon as he interviewed Gore, he said that. He said – it was amazing. And I stupidly said, "He hasn't even endorsed you," which he hadn't, Gore wanted nothing to do with our campaign in the primaries. And Clinton said, you know, I think if I pick him for the ticket, he will. I said, "Okay, good point."

And I said, "Well, what does he bring? He's the same religion, he's the same region, he's the same age, he's the same philosophy." And he said, "I might die." And I thought, oh my God. You know, that's when you start – it is the first Presidential decision they make. And, you know, I was never a fan of George W. Bush but I don't doubt at all that he picked Cheney for the right reasons. I don't think he was the right man but he picked him for the right reasons. I don't think he needed Wyoming's electoral votes or Cheney's charisma, he thought, "God forbid if something happened, I need someone who could step in on day one."

And that is, I think, a really telling thing about Presidential characters. The first time these people have to make a decision with that kind of weight and consequence. And so I was really proud of Clinton actually that he overruled me. He rolled right over me. He didn't –

KRISTOL: Take a long time to ponder your –

BEGALA: It's interesting. Just as soon as he met Gore.

KRISTOL: And it turned out to work politically too, the two young guys, the bus tour. I remember this well, of course.

BEGALA: Right. It was the su – the whole was greater than the sum of the parts because – and we had this nagging problem that Carville identified the first time we met Clinton – is he too good to be true, does he really believe – is he too slick?

Well, when you pick a guy who's just the same, it actually tells people, hey, this really matters to me because if God forbid, something happens to me, you're going to get a carbon copy, that's how deeply I believe in these ideas, it's not just like a trick to get your vote. And I had not thought of that but I think that was part of it, too, is it gave Clinton a sense of authenticity, not just popularity.

KRISTOL: Any moments in the general election campaign where you thought oh, my God, this might be going south or Perot –

BEGALA: The primary campaign was so awful. But in the general, it went better. Perot got back in but –

KRISTOL: And was in the debates.

BEGALA: It was in the debates that Clinton sealed the deal. I remember, again if memory serves, it was Mickey Kantor negotiating with James Baker. And I love Mickey but – and he's negotiated many great – but James Baker is like the greatest negotiator, diplomat of my time.

And somehow the Bush campaign agreed to debates. And Clinton had done thousands of debates and town hall meetings. That's all he'd been doing. He didn't have a country to run. He had a state but fewer people in his state than the city of Houston so, like, he could manage the state pretty easily. And the President had all this stuff going on. Plus, he hated debates.

KRISTOL: But he couldn't of not – do you think he could have not agreed to debates at that point, I guess there had been debates in '80 –

BEGALA: Since '76. Ford and Carter began the modern tradition after Kennedy. I guess not.

KRISTOL: It's an interesting question though whether he could have or maybe limited it to one or –

BEGALA: He agreed to three, and then he agreed to the thing we wanted most, which was astonishing, which was a town hall format. Clinton was so empathetic, and the presidency does isolate you, you know, and I remember getting the word.

My memory is we were in Wisconsin campaigning. And Mickey called and said we've got three debates and one is going to be a town hall. And I said, "Are you kidding me?" because we knew and there was that famous moment. A woman in the debate in Richmond.

KRISTOL: Which was the town hall one.

BEGALA: It was a town hall debate.

KRISTOL: The second debate, I think.

BEGALA: And I believe the woman's name was Marissa. And she said, "How does the national debt affect you?" It was kind of (INAUDIBLE) question, actually. You know, what does that mean – the national debt? And so President Bush gave kind of an answer like that. He was like, "I don't really get what you're saying," and I think he used a phrase like that, "I don't really get it" or "I don't see what you mean." And he said, "Just because a person has means, it doesn't mean that they don't care." And you

know, he was just floundering around in part because the question was not framed by a professional questioner or a journalist.

And it was like not a fair fight. Clinton sprang out of his chair, walked over to her. Before he answered, he asked her a bunch of questions. “Do you know people who have been laid off, have you got friends? Well, I run this small state and when a factory closes, there’s a very good chance I know the people who have lost their job and it really has an impact on me, here’s the impact.” I was just in our little holding room, we were like throwing the towel – this is just.

KRISTOL: I remember that so well because – I can’t remember what the sequence was but was that after the vice Presidential debate because my little, my bit piece in history was negotiating the vice Presidential debate with Jack Quinn, I guess who was running Gore’s kind of side of the campaign. And we had a very quick, we didn’t – ours was actually very loosely structured, which was good for Quayle and did okay, I thought.

He just carried Gore’s book out there or tried to carry Gore’s book out, which was against the rules. But it kind of like – and they just quoted from Gore’s book where he attacked the automobile or whatever – what was it? – *Earth in the Balance*, *Earth in the Balance*. The internal combustion engine is one of the terrible things that’s happened for mankind – we figured that probably wasn’t going to play too well.

So we did our best. But, you know, I may have my memory, too, but I think there was, we went after the first Presidential debate and did okay, and it looked like there was sort of an outside shot, and I think the town hall was then the next debate.

BEGALA: I think that’s right. It was the second –

KRISTOL: And I watched with Vice President Quayle who was smart, underrated in many ways by the media, but one thing, he’s a very shrewd political, you know, analyst, and he just, I remember, he was so loyal to President Bush he wasn’t going to say anything but I remember just him shaking his head as he watched Clinton do that.

Was that the same debate that Bush looked at his watch? Right, which was innocent in a way, right, he just thought like –

BEGALA: And then to his eternal credit – there’s no more gracious man God ever made than George H. W. Bush – and when they dedicated the Clinton Library, bitter cold, freezing rain. Now, his son had just been re-elected so he was in a good mood. But this is 2004 and President Bush, Sr., stood up there and spoke and he told that story. He said, “You know why I looked at my watch? I kept thinking how long do I have to be debating this guy?” He was so gracious.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that’s fantastic.

BEGALA: But you have to – this is a lesson I took from this as a strategist – you have to work with what you have and who you have, you can’t pretend. If your guy doesn’t like debates – or your woman – you can’t force her into it, can’t force them into it. Either take the hit for not doing them or manage it so careful that it becomes almost like a joint press conference. Put three or four journalists up there, long answers. You know, there would have been ways to mitigate that. But if you let Bill Clinton get a chance to directly interact with voters in front of 50 million people, you’re not going to win.

KRISTOL: And Bush didn’t win and Bill Clinton did. So that was congratulations almost.

BEGALA: Well, again, it was not me. I always tell people that sports reporters are so much smarter than political reporters because sports reporters say Secretariat won the race, they don’t say Ron Turcotte – I’ve actually memorized the name of the guy who was the jockey because no sports reporter said, “Ron Turcotte wins the Triple Crown,” right? They understand.

And these things as you know, you rise and fall with your candidate, you do. Now, sometimes there's larger forces that even the best candidate can't overcome. John McCain was never going to win no matter what, had nothing to do with Senator McCain, it was the country was sick of Bush, we're in a terrible crisis of economic collapse. So that was not won but usually if you win, it's not because the strategist. You know, and the President had James Baker, there's nobody I admire more. He had had Lee Atwater and Lee passed and that was a terrible loss. But he had Mary Matalin, he had quite a good team.

KRISTOL: Oh, he had a good team, it wasn't the problem. Twelve years and the recession and said – and I think Clinton really saw – I was in that Bush White House, I do think President Bush thought till near the end that he would win and that because in the America he had lived in, being a competent Commander in Chief, which he was, winning the war, ending the Cold War successfully and building on what Reagan had done, that would get you re-elected. I mean, that was sort of the test of a President.

And Clinton did see that we were at a post-Cold War moment and that you needed to talk, not just could talk but you needed to talk about education and health care and the like. He did also make sure that he covered himself enough on foreign policy that he didn't look – you know, he knew a lot and he chose Gore who was a Senator and a foreign policy kind of expert type senator.

BEGALA: And from sort of the hawkish wing of his party.

KRISTOL: Right, so he sort of covered himself on that. But he saw that you could have a domestic policy election, which you really couldn't have quite in the Cold War years.

BEGALA: That's exactly right. He chose not to run in 1988, which was, we didn't know it then but it was coming to the end of the Cold War. But I don't think he could have had the same success in 1988, frankly. He might have won, he might not have. But the moment and the man came together. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the fact that President Bush handled it so masterfully with Baker and Scowcroft, ironically. But of course the Brits fired Churchill as soon as the Second World War was over.

And internally – we didn't say this in public a lot, we tried not to because it's disrespectful – but we would talk about him as yesterday's man and having a gold watch strategy. He's of the past and a heroic past and good for him, let's give him a gold watch, but now we have to fix health care and create jobs and that's for a different generation, a different mindset. And I think that's how we approached it strategically, and it could not have been possible without the collapse of the Soviet Union.

### **III: The Clinton White House**

KRISTOL: So you won in '92 and I can't remember, did you go right into the White House in January of '92 with President Clinton?

BEGALA: No, we had a new baby. We had our first-born, came right in the middle of the campaign. And so I barely knew him, I had barely seen him in the first three or four months of his life. And so I very much wanted to be a dad. And so I was a consultant to the Democratic Party advising the President but not a White House official, not a government employee. I was paid by the Party. And that was a great deal because that was access and influence without accountability.

I mean, I've done both, you've done both. When you're actually working in the government, there is real accountability. And, you know, when you're a political advisor, of course, the ultimate accountability was we lost the House and the Senate, and I wound up moving to Texas then. We lost, the biggest landslide in history and I was one of the President's chief political advisors, I had to be responsible for that.

And we kept having more kids. We wanted to live in Austin where we're from. and I taught at the university and I thought I was done, that we were going to have kids and I was doing some corporate PR, which was really interesting and fun. I had clients like Southwest Airlines and CocaCola and the San Antonio Spurs and really just thought I had the life I wanted.

But I was asked to come back and help prepare for the debates in 1996 and, of course, was spending more time with him then and during the debate preps, Vernon Jordan, the President's best friend, pulled me aside and said, you know, "I think we're going to win," and I said, "I think you will." And he said, "And George is going to leave," George Stephanopoulos, and he said, "and the President wants you to come back and take that role." And I'd say my initial response was a vulgarity. I said, "No way." And Vernon was a little shocked, and I went home and told my wife and she said, "Are you crazy? Of course, we're going to go." She was so game. She was, like, seven months pregnant again. And, you know, you have a chance to serve your President, it was crazy for me to, like, say no. And Vernon fortunately did not take no for an answer. So I wound up in the second term as a White House official, which was infinitely more difficult but also more rewarding.

KRISTOL: So, tell us about that. You were in, just the mechanics of it. You were Assistant to the President –

BEGALA: I was Counselor to the President.

KRISTOL: That's nice. So you didn't have too much in the way of line responsibilities.

BEGALA: Right. It's the greatest job, and that's kind of how he talked me into it because he said – I said, which is true, this team he had assembled for the second term, it's a much better team. You know, often you run out of gas in these things. This was a much better team, much more organized. He himself was much more disciplined and organized than when he started. And I said, "You don't need me, this is a much better team than you started with." And he said, "Yes, but they're all strangers to me." And he wanted not only familiarity but, frankly, wanted somebody who would say you're full of beans.

And I had to really adjust though because in that campaign honestly nothing ever leaked. Democrats had lost so many times, they just really hung together. It was the tightest – we had strategic unanimity, we had real cohesion and so nothing ever leaked. We were very open, and the war room was famously open. You could leave the poll laying around and hundreds of people were in and out. Work in the White House, everything you say leaks, especially if you criticize the President. So you have to learn, you know, you have, like, the debate or the discussion and then everybody leaves and you kind of pull them aside and go, you know, that's a terrible idea, you can't do that, Sir, or whatever. So I loved it. I got to work –

KRISTOL: And you were there for most of the second term, for –

BEGALA: I was there for '97 and '98 and the first third or fourth quarter of '99. So about two years. And loved it. I mean, it happened to coincide with the impeachment of the President of the United States.

We lived through a lot of amazing stuff. There was one week in December of 1998 – here's what happened. Yeltsin had gone missing. You know, the Union was now free, it was Russia, they had a freely elected guy who we had a great relationship with and he'd gone missing. On top of that, there was some blow-up in the Middle East, and the President had to go personally to Israel to try and negotiate some kind of peace in the Middle East. I can't remember what it was. And then the Speaker of the House had decided he was going to step down, the Speaker Designate resigned, and then they impeached the President of the United States. On top of all that, Lawton Chiles, the Governor of Florida, passed away, and he was a very close friend of Clinton's, had just been succeeded by Jeb Bush but Clinton was recruiting him to actually come work for him. He was going to be an Ambassador to the Americas, a job that Mac McLarty had started.

So we had five or six major things, including the impeachment of the President of the United States all happen in that same week. And, you know, that's a little much. In the middle of all that, then, one of my children was 18 months old and he got a rotavirus, which is they lose all their fluids. And in the third world, you die. In America, you live fine, you spend the night in a hospital hooked up to IVs. And so my wife called and said, you know, "The baby is really bad, I'm going to take him to the hospital." I met her

there, she went home to take care of the other kids. And I spent the night with this infant in my arms, hooked up to the ankle and the wrist with an IV. And they saved his life easily. I mean, it's not a problem if you're in America, if you're in a wealthy country. They rehydrated him, and I went in my same clothes back to work at 6 or 7 in the morning when she came to relieve me. And I remember I was sitting in a meeting. I was in a Cabinet room. But I looked like what I was – you know there was all this going on and then a really worried bedraggled dad. And this friend of mine said, "This is really getting to you, isn't it?" meaning the impeachment. I was, like, actually it's the worst of my worries – the least of my worries.

KRISTOL: So tell us about the White House. I mean, how is it different from outsiders think or even than you had thought, since you had been close through a campaign and you had advised the President? But it is different being on the White House staff.

BEGALA: Completely different, it's completely different. You know, you do feel and you should this sense of responsibility. You know, in a campaign, everything you do is simply what you say, it's just a communications tool. In the White House, communications is vital but you actually have to do stuff, too. And so the follow-through and even for a Democrat, and I think not to be too generalized, but I think most bureaucrats tend to be liberal, even for a Democratic President, trying to get things through the bureaucracy is often pushing a string and the frustration of having to actually try to get things done was really a challenge.

And but that's the thing, you actually have to deliver. You can't – in the campaign, you just give a good a speech and they applaud and you know the dial meters go up and you get votes, it's great. But that's just the beginning in the White House. And so it takes an enormous amount of discipline to continue to follow through. And that for me was – is exciting, it was interesting, it was a real learning curve.

And then also knowing that everything that happens redounds to you. Not to you personally but to the President. Fred Barnes told me that. When Clinton first became President, Fred said, "There's only one question in Washington and that is, how does it affect the President?" He said, "There's a typhoon in the Philippines, and we'll ask you, how does this affect the President?" And he was right and I never forgot that.

And I remember I got deeply involved in NASA. You know I grew up not far from NASA in Houston but the Russians had an old Soviet tin can called Mir. And as a joint space exploration peace thing between Clinton and Yeltsin, we were sending astronauts up there. And I popped off at one point to Clinton. I was you know, "Mr. President, that thing," but it was always breaking down, I said "if that thing blows up, and one of our guys is in it, you know that's your rear end." And he said, "Now, it's yours."

And so I had to dig deep into it. We actually chose a guy for the next one to go up who had no spouse or children. Had to talk to his mom. Met with all the astronauts. They said it was safe, they said we're not cowboys and they made the case to me and ultimately the President, that the fact that everything was breaking on Mir was really a good thing because we had the space shuttle, it would land and we would spend a million person hours fixing it in perfect gravity and perfect conditions. And what NASA was arguing is actually being in an old Soviet-made hunk of junk is really good training for future space missions. And it was one of those things that I loved because nothing happened, nothing went wrong. The astronaut went up there, he came home safely, thank God. The Russians were thrilled. You know, the State Department is weighing in, Madeline Albright is like we can't back out on the Russians. And so it was this huge thing but it was all out of the papers because nothing bad happened. And I know you saw that a thousand times. You actually do something good –

KRISTOL: So much of government is right not – you never get credit for the bad things that don't happen, though, or rarely do.

BEGALA: Right, right. I still wish I had a framed headline that said, "American astronaut returns safely."

KRISTOL: Right. And Clinton as President. I mean, what was he like? You know, all these stories by now of him in the White House losing his temper or not losing his temper, endless meetings. That always struck me as overdone but –

BEGALA: Yeah. The first term, the first year, lots and lots of that. You're trying to get your arms around this huge behemoth and trying to pass a really huge economic plan, as these guys always do at the start of their terms.

KRISTOL: And I guess as Governor, correct me if I'm wrong, I've always wondered about this, Governor of a small state, he probably could run that – and that's not personally, right, that's just like he knew enough to just decide everything, basically.

BEGALA: Yes. And he knew the state so well, and it was so small and everybody knew everybody –

KRISTOL: And that's a bit of a trap, don't you think when they come to Washington?

BEGALA: Absolutely.

KRISTOL: I've always thought this thing about how governors are naturally good presidents. It's a little more complicated because you could argue that being Governor, especially of a smaller state, is more unlike being President than being like President.

BEGALA: Because the scale is so vast. And especially if you are smart and you have a lot of capacity, you don't like to sleep, you know, he had to learn to delegate and he had a series of Chiefs of Staff and I think each had really great gifts. When John Podesta wound up being his last Chief of Staff and (INAUDIBLE) President Obama.

When John was the Staff Secretary, which is one of these jobs nobody knows about, it's incredibly powerful. The Staff Secretary is the person who provides the information flow to the President of the United States and then executes all the official documents. But nothing gets to him but through John. And, you know, the President was so famously curious that he would say, "Well, I want to know more about that" or "I want to know more about this, tell me more." And John was the one in a way almost helped to school him by saying, "No, Sir, that's not ready for you yet, it's not going to come to you until the interagency process is finished." And he hated that at first. Clinton's, like, "I'm the President, I want to know." He's, like, "No, Sir." And you need people like that who are professional and disciplined and will force the delegation.

By the second term, he'd had Erskine Bowles, who was a businessman, he'd had Leon Panetta, who was a really experienced Washington hand and then at the end, he had John Podesta. And they all helped. I think you know if the impeachment had happened in his first term, I'm not entirely sure we would have survived because one of the ways we survived was just simple management. 95 percent of the White House staff stayed in their lanes. The Domestic Policy Counselor kept doing domestic policy, the Economic Policy Counselor did that, the National Security Council did their thing. And, in fact, Podesta told people at the senior staff meeting, he said, "If I hear you talking about the impeachment stuff, I'm going to fire you. You have a job to do."

And it was – so I was in the parallel universes, I went back and forth and I worked mostly on impeachment. And what that told – it was our strategy as well – it told people he's still working on the business of the government, he's not obsessing about his own problems. And we studied this. Michael Waldman was President Clinton's Chief Speechwriter. Michael is, I think, a good historian, too. He went back and studied Watergate and every day, every statement – Nixon kept talking about it and talking about and talking about. Plus, we had a recession. But so the voters got the sense that the President is only worried about his own survival. Clinton took the opposite tack.

John kept all the trains running so we always had stuff to do, here's a new bill, here's a new executive order. And his rhetoric then was the opposite of Nixon. He would say – Sam Donaldson would ask him

some latest question about Ken Starr. He'd say, "Sam, I know you've got a job to do, that's your job to answer that – to ask that question. Here's my job – it's to make sure these children have access to good affordable health care and that's what I'm going to focus on. So you focus on what you want."

And it was gold. It had the virtue of being true because of the management and discipline that President and John brought to the place, but also it was exactly the kind of message that had sustained him in his campaigns when he had scandals, but also it's what voters wanted to know.

KRISTOL: You wrote some of Clinton's biggest speeches, like the '92 convention speech. I remember but I can't remember the '98 State of the Union speech, which was what a week after the Lewinsky scandal broke, which was a pretty amazing performance and highly substantive and it exemplified – I think it probably was the key moment where you launched in a way that strategy. Did you write that?

BEGALA: I was involved in it. Waldman was the chief speechwriter. He had a great staff. I was involved in it. And there was a very brief, a very brief debate of do we mention the Lewinsky scandal? And of course, now it seems obvious. It was interesting because everybody in the press said, of course, he has to.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I remember that, yeah.

BEGALA: And inside the White House, it was – we brought it up, and we brought it to him. We were in the family (INAUDIBLE). It's like now here's the speech, you'll notice there's nothing about the Lewinsky scandal, and he looked at us like we were crazy, why would you put it anyway? And I don't remember anybody saying, yes, it has to be in there because again people knew about it but they didn't know about his policy ideas. And that was the strategy. And a year later, then he's giving his next State of the Union Address during his impeachment trial.

KRISTOL: I guess that's right. I forgot that.

BEGALA: And, of course, by then, it was a foregone conclusion – still your Presidency is on the line but it was very evident that the folks who want to get rid of him are not going to muster 67 votes to expel the President from office. But it was a very tense moment, especially for those Senators in both parties. They took their jobs very, very seriously, they really did. I was impressed. And I was talking to the Democrats every day, many times a day. They were really serious about their role.

So the President comes. You take the limo over to the Capitol building and they put you in one of the speakers' offices, this beautiful office the Speaker of the House has. The President gets that alone just to chill. Of course, Clinton is still going over the speech and making changes. And so to distract him, just to kind of lighten the mood, I fought one last rearguard and failed attempt to have the President not call 2000 the beginning of the millennium. I'm a liberal arts major but I can count. There was no year zero. The millennium didn't actually begin till 2001, and so I was kind of being a stickler. He thought that was crazy because it's like common. You know, but I just did it really just to lighten the mood, just to give him something just to spar with me about and I was teasing him – you're going down in history as the first President who couldn't count.

So we were like actually laughing and joshing and the doors open and the Senate Committee to escort him to the State of the Union address walks in. And it's Senator Biden and Senator Thurmond and all the – you know, Senator Lott, in fact, all the most senior members and they'd been all day trying this man, trying to remove him from office, and they walk in and he and I are cracking up and laughing and joshing, and he literally then turned to them and put the question to them. "Hey, guys, come here. Pauly thinks we should call – we should not call 2000 millennium, don't you think" – and they couldn't answer, they were just they were so freaked out by the fact that he was that loose.

KRISTOL: Was there any moment in 1998 when you thought he could actually be forced from office?

BEGALA: No, no.

KRISTOL: Is that right? You guys were pretty confident?

BEGALA: Yes. You know, for me, the bigger question was, would I resign? I almost did, and I chose not to because of the impeachment in part. And I really did take it seriously that I, like you, I had sworn an oath to the Constitution, not to any particular man, and I felt very deeply that the impeachment was unjust and unjustified. It wasn't warranted under the Constitution, that obligation then to stay. And I'm glad I made that decision.

I'm almost embarrassed it was so difficult but I never thought there was a real likelihood. That the most difficult – it's the only time I underestimated the American people was Podesta called me in his office, he was Chief of Staff. He had just come out of the Situation Room. We had decided to go after Saddam Hussein. Operation Desert Fox. And what I later learned is the Joint Chiefs were a little, like, sheepish about because the impeachment stuff and then Clinton said to them, "Just do your job. What if there was no impeachment, what would you recommend?" And then told him, "Well, we should have done it months ago." Actually, this is now the second or third violation. He'd been (INAUDIBLE). You know the whole history of Saddam. And there was something like 500 known or suspected sites of weapons of mass destruction we went after. And John told me, "We're going to bomb Iraq."

KRISTOL: This is like the week before or the week of impeachment. I remember this vividly. December –

BEGALA: This is like, right, coming into impeachment. It was actually it was the vote, I think they put off the vote day.

KRISTOL: I think they did. It was December of '98, yeah.

BEGALA: So it was right that same week with everything else happening. And John told me that. And that was the one moment I put my head in my hands. I said, "I don't know if people can take this." And I knew it wasn't *Wag the Dog* or whatever because I was quite sure we were ultimately going to win that. And all the polling – it wasn't just, like, faith – the polling was that this was a disaster for the Republicans.

So there was no, obviously – and, of course, we had a Republican Secretary of Defense, actually thank goodness because that protected us from the charge that – and those generals were never going to do that and they were unanimous in the recommendation to strike. And Clinton said, "Well, I'll handle the politics, you know, and I'll face the heat." And in the main, there were a few Republicans who complained, but in the main, the Republicans also said, "We have to do this." But just for that one moment when John told me that, I thought I don't know if the country can take this. And I'm proud to say the country totally got it, that they could hold two thoughts in their heads – big domestic fight here, but here's virtual unanimity that we had to knock this guy back.

KRISTOL: And at the end of the Clinton Presidency, there was the Gore campaign. And I can't remember – were you much involved, a little involved?

BEGALA: Very tangentially. Although I played George W. Bush in the debate preps. That was my job for Al Gore.

KRISTOL: Did you do a good job?

BEGALA: I think I did. I kicked his ass.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

BEGALA: You know, Gore is so smart. But I watched all the tapes of Bush, and I do think, as he would say, they underestimated him. He, you know, Ann Richards had been my county commissioner, I'd known her forever and a day. And no more gifted politician that I've ever seen and he beat her.

KRISTOL: And she was the incumbent governor in Texas in '94.

BEGALA: She was the incumbent Governor of Texas, and he beat her in the debate. So he was quite good. And I do think Team Gore might have underestimated him a bit. And Bush did some really smart things like on foreign policy. He didn't know much about it, and he famously told some reporter he thought the Taliban was a rock-and-roll band. But whatever, and there was only half of one debate. Can you imagine that?

KRISTOL: I know I was thinking –

BEGALA: And I think Jim Lehrer and he brought up various issues and you could – at least I believed – when Bush, kind of, wasn't sure, he just hugged Clinton because why not have national unity on national security, it's not what the election was going to be about. And he was, like, "I think the President's got Africa policy just right here."

And it was so smart in a way that IQ doesn't measure, his emotional intelligence. Enormously talented political strategist. And Gore who has, I think, a very high IQ did not have the same political sense. It was really – that actually was the most consequential election of my lifetime, and I think, obviously, Gore should have carried Arkansas and Tennessee and New Hampshire and Florida. I frankly think if they'd used Bill Clinton more they would have. The Gore people will say, well, we polled it and he wasn't popular with the swing voters and the swing states. My answer was, yeah, send him in, he will be by the time he gets out of the state. Turn him loose.

KRISTOL: And the Clinton people were frustrated by the Gore campaign.

BEGALA: Enormously beyond –

KRISTOL: And he personally was, without revealing any confidences.

BEGALA: Oh, yeah, yeah.

KRISTOL: I mean, he wanted Gore to win, right? He thought he would be a good –

BEGALA: Desperately. In fact, I think he might have helped Gore too much in the primaries by clearing the field. Really pressured Gephardt not to run and a lot of other really able Democrats. Now Bradley is a pretty impressive guy. But Gore is the only person in my memory to have a serious opponent and run the table in every single primary who was an incumbent President. And I think that's part of what bred the over-confidence going in to face Bush. That's – you know, finding that balance is difficult. You want to be confident. You look in the mirror and think, "I should have nuclear weapons," you know, you're probably not lacking in self-esteem. But you don't want to be so over-confident that you don't take your adversary seriously.

#### **IV: The 2016 Republican Field**

KRISTOL: So you've been talking about the 1990s. Now it's 2015. What strikes you about Washington or American politics today? The same, similar or different? What are you most impressed by?

BEGALA: This is not – I get this question a lot – I get this question a lot. This is the most polarized we've ever been. And there's polling that shows President Obama the most polarizing president in history followed by his predecessor, George W. Bush, followed by his predecessor, Bill Clinton. So we're in a moment of great polarization. Obviously, this is nothing like Vietnam. This is nothing like the Civil War. You know, Preston Brooks is not crowning, you know, Charles Sumner over the head with a cane like the 1850s.

And in fact, the President does have his haters. Obviously, every President does. This is what they're accusing him of. Being a Kenyan Marxist Socialist. The world has got millions of Kenyans who are lovely

and millions of Socialists and millions of Muslims. You know, they accused Clinton a lot worse, a lot worse. They accused him of murder. And so it's not – I mean, I think some of it is we all have to toughen up, political actors. This – go back and look at how Jefferson and Adams went at it, far more, far more savage than anything today. So I do think we all have toughen up.

I don't like the current climate – I think and I'm sorry to blame but I think it's young people. They all grow up, you know, because they get these stupid participation trophies for having been alive, during their five-year-old soccer game. I hate that stuff. You know, you have to toughen up. The world does not exist to protect you from having your feelings hurt. In fact, it's good to have your feeling hurt, toughen up, you're an American.

KRISTOL: Yeah, you better not become – you are teaching at Georgetown but you better not say that at Georgetown, you could get in a lot of trouble.

BEGALA: No, at Georgetown, I think the Jesuit tradition is pretty robust –

KRISTOL: They're probably tougher, yeah.

BEGALA: Tough guys. But I think this is the difference, though, and it might float. That we're not polarized as much but we're paralyzed. We can't get anything done. We got a farm bill done, thank goodness. That used to be one of the easy things. We can't even get a highway bill done. Everybody drives, everybody wants good roads. Like the easy, obvious stuff that always used to happen is not happening now and that's what I don't understand. I don't. I guess it's you know the way we gerrymander. Some of it is the media, people like me, people like you, you know spinning up my side and the other side. But I can't really put my finger on why.

But there's stuff in the worst of the Clinton/Gingrich wars. Newt and President Clinton stepped up and doubled the funding for the National Institutes of Health and National Cancer Institute. That wasn't a lot of money, it was about \$5 billion a year, no, it was more than that, it was about \$19 billion a year. But it was a joint Left-Right thing. And in fact, the Senate sponsor was Connie Mack, a cancer survivor, a Senator from Florida, who ran against, who was opposed in his last election by Hillary's brother. He didn't care, he wanted to help people with cancer. John Edward Porter was a Congressman from Illinois, a Republican, he was the House sponsor. And you know we came together. That should be obvious.

And I noticed this a couple weeks ago. The President announced a new initiative on cancer research. This is an issue I care about. Much, much smaller, really small. But okay, maybe, we don't have as much money. And he announced, and there was no Republican standing with him. Either he didn't reach out to them or they rejected him. Either option is bad.

That's something. I mean, cancer does not say, "Are you a Republican or a Democrat?" Even the stuff that used to be no-brainers to work together with we can't do. And that's what I don't understand. I think some of it is even voters. We keep firing people for the crime of compromise. Ask Richard Lugar, a Senator from Indiana. Ask Blanche Lincoln in her primary in Arkansas, a Democrat, because she was too moderate.

KRISTOL: Yeah, how did that work out?

BEGALA: Right. So what happens, we replaced a conservative Democrat with a conservative Republican.

KRISTOL: And then two years later or four years later, I guess, replaced a moderate Democrat with a conservative Republican and managed to destroy the Democratic Party in Arkansas. Yeah. Bill Clinton's state.

BEGALA: Yeah, I don't – I guess if I were a rich person, if I were a donor and these politicians came to me for money, I think what I would say is, you know, "I'll give you money but about 10 to 20 percent of

the time, I want you to piss me off” because, you know, that’s the sense that maybe you’re kind of doing something right. We can’t only always play to our base because no one is in sole possession of truth. There’s no – I mean, I’m a Democrat through and through, and I love my party – there’s no chance the Democrats are right on everything. You have to have cooperation with the other side.

KRISTOL: Do you think it’s a temporary thing? It was Bush and the war, and now Obama and the tough reelect and the Republicans. Also I think part of it – don’t you think? – is just Obama wins, he has a mandate. Republicans win in 2010, they have a mandate. Obama wins in 2012, he thinks they have got a mandate. 2014, Republicans win. And so it’s a little maybe just peculiar to this moment.

BEGALA: The demographics are such that for the foreseeable future, midterm elections look very strong for Republicans, Presidential elections look very strong for Democrats because the varying turnout among the rising American electorate. I do think that’s a big part of it.

I wonder – we talked earlier about the collapse of the Cold War – the Soviet Union. You know, I think people of our age are still of a mindset that was actually an anomaly in American history. You know, from Ike to Reagan and maybe Bush, our Presidents could – in Kennedy’s case, almost did – destroy the world. And so you had to have a little extra reverence. If you take that out, I think the kind of hating on Obama or Bush or Clinton is very much in the long tradition of American history. But if you’re a child of the Cold War, we couldn’t afford to do that. You know, as much as Democrats opposed Reagan or Republicans opposed Lyndon Johnson, there was, I think, a bedrock level of trust and support that you had to have or you couldn’t sleep at night. And so in a weird way, maybe that’s a good thing. But I do want to see us get back to the regular order of just getting stuff done, we can at least pave roads and fight cancer.

KRISTOL: Right. It all happens one way or the other. These things are cyclical. You and I have been through this and have discussed this. Whenever everyone agrees that something is the case, Republicans have an Electoral College locked, Democrats are demographically destined to win forever – usually the opposite happens. So I assume now that everyone is so obsessed with gridlock and partisanship, maybe it will break one way or the other.

BEGALA: Someone will – I think it’ll take a conscious effort. And then even on the House and the Senate, someone’s going to have to lose their job for never compromising.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that’s interesting.

BEGALA: We’ve had – you know, when Clinton ran, he talked about the braindead politics in both parties. He was sworn in for a second term, put his hand on the Bible, the book of the prophet Isaiah, “And thou shalt be called healer of the breach,” right, and they impeached him. Bush, who I knew in Austin, great guy, got along so well with the Democrats, and said that – “I want to be a uniter, not a divider” – even more divisive than Clinton. Obama’s most famous speech – “There’s no red states, there’s no blue states” – so we’ve had three presidencies in a row, three two-term presidencies in a row where a central animating motive of these politicians was to unite the country, and yet we’re more divided than ever. So some of it – what did Shakespeare say? – “The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in the stars, it lies in ourselves.” Some of it is us, we have to be better citizens.

KRISTOL: Right. What about – I mean, you’ll obviously be supporting Secretary Clinton here assuming she is the nominee or assuming she runs, which, I think, most people think she will in 2015/2016, I’m curious just analytically, so putting on your analyst hat since Republicans aren’t going to take your guidance about who to vote for in primaries, what do you think – do you think – I’m just curious, I mean, is Jeb Bush as much of a frontrunner as people think? What’s sort of analysis to the actual race?

BEGALA: You know, it’s not my party, so I’m often wrong, although actually I’ve never been wrong because they always nominate the oldest white guy in line. It’s a hierarchical party, it’s a party that values experience. So if you’ve lost before, it’s a good thing. I admire that actually – Democrats hate that, if you lose, you have to go to like –

KRISTOL: If you were a Republican, you would admire to a point and then think enough already, you know, I finally thought after 2008, maybe the Republicans would stop nominating the loser from the past time. And sure enough they nominated Romney. And it's not always the way to get the best candidate.

BEGALA: But if they do it this time – I guess the last man standing from Romney, I believe, is Rick Santorum.

KRISTOL: I know. Let's assume it doesn't happen this time. Yeah, right.

BEGALA: Your party is so much more in a state of flux. My party now is the hierarchical, it seems very settled. It's never been that way. We always want the shiny new thing. And so it's so interesting. Analytically, it's going to be really fun to watch. But mostly the establishment candidate winds up winning. That certainly would favor Jeb. But this time, the establishment lane is very crowded. It was not when Romney ran or George W. Bush.

So not only do you have Jeb, you've got lots of others who can really plausibly claim that – being much more establishment than, say, Tea Party or Christian conservative or libertarian. The three governors in the Midwest, I think, are really impressive – Scott Walker, John Kasich, Mike Pence. Really impressive. And with the exception of Pence, in blue states and having to govern successfully and campaign successfully in blue states, that always gets my attention. I would not count out Ted Cruz being a Texan, watching him win a landslide down there. He has Barack Obama's education and Sarah Palin's politics, so nobody can say, "Oh, he's stupid." That's always such a cheap conceit from my side. He's brilliant. And maybe the most conservative member of the United States Senate. And I think the party may – I'm serious – so I really have no idea.

But there's such a diversity on your side, not just lots of candidates but lots of – I mean, Rand Paul. You know, on national security, Hillary Clinton is probably closer to the majority of Republicans than Rand Paul is, and Rand Paul, he said he wants to end all foreign aid even to Israel. Do you know how much damage that would do to the United States? I mean, I know we're a noble country but we don't do that just because we're good guys, we do it because that's our national security. So I can't wait to see it develop but that's where all the action is going to be. You know, on my side, the press will try to pretend there's a fight. It would be better if Hillary had a fight, I'd rather she had a really tough primary challenge. I just don't see it coming.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I know. I mean, Obama, I remember in 2008 him being on TV Tuesday after Tuesday as Obama and Clinton slugged it out and our friend, Karl Rove would say, "That's really damaging the Democrats." You know, and there's a poll, 32 percent of the Obama voters said they moved over to Clinton. Remember this? And 50 percent of the Clinton voters said they went from – And I remember saying, I don't remember any of that. I mean, that's just like the heat of the fight. But they're all going to vote for the Democrat nominee. And I think this fight is helping the person who ends up winning and I think it did end up certainly not hurting in way but –

BEGALA: It helped Obama, and I think he would tell you that. I think they toughened each other up and tested each other out. And he had to put – especially on foreign policy – he had to put his ideas through a pretty rigorous test. I think that could be good for the Republicans, too. Instead of just taking as a given America's role in the world or what we ought to do about Social Security – I mean, almost everything is on the table with the diversity of candidates you have.

KRISTOL: I mean, one friend of mine made a point – I'm curious if you agree with this – with Bush having such a huge fundraising advantage, you can't sort of run, it'd be hard to run just an orthodox, conventional campaign. Hey, you were younger, I'm a governor. But my ideas are basically the same as Bush. I think at that point if you have 10 times as much money or 5 times as much money, you probably win.

So I think it might encourage the sort of other Republican candidates to be a little more imaginative or inventive in their message because just to be able to cut through against among themselves first of all to emerge as the alternative or leading alternative and then to have a chance against Bush.

BEGALA: Absolutely. And the democratization of media has money somewhat less important. If you're clever enough and you make an ad that catches on.

Joni Ernst just got herself elected to the Senate from Iowa. First, in a crowded primary field and then against the candidate the Democrats wanted, he turned out to not perform very well. But that's – She got everybody's attention from making Todd Harris, made the most creative ad of the cycle where she talked about growing up on a farm and how she castrated hogs. Boy, that will help her cut the pork in Washington. Brilliant. Funny. It caught on. I went and watched it on YouTube.

You know, so I think people who can live off the land, who are creative, which I don't know if they can win, but that would favor, it seems to me, maybe Cruz, we haven't seen him but Huckabee and Santorum have proven to be resourceful and creative and be able to go on a shoestring budget.

KRISTOL: Do you think the money situation has changed because of super pacs, too, that the sort of conventional fundraising is less important? If, I mean, Jeb Bush can get a zillion \$2,600 checks to his campaign but if one or two billionaires like someone else, they can fund super pacs that would keep someone else in the game or –

BEGALA: Yeah. I, of course, advised the probe on the super pac, which is now going to be a probe, Hillary super pac. And so they're the most important point. They still, it's still so much more important what a campaign does. But there's a level at which if you can if you're creative and you can – the free press matters so much more than paid ads in a presidential campaign, far, far more. It's more credible and people see it and they believe it more. And then you can get into the free press with a clever video or a clever, you know, particularly something that's funny. I think wit is way under-valued in politics. People are drawn to that.

I'm not sure who the wittiest one is although Huckabee is a very funny guy. A great sense of humor. Yeah, I think and then so I guess they have to be creative, live off the land, be fearless, don't be afraid to be an insurgent in a party that used to not like insurgents. But then find some billionaire, some eccentric billionaire who will finance, you know, vicious attacks on Jeb Bush. That's kind of – I mean, I think Santorum had strong support from Foster Freiss who's a very generous donor. And Sheldon Adelson, I know, helped Newt through an independent super pac. So there's you know you can find somebody.

KRISTOL: And Santorum almost beat Romney in Michigan and Ohio. People have really forgotten that, that was a close run thing and Romney outspent him 5, 10 to 1 by conventional metrics.

BEGALA: You know, I've done two campaigns against Rick Santorum. He won one and my client, Bob Casey won one. So I have high regard for his talent. And what he has that Republicans need is sort of a blue-collar Republicanism. He should have beaten Romney in those Midwestern primaries, even in Michigan. But he dragged back into social issues, which even the Republican Party, they were like this is too divisive. Remember he got asked about women in combat and birth control and –

KRISTOL: Or Catholic – John Kennedy's speech and –

BEGALA: Oh, that's right. Kennedy's speech when Kennedy spoke to the Baptist ministers in Houston and said that there should be a separation, that made me nauseous and sick to my stomach. You know, he keeps getting drawn back into those. If he had stayed on the Republican version of blue-collar populism, he would have beaten Romney, the private equity guy, in his home state.

KRISTOL: Yeah, it'll be interesting. I do wonder how many of the usual rules are out. I mean, as you said, the parties have sort of flipped. The Democrats are nominating the next in line, the senior person in Republicans seem to have a wide open race. But if you think about the change in the situation of money,

the super pacs, the schedule has been changed, media has changed so much in the last 10, 15 years, obviously the Internet. You sort of wonder how much the – what happened in recent campaigns whether that will happen again. I think most people assume it will – donors and –

BEGALA: Well, the one with the most money the year before the election begins always wins, except Obama beat Hillary.

KRISTOL: And I think on the Republican side, McCain did not have the most money. So in that race, they both – everyone has sort of forgotten that.

BEGALA: They always have these stupid rules because the sample is so small. We've had so few presidential – so the taller guy always wins. Okay, John Kerry is like a foot taller than George W. Bush, how'd that work out for him? You know, we always have these rules, when the truth is you've got to put them on the track and let them run.

KRISTOL: Let me ask you one last question. I'm just curious about this. Were you always a liberal, basically a Democrat? I mean, how did that happen? You seem like such a bright, such a bright pleasant guy. We need to have an explanation of this.

BEGALA: I grew up in one of the most conservative places in America, in Sugarland, Texas, in the 1970s. And our Congressman was Tom DeLay for many years, who was like the liberal.

KRISTOL: What is Sugarland, a suburb of Dallas?

BEGALA: It's now a suburb of Houston. It was a small town that was far from Houston. And the growth has come. We had a prison and a sugar mill and that was about it. And now it's huge and beautiful and very nice and I don't go there any more – it's not where I grew up. But I don't know.

I guess – I think I came of age politically in college at the University of Texas. Before that, you know I cared about politics. I've always been and remain a faithful Catholic and I think that has always informed me. And as you know, Catholics very often you know there's a social gospel that moves you toward I guess what America would be – economic liberalism. At the same time, there's a reverence for family and for marriage and that doctrine of personal responsibility. But my parents, you know, I guess my mother is, I think, liberal, and I think my father is probably moderate to conservative. But they voted and they were informed but they weren't very into it. They had lives to lead and children to raise and jobs.

The biggest thing – this is even in the 70s, though – was the prevalence of racism and race as an issue. My parents are from New Jersey. I was born in New Jersey. They didn't have a prejudiced bone in their body then or now, and that was absolutely forbidden. And they weren't bad people but everybody I grew up with said the "N-word" all the time. All the time. And my parents were repulsed by that and so I was repulsed by that. And I think maybe that was the dominant issue. And I was post-segregation. Our school was fully integrated, it was the 70s. But there was still such visceral racism. Not by everybody. Everybody used the "N-word," but often not even, you know, thinking about it in a way that people did back then.

So on that one, that was the biggest issue. And frankly, the big government was right, the feds were right, Lyndon Johnson was right, the Democrats were right. And maybe that had an effect. But it was really much more in college. You know, I went to the University of Texas, which is this beautiful blue oasis of liberalism in blood red Texas.

KRISTOL: So we can blame the university. But I was struck – my wife's family, my wife's mother's family really is from the South, and I do think if you had decent attitudes on race relations and were really concerned, certainly a generation ahead of you but even maybe in the 70s, it probably pushed one to the liberal and Democratic side. Fairly or unfairly, you know, the Democrats in fact were running the South, of course, all those years with their segregation. But somehow that got, that got lost –

BEGALA: Well, they turned it, that's the thing. You know, tomorrow is not like today. I was born in 1961. The Democrats were the party of segregation, of vicious racism. Even there were Democrats who opposed anti-lynching laws in Texas – opposed them, wanted to not criminalize lynching. Those were all Democrats.

In my home county of Ft. Bend County, Texas, there's a very famous Supreme Court case where once people began to enforce the laws which allowed African Americans to vote, the Democratic Party of Ft. Bend County, Texas, formed a private association called the Jay Bird Club. And the only people who could vote for the Jay Bird Club were white people and then the Jay Bird nominee was the only Democrat who was put on the ballot and so it effectively disenfranchised black people and the Supreme Court said, "No, you can't do that either." So there's this long legacy, you're right. But the Democrats have completely flipped. And it shows you, you know, the capacity even for huge and old institutions to reinvent themselves.

KRISTOL: That's a good note on which to end. So, Paul, thanks so much for joining me today and thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]