

# CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

## Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: James W. Ceaser, University of Virginia

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### **I: Rational Reverence for the Law (00:15 – 14:58)**

KRISTOL: Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol, and I'm very pleased to have as our guest today, Jim Ceaser, Professor of Government at the University of Virginia, distinguished scholar, writer for *The Weekly Standard* and other important journals. And a public figure in your own right, as well as being a great scholar.

CEASER: Thank you for the invitation.

KRISTOL: Good to have you. So most people think of you as a popular professor and a well-known scholar and intellectual, but I think of you as the person who drives around Virginia with FED49 on your license plate. Is that right, I think that's right?

CEASER: That is correct.

KRISTOL: Now what is that about?

CEASER: Well, it stands for *Federalist* 49, which is the *Federalist Paper* which defends the Constitution, and therefore defends law. So for everyone on the road, they have a chance to remind themselves of the Constitution, and especially the tailgaters because when they come close, they see it straight up and those are the ones who need the most restraint.

KRISTOL: And does that work?

CEASER: I haven't been able to do a rigorous scientific test yet of its efficacy. But I do my part in whichever way I can.

KRISTOL: It shows your loyalty to the *Federalist Papers* and the separation of powers in the Constitution.

CEASER: It does. And in that case, I think that paper is especially important because, in a way, when you think about it, that's the paper that invented constitutionalism. A constitution written on paper in and of itself is not necessarily something that people revere, that they look up to. I believe when the Founders wrote the Constitution they had no idea, or could've had no idea early on, that it would've been a document that would've been revered. After all, we don't revere the constitution of New Jersey.

So what had to be created was a way of taking this written document and elevating into something more than just a piece of paper. And Madison takes that step in *Federalist* 49 arguing that a fundamental

document can be looked at with a degree of reverence and veneration. And so the Constitution, in our system, plays a little bit the role of, say, the monarchy in Britain, something that's more than just a material thing, that raises something higher. And it's been treated that way more or less. There have been periods, of course, when people have taken off against the Constitution. The Southerners did, the Progressives did. But I think it's held a pretty high place in American political life.

KRISTOL: And what struck me when I first remember reading *Federalist* 49, maybe as an undergraduate, I guess, is, I mean, that he intended this. That somehow you think over history it became venerated. But he says, if I'm not mistaken, in *Federalist* 49, we need the Constitution to be venerated. Maybe he even uses that term, *veneration* or *venerated*, and that that's hard because, of course, it's a popular document, so it's not like something that was given down by a mysterious lawgiver centuries ago.

CEASER: Right. It was a created idea to take a piece of paper, as I said, and take a constitution and make it into what we call constitutionalism. So and it was done with a theory behind it. Of course, one of the reasons was, the immediate reason was a debate that he was having with Jefferson about the status of the Constitution. Jefferson's view was, well, we'll redo the Constitution every generation, which in effect means we won't venerate it. And Jefferson wrote a number of letters saying we don't want to venerate constitutions, this is like making it the Ark of the Covenant; we want to keep the system open to change and transformation. Law should never have this degree of the impact over human beings in subsequent generations. And, of course, this all had to do with the status of the past and what degree do we look up to our ancestors.

And Madison answers, well, very prudentially, veneration is part of it, this is supposed to be reverence, but rational reverence. So in effect by rational reverence of the Founders, you're revering not just the paper but the thought behind it or you're revering the political science behind it. So for those who are so inclined, they can reeducate themselves on why the Constitution was written as it was.

And in addition to that point as well, I think Madison wanted the Constitution to endure for a long time with chances for change. It really goes to an idea of how people think. I think the Constitution was an effort to structure how the public mind works; does the public mind work in the vein that we're going to change everything as we see fit today, or does the public mind work in such a way, well, we can change lots of things, but it's a good idea to think of what was done before, especially by those who were in a position to think deeply about a situation. So it was really, and I think it was seen this way as the structuring of the public mind.

That's why when it came to the Progressive periods, the Progressives attacked not just the Constitution but the idea of constitutionalism because they said, well, that's fine for the 18th century, but the 20th century is something entirely new, and, therefore, if we venerate the past, we've tied ourselves to the past, we're men of the future, we're looking ahead, no reason to look back to anything like that. So it becomes in a way a debate over the public mind, in the public manner of looking at the law.

KRISTOL: I want to come back to that because I think you teach political and yet – not yet – but the *Federalist* is so central to what you teach, I guess, in American politics, and I want to come back and have you explain why that's the case, why it's not simply or mostly of historical interest or point of departure for your studies.

But you get away at the University of Virginia, the university founded by Mr. Jefferson, as they say down there, with driving around with a license plate that has on it the one *Federalist Paper* that, I think, explicitly criticizes Jefferson, right? You're a Madison person, not a Jefferson person on this important point, it seems. Very tolerant of UVA to let you teach there.

CEASER: Most of them don't get the point, but, of course, there are 84 other *Federalist Papers* that people could put on their license plate to continue the dialogue, and I know you're a Virginian, Bill. I invite you to try one. *Federalist* 38 might be good for you.

KRISTOL: I should do that. So let's talk. You are a political scientist. You not a – you don't teach in the history department. You don't teach, primarily, political philosophy, though you studied that, and it's informed by that. But I take it you would say that the *Federalist* and the Founding, in general, for understanding American politics, remains central both as, what, a guide to the way it works and a guide to the way it should it work.

CEASER: Yeah, both. And it's also a guide – an interesting point since you mentioned political science, that our system is probably the system which was founded or established more than any other with reference to political science. If you think of all the countries in the world, how many invoked or explicitly relied on political science? The Constitution would not have been the way it is without political science.

So in a strange way, the American experiment is tied to political science and political science, if it understood itself well today, should understand itself as tied to the American experiment. This is the test case for political science. I think you could look at instances before that where elements of political science were adapted by specific leaders, but this explicit reliance on founding with the assistance of political science, I think the American case is the test case –

KRISTOL: The new science of politics, doesn't the *Federalist* use that phrase?

CEASER: Yeah, they do. They speak of the science of politics, and they use it. And so it's an experiment in, really, human history, to what extent can this science actually help to improve the human condition?

I mean, the other sciences like medicine, we have them. They didn't always improve the human condition. I think when people were being bled, it probably harmed more hurt. And I know some doctors of political science have had the same effect of harming more than hurt. But this was a chance to put this experiment before history and see if it could actually result in something positive.

KRISTOL: And so when you teach it, I mean, what's distinctive, what are the core elements that you think people maybe don't capture today, don't see today either in the science of politics or in the American experiment?

CEASER: Well, one thing is political science is not just an academic discipline, which is written for other academics and validated by other academics, which is what sometimes we mean by profession today. It's self-sustaining. After all, it's a big profession now. It has one of the largest conventions. If you're highly touted at a political science convention, you could consider yourself famous. The world might not remember you centuries later but for the moment it sustains itself.

But the political science of the Founding – and the Founders are something really quite different. It was meant to play a role inside of the political world. In that sense, it was a practical science, it drew on theory but it was really meant to aid and assist those who acted in politics. And I think every explanation in political science ought to have that at least in the background – can what we are studying and thinking about, can it be of assistance to those who act in the political world?

And acting means not merely acting as a leader, it could also be thinking because thinking is a form of acting. So that, I think, is the direction of, let's say, Aristotelian or classical political science as an assistant or advisor to those who act; understanding that those who act always have to take into account the circumstances and use advice as we all use advice. Maybe it's okay in general, but the specifics require me to do something else.

KRISTOL: And the Founders' advice stands up pretty well, you think, in terms of their core arguments, whether it's extending the sphere in *Federalist* 10 or separation of powers in *Federalist* 47 to 51, the executive, all these kind of key elements?

CEASER: I would think it can defend itself. I mean, there are always questions about whether there were other models that are superior for other places. We've never really been proselytizers for the American Constitution per se. We've been proselytizers or friends of liberal government and democratic government, representative government. But Americans have never demanded that before a negotiation with, say, the Brits, we won't talk to you unless first adopt the presidential system.

So we've understood that choices of systems are peculiar, and I think you could say that the American system works very well here. It might be questionable in its effects in other places. So to that extent, I wouldn't say that this was meant to be a model for everywhere. But I think it's worked pretty well here. And I also think that the efforts to change it now as some have advocated are misbegotten. And in any case, on pure conservative grounds, if something is working pretty well, you don't tear the whole house down and start again.

KRISTOL: That's a good point. I really hadn't thought of that, I mean, that the presidential system, it hasn't actually been that popular really in the rest of the world. The rest of the world, wouldn't you say, most liberal democracies remain more or less parliamentary, maybe with a touch of presidentialism in some of them. But basically the big countries, including the countries that we won in World War II against and therefore had a big role and when they set up democracies after 1945, Germany, Japan didn't – doesn't look like the American system. It looks more like Britain basically.

CEASER: Right. They grew out of parliamentary systems and given that that was their indigenous roots, there was no need to change it. In some systems, maybe people have done studies and counted these things, not always with great intelligence. Some of these American systems were developed in Latin America and then turned into dictatorships. I don't think it was because of the constitution; I think that they were so prone anyhow to *caudillismo*.

I would say, maybe, there was some transformation in the Fifth French Republic in favor of something moving in the American direction because what they had experienced under a parliamentary system was a system in which, unlike the Westminster system where you had one-party control usually, they had coalition governments. And it turned out that the coalition governments ran into great difficulty, couldn't sustain themselves. During the Algerian crisis, really there was no government. Every time a coalition formed, it would break apart. And people in France looked at the American model and they said, "Whatever else happens with politics in an ordinary way, we need some figure who can act for the good of the nation above politics when necessary." So in a way, it was a recourse to what I think the Founders had in mind by a presidency, that there's some office who can work of the good of the nation in a time of emergency. And so the French Republic adopted our system or a presidential aspect of our system, at least for that reason, combined in a strange way with the parliamentary system so that the French can have what they always want, which is cohabitation.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Good. So the presidential system, I guess, really, is in a way one of the distinct, maybe the distinctive, aspect of the American system. I mean, there are forms of free government but it does seem like a strong president and, I guess, it was invented here for some of the same reasons that the French were attracted to it, right?

CEASER: I believe it was maybe a reaction to the experiences of the Articles but a realization really of the need that if you're going to be a strong nation – and I think United States aspired to be that – that it would require an executive. The executive is the one who acts in a way that not everything can be handled by law.

Of course, the parliamentary system wasn't well understood in parliamentary regimes at the time because of the confusion that they thought they had an executive mainly in the form of a monarch. And they did and they half didn't. And as these things occur, some things in politics are formed by growth or accident, and some things are formed by reflection. Our system is pretty much – the constitutional

system has a large degree of reflection. And a large degree in which the reflection has remained the basis of how things actually work. Of course, you can find all sorts of institutions in the Constitution that don't work as originally intended; the Electoral College being one. But the basic structure still remains intact, and the logic of it remains intact today.

## **II: Origins of Party Government (14:58 – 35:42)**

KRISTOL: But as you say, there are things that have emerged since the Founding, and you wrote an excellent book on one of those things, which is really parties and party government in America, which and that's one of the changes, I suppose, both in the mode of presidential selection, and of course, in the actual operation of the separated powers, as well once you have a Republican Party and a Democratic Party or a Whig Party and a Democratic-Republican Party or whatever it was back then. So say a word on that. I remember that was the first thing of yours I read and I was very struck by it.

CEASER: And you remember it to this day?

KRISTOL: I remember it to this day. And I remember you made the argument that it didn't just happen, either, that it sort of was intended, the notion of strong, setting up parties in the United States at some point.

CEASER: Initially, it grew as a result of circumstance or accident, that is, once the Constitution got underway and politics began, people found that they disagreed more profoundly than they thought they would. And so they resorted to parties, not with the idea of establishing a party system but with the idea of winning, defeating the opposition, destroying it, then going back to the Constitution as originally intended as a regime without parties.

So the first phase, the Jeffersonian phase, was a phase without intention of parties. Still, there was the example that they had been used, which was important. And it's interesting that that phase ended with the abolition of parties. That's what the era of good feeling was about, it was return or so some thought, to the original Founding plan of politics without parties. And many militated against the formation of parties, including Andrew Jackson early on, when he was elected, James Monroe. They chased parties from Washington and thought they were going back to something.

So it was in the second phase that when parties were reestablished, say, in the 1830s, that that there was a kind of conscious effort to rebuild them. And, of course, it was never put directly into the Constitution, it was done extra-constitutionally, but with an understanding that it was a decision made at the level of constitutional structure.

And my hero in that book, or at least the early part of the book, is none other than Martin Van Buren, the statesman, if you will, who was most responsible for helping to reestablish parties with the general view of why we needed it. And I think his argument was in part, that it transformed the Constitution a little bit but was necessary in part to save the Constitution; because what he feared was the advent of demagogic leaders.

And this he thought would occur in a situation without parties, people running, five or six or seven of them trying to get a piece of the electorate in order to become elected president. Somewhat like a primary today. And goodness knows, in our national primaries, we have more than an ample amount of demagoguery as people appeal to a particular segment. That's what the final elections would've been like without parties.

KRISTOL: And then it would have gone to the Electoral College –

CEASER: The Electoral College and they didn't like that. But Van Buren, in particular, thought it would divide the country sectionally. You'd have a southern candidate, a northern candidate and tear the country apart.

So the party, at least the original version of parties, is a conservative idea in the sense of trying to tamp down this demagoguery. Look for two institutions that were national in character and allow politicians to have a say in elevating these people so you could get safe candidates on fairly safe national principles.

That was his idea, and it worked for a while. The problem is that parties are a very curious animal. You could think of parties a little bit as institutions. But parties are the point where something new can enter the political arena as well; they're the gateways for movements and passions, they're expressive of something. The problem, I suppose, from a Van Buren point of view and others, is that the parties soon became vehicles in the 1850s for expressing the deepest division, which turned out to be a sectional division.

And so parties have always had this dual character. Sometimes institutions, and many political scientists have treated them that way, that tampers down a dangerous division, and parties as vital sources of expression for something new. Movements becoming parties and bringing something new, new wine into old bottles. So I think the understanding of parties is difficult in that respect. It always has to be handled on both registers.

KRISTOL: I think that today one could argue that it does both, right. I mean, it seems to me that Democrats channeled the progressives or the antiwar sentiment in the 60s and 70s, the spirit of, let's say. And they channeled it into an existing Party, which to some degree tamed it a little bit. But also that sentiment took over the Party, you could say, and I think the Tea Party today, you could argue both changing the Republican Party but also somewhat tamed by being channeled into the Republican Party and preventing that kind of, you know, let's have seven different parties and seven sects, each in a more European way, each prosecuting its own narrow agenda which –

CEASER: Yeah, I think in the working out it's worked out fairly well. I mean, you've had moments where parties have been taken over by a movement, even in those situations where they've taken over, they've had to usually accommodate for the majority with the part that they defeated. So it's always had a little bit of a moderating effect. On the other hand, you do want parties to be able to express something new. It is a democracy, and the people speak. So it's a complex institution. And I'd say the moderating role is an important one.

I know there was all this criticism when the southerners, mostly the southern white population shifted from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party, much to the consternation of many commentators who want to argue that the Republican Party's a racist party. My goodness, if you take the most cynical view, what you see has happened is that you were able to incorporate a huge number, a mass of people into an existing political system rather than outside of it. If you just want to take it on the crudest level, and I think actually people have looked at and shown it's a little bit of an exaggeration how Democrats today want to depict the once solid South for them, the now solid South for Republicans. And as you know, the most solid parts of the country are really Democratic now more than Republican, the East Coast and West Coast.

KRISTOL: And I think it's very much part of the health of the American system that these populist movements, Left and Right, or original movements or reactions against other movements, in a way, grow up and they do tend, I think, as partly because of parties – partly because of federalism. I'm curious to hear you on that, too.

They can win primaries, they can enter parties, and they don't become 20 percent of the population disaffected outside of the two big parties, really unhappy with the system as whole. They tend to be able to – well, the Tea Party is a good example – they win some primaries and suddenly Marco Rubio and

Ted Cruz are possible contenders for a presidential nomination. If you're a Cruz enthusiast or a Rand Paul enthusiast or a Marco Rubio enthusiast, you feel like you're part of the Republican Party and you want your guy to, maybe, dominate the Republican Party. You're not unhappy with the system. So, in that respect, I think very much, maybe, in the spirit of Madison, you've channeled a lot of popular sentiments and energies, some of them healthy, some of them maybe less so, depending on anyone's point of view, into the system, not against the system.

CEASER: I think that's true. And even if you didn't have primaries, which people raise questions about, you would have third parties briefly. But the history of the third parties is that they, too, eventually are looking to form a coalition since there's only one presidency. So even if you had parties that were arranged a little bit in a more closed way, I think the third parties that started would always be looking to make deals with one of the major parties, always looking for that majority for the presidency.

KRISTOL: The presidential system has an effect on it –

CEASER: I think it's a really important factor in bringing the parties together. And we saw that in France as well. You've got more than two parties but they coalesce into two groups usually. Every so often, you've got a third but they're forced to coalesce finally if you need a majority.

KRISTOL: And do you agree that federalism is – I've come to more of an appreciation, I'd say, of federalism and decentralization over the years in the sense that it just allows, in a way that's not the case in a place like France, I think. You know, citizens in one part of the country to win a primary, to win an election, to organize themselves, to get represented at the national level because they would still be a minority, perhaps at a national level, but because there are these local races to win and both local races like Mayor and Governor and local races like Congressman and Senator for the federal government. Again they kind of get these sentiments usually get channeled into the broader system, not against it.

CEASER: Yeah, they do because, I mean, because they're part of the system at the level at which they have authority. And I think that was one of the original reasons for federalism and still is. I'm happy that the people of Colorado have their peyote and cannabis. That doesn't mean that we have to.

The other reason goes back to a Tocquevillean reason, which has always been one of the reasons I've looked at the importance of localism and federalism. We could put those together, they're a little bit different, is that where people are going to become citizens in some sense – and by people here, I don't mean 100 percent of the population. If it's 5 percent, it's still a massive number. Citizens have a chance and opportunity to have some influence at a level closer to home. And this is what makes them want to be a citizen. Why participate if you just show up like at a high school race for presidency, you show up, there's nothing really to be won. You really have to have the power, the power has to be there or it's ridiculous to contend for office. And so it's only by ruling, as Tocqueville says, in small things at the local level where people can exercise this notion of citizenship or what sometimes called republicanism. This is something that's greatly endangered today because of so many things that are being run more and more by federal government, federal influence.

Even if you can argue, here's Tocquevillean grounds as well, that the decisions made in the short run are better by the federal government than would be made by local majorities. His answer would be, "So what?" Far more important is that the long-term effects of people governing and playing some role in government. That, I think, is greatly in danger.

I was always a little bit skeptical of No Child Left Behind; I understood that it had its reasons in trying to break up unions, but from a traditional point of view, or Tocquevillean, it's a bad idea. And now I think this Common Core is a worse idea. I know this isn't the prevailing view in Washington. But when you think about it, there's one thing that people think that they know something about, it's having some influence over the education of their children. And there's no reason why they can't listen to federal advice, but to be commanded from the center and have the decisions removed slowly by the center; this

is what we see in one area after others, people alienating their power. That's one of the, I think, still key reasons for federalism.

And to make a final point. The country being the way it is now, divided and polarized in many ways, people will want to live where the institutions are closer to their way of life. And it's probably just as well that people in Utah can govern themselves differently under different standards than say people in San Francisco. Both are happy; they don't have to come up with one solution.

KRISTOL: I mean, Tocqueville feared though that the natural tendency would be centralization. That does seem to have been. And do you think there's much chance of reversing that? Or could one really, could a party, I suppose it would be the Republicans probably, come to power and really try to decentralize sort of some fundamental aspects of governance? I'm sympathetic to the idea, I just wonder if it's practical.

CEASER: I think it's fairly practical on some things more than you'd think. And we've had the example, strangely enough, in the last eight years of showing the importance of state governments. The most important political dynamic, one of the most important in the last eight years has been what has happened with the public unions and the public union movement and putting a halt to the union movement. That's entirely been driven at the state level. I think when people look back on this period, they'll see that is one of the – it's the singular contribution of the Republican Party in domestic affairs but it's also an important change in the character of our system.

Maybe drugs, maybe same-sex marriage, although that one probably at some point is going to have to go national, just by the dynamics. But I think it is possible. And it would take a party to stand up and make it a position. And that, after all, is what the Constitution is about in a large degree.

One great difficulty, going back to *Federalist* 49, is how we understand what the Constitution is. So many take the Constitution to be decisions made in the Supreme Court. I'm amazed at speaking with the students that I teach in American politics. You ask what the Constitution is. Basically for them it's the Bill of Rights and decisions made by the Supreme Court, that's the Constitution. Anything else is politics, politics usually in lower sense. So what's lost is the idea of the Constitution as a document, which in a way sets up how the country is governed and ruled, sets up the degree of power that should be in Washington and the degree of power that should be in the states.

And I know that that part of the Constitution is the most difficult. Madison realized that the idea of trying to list powers was going to be problematic. But that doesn't preclude a party from going to the country and saying, "Look, there's certain things that we want to do more at the state level, let's try and do it." That doesn't mean going back and abolishing Social Security or anything like that. Constitutionalism for political actors is different from constitutionalism by courts. Courts have to find a rigid rule. People in politics can say, "Look, we just think the Constitution means a lot more power at the state level, that's the direction in which we're going to move, don't ask me what Article X, Section B means of the Constitution, that's not what's important. We regard the Constitution as a political document offering us guidance."

KRISTOL: And I do think that if Republicans were going to make that case, it be important for them to make it not simply as the outcomes will be better in education policy or health care or whatever, but that it's better for people to have more control over their lives and over the decisions, over the political communities that will decide some of these things. So they need to make more of a self-government argument and a little less of a cost-benefit argument, I think.

CEASER: Right, I think they do. Some people will be sympathetic to it. Out in the West, they don't like quite as much government control of their land. They don't like federal posses. And others like to do things in different ways. It is important to keep in mind, you know, when what's a popular argument that it, we're not talking about 100 percent of the citizens. But I think a large percentage of citizens who are active, even if it's 1 or 2 percent in the United States is one of the keys to the maintenance of America's



system. That you have some people who know how to get together, how to act politically, have the confidence of doing so, have the habits of doing so. And that's inspired in part by civic associations. It's also inspired by local government.

KRISTOL: Yeah and political parties.

CEASER: And parties, parties having a local element because, as you say, these parties, they a national dimension, but they're also important at the state and local level where people's energies are often focused.

KRISTOL: I want to come back to your intellectual breakthrough on political parties for a minute because, I do think, I remember when I read the book in grad school, it was so surprising, and I think it was a real breakthrough. I mean what led you—Martin Van Buren was not, is not usually on the list of the 10 most important American presidents. I think he's generally regarded as sort of Andrew Jackson's kind of political guy, right, who then succeeded him for one term, and I guess he had a horrible depression right and got voted out of office. So how did you come upon this?

CEASER: Well, I came upon it from the modern conditions. The book started really with the reforms in the primary system, presidential primary – selection system in the 60s and 70s. It started as a result of what had happened at the '68 convention. And the transformation of the convention system up through '68, it was still possible to be nominated by a convention, the convention actually doing the work, rather than primaries. And the effect of the –

KRISTOL: And Humphrey in '68 who was the Democratic nominee and won, I think, no primaries.

CEASER: He never entered a primary, as I recall. And the bosses still had a role or at least Daley thought he did, he certainly made that point on television in no uncertain terms. So we had a very important change within the nominating system for nominations, the transformation from a half convention/half primary system, which was the case, say, from 1912 to 1968, to an entirely primary or popular dominated system. So a change in how we select or nominate our presidents, a change in how people run for president, that's the other point, is that this is not only who selects but how people act to try and acquire the nomination.

So I got in it from that point of view, looking at this institution, treating the nomination process not as something internal to parties but as part of a constitutional issue, because the original Electoral College was meant to be, if you want to put it, both the nominating and the electing system. And once parties started out, the party part went to the, quote, private or party side, but it was still something that the Framers when they thought of it, they raised the question, How do we select the president in such a way that you select good candidates and don't destroy the country while selecting them?

So I tried to return the thinking about the nomination politics to its constitutional status. And that led me to look back at all the periods in American history where you had decisive transformations in the either final election or mostly in the nominating process, and why that was done. Sometimes, it was a result of accident, sometimes it was the result of reflection. And those were the moments. And since Van Buren was pivotal in establishing the legitimacy of two parties, coming from a situation in the 1820s where everyone would've said, "America is a system without parties and we're better for it" to the late 1830s where everyone when asked "What are the first features the American constitutional system?", they would have said, "Well, of course, we have two parties."

So I looked at those moments, and that's how I got back to the wonders of Martin Van Buren. I also learned in the process or at least it's suggested, that the second most important word in the English language after *like*, which is *okay*, seems to have been linked to Martin Van Buren; *okay* being for Old Kinderhook, which he came from, Old Kinderhook clubs. So that attracted me very much to him as well.

KRISTOL: Very useful. Then you discovered some book he'd written or some at least pamphlet, was it. *In Defense of Parties*. It was pretty explicit, right?

CEASER: He wrote a book, yeah, he wrote book. It sounds a little bit like, parts of it like Burke's defense of parties. He wrote a book on political parties and said he wanted to put them, view them in a different light. And he was part of a movement, other – some other journalists and newspaper writers who actually said about the idea of defending parties. They were deeply worried, as they had a right to be from the election of 1824, what American politics would look like without parties.

1824 was for them, the institutional fire-bell in the night of segmented parties, demagogic politics. And, unfortunately, in some ways, we've come back to this in some of the ideas of candidates who run to segments of the population who start 2 or 3 years before the time the president is elected. All these properties, which they worried about in 1824, have resurfaced in American parties, although within the parties, rather than the final election process.

### **III: A Constitutional Politics (35:42 – 44:07)**

KRISTOL: I'm struck how much you seem to have been informed as you've studied this different aspect of American politics and American history by this broader sense of the Constitution. I mean, it's not just the document itself or the Article 1 and 2 and 3 and so forth, that there's somehow a constitutional system that is both formal and informal. That seems to me to have very much shaped your thinking about America. I mean –

CEASER: Yeah, it has. I mean, I think that there's limits to this, but it's instructive to think that part of our politics is still a debate about the Constitution and what it means. Not all of it but we've come away from that because essentially people said since the 1930s or 40s, look, there really is no restrictions on what the federal government can do. That seems to be the prevailing constitutional view. So that whole question, which was so central to the debate of parties in the 19th century. After all, they debated the Constitution as well as the policies, that that idea as some people said, has been lost as people now shift from Constitution to just the policy.

So maybe it's time to bring back a little bit of constitutionalism on these issues and make some arguments for them, especially since we're reaching another point in federal politics. For all the good that people think government can do, they find that it's too vast to control, outside of any basis for anyone being able to supervisor it. One method might be to simplify and move it back to other levels. You could have some of the same problems at the other levels, but, gee, they'll be at the other levels, rather than in federal politics. Federal politics has become much more contentious, in part, because it deals with everything, rather than a limited sphere. I'm not sure we're going to reverse this, can reverse it entirely, but I think it could be reversed some.

KRISTOL: And it is striking that the Tea Party, one of the genuine grassroots movements of last several years, explicitly is for constitutionalism.

CEASER: Right. That was it's contribution with the Tea Party was that – which was so astounding that they brought to the popular level the idea that the Constitution matters. Now, of course, you could criticize some of their constitutional views but when they asked that the Constitution be read in the House of Representative, an event which was met at first with the derision, it showed that there was something there.

Now, they have their difficulties, I think, in understanding the Constitution, beginning with the fact that the first they wanted is a constitutional amendment to rein in spending, which means the Constitution wasn't perfect. But the idea that the Constitution should be looked as more than a legal document, more than the preserve of lawyers and law school, more than the preserve of the Supreme Court. That's what has been lost, and I think they did a good work in bringing that idea back to American politics.

I have nothing against courts and lawyers, but the idea that they are the sole ministers of the Constitution and that the debate about whatever obscure point of law is the soul and substance of the Constitution, that's only part of the truth of the American system. And I think when you'd ask the Founders or subsequently the generations, how they thought the Constitution would be enforced, I don't think they would have put the Court as the first instrument for doing so. There are other mechanisms for enforcing the Constitution which we've lost sight of because we no longer understand what constitutionalism is. We think it's getting court – a court case, taking it to the Supreme Court, and wait to hear what the Justices say, if anyone can understand what they write.

KRISTOL: Right, ambition counteracting ambition, that's the key part of it of it, obviously.

CEASER: Ambition counteracting ambition, and political articulations of understandings of the Constitution with popular judgments. So, you know, when people say today, "What's the war power?" and they expect a decision by the courts. The war power is effectively, I think, what was decided in the first Gulf War, that if you're going to have a real war, you better have a vote in Congress. No one said that that was the absolute constitutional decision. The Presidents have denied it. But that's pretty much where we are; you're going to have a real war, meaning sending lots of troops, you probably have to have a resolution of Congress. That's where the Constitution is. It's not in some doctrine.

I've had discussions with people who say, "Well, this has to be resolved by the courts." I say, "Well, we actually have something." I know people try and worm out of it, for example, the people who voted for the Iraq war resolution, and say, "Well, we weren't voting for war." That never really quite stuck in the public mind, they knew what they were voting for and the American people understood what they were voting for. That doesn't cover the other elements, you know, where a President may have to act using force in other ways, where we understand that you're not going to have Congressional resolutions. I think the President has that discretion. But big wars, real wars in advance with lots of troops probably are going to – should need the Congress, and that's what the Constitution is.

KRISTOL: It seems to me listening to you talk about American politics in this way and coming back and forth from the Founding to current debates. I mean, you really are trying to understand politics in a way that is more in the spirit, I suppose, of the classics or of older observers and practitioners of politics, to think about the interrelationship of the parts and take a look at sort of the scope for statesmanship and what the actual effects of policies and doctrines are, as opposed to a sort of legalistic or scientific view of it. I mean, do you self-consciously think about that some, sort of about the right way to think about politics and political science?

CEASER: Well, on the negative side, long court cases put me to sleep immediately. I think I share that with everyone except some people at law schools. But on the positive side, that is what politics was about in the view of Aristotle or Tocqueville in not only going beyond the legalisms but looking to the important things of what politics produces, which is finally what's sorts of human beings are encouraged or produced within the society, what the character of the soul of our people is; that's I think the direction of classical thought.

So always keeping your eye on that, rather than on legalisms, and rather than just on policy. Policy sometimes means are we getting this degree of this, this degree of that, without looking to the outcome on the most important part, which is what sorts of human beings we are.

KRISTOL: Yeah, and this is good because it means political science professors ultimately have more to say and should be taken much more seriously than either law professors or public-policy, professors of policy schools, which I agree with this, they really do have – those two have become very imperialistic, you might say in the way they approach politics. The law professors want to make everything into constitutional law or other aspects of law, the public policy schools want to make it all into policy choices. But there is something more than those two aspects to politics.

CEASER: Yeah, I believe that's true. Lawyers, you know, they have the most prestige, their hallways are clean, their bathrooms are cleaned, and other things that we have in the arts that – So they have the most prestige. But for many ways, they've always been a discipline large parts of which have borrowed from others. So they borrow from law and get law and economics, which has been a really important movement. But they didn't originate it, the economists did. And they borrowed from philosophy, they borrowed from realms. I wouldn't say over the history of America that it's been the most original or creative of disciplines. But it's always been the most prestigious, or one of the most prestigious, and that counts a lot.

KRISTOL: But it's important that citizens have a broader view.

CEASER: I would say at least – Yes, for the many who I hope will not become lawyers and have some other calling in life. But that's true. It isn't true, however, that political science as a discipline is always true to these older objectives. It is a discipline now that has, in some parts, narrowness of its own making, and therefore I wouldn't offer it is the universal model. Let's just say political science of a certain sort, the sort inspired by three of my heroes—Aristotle, Montesquieu, and Tocqueville—and our Founders.

#### **IV: Barack Obama, and After (44:07 – 1:05:02)**

KRISTOL: You've written a fair amount about our current president, President Obama, and I'm just curious from the point of view of a student of American history and of the American constitutionalism broadly, anything striking about him. I mean, what will historians note about the Obama presidency?

CEASER: Well, I think they'll begin by noting the extraordinary election of 2008, which is partly about Obama but partly about Obama-ism, which was much more than a political phenomenon. It was a cultural phenomena and in way a worldwide phenomenon, something like almost a religious devotion to an individual who was seen as being able to deliver not only to the United States but the whole world from the morass in which it found itself.

And it's more telling, I think, about the masses, even than Obama, because, after all, he was just the vehicle for this mass movement that emerged. The yearning for someone who could transform the world. That doesn't speak well for the modern state of the world or democracy. It's in a way a terrifying – a terrifying event to see so much hope put into one person with the obvious understanding that no person, even if Obama were more than he is, could ever have achieved that. So I think that 2008 is a quasi-religious phenomenon pretending something about the character of our world. Maybe it's just a one-off. Maybe the experience of disappointment will sober people up and make them feel a little embarrassed at how they acted in 2008. But that's the event that stands out.

Even in the 2012 election, you look at that the campaign in 2012 was so radically different from 2008. It was effectively run in 2012 but there was no high inspiration, no hope and change, it was tough politics. So we'd already passed this curious stage. And I wonder in some ways, not to try and make excuses for Obama, whether he wasn't the victim of this movement, which probably must have affected his soul in some ways.

When you move from venue to venue and you're treated with such a degree of adulation, maybe if you're not a strong personality, you begin to believe it yourself. And I think there are personal reasons, deficiencies in his own character, which I think helped that process along. But I think he was affected by this, began to think that these speeches that he gave, which had these responses could actually change reality. In particular in international affairs, his first speech in Cairo, maybe it was a prudential move, but he seemed to think that he could run foreign policy by his own voice. And that the same thing which brought him success in the election could bring him success in the running of the country and the world.

We've seen, I think, that that's not the case. A good solid and simple education, but an education nonetheless.

KRISTOL: I guess the Cairo speech really was almost unprecedented, a President of the United States standing up and talking about his own, where he happened to grow up, and that some of that was going to change relations between the Muslim world and America, you know, which is kind of a – those are two big entities that have a lot of reasons for the complicated relations they have. Only one person isn't going to just by showing up change. But there is that real sense of that in that speech.

CEASER: It is maybe an exaggeration to say that the lesson that he derived or some of the people derived from the 2008 election, that he was incidentally President of the United States, in fact, president of the world. And there was a sense in which he was elected by the world. At least, the world felt that they had a say in the American election. The media certainly presented it that way. His trips to Germany during the campaign were redolent of that. And I think maybe for that reason, you could say, if you want to put it in the best light, that he thought he might have this power, so he might as well try to use it. That would be the prudent side. Let's put it to a test if this can really work.

But I think it went deeper than that. And I don't think he's subsequently been able to reconcile to himself; and his followers had difficulty reconciling themselves to the idea that he's merely mortal. What helped a good deal and this was the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize immediately, which even his most fervent supporters had to agree was ridiculous. And the realization that that was one of the great absurdities of history, maybe it was the beginning of some notion that this wouldn't quite work. But it's proved, I think, a disaster in foreign affairs. There are other things to be said – one can take this explanation a little too far – but since I wrote about it, I wanted to put in a plug for this quasi-religious character in 2008.

KRISTOL: And I suppose one question is – you know, my father said a neoconservative is a liberal who was mugged by reality. And a young friend of his, Mike Scully, who passed away young, a few years later, there were neo-liberals running around. This was in the early mid-80s and they professed to have been influenced by – understand the failures of liberalism, of society liberalism, but were still liberals. And I think Mike commented that a neo-liberal was a liberal who's been mugged by reality and refuses to press charges, which I think is a deep insight, really.

And I do wonder that about liberals today. I mean, the President himself or President Obama, it's hard for an individual to really rethink anything, I suppose, once you're President of United States, and he's deeply invested in his policies and I doubt if he'll change in the last two years. But I don't know, are contemporary liberals, I mean, you'd think there'd be a pretty big mugging by reality there but not much evidence really of rethinking. Would you say?

CEASER: Not on the surface and there's always the idea the investment in the person was so extraordinary that to climb down from the investment is difficult. That's why in campaign politics, you always get a guy to give a dollar. You'd think, well, he gave dollar, he's not going to give more, it's the opposite. Once you make an investment, then you feel that you're committed and you have to double down.

So I think there's an awful lot of that that has gone on, that so much as been – so much credibility has been put up on this event that it's hard to step down. And I also think there is the racial issue that people saw this as paying for the sins of America. And by paying for the sins of America, electing a black president, it's one that can't be admitted to have failed as much as maybe reality would properly judge. It's hard to admit that. It's difficult to admit that.

KRISTOL: And I suppose if Hillary Clinton runs for president, she can run as the first woman president and that in a way deflects from making her election a referendum on the two terms of President Obama. Or does that really work? I mean, you're a political scientist. Does political science suggest that at the

end of the day this will be a referendum on his past two terms or can it become a forward-looking election in which she kind of liberates herself from whatever burden he might –

CEASER: Well, first, political science has nothing to say on these matters but speculation always does. She'll face a delicate problem like, always, people following two terms of a president. I think much more than people, of course, expected in 2008 that her, part of her problem will be distancing herself, should she be the nominee, from him, in a way that doesn't completely repudiate. So that's just a way of saying what they all face.

But we're seeing her, I think, moving more towards the distancing than one might have thought at this point. And depending how things go in the last two years, if the record continues as it is now or even deteriorating, she's going to have to distance herself a good deal. Of course, the presidency is a personal office so that she doesn't have to take full responsibility for everything. And she was only involved in the foreign policy the first four years before many of the most difficult problems emerged. So she doesn't directly have to take responsibility for everything that Obama did over his full 8 years.

KRISTOL: Yeah, the good news for conservatives, I guess, is compared to where it looked like they stood and they thought they stood in, let's say, January of 2009, two blow-out elections in a row, you know kind of an older candidate who had never caught on against a charismatic young president, huge majorities in both houses of Congress. It just looked terrible. And then of course there's a huge comeback in 2010 and a loss in 2012 but not a blowout. You know, conservatives right now are probably pretty relieved, I think, maybe wrongly but they're probably a little relieved that the liberal wave hasn't swamped them in the way it looked like it might. It doesn't feel like the mid-30s with an FDR astride the American system and conservatives just totally –

CEASER: I think that's right. What we've had dueling mandates since 2008. We've had two views of the country. In 2008, the Left wins. 2010 is a repudiation to the Left. 2012 is, oh I suppose, a little bit more for the Left –

KRISTOL: A slight Left victory, I'd say.

CEASER: Yeah. And then 2014 may be another repudiation and there we are. Every election, we have a change. That also explains indirectly one of the reasons why we have such contentious and polarized politics is because everyone thinks they can win fundamentally the next time around. And as long as that's the predominant view, you have to put the partisan, or many put the partisan view, first, it's that important. I think politics is less partisan when everyone knows they're going to be loser and might as well get along because we're not going to take this institution.

Every election presents this possibility. And the Republicans coming up the next time, Republicans I think it's more important for them to win than for Democrats because Republicans can, I think, only obtain credibility if they show that they can govern well. If it's just a race between the two programs without any record, the Democrats offer more to the public. The Republicans have to show that they can manage things well. So they need to get elected to show that. And as long as they're on the outside, they're a little bit at a disadvantage. I know there's a lot of effort now to recast what conservatism is. And that's an important factor, it has to be as appealing a program as it can be. But I think it's going to be difficult just on a straight-up all things controlled for the Republicans to win an election against the Democrats. What they need is a bad record by the Democrats; that will give them the chance to hold office and then show that they can govern responsibly. That's the Republican strongest card.

KRISTOL: And does that suggest a Republican who has governed well? I mean, that would seem to push in that direction. A governor or someone like that?

CEASER: Well, it what would be or at least a record so bad that the Republican win, and then show that he or she can govern well. That's important. I mean, it would be important for either party. But it's really essential for the Republicans who are the less popular party.

And I'll have to make a more difficult argument about why their policies over the long run will win versus the party which says we can give you more now. And gee, if you're up in the air, you'll say, I'll take the more now. I'm not going to take the long-term view. So credibility and governing is important. I think it's always nice in some way to have a governor, if they're – depending on who they are but the governor can always push aside ideological arguments by just saying, "Look, here's what I did, here's the record, you can talk ideology all you want, you can make all the attacks you want, here's the record on the ground." That's an impressive kind of advantage for a governor.

KRISTOL: Conservatives have been arguing among themselves a lot. I suppose they always have. You've written a lot about conservatism and about different strands or aspects or visions of conservatism. Say a word about the state of American conservatism, what are the major elements of it in your view?

CEASER: Right. This – I have written a little bit on this. It goes back to a problem of Locke about the imperfection of language, which is something like this that you get a word like *conservatism* and therefore people think because it's a word, it's one thing. And now let's define what it is. But many words don't come into being in that fashion, they come into being by accident. And conservatism, we know if we do the most simple as that. It's a coalition of different ideas, different strands, many of which never considered themselves conservatives that have come into the same party.

And at least intellectual conservatives accept that, they're under no illusion that they're one tradition. It gives the Republican Party more heterogeneous in a way than the Democratic Party, more contention. It's a kind of coalition, a coalition born in part by its dislike of the liberal project. And the best leaders have been the ones who can keep that coalition together under severe strains and difficulties. On the other hand, that coalition and those strains can be a source of vibrancy as well. So that now in the Republican Party, you have the polar opposites on foreign policy within the same party and so on.

What I tried to do is just identify different strands – traditional conservatives, neoconservatives, religious conservatives and libertarians – and try and unpack what's their core principle, make it a little bit more of a philosophic discussion. What's their core principle, what do they dislike most about the opposition as a way of making people think about what conservatism is and what sorts of conservatives there are. And how to put together the conservative coalition in an intelligent way; understanding that it's not going to reach perfect consensus.

KRISTOL: And your general sense is that, despite the talk of, you know, that finally it's going to break apart, the conservative coalition cannot hold? Is your general sense that with adequate, competent leadership it does hold, that they have more in common in what they like and dislike than the differences among them?

CEASER: Definitely will hold. The glue supplied by Barack Obama and by Hillary Clinton is an adhesive, which is quite strong and brings them together. And it's a big country, and there's no reason why it should be – it shouldn't be the case. I think if we had a parliamentary system, we'd probably have three or four conservative parties, they'd have different names. And probably two liberal parties on the left. But three or four.

So but given the system we have, they have to find a way to work together but it always depends as well on the process by which the nominees are chosen, which is difficult for the Republican Party because the process of selection puts emphasis sometimes on the divisions. And it's a test of the statesmanship of the candidates to try and put the various elements together. But there are lots of reasons for them to stay together. They dislike the opposition and dislike for where they see it's taking the country. The idea of a

centralized, more fully, entirely government-mandated egalitarian system has all conservatives worried for different reasons.

KRISTOL: And my sense is – yeah, I very much agree with that. My sense is the one way in which I think things, maybe, are more problematic among Republicans and conservatives than they have been is the donor class, I mean the donors, the big-money people in the party who are probably even more important with all the independent expenditures, super PACs one can get going now. I think there's more of a gulf between the donors, Republican donors and Republican voters than there's been since I got involved in politics, and certainly more than on the Democratic side. I think if you put a bunch of Democratic donors and Democratic voters in a room, they would have different cultural affinities and maybe somewhat different priorities but they would basically agree on a huge host of issues. There wouldn't be that much tension. Labor and the environmentalists a little bit.

Republican donors and Republican voters are really living in somewhat different worlds, culturally at least in some of the social issues and even on some of the economic issues. You know, the kind of Romney entrepreneurship message is kind of – it doesn't mean that much to the lower-middle-class church-going salaried employee in the exurbs of Ohio or, you know, Orlando, Florida. I mean, the kind of class the typical Republican voter, they need to hold or pick up, I think.

CEASER: One of the difficulties is that this, the importance of entrepreneurship and the economy for making the country go is undoubted. But still the average person doesn't consider himself or herself on the path to being a Mitt Romney. It's not the life they want. So what Republicans have to understand, as important as that is to be respected, it's not the thing that most people even aspire to. We're not going to have 250 million entrepreneurs working the stock market.

So they have to be able to show that while this has an important place in the party, it's the idea of working and for providing for your family, which is the core of what this party could be. Efforts have been made to do this. It might require a candidate who could speak this better. Romney in his own way tried. He kept saying the issue is I want people to have jobs. It's hard to defend capitalism when you're that wealthy, and it's especially hard to defend it when you made your money in finance, which is what people don't understand. So I agree with you that there has to be some way to link to the decent working person.

Reagan was very good at this. He said a lot for the entrepreneur but he put a lot of the weight on what the person did to provide, the dignity of providing for your own family. And those can be put together because goodness knows a lot of things would be – look a lot better even with our low wages today, they would look a lot better if people were working. And the people dropping out of the workforce, choosing disability, these are enormous tragedies in American life, especially for a lot of the males in society are finding themselves more marginalized. It is a potential place for growth for the Republican Party if they have this group of people who after seven or eight years, probably should start asking, did this work? But they do have to calibrate their message.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that struck me the most in the Romney campaign. It wasn't just that most people aren't going to be entrepreneurs but also there's a certain lack of respect for those people. I mean, maybe that's not fair but it seemed that way watching it. Those people are kind of incidental players in this country, which is really driven by the entrepreneurs. And that may be true as a kind of strict economic analysis. Obviously, some key entrepreneurs create more jobs than those who just show up and do our job. And we're not – you know, but what most people do and they're proud of it and they should be and they contribute to the society and the community and take care of their families. And I think it's been a while since a Republican candidate has really been able to convey a sense of both respect for that and sort of solidarity almost for that.

CEASER: Rick Santorum tried. He had limitations. It wasn't the most impressive group but when we get down to it. There's other issues though where this comes up, also on immigration. In some ways, the Republican Party rethinking part of that in the way that the Democrats once did. Namely, what about



domestic workers and what about their wages; isn't this influenced by the rate of immigration? Whereas the business class wants the labor and so Republicans will have to find, I think, a prudent message on that point and not simply succumb to the idea that some limitations on immigration is a perfect sign of racism.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I think that's a good point.

[END]

### **BONUS FOOTAGE:**

KRISTOL: Jim, I think we met at Harvard in my first year of grad school. You were a few years of ahead of me, in a seminar that Harvey Mansfield was teaching. Did you come to Harvard to study with Mansfield, did you know about him already? Anyway, tell us your – what did you learn from him?

CEASER: Yeah. I did not come specifically for him because I was more in American politics but he was obviously one of the attractions. I had read some of his works, and I was also told by my undergraduate teachers that he was a person that you definitely would want to consider studying with. So it was a real attraction.

And I was very much influenced by Harvey. In political theory, which isn't exactly my area, but he was not only a great reader of certain texts of individuals – Aristotle, Machiavelli, Locke, and Tocqueville, original readings – but he also did something else. He was one that studied doctrines that evolved over history. So in a way, closer to political science, the most important being the executive. Put the theory into action of that. He also did party government and representation. So in some ways, his political theory flowed into political science that I was interested in.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I've always thought with Mansfield that one of the most impressive things is this kind of doctrines but also the institutions in a way of modern politics. He kind of x-rayed and sort of thought through to their grounding in political philosophy but then really watched them develop in history and how it was able to explain in a way their development and their modification by various thinkers and statesmen. It's very unusual for a political theorist really to make such a contribution to actually understanding real existing governments.

CEASER: Right. So it was not just the study of texts. And also, of course, it turns out that he's the political theorist that I know who was most engaged in his writings on contemporary politics and most willing to do so and to write on issues from very strongly held views. And I think that also comes from his political philosophy because he begins everything in his political philosophy with the political person acting in the political sphere, asserting and claiming something.

So Harvey, I think, begins with that; that's the way he sees politics. He begins politics from inside of politics, and, therefore, in a way takes this role on himself of the exact role that he explains. And there's one thing that I wish, maybe, that his students in political theory would do, which is not simply to comment on the brilliance of his scholarship and what he's taught us about these various figures, but to start writing about what Harvey Mansfield's own – I call it, political anthropology – because I think he's set out, beginning with his chapters on Aristotle but also in his social science work, it's an idea of what political man is. And that needs to be disengaged from scholarship and presented as Harvey Mansfield's view of how politics begins and how it unfolds and the role of the citizen and the role of the political leader. I think that would be a contribution, more important or as important as commentary on his really astounding scholarship on some of the various figures.

I know on some of these figures – well, first of all the classes, I enjoyed the classes because they always would have a little key, some key that he would have in a class, which would then unlock the whole book. So it wasn't just a series of going through book by book. In Machiavelli's case, it took about six weeks to

understand what one's "own arms" were. And once you understood the phrase what "own arms" were, you began to see the book open up, explode in your mind. And I had that impact. It didn't lead me to join the NRA but it lead me to understand leadership in a calculating way and how one figures what one's "own arms" are and how he manipulates and uses that. I teach a course on political leadership, or did for the first time last semester. And that concept came up again. It begins with the Bible, the story of David. And of course one's "own arms" is very important in that, it's even in Machiavelli and then go on to Xenophon. And I found that going back to the notes from that course opened up the way that I've taught political leadership.

KRISTOL: That's terrific. Well, you should write that book on Mansfield on political man, you know.

CEASER: It would be a contribution because there is, I think, especially more recently, his recent writing, that that's a strain that should be unpacked, and I think it would make a contribution.

KRISTOL: And Mansfield's seminars were somewhat cryptic and dense and sometimes difficult to follow. But if one took notes assiduously and quickly, you could back and as you say, unpack them later.

CEASER: Right. Yeah, you had to wait for the key to explode, then you understood the other part. So he could be cryptic in his writing this way is sometimes difficult, and then sometimes extremely penetrating and lucid. You get a few sentences, which astound you by their clarity. You have to work.

He has different elements of his style. I thought – I seem to remember reading the Burke book on party government, and it sounded a little bit like Burke but after we studied Machiavelli, his prose changed a little bit, it sounded more like Machiavelli. And I think he has a repertoire now of styles that he can blend in his own writing.

KRISTOL: That's fascinating. But Mansfield was not your dissertation advisor, you were in American politics. And was –

CEASER: James Q. Wilson was my dissertation advisor.

KRISTOL: So tell us about him and how you got to know him and how he influenced you.

CEASER: Yeah. I got to know him. I took his course on bureaucracy, reluctantly, I took the course on bureaucracy. I guess I learned from Shep Melnick that he changed the name of the course from Public Administration to Bureaucracy because he refused to teach anything called Public Administration.

And only he could make that course interesting, that was true. The readings were dreadful. The lectures were brilliant. I'm happy very much that I took that course because from the low of bureaucracy so much of the modern world is built. It's a stunningly disappointing fact that we really do have to understand public administration and bureaucracy to understand our modern world. It removes much of the excitement of study David, King David and Cyrus, to know that you have to understand Lois Lerner. But just the way it is. I'm happy I took that course.

And I was interested exactly in the things that he was doing then, bureaucracy or public policy as he did it. But I was interested in his view of political parties. He had written on parties. And he had written at a time where, I think, what he had understood and what his own teacher, Banfield, had understood to be the main glue of American parties and politics, which is in way the lower or motives, were the source of our stability, that is what he called the material senses, the machines, that they dampened down conflict and they gave some discretion to statesmen or political leaders that this was now a passing phase and that we were now moving into another style of politics, which is in some ways where I began my study of party reform.

This was in a way the coming into age permanently of the reformed Democrat or the reformer into American politics on both the Republican and the Democratic side. And that's the politics we have, it's a politics, which has, of course, influence and money, but it's influence or money is not praise. What you praise is popular politics, amateur pure motives, leadership demagoguery is very important, as are ideologies or purpose of movements. Which in some way makes our politics cleaner in one sense. It's on paper more noble but more difficult to manage.

KRISTOL: And this the theme of Wilson's work from earlier, I guess, right, *The Amateur Democrat* and it's contrast to the new type of partisan from compared to the old?

CEASER: Right, and I think when he probably wrote *The Amateur Democrat*, there was still some hope that the old system could be salvaged. Maybe I'll have to go back and read the book. But it was pretty clear that a few years later, it was only *The Amateur Democrat*, which was the style, and has become the style of modern American politics, amplified by media and communications.

KRISTOL: And it seems to me your writing, it follows Wilson's, a scholar who tries very much to address a broader public and is willing to discuss current figures and current issues but in a way informed by a deeper understanding of the regime, to use a fancy word, or of the Constitution, the society in which we find ourselves.

CEASER: One thing that he – many, many things in which I admire him, which I have never done, is his ability to digest social science. I call him “the great sifter” because he would go through and sift out everything in social science, stuff I would never even imagine reading. He read and but he read it not from the point of view of just contributing to social science, that was secondary. He looked for anything in social science, which bore on the issues that he was studying. And, of course, there's so many social scientists doing so much work that some of it was valuable – he would distill that and bring that to bear on the judgment of issues of public policy. So as distinct from some people who just start from what the discipline has, he started from questions of public policy. And but, he was a great user of social science. I sometimes wish I could discipline myself to do that but alas –

KRISTOL: He had super-human patience in terms of reading material that he couldn't really have respected very much and pulling out and feeling that he should do that. I guess that was –

CEASER: And he's remarkably, was remarkably a non-ideological person. I mean, he genuinely was a person who suspended his own beliefs and looking at the facts and revised his views in light of what the – what he could see what worked, which is also difficult, especially maybe difficult for me. I like to be a little bit more sure about what the conclusion is and let the facts be damned. But he was true to that model, and you see that in his students as well.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I think that's right. And he has many fine students teaching around the United States. But he set a very high standard. The range of topics he covered, it's pretty amazing.

CEASER: And it is, since you did mention the classical part, I mentioned social science, it all comes back in some ways to the most classical concerns. For example, “The Rediscovery of Character,” which is one of his good essays, is that in a way he comes back to this public policy, not to the policies but the effect of policies on human character is a central element of that. And I guess the final thing I'd say about his social science is its rootedness in common sense, which was so important.

I think that's why he liked to study the police. Was given an opportunity to judge these guys as they tried to work their way through difficult situations. Incidentally, also people in a bureaucracy who don't act bureaucratically in a lot of ways, that they have to free themselves from the rules that they were in, handle a situation on the ground. How do I restore order here with this guy having a fight with his wife or of a brawl in a barroom? He seemed to enjoy seeing the human being making these judgments, concrete

judgments in situations, which was another thing, which made the study of bureaucracy, I think, more exciting than just the rule-bound behavior.

KRISTOL: Right. Before you got to Harvard, you had I think great teachers at Kenyon as an undergraduate and then you spent a year maybe at Cornell after Kenyon – is that right?

CEASER: Right, I can't complain about the teachers that I've had. Harry Clor and Bob Horowitz that Kenyon, it was a small college in Ohio. I'll put a plug in. As Webster would say, it's a small college but we love it.

And I did go to Cornell for a year, the year before it blew up. And I took courses with Walter Berns and Allan Bloom. And what a pair that was. On the surface, you couldn't imagine two human beings more different. Walter Berns, seemingly prime and perfectly waspish and perfectly well-spoken and articulate in a precise way. His prose crisp and a little big forbidding in public, at least that's how we took him, seemed a little bit. Seemed a little bit – well, my goodness, we had grown up on "I Can't Get No Satisfaction," and here's a person writing a book on virtue. That was quite a clash.

And Allan Bloom, what they say in French, is an original. Like no rules, a person absolutely unique in his personality, in his laughs, in his mannerisms. A striking person. So those two together, but they were famously friends in every respect and enjoyed each other. And the thing about Walter is once you got below his public person in class, you found that he was really pretty much the opposite in private – open, friendly, warm, ironic. He was like a sabre, sort of, virtue on the outside, irony on the inside. So I was happy that I got to know him personally as well as any of my teachers of the personal side that I delighted in in his humor and his warmth. And I'm happy to see him still connected with AEI and doing all that he's doing.

KRISTOL: And he covered a huge range of – began with topics in his professional career and began more with constitutional law. Patriotism and again character and just a bunch of wonderful essays on a range of issues.

CEASER: Yes. I took a course with him on the Warren Court, and I think I can thank him for forever changing my mind about the study of constitutional law. Not that it's his fault. It was the cases that we read from the Warren Court.

I decided that as an undergraduate I enjoyed not only the decisions that were made, the elements of justice, court cases, but the arguments that were made and the decisions by Marshall and others. But so many of the arguments in the modern court cases, so many of them add nothing to the decision. They're just a list of citations probably put together by law clerks. Most of them are simply unreadable and probably not worth reading. So after trying to discern all these differences between the different tests – high scrutiny, medium scrutiny, weak scrutiny – I said I've had enough of these doctrines, I think I'll move away from constitutional law. So I can thank Walter for –

KRISTOL: He drove you away from constitutional law.

CEASER: He drove me away on solid grounds from the decisions. I still occasionally – I don't think I've read a Supreme Court case from beginning to end since that time, with the exception of *Bush v. Gore*, which I had to do for political parties. But I'll occasionally read an opinion, some of the opinions are interesting. They're like essays. Scalia and Brennan used to write interesting ones and Thomas. But most of them are run-of-the-mill and unreadable really.

KRISTOL: Hope none of your students is vying to be a Supreme Court law clerk in the next few years.

CEASER: I guess not.

KRISTOL: If they're watching this, they're in trouble. But maybe they can conceal that on their resume, you know. Allan Bloom, did you actually take courses from him at Cornell? Wow.

CEASER: Yeah. I took a course with Allan Bloom. And he was, as I said, a unique figure. As a teacher, he was, I would call him a soul-grabber, that he would penetrate to the individual. He was less interested per se in modern politics and more interested in the direction of souls of people, indicated by his study of Rousseau and Plato. It was a little frightening to me at that time. I'm not sure that I was ready to be invaded quite that way. So it was a pleasure later on to move to Harvey who gave you a little bit more distance.

But I got to know Allan Bloom personally a little later on beginning at Herb Storing's funeral and other places. And I got to be a bit friendly with him afterwards, which was nice. A very funny person, obviously. Ironic about his own success with *Closing of the American Mind*. I remember when he reintroduced himself to me saying, "Hi, I'm Allan Bloom. You might not have known me when I was Allan Bloom." That was before he was Ravelstein. So he was quite an interesting person, a genius and a delight to be around and very, very imposing and important teacher.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I got to know – I was never a student of Bloom either and got to know him later, somewhat maybe similar to you, sort of occasionally seeing him at conferences and parties and friends of friends, kind of thing. And but, I was struck by how different my relationship was to him, which was totally friendly and I very much admired him and I think he was well disposed to me as he was to you.

But when you were really his student, that was a different story. He was an unusual teacher. I mean, there was a real closeness, a bond with those students whose souls he had really penetrated, as you say, and whose futures he had tried to shape. And, I guess, complicated rebellions against him by some of his students. But that doesn't happen much in American, in the American academy, do you think? I mean, there are very few instances of that. And in a good way, too. Sometimes, it happens in a slightly weird way. But with Bloom, it really allowed people to become something much more than they might have been, I think.

CEASER: Right, and I think his notion of teaching was of a turning of the soul, that that was more important than the facts or anything like that. And or even the doctrines of philosophy was to get a person to turn their soul in a certain direction and change them, transform them. And I think he was successful with an enormous number of students. Plus, just the sheer force of nature of – every lecture was a performance. It could be the three cigarettes going at the same time or an infectious laugh. It was quite a performance, and it required, I'm sure, a lot of energy on his part to give those lectures but it required a lot of energy to listen to them as well.

KRISTOL: I never really heard him lecture, I guess. I don't think I was ever in a classroom where he spoke. I guess I heard him give one or two lectures like a guest lecturer at Harvard but never, I never sat through a class he taught.

CEASER: Yeah, I think – you know, I've seen some tapes of his lectures where he was usually more serious and sober and academic than he normally was. But in a classroom where he was the performer, he would have you section day after day, that's where the spirit of his personality would emerge.

KRISTOL: I recently went to see *Henry IV* here at the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, and I recall that Bloom had written something in his very late book, in the collection of essays, I guess, it's collected in *Love and Friendship*, and it was printed separately in his essays on Shakespeare, on Falstaff, actually *Henry IV*.

And I guess if I'm not mistakenly, Bloom dictated those last things. He was pretty ill and couldn't really write. And it's amazing how you see – you get a bit a glimpse. I really recommend those to people. He would have improved them, I think, as literary products if had lived longer and been able to edit them

and, you know, probably make more careful formulations. But there is a kind of stream of insight and just incredible psychological perception and, also, he knew so much about so many different things – he was able to tie things together across centuries and across oceans in terms of interpreting these different Shakespearean characters. It was really striking to read that. I hadn't read anything of Bloom in quite a –

CEASER: Well, the literary side of him with Stendhal and everything. But even in that essay and the focusing on what's so important in the political world, which is honor, but really which is deconstructed in the play. This Bloom at his best to show these things.

And also Henry or Hal as he develops from a person to a leader, he becomes less of a person and more of a leader. And, alas, I think that's probably the fate of all good leaders is they have to leave some of their personality behind. They're partly players on a stage with a role to play. And they become less interesting persons as they turn their backs on that for being a political leader.

KRISTOL: Right, right. Other teachers or writers who had a big influence on you?

CEASER: Well, your father, who I never had in class. So he was, I'd say, a great teacher outside of class. And only met him a few times and spoke with him a few times personally. But –

KRISTOL: You wrote some essays for *The Public Interest*, though.

CEASER: For *The Public Interest*, right. And so we corresponded a few times. And then I had a chance to review one of his books, the last book. Extraordinary essays. But again we keep coming back to the same thing. We mentioned character but soul as very important, who was it that treated the welfare state, not merely in terms of its policies but its effects on someone's soul. He opened up looking at the welfare state and modern public policy in terms of – well, let's call it, fancy term, regime terms. Not really the outcomes for material outcomes but the concern with what human beings were like and what sort of human beings would be produced.

Plus *The Public Interest* group, though it was a magazine that did a lot with social science and defining of social science, I think your father also had this other dimension, which was probably more important to him, which is the state and status of the evolution of western civilization at that point, which was prominent in many of his essays. They fit in more or less with the magazine but they were a little bit different. And his concern about what he called post-modern paganism. I suppose you could say the religious question was always very important to him. And then in reviewing the book, I hadn't actually been aware of all the material he had written, essays he had written in the 40s and 50s. They shed a great light on the fact that he had come politics from this view of Marxism, which is as inexplicable to us today as, I think, I put it as someone who was living in Puritan New England. It's hard to believe that people 40 or 50 years ago believed these things and they looked like us and dressed like us.

It was literally – and so your father thinking his way out of that is one of the most fascinating aspects of an education of that period as developed his view. I think the concern there, the conclusion he came to was the folly of believing in the full perfectibility of human beings, which evidently was believed in, as hard as I find it to believe, by the majority of smart people living in these New York circles. It's a work of anthropology just to read some of those essays. As he slowly moves from these under the influence in part of Leo Strauss's readings that he read and Lionel Trilling.

KRISTOL: Yeah, but I think that – at some point, everyone gave up the belief literally in perfectibility but the degree to which utopianism and a certain kind of gnosticism, to use a fancy word, but I don't know, antinomianism, disdain for just mere law for the sentiments of *Federalist* 49, to get back to your favorite *Federalist* paper. The degree to which that pervades so much of modern liberalism, even some of modern conservatism, of course. The modern academy, modern intellectual life. I guess that is pretty stunning.

CEASER: It is, and what's interesting today is I don't see the same on the Left, the same belief in perfectibility but that seemed to animate the early stages of the Great Society. But a belief just in the consequences today that we can get these consequences that are right but there's not the corresponding view that it's going to transform human beings, which, I suppose, makes modern liberalism a little more practical in some ways than explained there. But less idealistic.

It also would mean probably a notion of permanent rule of a scientific or intellectual class because the old view seemed to be that once the transformation took place, the people would be able to take over. I'm not sure that that is the view honestly anymore. The people who run it should make things just and that's how it's going to be for a long time. That's a speculation; I'm not sure that it's true. But I was struck by that difference between the motive forces of a progressivism in the 60s versus today.

KRISTOL: Yeah, Tocqueville may have really seen this, that the degree to which the nanny state was kind of the – would be the endpoint. Not so much a Marxist belief that the state would wither away. I mean, Tocqueville, I guess, didn't have access to – well, he had access to some of Marx but not to – that wasn't really his – that's not where people ended up. We went through that stage and paid a huge price in terms of the lives that were lost to communism. But and the craziness that was unleashed. But now, it seem to be it's both more muted, which is I suppose better, more modest and more prosaic, the progressive aspirations. But also in a certain way, less idealistic and less, and more boring. I don't know. I wonder which way that cuts, does that make it stronger or weaker? It's a little hard to figure that out, actually, you know.

CEASER: Right. Well, some people engage in politics for its outcome, some for its entertainment. I think in some ways, it's less entertaining today.

KRISTOL: Right. You'd think that would make it less attractive to young people, for example. Well, but Obama, I suppose, as you were saying earlier, that 2008 moment shows that people want more, they want to believe, they don't want to just – they don't want to just nudge and manipulate and improve slightly.

CEASER: I think when you get to the younger people, the most important thing, there's a lot of ambition among young people, a lot of ambition directed towards politics. My goodness, what they will do to try and prepare themselves for a political career? But they lack the models for what they're going to do with their ambition. And I think Obama was in a way a hope of what that could be.

The best education for them early on is to read various biographies, classical and otherwise, so they can get some picture of what you can do inside of politics and what greatness and failure mean. I would say that that would be worth a lot more than certain courses even in political theory at the beginning level.

KRISTOL: Didn't you once teach or plan on teaching such a course?

CEASER: I did do something like that. I mean, in this leadership course, as I said, it has David, lots of Plutarch's *Lives*, so and biographies of some of the presidents so that they begin to put together without much theory, these models. And it's the moral imagination of the student towards leadership, which is in need of a good deal of attention.

KRISTOL: And it works, these courses?

CEASER: Well, none of them have become president yet, but we'll see. But I think they like that.

KRISTOL: And, of course, the way history and political science are taught these days and other disciplines, they probably never read them. One thing they don't read is biographies.

CEASER: Right. The public does.

KRISTOL: Right. That's striking, isn't it?

CEASER: Yeah. But and, of course, in a course, you don't have time to read long books, so what you need are the shorter essays, which cover a lot and maybe aren't the perfect biographies from a scholarly point of view, but which raises this question of the moral imagination of people towards political leaders and let them begin to see and let a moral imagination develop by recourse, either to literature or to the study of biography. I think that that has an important role to play inside of our education.

KRISTOL: Speaking of education, one last question or a couple questions. You've taught at Virginia, what almost 40 years. I'm just curious—the change of young people over that time, radical, drastic, not so different? Are the American 19-year-olds still what they were, are they better or worse? I mean, how much have they changed?

CEASER: Well, one thing, Virginia is probably not the best place to make this judgment. It's not the controlled situation since the state has changed so much. And when I began teaching, we had the valedictorian of every class in Virginia, half of them couldn't read or write but we had them. But now we're heavy recruitment, really, from Northern Virginia, which is the largest part of the state. So it's a different type of student.

I have found the students, yes, national students, right. We used to attract a third from the south, now we attract a third from all over. So it's not a controlled experiment. I found the students more colorful originally, characters, lots of characters. These students are more earnest, in some ways programmed, smarter, and better. I mean, they're just simply a higher quality of student by every standard, much closer to the best students. So it's not the best experiment. So I'm impressed with their intelligence and sometimes less interested in them since they're all trying to do what – gee, I'd like our own children to do, so what's to complain about? But still that's the fact of the matter.

KRISTOL: We always want to – no matter how much we admire them and admire our own children, you always want to complain about something.

CEASER: That's right.

KRISTOL: That's important. It's a good note on which to end. And, Jim, thanks so much for joining me today. It's really been a pleasure having this conversation with you. And thank you for joining us at CONVERSATIONS.

[END]