

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Fred Barnes, *The Weekly Standard*

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I: Covering Ford, Carter, and Reagan (00:15 – 20:40)

KRISTOL: Welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol, and I'm very pleased to be joined today by my friend and colleague, Fred Barnes. Fred, thanks for taking the time to do this.

BARNES: Well, glad to be here.

KRISTOL: So I came to Washington in 1985 but I had already read you for a decade before then covering the White House. How did that happen?

BARNES: Well, I was covering the White House for *The New Republic* magazine, which everyone knows now was a very, very liberal magazine. It wasn't that liberal then. The owner was Marty Peretz, who was sort of, he'd come sort of halfway down the neoconservative trail, and Charles Krauthammer, of course, was the big foreign policy writer there. And so it was very congenial.

The New Republic had a column for a long time called "White House Watch," and it was very good. It was written for years by a man named John Osborne, then he was replaced by Mort Kondracke, my friend, and, of course, you know, who was in 1985 was hired to be the bureau chief for *Newsweek*. So he left. And I had gotten to know a little bit Mike Kinsley, who was then the editor of *The New Republic*, and they hired me to come in and really write this "White House Watch" column, which I did, almost every week.

KRISTOL: You had been covering the White House already, obviously that's why you were hired. Since when, when did you show up at the White House?

BARNES: Well, I showed up at the White House on August 9, 1974. You'll remember that as a crucial date because that's when Richard Nixon flew off in a helicopter out of the White House and Gerald Ford became President.

KRISTOL: Was that part of the deal? Nixon agreed to resign but only if Fred Barnes gets assigned to the White House? So who were you working for then?

BARNES: I was working for *The Evening Star*, Washington's afternoon newspaper, which was a very good newspaper, it just had one problem – it was losing a lot of money and it ultimately folded in 1981. By then, I had gone to *The Baltimore Sun*, and of course, a few years after that, to *The New Republic*. And then when *The Weekly Standard* started in 1995, there I was, there you were.

KRISTOL: So you really have known, you've covered really and known to some degree every President since Gerald Ford?

BARNES: Well, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush 41, Clinton, Bush 43, and now Obama.

KRISTOL: Yeah, so, let's talk about them. That's an unusual perspective on history. And Gerald Ford.

BARNES: Gerald Ford was unlike any president, any of the other ones for one particular reason and that is he'd been in Congress. Now, if you're in Congress, you have a different relationship with the press, in particular, because it's sort of a chummy relationship, and it's not adversarial like it is between the press and the White House at all.

KRISTOL: Especially back then, right. People really forget – I mean, Ford, what was he Minority Whip or –

BARNES: He'd been the Minority Leader.

KRISTOL: Leader, so he was the senior guy. But even so, someone like you could just show up in the Capitol and talk to him, right?

BARNES: Oh, sure. Very easy. It's not that way at the White House. But Ford actually liked reporters. When they'd ask some really sharp leading question, he'd sort of chuckle. I remember Phil Jones of CBS would ask him and he'd say, "Oh, Phil," at some question like that. And he was a very nice man.

Turned out to be a better President than I think he was credited for at the time, particularly after he pardoned Richard Nixon, which was a month into his Administration. But he really stabilized and settled the country, didn't do anything really dramatic, but he really was the right guy at the right time. I liked him a lot.

And just unusual to see a President who actually on the – well, when he was Vice President, anyway, he'd come back on the plane and he'd have a drink and it'd be sloshing around and he'd come back and talk to reporters. He really liked them. He was a one of a kind and the last of those. I think he was the last President who really had friends in the media.

KRISTOL: And even as President, people had access to him to some degree?

BARNES: Well, a lot more than you have access to any President now. You particularly had some access to him on trips, and he would even have press conferences when he was on trips. I remember one in California.

KRISTOL: Oh, yeah, the trips. You should explain how they work. I mean, people don't – so there's Air Force One. But the press, some of the press, at least, is on the back part, right?

BARNES: Yeah, there's a little pool on that, and it's a little uncomfortable, and you're in the back in the plane, and the President comes back sometimes. Ford came back a lot.

It's much better on the press plane. The food is better; you can spread out more. It's – but you have to get there earlier to be on the press plane. I mean, both the Air Force One and the press plane leaves out of Andrews Air Force Base out in Maryland. What is it, about 20 miles from the White House? And the president flies out in a helicopter. I had to drive. Get there at the crack of dawn.

KRISTOL: But even if you were on the press plane, you were able to talk to the President on these trips sometimes or to his senior staff –

BARNES: Well, particularly if you were on his plane, but, yeah, you did. One press conference in California, he came out and talked. And for some reason, I had noticed – I don't know why – that he

didn't use Richard Nixon's name. He would say "my predecessor," "the former president." He'd have all these ways of referring to President Nixon but he didn't use his name.

And this would have been the Fall of 1974 so he'd been in office a few months. And I asked him, "Mr. President, why don't you refer to your predecessor as President Nixon or as Richard Nixon?" And Ford said – and I was amazed at this answer – he said, "I just can't bring myself to do it."

KRISTOL: Wow.

BARNES: Unusual for someone to say that.

KRISTOL: And then you covered – so he was President and then, of course, he got challenged by Reagan in '76. And were you covering his side of that campaign or –

BARNES: Well, I covered both of them, but I covered Reagan in particular. I had never met Reagan. Of course, I had heard a lot about him and even seen a couple of his movies, and I'd watched "Death Valley Days" – remember when he was the guy who introduced the story on "Death Valley Days" on television?

But I covered him in the primary, and if you remember the 1976 Republican primary, the first, the Iowa caucuses didn't amount to much then so New Hampshire was the first big event. Reagan was ahead in polls and was expected to win but Ford then narrowly won, which was a big deal.

And Reagan – I didn't cover him then although I was later in 1980 in the Nashua debate but I guess we can get to that later – so Reagan then, then we went to – I think Florida came up later, actually soon after that – it rained the whole time down there. Ford would campaign out in the rain and getting all wet. I don't think Reagan did.

Went to Illinois, and I remember that Reagan dropped all of his note cards. You know, that's how he would give speeches – he wouldn't have a text, he would have note cards. And they dropped on the floor and the poor guy was down there trying to pick them up. I think he got them out of order. Then, he continued his speech, which as I recall was in Joliet, Illinois.

And then a couple things happened that were really remarkable, which made it such a great campaign, by far the best primary campaign I've ever covered. Of course, I was younger then, and maybe I was just in awe. But we got to Texas. And you'll remember – this was '76 and one of the big issues was the Panama Canal Treaty, giving the Panama Canal to the Panamanians. And Reagan was fantastic on that – he opposed it, I didn't even agree with him but it was so fun to watch –

KRISTOL: One forgets how much in the minority he was. Bill Buckley, *The Wall Street Journal*, everyone was saying, "Oh, come on, this is the time to do it," but Reagan really made an issue of it.

BARNES: Oh, I think even Barry Goldwater, and yeah, sure. Oh, he made a huge issue of it. And I forget how he said it – you know, we bought, we all these things and we're not going to give it up and we're not going to sell it and so on.

But what struck me was – particularly in Texas – crowds would go berserk. Oh, they just loved it. I have never seen a President since then stir people the way Reagan did on that issue. And you could see – he'd smile, he enjoyed it, seeing the crowd go crazy. And then we got around –

KRISTOL: Texas, I think, was where he won like every – didn't he win every delegate or something in what was considered an upset – I mean, didn't Ford have John Tower, the only Republican statewide elected official of Texas who was going to deliver the state for him.

BARNES: This was probably my most embarrassing moment in journalism.

KRISTOL: Well, good, please tell, yeah.

BARNES: I had written a story for *The Evening Star*. I had been led astray by some of the Ford people, particularly the ones on the ground in Texas that Ford was going to surprise everybody in this very conservative state with conservative – the Republican Party being pretty conservative – and it was, I think, it came out the day before the primary, which was on a Saturday. And of course, Reagan won every delegate.

KRISTOL: And what was your piece? Your piece said Ford could do well, watch for a Ford upset?

BARNES: Yes. And so, of course, my friends in media all had copies of that. And I got teased about that for years. In fact, it's only stopped recently. So anyway I may have left out North Carolina. I'm not sure whether it came before or after Texas. But in any case, Reagan – it was Reagan's –

KRISTOL: Before, I think, I think that's where he was sort of might have been knocked out of the race if he hadn't –

BARNES: Yeah. Well, all the top – yeah – all the top Republicans were for Gerald Ford and if he won there, it would have been over. Reagan's candidacy would have been finished. And amazingly, ads were put on the air of a Reagan speech in North Carolina in which he used his Panama Canal issue. It was tremendous, it really had some impact there. And it was actually Senator Jesse Helms who was the one who was behind him, and he drove up to Washington to get this thing, this video to come back and put on the air. It was amazing.

Total shock to the Ford people. They had no idea that Reagan had a chance of winning, and then he went on and won in Texas, so he was still viable, only 100 delegates behind when you got to the convention in Kansas City, he couldn't – he couldn't make it up but there was one final event and that was after Ford had been – won the nomination.

The last night when Ford was going to give his speech, and Ford invited Reagan who was down there sitting near him and invited Reagan to speak. Well, Ford was never a very good speaker, and Reagan always was a good one, but Ford gave a great speech that night. Reagan's was better, and Reagan's was interesting because one, he didn't have a text, and, two, he talked about wiping out nuclear weapons from the face of the earth. Remember something that came up again in 1986 at Reykjavik in his Summit meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev? It was a dazzling speech. Ford's was great, but Reagan's was even better.

KRISTOL: I've seen the video of that Reagan speech but it must have been unbelievable to be there.

BARNES: Yeah, it was.

KRISTOL: So, where were you? On the floor –

BARNES: I was on the floor, yeah.

KRISTOL: Again, this was a different era, right? I mean, the media now tends to watch the conventions when I've been from a room elsewhere, you watch it on the video screens. A few of you go on the floor but it's a pain and –

BARNES: It was a different era. And there was a lot less security then, among other things.

KRISTOL: Right, and they don't let you go many places.

BARNES: So I think I was sitting with the Mississippi delegation, which was one of the crucial delegations there as it turned out. It was – it was easily the best convention I've ever covered, and now they're just sort of Hollywood type shows. But that one really mattered. I mean, that was the last time the nomination was still in question.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Anything else about Gerald Ford? I mean, any other memories of covering him in the White House? In the general election, were you mostly with Ford or –

BARNES: Yeah, not with Carter. I did Carter a little. But mainly with Ford. Ford –

KRISTOL: Dick Cheney was the Chief of Staff, I guess.

BARNES: By then, yeah, Dick Cheney was the Chief of Staff. And Ford, I don't know whether you remember the great line that Ford had, I don't know if it was great but he said it a lot during the primary and as President. Remember this line, he said, "If the government is big enough to give you everything you want, it's big enough to take away from you everything you have." And a great conservative line, actually. And he said that a lot. And of course, reporters had heard it so much, and I was covering him, you know, we'd roll our eyes and chuckle and so on. A very nice man.

The other thing about Ford is Ford, you have to remember this. I remember this because of my dad who ran for the Virginia House of Delegates in 1963; he was a Republican, he got clobbered. And it really crushed him. You know, I mean, he had really no chance of winning. Virginia was a Democratic state then, and he lost. But it really did hurt him that he did.

The same with Gerald Ford to come from 25 points behind to only losing by a point or two. And we've heard this from other presidential candidates – if the campaign had only gone on a week more. That was Hubert Humphrey's idea in 1968 that he would have beaten Nixon if the campaign – if the election had been in the middle of November rather than early in November. But Ford was crushed. It took him months and months to recover from losing that. I've always remembered that, and it was a good lesson for me to stay in journalism and not run for office.

KRISTOL: That's true. And Jimmy Carter, had you met him once he –

BARNES: Well, I met him during the campaign. I had campaigned, I had gone out with him for about a week or something. And people forget because Carter was such a weak President – he was a very good candidate. By the time I got there, I hadn't covered him, the reporters a lot of them had been with him all year in 1976, and they were so tired of him. But I hadn't seen him much. I thought he was an awfully good candidate, and he really tailed off at the end.

Bush, rather Ford ran a great campaign. The ads were – you know, Ford had a jingle. I wish I could sing it. Tom DeFrank with *Newsweek*, a friend of mine, could, he could sing it to this day. But it was John Dierdorf and it was a Republican media consultant and his partner who had put these ads together, and they were very good. And they had the jingle on them. Anyway, Ford came close and just not close enough.

KRISTOL: Carter, especially if you're a conservative, you don't think much of his Presidency. And he, in any case, got clobbered by Reagan four years later. But, I mean, suppose it is the biggest upset victory in modern – I mean, Carter started with one percent in 1975 and ended up defeating a pretty formidable Democratic field.

BARNES: But remember what the political climate was in 1976. It was still a Watergate – Republicans had lost overwhelmingly in the midterms in 1974 but there was still a hangover from Watergate. And Ford, of course, had been Vice President to Nixon for a year and a half or something like that. So, it would have been an upset if Ford had won.

KRISTOL: Right, but Carter barely hung on for the general –

BARNES: Yeah, I didn't cover all of the Carter White House because I went off – because I had a fellowship at Harvard for a year, which was a lot of fun.

KRISTOL: Shaped your thinking, I'm sure.

BARNES: Saw a lot of Red Sox games, and it was a great time, cold but it was a great time. Then I came back, covered Carter some more.

But Carter – Carter just was a very weak President. The low point was that speech, of course, where he blamed the problem on the country, the problem is the American people, this was the malaise speech. That was a huge mistake.

And, you know, during his last year, they had, inflation was terrible. And almost every night on TV, they'd have reporters going around grocery stores and picking up things and then they'd show on the screen how much more they cost now than they had six months earlier or something like that. It was so I really didn't cover Carter that much and was really looking forward to the 1980 campaign, and it was a remarkable campaign, too, and obviously, Reagan won the White House.

KRISTOL: And did you cover the primary much, the Carter-Kennedy primary or the Republican primary or which –

BARNES: Oh, yeah, no, I did. I covered the Carter-Kennedy primary. You know people forget Teddy Kennedy had come – Democrats had been trying to get him to run for president in '72 and '76, and he finally did challenged Carter in 1980. Hard to beat an incumbent. But Carter had a trick up his sleeve, and that was that he would, because of the hostages were being held in Iraq-Iran, what they lasted there a year and a half or something like that, ultimately. But he said he couldn't go out and campaign, he had to be Washington and stay and be working on that.

And this is what became as the Rose Garden Strategy and other presidents – Gerald Ford tried it a little, had tried something like that earlier. But and he had a letter that was leaked to explaining why he had to do this and so on that was leaked to Jack Nelson of the *L.A. Times* and Jack Nelson took it seriously like this was a real problem and it wasn't at all – it was a tactic in the campaign so he wouldn't have to go out and campaign a lot and argue with Kennedy and so on and have debates against Kennedy, and he didn't do that.

KRISTOL: There were no debates, right?

BARNES: There were no debates.

KRISTOL: In the primary.

BARNES: In the primary, and there was only one debate in the general election, you know, and that's the one where Reagan famously said, "There you go again," and then wound up with that great line about "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?"

KRISTOL: Now, were you at the Reagan-Bush debate in that primary in 1980 in Nashua?

BARNES: Yeah, I was there.

KRISTOL: You guys, you just got to cover either campaign or something, I guess that's how it worked.

BARNES: Well, look, by 1980, I was with *The Baltimore Sun*, and we had two political reporters, and we had two campaigns and we shared them. But the other reporter was Carl Leubsdorf, who's a longtime AP reporter, covered many campaigns, ultimately went to *The Dallas Morning News*, was a great political reporter. Well, the Nashua debate, you know, this was the – I love tricks in politics that happen and the ones that aren't illegal. And –

KRISTOL: Even some of the illegal ones –

BARNES: Well, yeah. So George W. Bush, George H. W. Bush had won in Iowa. Reagan had – he wasn't saying much. Remember he came – his campaign was sort of built on some North-South, U.S.-Mexico, North-South alliance or agreement or something, it's hazy in my mind. Ultimately, we wound up with NAFTA, the economic treaty between Canada, the U.S., and Mexico, but that was years later.

KRISTOL: I think the Reagan team thought he was the frontrunner, and he didn't have to do much.

BARNES: He skipped the one big debate that's put on by *The Des Moines Register* in Iowa, skipped it. That was a mistake, and people in Iowa, you know, they frown on you not at least appearing. So –

KRISTOL: And it fit into the narrative that he was too old to be in a debate, you know, and all that, right?

BARNES: Bush wanted to debate him one-on-one. So Bush put up the money for a debate in New Hampshire. I hope I have this right – it's only been 35 years ago. The – or maybe it was Reagan who paid for the debate. Anyway, one of them. They went one-on-one, that's the important thing.

The debate was – I don't remember much that was said there but to have a one-on-one debate, that meant all the other candidates – remember you had this dazzling field among Republicans in 1980 – Howard Baker, Bob Dole, Phil Crane, John Connally, the former Treasury Secretary and Texas Governor. It was really a remarkable field but they were not in the debate.

And but at the beginning – and this was a trick by John Sears, who was a Reagan campaign manager – they were led out into – we had these two candidates sitting, and these candidates were led out and complaining that they should have been in the debate. So that's how it started. And so that trick became the story. And of course, Reagan saying – you know, this why I figure Reagan, it must have been Reagan who paid for it – “I paid for this microphone, Mr. Green.” His name was Breen. But that's all you remember about it because what they said didn't amount to much.

II: The Reagan Years (20:40 – 42:22)

KRISTOL: And so Reagan – what was that like in 1980 as a candidate? So he's 69 years old already, right?

BARNES: Yeah, Reagan was a great candidate, and I didn't really know him then. I had met him in the campaign but other than that, I got to know him when he was President. But I didn't then.

And for once, the press turned against a Democratic presidential candidate for being mean. The press decided that all these things that Carter was saying about Reagan, that he was – that Reagan would take us back to the Stone Age and that he was stirring racial tension in the country and all these things and he was being mean. And so Carter had to have a press conference in which he said in effect, “I won't be mean anymore.” It was not a good point in the campaign for Carter.

They had done – the Carter people were so optimistic about this because they had done all this negative research and they had all these statements that Reagan had made and what he'd said in radio broadcasts and in conservative speeches and so on. And they thought by just letting those out, that that was going to be enough for them to win easily. Well, Carter was in a lot of trouble, and Reagan turned out to be a more soothing campaign than you might have thought – a campaigner than you might have thought from hearing these things.

But it was a close campaign, and Reagan, of course, gained about 10 points in the last week or two and won by 10 points and they had one debate. Remember there was an earlier debate because Carter wanted – he said, “I'll only debate Reagan.” But John Anderson, the Illinois Congressman, a Republican was running as well. And so Reagan debated Anderson. Yeah, debated Anderson in a debate that was obviously forgettable because I forget – I covered it but –

KRISTOL: But gutsy of Reagan in a way, some risk of having Anderson show him up, I mean.

BARNES: Early in the – earlier in the campaign, Reagan was so good in these things. Earlier in the campaign in the Illinois primary, which Anderson was running in at that time. It was Reagan and Anderson. And Anderson was flirting with the idea of naming, of getting Teddy Kennedy to run as his Vice Presidential running mate. He'd gone to meet Kennedy in the Senate Office Building in Washington. At one point, Reagan leans over to him and said, "John, would you really prefer Teddy Kennedy to me?" And Anderson got all flustered. It was a great moment.

KRISTOL: And Reagan as a candidate? I mean, the rumors or reports were he was very disciplined, didn't work excessively long hours. Is that true?

BARNES: No, no. Well, one of the things that was great, I think it was in 1980 that when I was covering Reagan, I got to go see a twilight double-header at Comiskey Park in Chicago because Reagan would have an event in the morning and that would be the one for the press that they could, that's what – if there was any news it was going to make, it would be then.

And then there might be, he'd go greet people or something and then he might speak in the evening but there wouldn't be any news there. It was really designed for one, Reagan did not work very hard, and two, made it easy for reporters. So, we were staying at O'Hare somewhere and sure enough, I knew this twilight double-header was there, I got my story finished, and I got to the park in time to see the first pitch of the first game even and stayed the whole time. Haven't seen a twilight double-header since then. I don't think they exist anymore.

KRISTOL: I don't know if they really exist.

BARNES: But Reagan was a wonderful candidate. We talked about the debate and brought a lot of people in with him. Remember, Republicans had 39 Senators going into that election and they won 12 seats. Remember Al D'Amato, Al D'Amato in New York and Paula Hawkins in Florida and Jeremiah Denton in Alabama and so on. It was – Reagan did have the ability to bring people in with him.

KRISTOL: I remember watching that night. I was an assistant professor at Penn, and they called the race for Reagan nationally, and I think and then they called – I can't remember which – D'Amato and Specter, I think, it was winning what, I think, had been a Democratic seat. An open seat in any case in Pennsylvania. And I remember thinking, "Oh my God, Republicans are winning New York and Pennsylvania." It was an exciting evening. Yeah.

BARNES: Yeah, there were a lot of unhappy reporters because most of them were Democratic, didn't like Carter all that much but they liked him better than Reagan, for sure.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Well, did Reagan – people forget Reagan succeeded in an era when there was no Fox News, no talk radio, no Rush Limbaugh. No *Weekly Standard*. No Internet. No ability to go around the liberal mainstream media, and yet somehow he succeeded. It's pretty amazing when you think about it.

BARNES: It is pretty amazing. And he – you still did ads on television, of course – but I remember going around, I would, I had one of those little trash 80 Radio Shack computers but before I got one, I was still actually writing stories out in longhand and then would call them to a dictationist, read them to a dictationist. And it really seems like the Stone Age of political reporting and it was. It's so much easier now. No question about it.

KRISTOL: Could a candidate do what Reagan did in '80? The sort of one or two events, get your news straight, and not too frantic. I mean, I remember watching Romney in 2012 and six events a day, you just sort of wonder is that really necessary?

BARNES: Well, Reagan could do it again but another candidate couldn't. You know, Reagan started with an enormous following. That's one of the reasons why he was underrated going into the 1980 campaign because so many reporters didn't realize he had a huge following in the Republican Party and not just a

following because people had liked him a little bit – they liked him a lot. So he started with a base. And that got him the nomination and helped him in the general election.

KRISTOL: So, covering Reagan as President, you first with the *Sun* and then as you said, you went to *The New Republic*. You also began doing *The McLaughlin Group*. We'll come back to that at some time.

So you were – I mean, I would say when I got here to Washington – not to flatter you – but you were an important, I think, figure, you know it mattered what you wrote, and I'm sure the White House cared about it. I could say –

BARNES: Flattery, I don't mind.

KRISTOL: So how did it work? I'm just curious. So you're there and you're sort of mildly friendlier to Reagan than your average –

BARNES: Sure. I wasn't the White House reporter for *The Baltimore Sun* but I wrote, I was the national political reporter so I wrote a lot about Reagan. Didn't see that much of him in his first term that was – you know, he was very down in the beginning because we had a very deep recession. I mean, President Obama acts like he's the only one who had a serious recession during his presidency but Reagan had a longer and deeper one which really didn't – remember, he came in in early 1981, the recession didn't lift until 1983. But when it lifted, whew, boy, it just boomed like crazy. Well, that's before you got here but you could feel it everywhere. I mean, Reagan's tax cuts had worked, and it was amazing.

Then we get around to his 1984 reelection, and he's reelected. And Pat Buchanan is invited by the new White House Chief of Staff – remember, there had been a switch. Don Regan who had been Treasury Secretary became White House Chief of Staff, and Jim Baker who had been White House Chief of Staff became Treasury Secretary. Pat Buchanan became the Communications Director and so he invited me and Mort Kondracke who was then with *Newsweek* and Paul Harvey. Remember Paul Harvey? Yep. He invited us to lunch at the White House. This must have been with Reagan and Don Regan and Pat Buchanan. We were all there at this lunch in that little office off the Oval Office. And the – and it was a very nice lunch.

Reagan – this is when I discovered Reagan is so disciplined. Reagan, I thought – well, this is off the record, but I'll learn so much, I can sort of scaffold this and not dishonestly but into stories, I can pursue stories. I didn't get anything. I didn't print anything. I learned that Reagan had one tactic that was very good when he didn't want to tell you anything. He told you a lot of Hollywood stories. He told us one about Errol Flynn, and he said the movies liked, you know, the movies he would get shown at Camp David when he was up there on a weekend were ones that he described. He didn't like the sex in modern movies. But he said, "Why can't they do it the way a director did back in the 30s when a couple got married, they went in their hotel room and then a hand sticks out with a sign that says 'Do not disturb?'" That was Reagan's idea of how you handle sex in a movie.

Anyway, this lunch was Paul Harvey. I don't know whether he got the rest of the story item out of it. Remember that on a radio show, which was very, very popular. Paul Harvey, you know, these – his deal was at the lunch was well, these guys, Kondracke and Barnes, they're just reporters here in town, I represent the Middle West of the country, the heartland of the country. Anyway, I was glad to meet him, and my father was a big fan, listened to him every day.

But there was – when we got a picture of that lunch – if you saw it, I still have the picture – in the lower left-hand corner was a shoe sticking in there and I couldn't figure out at first what it was and then I realized it was the shoe of Edmund Morris who was sitting in there. Remember the White House and Reagan had approved this, to have that he would be the first President to have an authorized biography with – and allow the author of it to spend all this at the White House talking to him, coming to a lunch at the – with reporters there and so on. And that was sitting in the corner, not saying anything, it was Edmund Morris.

And of course, his book turned out to be a fiasco, *Dutch*. You know, he said nobody could figure Reagan out. And I'll have to admit it is hard to figure out Reagan. I think I've figured him now but it was hard for Edmund Morris who is a great biography of Teddy Roosevelt. He's not the great biographer of Ronald Reagan. He had to inject fictional characters in the book. It was – I read 20 pages of it and could – I couldn't figure out what was going on.

KRISTOL: So what is – what is your shorthand version of Reagan? I mean, you say you think sort of figured him out?

BARNES: You know, Marty Anderson, I'm told Marty Anderson who recently died who was a Domestic Policy Advisor for Reagan and Californian for years, wonderful guy. Then after the Reagan Presidency, went to the Hoover Institution and published a number of books about Reagan, he and his wife, Annelise. And I'm told he believed that Reagan when he was in elementary or junior high school figured out that the smartest guy in class is not the most popular guy in class, and Reagan realized he wanted to be the most popular guy. And so he, you know, that's how he was student council president in high school, and I guess this was in Dixon, Illinois. And then he was – I don't know whether he was – I mean, even in his first year, he was a leader of this student revolt at Eureka College and so on.

And Reagan really fashioned, I believe that Reagan fashioned this person who doesn't appear that smart because he wanted to – but really a common man who really fit in with the American people and so on. It worked marvelously and got him elected.

There was an interesting story that happened that I think supports this. In Reagan's second term when it was brought to him I think by Marlin Fitzwater, a Press Secretary, a very good one, and said, "Mr. President, I have this list of all the books you've been reading." And these are serious books about politics and the world and so on, "And I'd like to release this to the press because you know a lot of the, those reporters they just think you're not smart at all and you're you know just sitting back, when you're in public, you're sitting back watching TV." And Reagan said, "No. I don't want you do to that."

Reagan did not want to change and have people think that he's some highfaluting guy reading books with a lot of footnotes and so on. And what shows you, the one thing if anybody wants to see the real Reagan, it's to read, you have to read Reagan's diaries. And you realize that he was so far ahead of his age. I mean, he could look around corners. He knew where he was going. He knew what he wanted. And they're really revealing, I'd say even for me. And I was proud to be mentioned a couple times in there but that's here nor there. It really shows that Reagan was so on top of everything in ways that even his staff didn't recognized. And you remember Bud McFarlane, the National Security Advisor, his famous line was, "You know, Reagan knows so little and he accomplishes so much." Well, the truth is Reagan knew a lot.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's so interesting. What was it like covering the Reagan White House? I mean, how does – like people would be interested. How does it work? You don't just place calls to the Press Secretary, you place calls to Chiefs of Staff and Domestic Policy Advisors and –

BARNES: There's something that's lost in the, really, shutdown of reporters in the Obama White House. And there used to be something reporters would do when they covered the White House – they would develop sources outside the Press Office. You'd find people you could talk to, and you would have to build up a little trust that you weren't going – if they told me something, you can't quote me by name and then you quoted them by name, you weren't going to last long. And there were a lot of them. There were a lot of people that would like to talk about Reagan. And so you had to develop them and that was true in other White Houses as well.

It looks now the reporters haven't been able to develop any sources in the Obama White House, and stories that look like they have or stories that have been, what's known as official leaks, in other words, they're leaked and handed to reporters by White House officials.

I interviewed Reagan a couple times, and the last time was in 1987. This was after Iran Contra, and

Reagan's numbers had gone – if you remember Iran Contra, of course, it was the Reagan said what were they, they weren't tanks, I guess it was artillery to the Iranians and they paid for them and the money wound up going to the Contras in Nicaragua and it was a mess, it was a scandal. And so I go in there. This was about three or four months afterwards.

And I took with me a picture that my mother had given me. Actually, it was a picture of Reagan at the Presidio of Monterrey in California when he was filming a movie called *Sergeant Murphy*. And *Sergeant Murphy*, I've seen the movie. Actually, it was Marty Anderson who sent me a copy of the movie. *Sergeant Murphy* was a B movie because they used to have double features, the main movie and then the second movie would be shorter. And *Sergeant Murphy* is about an hour. And Reagan, he's wearing these riding clothes in the whole movie, and he's there in this picture. And I asked him to autograph. And the amazing thing was Reagan remembered everything about the movie. It's a movie that came out in 1938. And it was certainly – I think it was his third movie, the least of his movies probably. I mean it was not very good, and nobody would watch it now, except Ronald Reagan was in it. And he went on and on about being in the Presidio there and so on. My grandfather was a post commander at the time. So I think my grandmother was in the picture, and their daughter married a lieutenant in the cavalry there, my father. But I was just amazed at how Reagan – I had heard he had a photographic memory. Well, he certainly did about that.

Also to get out of the Iran Contra scandal, his staff had finally gotten him to say in public well, it wasn't arms for hostages. You remember there were what five or six hostages that were being held mainly in Lebanon, I think, by terrorists or – And that he had actually sent this weaponry over there in order to get hostages out. And Reagan never believed it but they got him to say it. Well, I asked him about it in that interview there and a couple of Press Secretaries there – Marlin Fitzwater was one of them hovering over there, and Tommy Griscom, who had been Howard Baker's Press Secretary, was there. And I asked Reagan about it. And he said it wasn't about it, for hostages.

KRISTOL: Unraveling, the careful White House damage control strategy.

BARNES: Yeah, Reagan never believed it was. And so I looked at the Press Secretaries – they were stricken when they heard Reagan saying that. But it was – I mean, this is in the Oval Office, and that was – I don't remember what else he said but it was I enjoyed that. Still have the picture framed. A good picture.

And Reagan, you know, Reagan was particularly great because he'd been an actor, and they thought – I mean, he thought speeches were serious. And he thought, you know, events where he would just walk or be somewhere, and he was really great doing that. The one I remember the most was being in Moscow when he went there in 1988 and gave that speech at Moscow University. Boy, don't send your kids to Moscow University. It was an incredibly forbidding place. I mean, horrible, grim. And Reagan gets up and just his being there up at the podium at Moscow University, great picture. And he walked across Red Square, of course, with Gorbachev and so on, and then he gave this great speech, just a fantastic speech about democracy and so on. And he got great applause. And then students asked questions. It was – I mean, it was a tour de force. I don't think anybody else could have done that. It was really remarkable. That's why he was a great president. Yeah, one of the reasons, anyway.

If you had to rank the Presidents, I'd, of course, rank him the highest. I kind of look at them as Presidents, what's the big thing they achieved. And, Reagan of course, basically won the Cold War. He wasn't the only one who contributed to that but he certainly contributed more than anybody else. And I'd put – I'd put George Bush 43 second, not the first George Bush in the White House but the second and for this reason – and that's the surge in Iraq. This was in 2007, and we were losing the Iraq War by that time very quickly. Remember, American troops had been sent in there in 2003. And Bush hadn't given up, he still wanted to win and thought he could. And very few people at the White House were involved in this decision to get – what did he send, 60,000, 80,000 more troops?

KRISTOL: 40 or 50 but a lot. It strained the Army, extended deployments 15 months – that was one of the main objections to it, I remember.

BARNES: Everybody was against it. The State Department was against it. The generals at the Pentagon were against it. The press was against it. Most Republicans on Capitol Hill were against it, particularly after Republicans had been just slaughtered in the 2006 midterm election in which Democrats won both the House and the Senate. Just the Washington community was against it. You know they were sort of a Greek chorus and sound-off about the conventional wisdom. The foreign policy establishment was against it. Condi Rice, then the Secretary of State, really didn't want to do it. Just about everybody was against except the President, the Vice President, Cheney, and about three or four people on the National Security Council staff, J.D. Crouch was the Deputy, he was one of the leaders, Steve Hadley was the National Security Advisor. And you get past that, there weren't many people for it and yet Bush insisted because he thought they could win.

And naturally, and you know there's a meeting in which he met before he ordered this with the Joint Chiefs of Staff in this room called the tank, you know, with no windows at the Pentagon, trying to persuade them that it was a good idea. He wasn't ordering them to do it them but obviously they followed that order ultimately. And but he didn't get very far. It was a couple hours. But then he went ahead and did it. And he didn't just send a trickle of troops. He said he wanted it to be robust. One of his aides said – I wrote a story about this, I quoted one of his aides saying, "Look, if you're going to be a bear, be a grisly." And Bush was a grisly.

But it was against everybody, practically everybody was against it, and he did it and it was successful. Remember when we all but won the war, it wasn't completely over but it had completely turned Iraq around and we were withdrawing troops ultimately. And then George W. Bush has the misfortune of being followed in office by Barack Obama, who wound up taking all the troops out – and now look at it.

III: Politics in the Nineties (42:22 – 1:01:37)

KRISTOL: So we really got to know each other during the George H. W. Bush Presidency when I was Dan Quayle's Chief of Staff and was one of those sources that you developed. I don't think I was very hard to develop. I'm not sure how much of a good source I was. But what about that, President Bush, you got to know him fairly well?

BARNES: Well, I did. Not that well but I covered him back when he ran in 1980. I had gone on a trip with him in 1978 when he was traveling around, actually doing the groundwork for his campaign ultimately in 1980.

And I rate him slightly below his son for this reason. The degree in difficulty in pulling off the surge when all of Washington and most of the country was against him, including Republicans, was remarkable and the surge was successful. George H. W. Bush, the father, did two really remarkable things. One was the coalition he put together in the first Gulf War. It was really extremely well done. I'm not sure another President who could have done that so well. But he had, you know he'd been Ambassador to China and he'd been CIA Director and he had a lot of contacts. It was really remarkable, though.

And the second thing was something that was deemed, I think, by most people impossible at least in the near term and that was the unification of Germany. West Germany and East Germany. We take that for granted now. But boy, it certainly wasn't then. And yet he with a lot of help from Jim Carter – Jim Baker, his Secretary of State, pulled that off, a remarkable achievement. But as hard as that was, it was not quite as hard as the surge, or brave. I go back to the surge again because this was really something – a profile in courage on the part of George W. Bush.

KRISTOL: People totally forget how impossible – I was pushing for it, of course; *The Weekly Standard* was pushing for it, had been pushing for more troops for three years. And then September-October was the real push. But I remember after the huge Republican defeats in '06 were, I think correctly, considered a judgment on Bush and the war in Iraq.

When he fired Rumsfeld, I was at a debate at Harvard – a post-election forum with Bill Galston, and we

do it every two years and with Harvey Mansfield hosting and moderating. And I remember saying, I thought Bush might do the surge. This was maybe a week after the election, in November. And Galston really thought I was crazy – “Well, you want it, Bill, I understand that but it can’t happen.” I mean, you can’t lose an election on a certain issue and then double down on that policy, and it would just be considered totally out of bounds. He wouldn’t have Republican support, let alone Democratic support. They would stop it in Congress.

And Bill wasn’t being foolish. Bill was really reflecting what I think was the conventional wisdom and not a stupid conventional wisdom. I mean, Bush really had – people forget now, and it’s sad because, of course, it’s all been frittered away in a sense, so he’ll never in a way get the kind of credit he deserves for that two years of leadership.

BARNES: I’m afraid you’re right but one of the things you mentioned there was the Republicans were against it. Bush, after the election in 2006, invited something like – I don’t know – 200 Congressional Republicans – that may have been all there were left – down to the White House and mainly got complaints about what was going on in Iraq.

And the Pentagon, it was during that time where – I mean, he was already thinking about it, this is late 2006 – had asked the Pentagon to put together what would – you know, if we did something like made another big effort that turned out to be the surge, what would it look like? And the Pentagon dawdled. The Pentagon really just didn’t want to even put that together. I mean, this had to be something that the President did on his own. There was nobody else. I mean, Cheney was there, and a few other aides but the rest of them – this was a personal triumph. A very personal decision and a personal triumph.

KRISTOL: So between the two Bushes – there were two figures that you covered and knew pretty well. One, Bill Clinton and one Newt Gingrich. Let’s talk about them for a minute.

BARNES: Well, we think of him now in contrast to Barack Obama because they both started out the same way and then took different directions. Remember when Clinton came to town and became President, he in his first two years, he took a very liberal path. George Mitchell was the majority leader in the Senate, and I forget who was the leader in the House. Foley but the –

KRISTOL: And Gephardt really.

BARNES: Dick Gephardt was the key guy, and they steered him to the left, and you remember all the problems that he had. One, HillaryCare, which it was so bad it never came to a vote in the House or the Senate. And then you had things like the crime bill that was a disaster, you know, and midnight baseball and all these things and the things that liberals love. And 1994 was a striking election in which the Republicans won everything.

And Bill Clinton recognized that, that he had to change and go back to the sort of much more moderate campaign, the stance he took there and became a much more moderate and successful President as a result. He went back to welfare reform, which had been a big thing in his campaign and finally got it after vetoing a couple of welfare reform bills that Newt Gingrich had sent him. Agreed to cut the capital gains tax rate, amazing for a Democratic president to do that. Jimmy Carter had gone along with a cut in the capital gains tax rate back in 1978 but only under extreme duress. Clinton agreed to a budget that ended in a balanced budget and so on, completely changed his Presidency, his tone, and the ideology of it.

KRISTOL: And did you deal with him personally much, were you charmed by him like everyone says?

BARNES: Yes. You know, I didn’t deal with him much but I’ll tell you he was incredibly charming. And many people have had the same experience, probably everybody who’s ever run into him, have had this experience where you may say a couple of words to him, and he may say a couple to you but you feel like you’re the only person in the world that he cares about. It really is amazing. It’s lethal, this charm he has. There was an interview, I had one interview with him that was arranged by Dave Gergen. I forget exactly when. Dave Gergen, who had worked in the Ford Administration, the Nixon Administration.

KRISTOL: Yeah, Gergen was there like the first two years that I was at the beginning.

BARNES: Yeah, the Reagan Administration. Yeah, the first two years. He'd been – basically, Nancy Reagan had gotten him fired in the Reagan White House. Here, he crossed – I think he crossed Hillary in the – he said some things critical of the health care bill, I think that may have gotten him out –

KRISTOL: He was brought in when Clinton had a very rough first few months, and he was the old pro, bipartisan, stabilize things, but then, yeah.

BARNES: Yeah. It – anyway, Clinton was under duress for something, I forget what it was. And I went in and interviewed him. I can't tell you anything he said because he didn't say much. Then I went back and wrote something utterly forgettable. We met in the – I don't think it was in the Oval Office, it was somewhere else. And Clinton – this was the one time I saw Clinton when he wasn't at the top of his game, when he wasn't particularly genial, when he wasn't even very charming. He was really under pressure, and it showed.

Somehow, he got his way out of this. This is well before Monica Lewinsky and all that, this is much earlier in his Administration. He wound up being – he'll be, I think, regarded as a successful President, not with any great success but just a President with a rough start and then got better.

KRISTOL: The first issue of *The Weekly Standard* on Labor Day 1995 had Newt Gingrich on the cover. You had one of the articles on that, and you must have written a ton about Newt over the years, really and –

BARNES: Yeah, you know, I'm trying to think what the cover line on it was. It was something like – I don't know. Yeah, but anyway it was going to be "Republicans are going to be on top forever." Permanent offense.

KRISTOL: Which was Newt's phrase, I think.

BARNES: Yeah, it was. Remember they were riding, really riding high. You know, this was something that everybody thought Newt was capable of doing. Newt is probably the smartest member of Congress I've ever met or talked to. Mort Kondracke and I are doing a book on Jack Kemp, and he was interviewed for it by Mort, and there was a transcript. I read it, I've read it about three times. Out of a hundred of these interviews, his is by far the best.

I mean, he can see politics at different levels. The level of getting votes in the House, and another level is the agenda. And then what does this mean historically that's going on. I mean, he's really a remarkable figure. He wasn't a very good Speaker of the House. He made one mistake and that was to – well, I think he believed you could govern from Congress. You can't govern from Congress. The White House – you can play a role but you can't do it on your own. And he would have a press conference every day and you can't do that, either.

KRISTOL: He loved the media, Newt. That was a fatal flaw there.

BARNES: He loved the media. But you just put yourself in eventual trouble if you're doing that every day. All the other members of Congress will resent it, among other things. That's probably the least problem you have. Every word is going to be followed and looked at and examined. And anyway, it was trouble.

He just, he got just a little farther out there than he should have. But Newt was elected in '78 and one of the things he used to do if you wanted to come and talk to him, you would have to walk with him from the Capitol. Did you do one of those? You walk from the Capitol.

KRISTOL: A few. When I was government, even when I was a young person working for Bennett and he had an interest in young people in Washington, conservatives. Yeah, you'd meet him early and walk from

his apartment, which was right near the Capitol.

BARNES: Yeah, in the Methodist Building, I believe.

KRISTOL: To the Washington Monument and back. That was his exercise –

BARNES: No, no, go farther than that. I think you'd go all the way down to the Lincoln Memorial, anyways, down the Mall and back. And it was fascinating, and he'd talk the whole time. And you weren't running, you were just walking, hurriedly. But it was, you know, if you wanted to interview Newt. I don't know whether – I'm trying to think whether I tried to take notes or not, it would have been hard.

But there was – not only is he the smartest but probably the most fascinating in everything he said. And he could, and he knew a lot about a lot of things but particularly politics and history, which he always bragged about as being an historian.

KRISTOL: That's right. Jack Kemp, you knew him quite well when he was obviously a Congressman and a Presidential candidate, a Cabinet Secretary, then Vice Presidential candidate. And now you've just about finished this book on him. What's your judgment?

BARNES: Yeah. Like Newt, Jack Kemp was one of a kind. And he was a self-taught expert on the economy and on other related conservative subjects. I don't know whether you've read any books by Von Mises. I've tried. I couldn't. Jack read them.

KRISTOL: That's amazing.

BARNES: Hayek, of course, and then and Friedman and many others that are a lot easier to read. Kemp was elected in 1970 right when from Buffalo where he had played with the Bills and been a star and he decided that what he wanted to do – he needed to do something for Buffalo. Buffalo was already deteriorating as a slightly worn out Rust Belt industrial city. And he first came up with a bill – I forget what it was, I don't know, some business tax cuts. Then he had another one.

And by – and then – what you have – Jack was brilliant but he was also dynamic. And that's what people seem to forget about him now. He wasn't just a guy that studied economics and came up with this bill that was the Kemp-Roth 30 percent across-the-board tax cut that was in '78 and was later adopted by Reagan and was the heart of his economic program in 1981. Kemp had a following, and he put together this incredible – he was the nexus of this supply-side economics, supply-side tax cut movement where you had parts – in New York, you had economics there, you had the editorial page of *The Wall Street Journal*, which Jude Wanniski was an editorial writer there, and he brought Kemp together with the *Journal*. You had a number of members of Congress, particularly younger members who Jack had recruited.

One of his Chiefs of Staff, Randy Teague, told me that Jack would, almost every time he'd come back from the floor, he'd say, "I've just been talking to so-and-so, I think he's going to be with us on this. I want you to get in touch with his legislative director and we need to" – you know, he'd do that all the time, he was recruiting people. And he recruited an impressive, some older members but a lot of the younger members. You know by late in the 70s, I mean Newt came in '78, he was one of Kemp's followers. Connie Mack from Florida and Vin Weber from Minnesota, really the best of the young members. And, of course, they got the Kemp-Roth tax cut. It wasn't passed but it was voted on in '78.

And finally the person that Jack Kemp persuaded to become a supply-sider was Ronald Reagan. You know, there was a famous meeting in, I think, early 1980. The Reagan, the campaign was already going and Reagan – look, Reagan was for tax cuts, there was no question about that. And so it was in a sense Kemp and his group were pushing an open door. And but what he convinced Reagan of was a particular type of tax cut, the supply-side tax cuts where you cut from the top and you cut the marginal rates, and this would stir innovation and savings and investment and so on, all these things, which most people and economists back then and certainly most people in politics, including George Bush, thought was fanciful.

And yet Reagan adopted it. Reagan trimmed back some, spread out the implementation of it, passed it, and it worked.

Without Jack Kemp, that wouldn't have happened. I mean, an incredibly dynamic driven guy. We remember how as a guy who would – I've sat through many of these where he would, Jack would give a 30-minute speech, come to the logical end and then speak 30 minutes more. But he was an amazing figure and, of course, he was helped by having been a football player in the American Football League. Never played in the NFL because they hadn't merged yet but that gave him some credibility with working-class people and but he was in his knowledge of economics was really extraordinary. He majored in Phys Ed at Occidental College in California, and yet was self-taught and very effectively.

KRISTOL: And made such a – your book will help correct this, I think, but people don't appreciate how much difference he made and how difficult – I mean, the idea that a backbench Congressman in his first few terms, not on the Ways and Means Committee, the tax-writing committee of the House.

BARNES: Yeah, but that was good. You see if he'd been in the leadership, which he later became in the 80s. And if he'd been a member of the House Ways and Means Committee, well, then he'd be fighting these battles there and he wouldn't – but on the outside, he could do what he really wanted, he could follow the supply-side model and he wasn't weighted down by being in the leadership.

KRISTOL: It was such a bold reversal, not just of conventional wisdom, liberal economic policy, but of Republican conventional wisdom.

BARNES: Oh, yeah. Well, you know so many of the Republicans then were still –

KRISTOL: Tax cuts, expensing –

BARNES: Yeah, the business tax cuts, expensing, balancing the budget, let's cut spending. And Jack Kemp did not care about balancing the budget or cutting spending. He cared about economic growth and what that would do for Americans across the country and he turned out to be right.

KRISTOL: I want to talk about the media which you have so much experience in. But any other political figures, other people who sort of were forgotten today who at the time you thought were fascinating, under-appreciated, that you'd like to recall to people.

BARNES: Well, how about somebody who was at least in Washington really disliked and that was Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina.

KRISTOL: Well, you became close to him, you covered him quite a lot.

BARNES: I got to know him pretty well, and that's because I was on *The McLaughlin Group* on television, which they would watch. This was a Saturday night at 7:30, and his wife like me, Dot, a very nice woman. And so I got to know him, and I interviewed him a lot. And, you know, he was known as "Senator No" because he was against a lot of things but he was a great anti-communist for one thing and he had this trait that practically no one else, maybe with the exception of Ronald Reagan, has in Washington, and that was the ability to just ignore the press, just shut them out of his mind, wasn't worried about what they were going to say or write or anything, you just didn't bother with it. Very empowering in his case.

And being as firmly conservative as he was, he had an enormous influence in Washington on foreign policy, less so on domestic policy. But and he'd been accused of having his own State Department because he had people like John Carbaugh, one of his aides, would go around the world and get involved in things but Jesse Helms was a fascinating, influential and, I think, great Senator.

KRISTOL: And really ignored conventional wisdom. I think one of the early pieces you wrote for *The Weekly Standard* – well, I guess it wasn't that early, after Bill Weld lost in '96, I guess, the Senate race to John Kerry in Massachusetts, President Clinton reaching across the aisle nominated him to be what,

Ambassador to Mexico?

BARNES: Mexico. Ambassador to Mexico and Jesse Helms partly because he'd been criticized by Weld, was then the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and he said, "No, no, we're not going to do anything with that nomination." Everybody in the press and other senators said, "Well, you can't do that." And Helms said, "Of course, I can."

KRISTOL: Everyone thought that Helms would, of course, eventually buckle. A reputable, distinguished Governor nominated by the President has just been re-elected who was qualified in some sense for the job, I guess. No scandal or anything. And Helms just stopped it.

BARNES: Yeah, right, you're the Chairman – if you believe what you're doing and will stick with it and you're Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, you can stop a lot. And he did. Weld tried to come by his office and see him once, and Senator Helms wouldn't see him. It was fascinating.

IV: Talking Politics on Television (1:01:37 – 1:24:44)

KRISTOL: When I came to Washington in 1985 I, of course, knew you from some of your other writing in *The American Spectator* and some of the daily journalism and you had just begun at *The New Republic*, I think. But you were already famous for *The McLaughlin Group*, which people – now there's so much talk and all the Sunday shows and cable TV and all but that was really it seemed to me at the time, an innovation. In any case, it was a big deal, I remember if you could get you to mention something on *The McLaughlin Group*, people talked about it the next week. So, talk about that.

BARNES: Well, it was a great show, and it was helpful that Ronald Reagan watched it when he was President, and I would say much of political Washington paid attention to it, it was syndicated around the country. And it was based, it was a show – the founder and moderator and *fuhrer* was John McLaughlin, a former Jesuit priest who had worked in the Nixon White House, who was very outspoken, who was conservative, he's not as conservative now. But really understood television, and that is that you could be outlandish and emotional and yell and be exciting and it would be great television – and it was.

KRISTOL: So he started it in –

BARNES: In 1982.

KRISTOL: And there really was nothing – was there anything like it, even sort of reporters talking about the week's news? I mean, one forgets how little there was at that time.

BARNES: Well, there had been a show called the *Agronsky and Company* that had had a couple of bureau chiefs and reporters like Peter Lisagor of the *Chicago Daily News*. Nobody – people had read these folks, they'd never seen them before. But it was, I'll have to say it was pretty polite.

The McLaughlin Group was not known for being polite, it was pretty rambunctious, which, I think, it helped it become something that people really wanted to watch. And you had a diversity of opinion. When I was on there the first time, it was the Saturday after the first Reagan-Mondale debate, and I don't know whether John McLaughlin had ever seen before but I was one of the panelists on that debate and –

KRISTOL: I forgot that. Didn't you ask some famous or notorious question? Let's talk about that. Was that your first presidential debate?

BARNES: Absolutely. Only.

KRISTOL: The only one you've ever been a panelist on.

BARNES: But it was the first one. It's remembered because Reagan was terrible. He was a zombie on that. I mean, you could tell when I shook hands with him afterwards, he was kind of stricken because he

knew how poorly he had done. I mean, it didn't affect his reelection but anyway they had trouble getting – you know, the campaigns have to agree on the questioners. I don't know whether – I don't think it's that way now when you have one person, one moderator, and not a panel. But they'd have to agree.

And so the Mondale campaign and the Reagan campaign had to agree and they – or so it was written – they'd gone through a hundred people without getting a panel. And finally they did. It was me, it was Jim Wieghart of the *New York Daily News* and what's her name who was with ABC – No, no, no. Diane Sawyer. Yeah, we were the panelists, and Barbara Walters was the moderator. And I remember getting – this was in Louisville – I remember getting together the night before with all the panelists and we talked about the questions we were going to ask and about – ask about tax cuts and so on. And I'll have to say I – Diane Sawyer, I was really not impressed by her. I thought she wouldn't do a very good job. I was wrong. She was fine, and went on to be an anchor on ABC and did very well. So I was not right about that.

But I asked a question. Oh, I had my good friend, Tom DeFrank at *Newsweek*, I called him the day before to say, "Look, what should I ask? I want to ask some question that will not be expected." So, Tom and I talked it through, and we dreamed up this question. It was basically to ask Ronald Reagan, "How come you don't go to church?" And I had – saying, look, if you're at Camp David, you could get somebody, a preacher to come up there at the White House and so and all these things. And Reagan said, well, he was just worried about the security, and I thought I'd really stumped him – you know, the security and you know, we can't go, it'll be so – it will mess up the service and so on. When I asked the question, sitting behind me in the audience – and my back was to the audience, you know, there's a debate, it's in an auditorium, and there was an audience there, the Reagan people were sitting behind me. They hissed.

KRISTOL: Right. They probably thought you would sort of be friendly to Reagan.

BARNES: Yeah, I guess so. I was just looking for a good question. And so anyway it was a terrible debate, and he didn't answer that question very well. He didn't do very well on others. He tried – remember, he'd been – over-prepared with all these details. Reagan was not a great detail guy. He may have remembered them but he didn't use them much.

And anyway after that, I got on *The McLaughlin Group*. I had never watched the show, even though friends of mine like Bob Novak and Mort Kondracke and Pat Buchanan were on the show. But Pat missed that week so I was invited to sit in. And I'll have to say I did not take it lightly. I prepared. And you know ahead what the issues are, and I guess I did all right. And McLaughlin invited me back a few times, actually a lot of times. Finally, I became, a couple years later, a permanent member of the panel when Bob Novak started his own show on CNN. Then I did it – what'd I do it for about 12 years? And it was a great show, it was a fun to do. You got paid, not much but people did watch it and still hear it today. You know McLaughlin used nicknames for people, and he referred to me as Freddie "the Beetle" Barnes.

KRISTOL: And where was that from? I always wondered.

BARNES: Well, "the Beetle," as McLaughlin explained to me, was the guy in the procession in a Catholic Church, was the guy who carried the mace, you know that big thing that looks like a big drumstick or something? And he said, "Well, gee all the Jesuits watching would know," and, of course, John was a former Jesuit priest.

KRISTOL: And why was that appropriate for you, just –

BARNES: It just occurred to him. But it also meant the teacher's pet. And I sat in the chair that – yeah, you know, and I sat in the chair that Pat Buchanan had sat in before he went to the White House. And I'd get the first question. And you know the teacher's pet was – when McLaughlin taught in Catholic boys' prep schools, was the kid who sat up in the front row and would dust the erasers, and take attendance and so on.

So it – and I – look, I got along with McLaughlin fine. I mean, sometimes it took an effort, he was a difficult person. But he sure knew how to put a show on television. I mean, we really did seriously discuss issues. But it was fun to watch.

KRISTOL: It was fast-paced. But there was a lot of nuggets of news. People forget that.

BARNES: Well, fast-paced, that's exactly what it was. I mean, if you started to wander on and I finally figured if you tried to make two points in one of your interventions, you were lost. One was the most. You'd see McLaughlin when he wasn't on the screen, and you were sort of looking at him while you were saying something, he'd be going like this – in other words, stop.

KRISTOL: That's funny. And you all got along off the set? People always ask me that – do I get along with people I argue with on TV? It was a nice group, right, I mean –

BARNES: Yeah, sure. I got along with everybody there. Jack Germond was there, who had been sort of my mentor in covering politics at *The Evening Star* newspaper, and he'd sent me to cover – this was a great break for me – he sent me to cover, in 1973, Vice President Gerald Ford on the thought that well, maybe Ford, Nixon will have to leave and Ford will take over. And of course, it happened. And I loved, I loved covering Ford. And then it was extremely informal covering him. Got a little more formal when he was President, obviously, and a lot more security but –

KRISTOL: The Vice President then didn't even live in the Vice Presidential – what we now consider the Vice Presidential residence, right?

BARNES: He lived – he lived about a mile from my house, maybe a little more than a mile, in a house in Alexandria, just in a normal community. And of course, we all went over there the night, August 8, the night before, he was going to be inaugurated the next day. And remember what the heart of his speech was, and that was that “Our long national nightmare is over,” and it was, in his Presidency, I have to say. So and the McLaughlin –

KRISTOL: So, Jack Germond was on, and he was crusty – like his thing, as I recall, was crusty and –

BARNES: “Nobody cares about that anymore.”

KRISTOL: Yeah, right, dismissing the importance of everything –

BARNES: He'd kind of tilt over in his chair. And you know, what when they do, and McLaughlin was very sensitive to how viewers reacted, and he did something called a thermometer. And the thermometer was people would say, “How warm are you?” I don't know how it actually worked but it would say, “How warm are you to the members of the panel?” And I have to say they were warmest to Jack. They liked him the best, yeah. They liked that shtick he had. But you know he got – and if I hadn't been covering Ford as Vice President, I wouldn't have moved in as the White House correspondent for *The Sun* on August 9, 1974. A big day for Nixon, a big day for Ford, a big day for me.

KRISTOL: That's most importantly, right. And then so you did *McLaughlin*. And then I can't remember, so you didn't go to Fox till '98, is that right?

BARNES: Well, no, Fox started in 1995. And actually Mort Kondracke and I did – it might have been around about a month on Election Day. And Mort Kondracke and I were the two people doing the election returns and coverage. Boy, we had just one person there coming in and handing us paper, you know the AP has called this Senate race for so-and-so.

KRISTOL: This is '96, right?

BARNES: This is '96. This was really rough, and obviously Fox has gotten a lot better. But, Fox, you know the hardest thing was getting carriage, getting network, cable networks – he had to carry the show.

It's very balkanized, you know, every country and city has a different carrier, a different cable person. And a lot of them just one. Now, you have Direct TV, which you could get by satellite.

And I was surprised, Mort and I started a show in 1998 called "The Beltway Boys," and we – and we just – well, it was kind of a buddy show, and we're great friends, but it wasn't left-right, it was sort of right-center because Mort is kind of a centrist, though he's become a real – I mean, he really was persuaded that supply-side economics was the answer. And he didn't start there. But anyway we did that for a number of years at Fox. In 1980, we argued there ought to be a "Beltway Boys" segment at the convention every night. And they said okay, so we did one at both conventions.

KRISTOL: But this is – you mean –

BARNES: Yeah, 2000, sorry. And then and I thought, "Boy, this is so great," a large Fox audience and so on. And I later looked at the ratings. Practically nobody was watching. And then, of course, we had the 36 days after the 2000 election, and that's where Fox exploded. They really took off.

KRISTOL: Yeah, people forget that because, I remember in 2004, I think we were on, both of us on the coverage. And maybe that was the first night that Fox beat one of the networks at one of the conventions – I think at the first night of the Republican Convention. And that was like a huge moment.

BARNES: Fox has gone on to beat all of them now.

KRISTOL: Yeah, it's amazing. And then, of course, Brit Hume started "Special Report." And you were on the first show?

BARNES: Yeah, the first show.

KRISTOL: And so talk about – Brit told that story but you should tell it from your point-of-view.

BARNES: Well, you know I've done some things at Fox. Fox really hadn't jelled. And this 19 – January 1998. So it's been around what? It's been around a year and a half. And Brit wasn't sure what he was going to do. He was going to have some show but it wasn't going to start then. And it was decided, I guess by Roger Ailes, ultimately that you're going to start tonight.

KRISTOL: This is Lewinsky had broken.

BARNES: Yeah, the Lewinsky story had broken over the weekend. This was a Monday. And you talked about it, I think, over the weekend on some show on ABC this –

KRISTOL: Had been dismissed as just a rumor.

BARNES: It ultimately was not dismissed. And like the next day, it wasn't dismissed.

And Brit did one thing that I think was smart, and that is – not just that he got me, although I'm certainly appreciative of that – and he had Mara Liasson and Mort Kondracke, we're all in journalism. And originally there was some pressure to have somebody on who was out of politics on the show. I can't remember exactly who it was. Bob Shrum, that's who it was, he'd worked for the Kennedys and was a great speechwriter, very talented political advisor, but it's different when you have people who are from journalism.

Journalists may have some of the stupidest ideas and dumbest thoughts that you've ever heard but they're their own. They're not campaigning for somebody, they're not things they can't say because it might get them in trouble with their party they're allied to and so on. The people in journalism, they'll tell you anything. It may be ridiculous but it's what they believe.

KRISTOL: And they'll go contrary to their own side if they don't agree with it and yeah.

BARNES: Sure, yeah, absolutely. And Brit was – you know, Brit was a sort of hands-off moderator. You know he'd let us talk, he'd let Mort and myself argue, and I used to like to tweak Mort on the show and he'd – and he was fun to tweak. And Mara Liasson was down at the White House. I mean, it was a terrific show and but Brit was in charge and it wouldn't have worked without him.

KRISTOL: Yeah, he was terrific.

BARNES: And we went on, we were on there up until what 2008, I think, into the Obama Administration. Then Brit retired, and Bret [Baier] came on and Bret has – he's done it differently, different sort of panel, but it certainly worked.

KRISTOL: Yeah, both of them were great, yeah. And in general – well, go on, I'm sorry.

BARNES: Well, I was just going to say, it was a show fun to do. Brit and I have known each other since high school. We went to college together at the University of Virginia. We went into the same business. And Brit, I'll have to say, Brit loved it a lot more than I did in the beginning. I kept thinking about "I'm going to have to get a real job, maybe I'll go to law school or something," and it really wasn't until I was at *The Washington Star* as a local reporter covering – I mean, this is going to sound incredibly boring – transportation. That was a beat if they didn't think you were going anywhere.

KRISTOL: Sounds kind of boring. So why was it not boring?

BARNES: Well, it wasn't boring because they were building the Metro system, there were huge highway disputes about highways going through urban areas. I66 was a big issue, and the Three Sisters Bridge over the Potomac, which was never built and so on. And then you had a bus system. They had private bus lines, and they were going belly up. There was just so much going on, and they were actually, the highways in particular were national stories because it was happening in cities all over the country.

And I just found it interesting. And Metro, of course, you know, this was so typical of the way Congress and Washington works. I think the original estimate of how much it was going to cost was something like \$2 billion and it turned out to cost \$10 billion or something – so typical.

KRISTOL: That's amazing. What – I think people would be curious to know all these years in Washington on the media side, on the political side, what should people read? I mean obviously they should read *The Weekly Standard* and but I mean books, memoirs, anything that strikes you that you particularly recommend if a young person says, "I'd really like to get a feel for either what that era was like or Washington is like"?

BARNES: Well, the best book by far I think if you're somebody who's just sort of starting and you want to get an idea of what's politics – what's been going on in politics for the last 50 years and what's been going on in Washington is to read Robert Novak's great book, his memoir entitled *Prince of Darkness*, this sort of role that he fashioned for himself. He wasn't at all a prince of darkness. But a wonderful guy. Knew him well.

KRISTOL: When did you get to know him? I mean, I'm curious.

BARNES: I got to know him when I was covering Gerald Ford as Vice President.

KRISTOL: Oh, really? And he was covering –

BARNES: Well, he came out to write a column on it.

KRISTOL: He was writing a column, I guess.

BARNES: Yeah, and he and Rowland Evans wrote a column that appeared three days a week back then

in *The Washington Post*. So it was huge. And I think just about everybody read it. I read it. It was the first thing I would read in the morning after the sports section.

KRISTOL: And it broke news, that's my memory.

BARNES: And it broke news. Yeah, Bob always wanted – there always had to be – his rule was “We always have to break some news.” Maybe small but there's got to be something in there that people don't know. And he was really good at it.

Well, I met him and we started talking and then he told me or maybe I told him, you know, that I'd seen him at a Washington Wizards – they were then the Bullets – basketball game. This was 1973. And I said, “Yeah, I'm a season ticket holder.” And he said, “You know, I think I'm going to get season tickets next year. Why don't we sit together?” I think this was the first time I'd met him. And I said, “Okay, well, I'll call the Wizards and maybe I'll –” And he said, “No, no, no. Let me arrange it.” And so Bob arranges it because he knew the president of the team, it was a man named Peter O'Malley who was a very active Democratic politician in Maryland. So when the next season starts, we wind up right at mid-court about 15 rows back, great seats. I still have them.

Of course, Bob died several years ago. And I got to know him very well. It was great sitting next to Bob for about 35 years watching these basketball games. Bob was a great reporter but also a great basketball fan, very astute. His book will tell you about what went on in American politics over the last 50 years and particularly in Washington. And Bob is very opinionating – opinionated. He had help in going back in writing this – all his columns that he'd written all those years, went back to them and they would refresh his memory and he'd think of other things. It's – I would start there. That would be the book I would read. You know, some people still read Teddy White's book on the Kennedy campaign in 1980, *The Making of a President* –

KRISTOL: 1960.

BARNES: 1960, yeah. It's still the best – it's still the best book and changed political reporting forever. It was you're not just going to – earlier, reporting had been, you, just it was more repeating than reporting, you'd just write a piece about the speeches and what was said in them. And his was all behind-the-scenes and the advisors and the strategizing and so on. Still a wonderful book after what, you know –

KRISTOL: 55 years, yeah, it's hard to believe. I read that book as a – I guess it must have come out a year or two later, so it was '62, I suppose – and I remember reading that book as kind of a, I guess, 11 year old or something, 10 year old, I don't know –

BARNES: Very well written.

KRISTOL: Yes, totally captivating and accessible but not simplified, really, I don't think. I don't know, I haven't gone back and looked at it.

BARNES: Yeah, there have been some other books that have been well written but that's – that's about the best one. So I would still read it. I mean, and besides, it was a great campaign and primary, you know, John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon, it just had – it had an awful lot there.

You know, the thing now I think that people have a problem is choosing what to read on a daily basis. There's just so much information out there and people forget, you know, we used to have three TV channels, a couple of – you had the wire services and that was two and three news magazines, and you know that was it. You had nowhere else to go for information. It was easy. Bureau chiefs in Washington for newspapers were really important then because they were really the gatekeepers, and they were really the ones who decided what the story was.

Anyway, there's so much now. The first thing I go to is RealClearPolitics, which is an accumulator of stories, left-wing stories, columnists, news stories and so on and you can – there's a lot to choose from

there. And there are many other accumulators as well that are good. PowerLine accumulates things, that's one that some guys in Minneapolis put out.

And look you can't – if you're interested in what's going on in Washington and Hollywood, for instance, you have to watch the Drudge Report, you have to look at it. You know Brit Hume taught me that. I would watch it, I'd look at it occasionally. He said, "I look at it every day first." And it's just a brilliant collection of things. And you always find something you want to read. So you pick out three or four of them to start with and depending on that day, you can go elsewhere. Look, the Fox and CNN and the newspapers also have good websites. But you know, I still get papers in the morning, you know, actual paper. It's so much it's fun to –

KRISTOL: You're one of the last but that's nice that you're doing that. We get them delivered to our driveway and they sit there as I go online and just read everything on my laptop. But even laptop dates me because, of course, no actual person under 35 is using a laptop anymore, I suppose, just mobile devices. Well it's changed a lot – has changed a lot. But I think the same basic principles of good reporting and smart politics still hold. I mean –

BARNES: Yeah, of course, yeah. The – but it is a problem choosing. So and this is a problem that people have with newspapers and magazines, they don't want to get too many of them, they're sort of intimidated by them, I'll never read.

I get all kinds of magazines. They're very cheap now because magazines need subscribers to have their ads rate be high enough. And you shouldn't be intimidated by them. Just if a magazine is a few weeks old and you haven't even read any of it, toss it. You don't need to be intimidated by it. If there was something that were intended – that was intended for you to read that you needed, you'd have heard about it and you'd have read it. So.

KRISTOL: As an editor of a magazine and as colleagues on a magazine –

BARNES: But there are always things you need to read that –

KRISTOL: I encourage people, exactly. But you're right, people do have the sense of it's a big commitment to subscribe but it's not. Subscribe for six months or a year, don't renew it if you don't like it. But people do have the sense of pausing before – maybe too much so.

BARNES: Yeah, they shouldn't. Get a lot of magazines. And I get a ton of them. My wife complains I don't throw them out enough but, anyway, there's always a lot there and there's always going to be – you're always going to – there's always going to be more that you think you should have read than you're going to read. So what?

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

[END]