

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Christina Hoff Sommers, scholar, American Enterprise Institute

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I: "Safe Spaces" on Campus (00:15 – 06:16)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined today by Christina Sommers, resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, former philosophy professor. Once a philosophy professor, always a philosophy professor, right? Author of many important works, including most recently, *Freedom Feminism*, and, of course, star of the wonderful series of YouTube videos, "The Factual Feminist".

So we'll talk about feminism in a minute, but I thought maybe we'd begin by – I was minding my own business a couple months ago, I guess, and suddenly, I'm looking online, and you're the subject of a huge controversy. You're speaking at Oberlin, and people are outraged. What was that all about?

SOMMERS: I am still trying to figure it out. I have been lecturing on college campuses for years, more years than I care to remember. It's often controversial. Young women come to spar and debate because I'm a moderate feminist and I take exception to some of the eccentricities on the campus. And that, that has created controversy.

Well, at Oberlin, they didn't come to debate. First of all, they said that I was going to give them PTSD, and they organized a safe space, a safe room where young women could flee if what my arguments created, you know, led to panic attacks.

KRISTOL: What was the terrifying topic you were discussing?

SOMMERS: I had been invited by a small group of the Libertarians and Republicans of Oberlin, and I was just going to talk about the need for reforming feminism. However, the very idea that I was questioning sacred tenants of the religion of feminism was apparently triggering. Thirty young women fled to a safe room. Thirty young women and a dog. I triggered a dog; I feel bad about that.

KRISTOL: That's terrible. They literally – they showed up. How does it work? So you're giving a talk, and they show up and they throw their hands up in horror?

SOMMERS: Well, they did a number of things. First of all, there were some ferocious Facebook debates about my coming to campus. And it was interesting because – and this happened at Georgetown as well – the administration became so concerned about these young women and what they were saying on Facebook about their safety, they became worried about my safety, and for the first time I had armed

guards. On campus. For being a moderate feminist and recommending some reforms and questioning statistics. They didn't like, that I questioned the statistics on women's victimization.

So now that was just one thing to have the safe spaces. They had two young women that gave a little talk. I wasn't even allowed in the room, and the room was, of course, very large because they had been so much controversy, it attracted interest. They would have been better off ignoring me, but they created all this interest so it was a huge room, and I entered after they'd been given a kind of talk by these two sort of therapeutic activists to help, told them, you know, told them not to be upset.

And then the first three rows were young women with red duck tape on their mouths, and I don't know why. And they stayed that way throughout the lecture with these – and then everybody with protest signs, and I was heckled and jeered. It was funny.

However, there was one moment where a very lovely philosophy professor just sort of stood up and urged the crowd to be civil, and he was told to be quiet and sit down. It was a mob. So here we are at Oberlin College with these students who were supposed – among the most privileged, who were supposed to be getting a good education, and this is how they acted out and then to behave that way – to me, alright, a controversial speaker – but their own professor. It was sad, a sad spectacle.

KRISTOL: How bad or, I mean, I myself had a slightly "I don't know, can't take it seriously" attitude towards this. I've spoken on many campuses and been heckled a few times and been attacked once by a banana cream pie. Well, that's not so fun. That's funny, also but in a certain way you think what if it were something more serious that could hurt you?

Nothing happened, of course, but what about the campuses? I mean, you've talked at and in colleges and universities, and as you say, spoken at a million of them as a prominent public intellectual on many topics, really, boys, feminism.

How bad is it? What do you think? And how much effect is it having on young people? And how much is it stifling speech and thought? What's your take on it?

SOMMERS: I would say that right now on many campuses, probably not all, but many and especially small liberal arts colleges – the more elite university the more likely this is happening. I think it's a contagion of hysteria. And I don't use those words lightly. Because in the past I always thought it was eccentric, it was strange, these young women were a little carried away. This is more than carried away.

And, it's not all the students, of course, but a sort of critical mass of young women and some young men believe that students, at places like Swarthmore or Wesleyan, Bard College, Columbia University, that they are – women are captive to the tyrannical, patriarchal, oppressive, violent culture, and they aren't going to take it. But on the other hand, they've been so injured and traumatized that a lot of effort goes into ministering to their, their various afflictions and so in the –

This was described in the *New York Times*, at Brown University they organized a debate, and I think a libertarian feminist who questioned some of the victim statistics was going to debate a feminist who believes in them. Which is the idea of having a debate was too much for the Brown students, and with the full approval of the president they organized a safe room that came equipped with, they played tapes of frolicking puppy dogs and they had bubbles and games. It was so infantilizing. This is what feminism has come to? It's madness.

II: How Feminism Went Awry (06:16 – 32:27)

KRISTOL: How did feminism – since you've written about this for a long time. How did this happen? It really is shocking, actually.

SOMMERS: I tried to warn people that something was amiss many years ago. It was in the late 80s. I was teaching philosophy, and the chair of my department said, “Why don’t you teach feminist theory?”

KRISTOL: Where was this?

SOMMERS: At Clark University. I sent away for the textbooks and I thought, “Ok I’m a feminist and philosopher.” I assumed when I sent away for the texts that it would be like other philosophy textbooks, that this feminist theory text would be the best that was thought and said about issues that concern women. So really good arguments for and against affirmative action or surrogate motherhood or abortion.

Because I just thought it was a sacred commandment of college teaching, “Thou shalt teach both sides of the argument,” and that’s what I had always done. I never saw the classroom as a place for me to pass along my particular beliefs to students but to give them the tools to make decisions themselves.

These textbooks shocked me. They were, first of all, they were putting forward something that looked to me as a philosopher, it looked to me as a conspiracy theory about the patriarchy, and most of the, the selections were mutually reinforcing, rather than real debate. You just had – it seemed like propaganda. And naively I thought, “Well, this is a mistake.”

And I sent away for more, and I became concerned, and I went to the American Philosophical Association and gave a paper on, you know, what’s gone wrong with feminist theory. Now, typically when you go to the APA, it’s contentious and the, you know, everyone in the audience tries to find fault with what you say. I was prepared for that. But then you go out for drinks.

We did not go out for drinks, and I was not prepared for people hissing, and booing, and stamping their feet. It was – and that evening I was excommunicated from a religion I didn’t even know existed. And I’ll tell you what before that as a woman teaching philosophy, my articles were sometimes included in women’s anthologies, and I was invited to review papers for feminist journals. After that, it all stopped. I became an enemy. It was very alarming to me.

KRISTOL: This is because of your thought and argument, not because you discriminated against female students or something ridiculous like that?

SOMMERS: This was shocking, and I wrote about it, and I wrote about some other things. And then *The Atlantic Monthly* commissioned me to write a paper about feminist theory and women’s studies. I was not an authority on this except that I had encountered something troubling.

A lot of things about it were troubling. Not just the conspiracy theories. The denigration of men, it was almost as if women are from Venus and men are from hell. This seemed to be running through the books, and then there were statistics to prop up this very grim worldview, and they were ludicrous. At first, when I was writing *The Atlantic* piece I thought, “Well, maybe I’ll hire a statistician to look at these.” I didn’t need a statistician; these studies were preposterous. Claiming the AAUW had a study that girls have a massive loss of self-esteem, and this was supposed to be an American tragedy, they called it. And I called up some psychologists who had not come upon any such affliction and all kids sort of go up and down in adolescence, there was nothing remarkable going on with girls, and yet they had done this ridiculous specious study.

There were other statistics I questioned so it just seemed to me at the heart of the feminist theory was a body of egregiously false information and then the twisted theories. It was almost as if they took Karl Marx and crossed out class and put gender. It was tedious. And people were taking it seriously. Well, as you know, we kind of had a culture war in the 90s, which many of us felt we won because –

KRISTOL: So this article appeared in *The Atlantic*? I’m trying to remember.

SOMMERS: Actually, interestingly enough a version of it ended up in *The New Republic* because the feminist philosophers found out that I was writing it and they organized a campaign to persuade *The Atlantic* not to publish it and frightened them, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* came to do a piece about this dangerous women and it turned out to be very sympathetic and the women philosophers were furious because they looked like censors and just trying to silence a woman who had some disagreements with them. They came off badly. So this started a long time ago and –

KRISTOL: This is the early 90s? Or late 80s?

SOMMERS: Early 90s. So that's – and then after when I was researching the paper for *The Atlantic*, which ended up in *The New Republic* and it ended up being *Who Stole Feminism* – I mean, it was the research that led to the book *Who Stole Feminism* – so then I learned more and more and I went to the National Women's Studies Association in 1992, and I took my sister with me who's a psychologist and she found it clinically interesting because even then you saw the identity politics spinning out of control.

This was an academic conference but it was all about our grievances and our healing needs, and we were supposed to break down in groups based on our oppression identity. So there was a group for Jewish women, Asian women, Black women, overweight women. None of the groups proved stable; everybody was fighting because the gay black women wanted to separate and the gay Jewish women wanted to separate. And then there was an eruption from a group of women who were furious at all of us because they had been marginalized. Women with allergies, they had a list of demands that next year no one would bring clothes that were dry-cleaned, wear perfume, and so forth.

And then the eco-feminists were furious because they were serving cream with the coffee. It was – my sister said, "It's a conference of borderline personalities." And I said, "No, it's just nervous, overwrought feminists." Because by then I was sort of used to it, but through my sister's eyes, I could see the madness. So it was there but it's almost as if today when I go to Oberlin or Georgetown or same things, similar thing happened at UCLA, what I think these are like the daughters of those women who were at that Austin conference. So they passed that along through their classrooms, these gender scholars.

KRISTOL: And so, and you are a feminist. Not that one has to be and it would be legitimate to criticize that, I suppose, sort of in toto, but that's not your position, as I understand it, right?

SOMMERS: I've always defended equity feminism. Basic enlightenment, classical feminism, that women are the equal to men, and we deserve the same rights and opportunities and dignity and freedom. Everything Mary Wollstonecraft wanted and then John Stuart Mill and Susan B. Anthony, down to the second wave of feminism.

The early days, there were actual conservatives and liberals that worked together. If you look at the Equal Pay Act and many of the Supreme Court rulings, it was with conservative courts where women won some of the greatest victories. The basic rights – you know, had been problematic for women where you were, could be arbitrarily fired because you got pregnant or if you were married – that sort of thing.

Those were pushed out. So, of course, I believe in that. I think it's a great American success story, something to be proud of. But today and I've been arguing since I went to that feminist conference or read those textbooks, this is not what feminism should be, it's not what it's about. And for that I am considered dangerous.

KRISTOL: Is there a moment, just looking at the history of feminism, is there a moment where you think it decisively goes off – is a kind of key juncture where equity feminism is replaced by –

SOMMERS: Yes, I would think it was probably the battle over the ERA. I think it was the battle over the ERA. Because in many ways, but again everyone wanted – there was no way the ERA wasn't going to

pass. It had gone through states and conservatives and liberals, several Republican presidents supported it.

Phyllis Schlafly was – someone, I think, called her from a bookstore and said, “Come and debate the ERA,” and she didn’t know much about it, and she said, “Well, I don’t know what I think of it, let me debate –” She was more interested in arms control and so forth.

She read about it, and she had this idea that these women were not simply, it wasn’t simply about equality they wanted to erase the sex difference so things like girls’ schools and boys’ schools wouldn’t be allowed or you’d have women in combat with – she thought they were going to do that so she started debating them.

KRISTOL: This is the mid-70s, I guess?

SOMMERS: Yeah and they said, “Yes, that’s what we want to do.” It had widespread support because I think a lot of people were equity feminists, and it was almost a gesture of respect and regard for women and acknowledgement of women’s equality, but there were hardline feminist who really were much more ambitious, and I think that’s what Phyllis Schlafly showed.

And then as she would go and tell women, and she launched one of the greatest sort of grassroots campaigns in American history because she would get groups of women to look at what it would mean and women who thought maybe they were in favor of it, then they would see what it would mean to American society.

And they started to turn against it and then it went backwards. And, I mean, the votes. People started rescinding their votes, and they just started to lose. So what happened is the feminists who pushed it and who had a very ambitious agenda were so bitter and so angry and they felt they’d been let down. But you know, if you go back you’ll see that they could have passed it.

There was once a debate on *Firing Line* between, I guess it was Phyllis Schlafly and someone from NOW. And you could tell that Bill Buckley was kind of in favor of the ERA because he, like everyone else, just thought it was reasonable and fair, you had to be a curmudgeon to be against it.

And during the debate Phyllis Schlafly said, “Well, if they would just have a provision that they weren’t going to require that we eliminate every manifestation of difference. If they wouldn’t put women in combat and they wouldn’t ban single-sex schools.” And then Mr. Buckley, “Well, surely.” He said this to the women, “Well, now you’re not going to do that.” She said, “Yes, we are”. And you could see he was very surprised. So this was going to be a program for radical social engineering, and this was back in the 70s. Women in combat, that’s controversial right now, that’s controversial in the military, even among women in the military. Most of them don’t want to be in combat.

It was really the women in combat issue that was pretty powerful, to persuade women, what is this all about? Well, anyway, those women who lost ERA, a lot of them retreated into their enclaves and into the universities and they learned a lot about organization from this campaign. They had lost but they had not lost their resolve and they have been working ever since. And everyone else thought, “Ok, let’s move on,” they never moved on and that kind of hardline feminism, it had this center of – in the universities where it has tenure.

KRISTOL: And how – feminism was about strengthening women or women being strong, let’s say, and being treated equally, obviously, now it’s not about women or –

SOMMERS: I call it fainting-couch feminism. It’s Victorian. It’s a worldview now has become, you know, a kind of a battle between fragile fair maidens, injured little birds, and then these male predators. It’s absurd what’s going on.

KRISTOL: Do you think people believe it? I've always wondered this. Most girls, if I can use that term, most women or girls on campus really feel that way, or are they just sort of taken advantage of by a few ideologues and a few of them are persuaded to come demonstrate when you speak?

SOMMERS: Right. Do they really believe it? I don't think so. I think the majority of people are resilient and sensible, and professors can say a lot of things and you don't really take it seriously. However, there's, in almost every college, there's a small group around the women's center and they believe it. They believe in these theories about the patriarchy and male toxicity and so forth. And they have been empowered. I think the reason that we're seeing so much acting out now and what I encountered at Oberlin, at Georgetown, at UCLA, this is happening because of a specific event, which is in October of, when I was, in 2011.

I think it was April 24th, 2011. The Assistant Secretary of Civil Rights sent out a "Dear Colleague" letter reading colleges the riot act about the rape culture and saying you have to take draconian measures or these young women can sue. And so these young women were suddenly, they could be litigious – so you add the bitterness, the false statistics, this paranoid view about the world, and you can sue anyone who questions you.

We just had a professor at Northwestern, a liberal feminist, who posted an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* making fun of this whole, all of silliness about trigger warnings and safe spaces and microaggression. She made fun of it.

Well, two young women at Northwestern brought a Title IX lawsuit, and her university investigated the professor for the contents of her article. And people say, "Oh well, the system worked because she was found not guilty". No, you should not be investigated for an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. I'm sure now I would be constantly investigated.

KRISTOL: That's what's so striking about it. It's so contrary, it seems, to me, in just this sort of obvious way – there are two things, there's the feminist side of it and the academic side of it. The academy, it's one thing if she were consistently giving male students A's and female students B's, then someone could legitimately complain, and that's in the university's provenance, of grades. There's no such claim, never such a claim. She writes an article? And you can investigate people? Isn't that sort of contrary to the whole principle of the university? I mean –

SOMMERS: Absolutely, and if the universities are going to become – instead of pursuing these ideals of, of free expression and the pursuit of truth and they replace it with the pursuit of safety and creating comfort zones and safety zones. Those universities will lose their reason for being.

Since the time of Socrates, the academy, education has been associated with debate and discussion, and contentiousness, and without that, what do you have? Well, what you have is, I don't know, these little islands of repression, as they call it. Universities are now islands of repression in a sea of freedom. I think it's time to liberate these islands but I don't know who's going to do that right now. Who has the power to challenge? Because to challenge the sort of feminist juggernaut that exists on campus can be career annihilating.

Even if you're Larry Summers, President of Harvard University, then who could be more entitled and more empowered? And he was driven out, largely, because he dared to entertain the possibility that there might be some differences between men and women that could explain the – there's so many more men than women in higher education, I mean in the sciences.

KRISTOL: I guess what strikes me as someone who doesn't follow this as closely as you – feminism, I think I once sort of understood what it was and get to debate various aspects of it, and I mean now has come so complicated and confusing. Is feminism about strengthening women or about women being

weak? Is it about gender really matters and we need to be serious about that, or gender is a total invention and the difference is arbitrary? How did that happen?

SOMMERS: If you're asking, is it a consistent body of beliefs? No. It is full of contradictions and confusion. And you know, in principle, gender studies could have been an interesting new discipline, but a new discipline, to have a new discipline suggests that there is a methodology that would be mastered. Where is that in gender studies? It doesn't exist. It's just, as I said, kind of a combination of twisted theories, derivative theory, and propaganda, in my opinion. Not that there isn't some value here and there but overall it has not had the benefit of criticism.

You suddenly have a group of scholars but lots of types of criticism are out of order, not permitted. There's a system of quality of control in the academy, which is not just – it is, "You will be criticized and you will have to give an accounting." Well, they just haven't had to do that and so for years they can go on, "Oh, gender is a social construction," Well, who thinks that? You have to have years of gender studies to believe that. Not that's is purely biological, it's obviously a complicated mix of biology and culture, but, you know, there's no society in the entire anthropological record where you find the men are the nurturers and the women are the, you know, soldiers. They don't exist.

Again and again, we see that it's real. There's something, femininity and masculinity are real and most people, not all, but most people, many of the stereotypes are true. That women do tend to be more nurturing and risk-averse and have usually a richer emotional vocabulary, and men tend to be a little less explicit about their emotions, emotionally flattened – we'll say, stoical to be nice. More stoical, more competitive and they do engage in a lot of risky behavior, for better or worse. Men tend to show up at the extremes of success and failure more than women because they are sometimes more – single-minded in the pursuit of, more obsessive pursuits – more likely to do that than women.

But you take gender studies and they say, "Oh, it's all a social construction". Unless you're gay, then they say, "Okay, that's just the way they are," and then if you're trans, I don't know how they're going it account for that. And what I say, I do believe that these are legitimate human rights movements – the gay rights movement, the trans movement – but I don't think, whatever we're in, third wave, forth wave feminism is a legitimate human rights movement. I think it's just a group of people who have gone off in an extreme and they're pretending to be part of these other efforts but they're not. And they're also at war with – they say, "Oh, we're for sexual liberation". But they're not really because if you're conventionally feminine, which many women are, or conventionally masculine, then they problematize that or they feel sorry for you or they think you don't have free will.

KRISTOL: What's sad about gender studies, I always thought this when I was briefly in the academy, is it's a very interesting topic. I mean, it wouldn't be foolish to organize a course, and people have, for decades and centuries, on men and women and literature and history and women who were – if you want to use this term – atypical. And how did Queen Elizabeth and Margret Thatcher succeed in societies that weren't friendly to them? There are all kinds of lessons to be learned but actually there's no actual study of gender and gender studies because if you actually studied them you would say all the things you just said eloquently, but all of which were politically incorrect, and you couldn't say, I suppose. Or could you say it in a class that's –

SOMMERS: There are too many forbidden topics, too many forbidden topics and too many sort of ideological purity tests. And so you get a group of like-minded people marching in mostly sisterly solidarity and it's – and as I said, these people have tenure. And we were talking before about the culture war in the 90s, well, I felt like my side won the argument, and even among feminists there were a group of us who were against Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin and at the time they wanted to censor, you know, the *Playboy* magazine and we were against it and almost everybody agreed with us.

Even at that time, my defense of moderate feminists and questioning – they were talking about the rape culture even then and there just wasn't an evidence of such a thing. And *New York Magazine* and the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were mostly on my side, our side, of the debate.

But, at the same time, while we were winning these arguments and then the media kind of got bored with the whole thing, these women were quietly, were assuming assistant professorships. So they had been training with the same textbooks that I had found. The textbooks even became more unhinged, and irresponsible, one-sided, and so you have, by now, the graduates of these programs and they're coming out and starting their blogs, their podcasts, and they're journalists and they're busy and they're very impatient to change the society, and I don't know if people realized what they learned and how little they understand about gender because they were raised on dogma and ideology, not any encounter with knowledge or with science of sex differences.

The science on sex difference is an interesting debate – and a very volatile and constantly changing. That's not what you typically get in gender studies.

KRISTOL: People like me, I've always had a tendency – well, there's a lot of silliness in the academy but who cares? I think there are two ways, and you've written on both, in which it has an effect. One is sort of freedom of speech and even of thought in the academy, especially when those same people you're describing become administrators and then when the Obama Administration hands down an edict that makes it so much easier to sue, and suddenly you have a pretty big complex, don't you, of administrators and lawyers and assistant deans and feminist professors and a few students who really are curtailing freedom of inquiry on campus, aren't they?

SOMMERS: And now you have the lawyers who, oh you know, always want to err on the side of, "everybody just keep quiet and be as, say things that are just within the range of approved views," and then you have these busybodies, these apparatchiks who get a salary for being busybodies and making rules and commissioning studies. There's now a proliferation of phony studies on abuse and how – and actually there is a binge drinking culture on campus and there are sexual assaults. It is a serious problem, but it is not an epidemic comparable to the war-torn Congo but the statistics that are routinely used –

KRISTOL: Yeah, what about this 1-in-5 female college students have been the victims of sexual assault?

SOMMERS: It's the result of advocacy research. It's a result of, you can get that, you can get very alarming findings if you're willing to interview a non-representative sample of people and if you're willing to have definitions that are very broad, that include a lot of behavior most of us don't think of as assault or certainly not criminally prosecutable assault. If you just play with those, you can get an epidemic.

And that's what they do over and over again. Now the Bureau of Justice statistics does their annual crime survey, and they find one, that rape, like all crimes, is way down. It's, I think, a 41-year low or something extraordinary, and they also find that it's not 1 in 4, or 1 in 5, that they looked specifically at the campus and found a figure something like, I don't know, 1 in 50. Still too much but it is not the same.

The difference between the war-torn Congo and, you know, the United States, it's a huge difference. And, they have the best-trained criminologists and statisticians and they do all the proper controls. But their data is not taken seriously. People go for the advocacy research and again I saw that happening. Mary Koss, she was handpicked by Gloria Steinem, she was a researcher, I think she was at Kent State, and she did a rape study and found an epidemic, and then that was, you know, that was her ticket. She was then at the University of Arizona and called in as an expert, and cited as 1 in 4, 1 in 4, but it wasn't until the Assistant Secretary of Education sort of gave the 1-in-4 activist – now they say 1 in 5 – gave them this tool. Really, she weaponized their paranoia.

III: The Factual Feminist (32:27 – 42:29)

KRISTOL: And it seems to me when you've been attacked the debunking of their statistics is one of the main things that offends them because that's sort of the round, I guess, of their victimhood and their –

SOMMERS: Especially the wage gap. When I was at Oberlin I was lecturing and I said at one point, "You know, young women here, you want to close the wage gap, change your major." Because women – another sex difference – despite three years of consciousness raising and gender-neutral pronouns, women and men still major in rather different things. I mean, if you look at who are the computer science majors, physics, math, mostly guys. Psychology, art history, early childhood education, almost all young women. And there are many fields that were once totally, totally dominated by men but women liked them and there was no way to stop us and we've taken over.

Like veterinary medicine, for whatever reason and so when I hear, oh, the reason women aren't in engineering is because there's a hostile environment, well, maybe there was a hostile environment in law and journalism, that didn't stop women. Maybe there's just not the same eagerness to be an engineer as there is to be an educator or a journalist, lawyer, veterinarian.

So anyway, at Oberlin, I just said to them, "Change your majors, and if you want to earn a lot of money when you graduate, be a petroleum engineer or go into naval architecture or metallurgy." We should have gone into metallurgy, a lot of money there.

And someone screamed out, "Don't tell me what to do." You know they were, I think they think that you should be able to major in feminist theater or something and earn as much as much as a petroleum engineer in a fair society. I was not acknowledging that injustice.

KRISTOL: I mean, you've had so much success with the video series "The Factual Feminist," and I'm going to say a word about that, but what are the most striking distortions to you? The wage issue, the rape question? There's so many different areas you've taken on.

SOMMERS: This is the thing. I've been making these weekly videos, about five minutes, correcting a myth once a week. We don't always manage once a week, especially in the summer, but the hope is that it will be once a week. And at one point my mother said, "Aren't you going to run out of topics? I mean, how many myths can there be?"

KRISTOL: I had the same thought after the first dozen or so.

SOMMERS: I said, "I could go on for years." And this is a bit of an exaggeration, but not much. Almost everything we think we know about men and women, about women and depression, about women in the workplace, women in education, in every domain, is false or – because these spin-mistresses, they spin. And it's so irritating to me, why do they do that? If you have a very rigorous study that shows low levels of victimization, they ignore it. If you have the shoddiest, most specious study, bogus, it goes right into the textbooks. And once it's there it can't be corrected.

Then there's a sociologist, Joel Best, that said that a false statistic that gets into the media echo chamber can never be corrected, it's harder to kill than a vampire. Well, I have found that a false feminist victim statistic, it is the hardest to kill of all. They are beyond correction; they are beyond rational analysis. And that's troubling to me, just as a philosopher, as a person, that it's propaganda. You take sensitive young women, freshman year, and they want to improve the world, and they find out that women are being cheated out of their salaries, died their self-esteem, dying in droves from eating disorders caused by men. The patriarchy, toxic masculinity. They're likely to be raped, and that's if they're not already dead from a suicide, you know, on and on.

I'm overstating a little bit, but not by much. When I first wrote *Who Stole Feminism*, Gloria Steinem and everyone was saying 150,000 girls die every year from anorexia nervosa, it turned out to be closer to 500, and that includes suicides, a very small number. It was so wrong. And I corrected it and then I was thought to be insensitive to eating disorders. But what I always say is, "No, I'm not insensitive to any of these things. I'm compassionate; I care about these problems, even – certainly sexual assault – but I think that victims will be helped by truth and good research." But they're not getting it because I think that these ideologues are so carried away that they will hang on so tenaciously to the propaganda because it's in the textbooks, it's in the women's centers, it's on the posters, it's chanted at the marches.

KRISTOL: The idea that the rape culture thing, I mean, it's horrible obviously, any rape or any sexual assault, unwanted, forced activity or anything like that, taking advantage of people. I mean, all of that. That's why some of us are a little bit more puritanical than –

SOMMERS: A lot of people became conservative in the, I think – if you think back to the 60s and 70s, it was liberals who were so soft on crime and people were getting out and there would be jokes, someone's going to go to jail, he rapped and murdered, and oh, he got three life sentences, he'll be out in 10 years. Not exactly, but that was so infuriating and there were a lot of films and things and I think a lot of people became conservative because liberals – so now it's very odd and I'm not at all sympathetic to criminals of any kind.

But, who are the criminals? They're young men, and many are getting falsely accused and then taken through these kangaroo courts, taken through these procedures that look like they were written by Franz Kafka. I actually became so concerned about these, this injustice on the campus, what's happening to young men. I went back, and I told you before I think there's a kind of hysteria around this rape culture idea, and that I went back and looked at the Salem Witch Trials to find out what finally stopped it and one thing I found is that when very prominent people began to be accused, and in particular one gentlemen from Boston, he was called a worthy gentlemen from Boston, he sued. He brought a lawsuit against his accusers and that sort of slowed it down, considerably. So there are a number of people suing now. I hope it slows it down, but it's awful.

KRISTOL: And I expect it to collapse on it's own accord. I was saying, there are these terrible accusations, and then you go to campus and you look, walk around, it doesn't look like a place where the girls think there's a 1 in 5 chance they're going to be assaulted?

SOMMERS: What parent would send a child to a college?

KRISTOL: We know what a war zone looks like. We know what an extremely dangerous neighborhood, let's say when I was growing up in New York, looks like. And we know what precautions people take if they have to go into such a neighborhood and I really don't think that's what your typical Oberlin looks like and yet they kind of can say with a straight face. I guess it would always assumed that it would be laughed at out of court, but as you say, it's front page of the newspapers.

SOMMERS: Now, there are motion pictures, there are every week another – I think I was watching a *Law and Order*, and it was date rape scenario and all the clichés. Eventually, it has to die down because it's so destructive and it's so illiberal, and they seem to be using Title IX to, and I think they are, I think there was a conscious decision to use Title IX to achieve their ends and to take it way beyond it's original purpose. But to use it to rescind the First Amendment and due process.

Our sort of moral and political heritage is going to be wiped out because of Title IX and the need for women to be comfortable on campus? And not even women, it's most neurasthenic, highly oversensitive, women who feel that, they call it microaggression. If someone would compliment you or hold a door that's called benevolent sexism and that's microaggressive. I mean, they have this whole worldview. It's so tedious and unbelievable that anyone takes it seriously but they do.

KRISTOL: And I guess on campus it's such a bubble, its own world, they can sort of make you take it seriously in a way that would be harder.

SOMMERS: You can be shamed, and boys can't get dates if they don't along with it. You know, we know young men will laugh and just whatever. What am I supposed to say? So they're not going to make a fuss. So who's going to do it? And now I think it's pretty scary for a professor because, and you've even seen recently, I think, it was Fox had a professor who wrote a piece anonymously that said, "I'm a liberal professor but my liberal students terrify me" because they're afraid they're going to say something wrong.

KRISTOL: What kind of reaction do you get to the videos and to your writings? You must get a lot of email and communications. Are there young women who say thank you for saying this?

SOMMERS: This is what's heartening so that people will say things like, "I knew something was wrong and I'm so glad to see someone on my side" or you know – and I'm just, I am constantly. And once in awhile I just get tired of it, and I just want to be a dilettante and I want to read 19th-century novels, I don't want to be fighting. I didn't think this fight would last so long. I mean, I really thought maybe I'd fix it.

I went to the American Philosophical Association and they would say, "Oh yes, you're right, let's get back on the straight path and be accountable to reality." Well, that'll never happen, and others have joined me, I've had wonderful allies, but they get tired, too. I mean, along there's Cathy Young and Katie Roiphe, Camille Paglia, my heroin, my favorite of all, and it's just – it never ends.

IV: The War on Boys (42:29 – 49:09)

KRISTOL: One of the consequences you've called attention to in your book and other writing is the war on boys. There's a real, apart from the campus insanity, there's a real consequence on boy's achievement and wellbeing. Explain the argument and does it stand up now?

SOMMERS: I think all authors would probably say this but I actually believe my book was probably more relevant now than it was when I wrote it because things have become a lot worse for boys and young men. The college gap has grown, intolerance for youthful male, just liveliness is very high right now. We've seen a series of cases where little boys are suspended from school for playing cops and robbers or bang-bang.

Almost from the moment a child, a male child, enters school he's there on sufferance because a lot of teachers have got, maybe they've gone through schools of education where they've learned some of these theories about toxic masculinity, and many are unable to – not just teachers, mothers and fathers too perhaps, are unable to distinguish between healthy rough-and-tumble play, which is the typical play of little boys, and aggression.

Rough-and-tumble play involves a lot of mock fighting and, you know, sound effects, and girls do it too but boys do it a lot more. Typically, little girls, there's a lot of theatrical imaginative play, playing house, playing school. Teachers like that, mothers like that. The boys, you're always a little nervous about it, as a mother of two boys. There's a lot of – but experts on playground dynamics like Anthony Pellegrini at the University of Minnesota will tell you that this is the healthy play and boys are learning critical skills. And they're also just having a lot of fun, forging friendships, learning limits, learning who they are, their place in the pecking order, through that rough play.

You have schools now that view it as violence but violence is very different. If boys are violent and hostile and aggressive, they're not having fun, they're not smiling and laughing. When they're rough and tumbling, boys are happy. As I said, they're popular, they're forging friendships. Well, now on many campus, schools, they don't want dodge ball and they don't want them playing games where anybody, so it's a mix of the self-esteem movement and this fear of violence and punishing little boys for the crime of being a boy.

KRISTOL: What is the affect of that? Does it have a real effect as they grow up do you think?

SOMMERS: Well, I think that what's happened is – it's probably the case that girls were always better at school and just cooperative. As I said before, there is a difference that, on average, boys are less cooperative, more risk-taking and more rule-breaking. This is true cross-culturally. There's no society that I'm aware of where you don't find more little boys lined up at the emergency room because of crazy antics. You have more, more boys are contentious and they challenge authority more.

That's always been there. So that they would never have been able to compete probably with girls when it comes to paying attention, and being – but teachers made a place for it and the thing is if boys weren't happy at school, there was a time where they could maybe just get a high school degree and go, and still if they worked hard, they could make a very good living and you could make it into the middle class. So even though boys had a problem with school, they could, they could be fine. Today, it is very difficult, bordering on impossible to – if you don't have education beyond high school, and increasingly young women are getting it, and young men are not, just comparatively far more young women are getting it.

Far more young women in our colleges and universities, it's approaching 57, it's already 57 percent, approaching in some schools. They worry about tipping. They worry about so many women that, it's not that the young men don't want to go, the young men don't mind. 70 percent women? Ok! And they go there and probably have a good time.

But the young women don't want to go there. So the college administrators are now practicing kind of an affirmative action for boys. But why are boys so poorly prepared? They do better on their SATs. You still find more boys than girls at the very, very, high end in math performance, quite a pronounced difference in male achievement there.

We have pretty good evidence that teachers don't like them as much, and boys are graded down for their bad behavior. So you might have a child who, you know, is very smart and very interested in history but he doesn't get a good grade. This has been researched carefully. The teachers will mark a boy down academically for his comportment. So boys, and there's probably grading bias against boys.

And we don't have – maybe I don't want this – but we don't have men's groups, or a men's lobby, to compete with the women's lobby. The women have, as I said, a juggernaut, you cannot – we're trying right now, my assistant and I are trying to count up the number of groups advocating day and night for women and what is there for boys? I mean, almost, there's a few groups, fortunately, but almost nothing. So there are – once a psychologist said that in schools today the gold standard is girls, and boys are not meeting that standard and so they're seen as inadequate, failing.

If they're told to write stories – there's just one example, a little boy named Jason in California, or Justin, he was 6 to 7 and he wrote a story about pirates and illustrated it and there was sword fights and the teacher was very concerned and called in his parents, and he was a perfectly well-behaved little boy, but to her, this drawing and the father was shocked, he said, "Well, he likes pirates". But there's swords, and people are being killed. And he said – and the father asked a very good question, "How could a teacher have so little sympathy with my son and his imagination, how's she going to be able to teach him? He's just going to feel ashamed." There are a lot of boys that are just shamed.

And their parents don't realize it because you're sort of mad at your kid if he comes home with bad grades, it doesn't occur to you that there could be this intolerance for who he is. And this is very common. So at a time where we should be doing everything we can to improve the educational prospects of boys, we have just abandoned many of them.

V: A War on Women? (49:09 – 52:09)

KRISTOL: We've been talking about men and women, and it's become suddenly, not suddenly, but in the last few years this huge political issue, this war on women. Kind of amazing in a society, which has probably made more progress towards genuine equality opportunity on women.

SOMMERS: Who's waging this war?

KRISTOL: Republicans, if you haven't heard that. Mitt Romney, personally.

SOMMERS: Republicans have daughters and wives, and a lot of Republican women. I mean, women in society, it's so absurd to speak of women as second-class citizens. I mean, I was hissed and booed when I said this at Oberlin, but women are not a subordinate class. Women are better educated than men, women live longer, probably have more choices on how they live their lives. I don't say as a sex women don't face special problems and special challenges, but so do men.

It's, it's a complicated mix of benefits and burdens, and nobody's warring against anyone.

KRISTOL: Were you ever shocked how it seemed to succeed politically for the Obama campaign in 2012? I kind of dismissed it out of hand at first, and this is ludicrous. Who's going to believe this? And it turned out – I don't know how much people believed it but it seemed they thought it worked pretty well.

SOMMERS: There's a general sense because a lot of the information that we get about women come from, comes from the academy, it's the brain trust of these women I've been describing. And journalists depend on them, politicians, both the Republicans and Democrats draw on this, so it becomes the conventional wisdom.

Women are being cheated on over 25 percent of their salary. Now if you think about it, if you could pay a woman, you know, 25 cents less on the dollar for the same job, I mean, every competent employer would fire all the males and just hire females. What happens is when economists, including feminist economists, do the proper controls, what did they major in in college? How many years have they been in the workplace? How many hours a week do they work? How dangerous is the job? You just look at relevant factors. The wage gap narrows to the point of vanishing.

But that's not what we're told. We're told and it kind of nurses a sense of injury in women, that's someone's being bad, bad employers. So we never have an intelligent discussion, it's reduced to platitudes, and then it's used opportunistically. It's difficult for me because it seems so phony, and there are a lot of good debates to have and there are women's issues that should be on the table but the ones where allegedly women are the victims of a war is so absurd.

KRISTOL: I guess it's hard for individual voters to know, if those are the statistics. They may know in their own case and their own employer seems to be treating people –

SOMMERS: How would they know? Well, they've done polls, they'll ask you, are you cheated out of? "Oh no, not me." But do you believe it's a big –? "Yes, it's a huge problem." So that's where we are.

VI: "GamerGate" (52:09 – 1:03:49)

KRISTOL: This is sort of related, but you've become a heroine to a group I really don't know much about. The gamers, the people who play video games.

SOMMERS: You didn't play a lot of video games?

KRISTOL: I played an incredibly primitive form of video games when I was in college and grad school.

SOMMERS: Probably what I did. I played Pac-Man at Cambridge.

KRISTOL: Pong, I remember that. It kind of pathetically primitive. Now, there's super-sophisticated video games that make a fortune. So how did you get involved with that?

SOMMERS: It was an accident. I was reading a poll that was being celebrated in a lot of journals, particularly *Salon*, was very excited about it, a journal I don't particularly trust, and the *Daily Dot* was saying, "How wonderful, there's been a revolution. The new gamers, the dominant demographic is middle-aged women." And, I thought that's – as the factual feminist, I thought, well, I want to look into that because, you know, I don't know any and I know a lot of women, and I don't know any that I would call gamers, although we do played "Bejeweled" and "Candy Crush." What was going on?

So I looked at the study, it was actually a reasonable study done by, you know, a business group that sells games and what they – women are playing games but they didn't make distinction between these sort of complicated video games with consoles versus hand-held, you know. And it's still the case that males are, by and large, the ones for whom it's become, for whom it's a primary hobby. Something they do – if you look, you do this more than 30 hours a week and that's the most important thing. And these young, you know, not – and there are gamers all over the world. All sorts of people. More men, a small group of very cool women, but a lot of guys.

And passionate about these games, and they go to, you know, expos, and they have websites where they'll debate if, you know, a game, a new game comes out and they make a change, this is, you know, could be very controversial. They're very opinionated and passionate about this hobby. And they have a reason to be passionate because they've always been disapproved of and their mothers didn't like it and their teachers, and every time there's a mass killing they go, "Oh, it was a video game, video games." Fact is no one has ever been able to show a connection between video games, even the violent and shooter games, and becoming violent. There are a lot of well-adjusted people who enjoy the thrill of Grand Theft Auto.

And Grand Theft Auto looks horrible, it's meant to be a parody, it's sort of a crazy –

KRISTOL: Extremely sophisticated. I looked at it for three minutes in the office because I was just curious. It's very high quality.

SOMMERS: And they're very hard. They're very challenging, and in fact, now that I have this following among gamers, they're very smart and tech savvy, and they're artists. It's one of the most talented groups of people I've ever encountered, and nice and friendly, and we've had some meet-ups. We had one in Washington and just as diverse as you can imagine. More males than females certainly, but you know they're of different races and social classes.

What unites them is this passion for games, and it is mostly males that play the most popular games.

KRISTOL: And you exposed this? Is that what – how did you become their heroine?

SOMMERS: I just made a video saying that I did not think that I, a middle-aged woman, was the dominant market for games. I said, you know, I might like a game about *Downton Abbey* or the *Umbrellas of Cherbourg* and I did look at the games and I didn't like the look of them. They were too violent, I wouldn't play them.

But I don't, I don't like *Breaking Bad*, it was too violent. It was very irritating to my sons, I couldn't watch *The Sopranos*, I just don't like that. But I do not think because someone watches *Breaking Bad*, they're going to become meth dealers and shooting people. There's just no evidence that playing these games does that. It's fun and, as I said, they're very challenging. These people that play them, the skills and the

imagination, the strategy, it's – there's many different levels, and it's hard and impressive what they do, and they love it.

Well, what happened was this celebrating women, this group of cultural critics, the sort of people who've been marching through our universities, gender studies or cultural studies majors, set their sights on – well, they chose the wrong crowd. They chose the games.

And gamers know a thing or two about, they like to win, and they started an argument with them and said, "Your games are sexist and misogynist, and women are irresponsibly proportioned." Now, it is mostly guys who play the game; a lot of them, not all of them, but a lot of them like sexy women, so there's sexy women in them. They say there's violence to women; well, there's vastly more violence to men, and you usually get punished if there's violence to women, and if there's violence to women at all, it usually gives the motive to the protagonist to go on and take revenge or something.

It's an innocent pursuit, they're having fun, and now they're, suddenly they're getting these gender studies majors telling them your games are treating women as the other. And all of this is happening when the world of games are exploding, and there are games, women-centered games, there are female heroines, they're still not happy with that. There's a female heroine I like, Bayonetta, who's sort of awesome. But she's sexy. They don't like the fact that she's sexy, they say it's still catering to the male gaze. And then I ask myself, what's wrong with the male gaze if –

KRISTOL: Gaze, g-a-z-e?

SOMMERS: Gaze. No, there's a whole thing. Oh, it's objectifying women's bodies, that's a healthy part of male sexuality, they do rather like women's bodies, most men. Gay men like men's bodies. There is a lot of gazing going on in gay culture, it's part of sexuality.

So here we have this movement, and why I say the contradiction, it's supposed to be celebrating people's sexual freedom, except that of heterosexual men, suddenly that is being pathologized and treated as, you know, something toxic and dangerous that must be policed. So they came to police the gamers.

Well, the gamers fought back. And they don't always play by the Marquess of Queensberry rules, but what happened was then it got out of hand because the gamers were accused of making death threats. No one has ever been able to show that any person identified with GamerGate, as the group has been known, hashtag. No one has been able to show and what the press leaves out is that the people defending the gamers have been threatened about as much.

There's a lot of – it's the Internet. Okay, there are crazy people. But at the core, you have gamers who love their hobbies, they were fed up with what they thought was corruption in the gaming press. I don't completely understand that but I can imagine, and they were fed up with these kind of cultural authoritarians coming in and bossing them around. Many of them, I will say, politically lean left-libertarian, but what happened is when these critics came in and these scolds, they kind of awakened the sleeping giant because there are gamers everywhere, they're all over the world and they love their hobby and they knew this was false so they rebelled and starting madly creating – they are very creative, in a minute they can come up with a joke, a video, or they give lectures. They're constantly fighting, and they organized around this hashtag, GamerGate.

They give, they're prone to some conspiracy theories, and it's just fun. They're fun. They're amusing and smart. And then they keep getting attacked, savagely by the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*. They're said to be a misogynist hoard. Well, in this misogynist hoard, you have a lot of women, you have gay guys, it's a consumer uprising against cultural authoritarians, and I love it because it's the first group that I saw fight back against all the things we've been talking about. They're not afraid.

And they've been through a lot of battles before, because as I said if you're a gamer, you're mom probably didn't like it, your teachers. Authorities thought it was problematic. So they don't like critics that come along with evidence-free theories about how bad they are. And they are feisty.

KRISTOL: Can some of that spirit of rebellion come to the campuses, or come –

SOMMERS: This is what I'm hoping because what I found is these militant, ill-informed, dogmatic feminists, they have brought a lot of acrimony, bitterness into the world – a lot of worlds where you have more men than women. Libertarians, you have more men than women. Atheists, the atheist community has just been split because these bitter women came in and made trouble and made all sorts of unfair attacks. And they did it to scientists, they did it to sports.

Well, the gamers were the first group that I think really fought back. But they know a thing or two about, you know, going after a monster. And as I said, they like to win. So it wasn't the right group to pick a fight with. So it's still going and they're, as you know, they're determined. And I think they are making a difference, and I think they're sort of showing other subcultures and hobbies that you can be a, you know, a good person. I find most of them very fair-minded.

They – oh and the reason they like me is I said, "I'm an equality feminist but you don't have to be a hardline fainting-couch feminist," and they like that. Because they believe in equality, most of them are not misogynists. They're young men, in many cases who've been brought up – they're the most open-minded generation, you don't see more misogyny with the rise of video games, you see less. You see less violence with this. I tried to make videos that made that clear so now they call me "based mom" – mom being mom and *based* means sort of cool.

KRISTOL: Based.

SOMMERS: B-a-s-e-d. Based mom.

KRISTOL: I wasn't aware of that slang. I'm impressed.

SOMMERS: Now, I have a lot of followers on Twitter. Now if someone criticizes me, I'm afraid to forward it because they will go to great lengths to defend "based mom" so unless it's someone more powerful than me. If they're, you know, just someone who is unknown, I won't mention it because the gamers will start. They're polite but they'll be –

KRISTOL: They should go after people in power because that's who – It would be a healthy kind of citizen rebellion against these cultural authorities.

SOMMERS: It's a citizen rebellion, it's a consumer uprising against cultural authoritarians, and the gamers have done it better than anyone I've seen.

KRISTOL: On that note of hoping the gamers inspire the rest of America, thank you Christina for spending this time here on CONVERSATIONS, and thank you for joining us.

[END]