

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

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Guest: Robert Putnam, professor, Harvard University

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I: Our Civic Life in Decline (0:15 – 43:21)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very glad to have with me today Robert Putnam, Professor of Public Policy at the Harvard School of Government, formally the Government Department at Harvard. And a very distinguished commentator and scholar, student of American public life in many different aspects. Thanks for joining me.

PUTNAM: It's great to be with you, Bill.

KRISTOL: Your most recent book – your most famous book, I suppose, maybe, is *Bowling Alone* from 1999, 2000?

PUTNAM: 2000.

KRISTOL: Come back to that. Your most recent book is called *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. I think there is a continuity of the two books. So let's just talk about – not so much the books – but talk about America.

What is your analysis of the society, the politics, the culture, and above all – you're an empirical student of American society. Everyone else has opinions and ideas, but you've actually looked at the data. So what alarms you? What doesn't alarm you? What are the things one should know if you're thinking what's up in America?

PUTNAM: Well, if you mean by what's up – I know you didn't. If you mean by what's up, what's going well, there are a lot of things that are going well, and I want to begin by saying that because a lot of what I have to say is what's not going well in America, but over the last 50 years, say, over the period since I was in college, a lot of things have gone well. America's materially better off than we were. We have cell phones, longer life expectancy, more tolerance for minorities of all sorts, gender preference, women – my daughter has a lot more opportunities than my sister would have had.

Obviously, we've made progress also on race. Not enough, but we've made progress on race. A lot of good things have happened, but I think a lot of bad things have happened, too, over this period. And the two of them that have attracted my attention most firmly are a decline in our sense of community, our sense of connection with one another. And that is what I wrote about in *Bowling Alone*. The title *Bowling Alone*, obviously, referring to the fact that although more Americans are bowling than ever – actually, more Americans bowl than vote – bowling in leagues, bowling in teams, is off by about 70 or 80 percent now from the peaks.

That reflects – that was the image of the lonely bowler. But the larger picture was that in many different ways in which we can measure these things, people are just less connected with other people in civic activities, within their own family. Family dinners were disappearing and have continued to disappear. In terms of their ordinary, everyday life, people had fewer friends, fewer intimate friends –

KRISTOL: So the argument wasn't so much a psychological one as a sociological one, if that's the right word. That, in fact, there's less community, not just that people vaguely felt somehow –

PUTNAM: People do feel it. And what the book says is, "You're right. It's not just in your mind, actually it's just true." And when I published the book, one of the most striking things that happened to me afterwards, lots of people came to me said, "Yes, you've got it right." They didn't know the data, for goodness sakes.

They knew that their mom had been in Hadassah, and they weren't. Or their dad had been in the Rotary Club or, you know, in a union, and they weren't. And they conceived that as something – they knew why they hadn't. They were busy and they couldn't do all that other stuff, but they also felt a little guilt that they weren't doing it, and then along comes this Harvard professor and says, "It's not you. We're all disconnected from one another."

That was the first place where I began to focus on this change in the degree to which people were connected with one another. We can get back to the Internet because when I wrote the book the Internet didn't exist but it came into being almost exactly after I wrote the book and so people then – often natural question is, "Well, isn't the Internet more connection than ever we've had before?" So that's an important issue that maybe we can bracket for now, but the larger picture was that we were being less – we were, in fact, less connected with one another, both in the big picture – that is, connecting with your town or your community – and also in the smallest, most intimate way – less connection with your family even.

And in *Bowling Alone*, I try to argue that isn't not just an interesting fact, it has a lot of bad consequences because a lot of the way, especially American society, fits together has depended upon what Tocqueville wrote about, you know, in the almost 200 years ago now, about this Americans constantly joining things. We've been able to run a different kind of society. A less statist society, a more free-market society, because we had real strength in the area of social capital and we had relatively high levels of social trust. We sort of did trust one another, not perfectly, of course, but we did. Not compared to other countries. And all that is declining, and I began to worry, "Well, gee, isn't that going to be a problem, if our system is built for one kind of people and one kind of community, and now we've got a different one. Maybe it's not going to work so well."

And one way in which I then talked about it was the idea that we were having a more constricted sense of *we*. That is what had once been – we talked about *we*, *we* meant all the people in town. What's a *we*? I'm not one for exaggerating, of course. There were people without groups and so on, but there was a sense of *we*, and that over my lifetime that has gotten constricted. And so the *we* became an *I*. And fast forward, that's 2000, coming forward 15, 10 years, I then began to think about what are the consequences of that change and other big changes in America for kids.

KRISTOL: Before we get to kids, just curious, and you think – I mean, you're biased – the data both hold up and, obviously, there's a huge amount of back-and-forth and controversy and detailed analysis and your detailed analysis, you think A), the data from *Bowling Alone* hold up and B), has it gotten more that way or has there been any reversal? I'm just curious. You don't need to defend the proposition.

PUTNAM: I can think of things that I've written in the past that turned out not to be right, but this wasn't one of them. I mean, a lot of the history, the history of the debate about *Bowling Alone* is that I wrote an article before we had done a whole lot of work on it called "Bowling Alone," and people said, "No, no, he's forgotten soccer leagues, he's forgotten reading groups, he's forgetting all these things." If you took those

into account, there wouldn't be a decline.

So I spent five years and got really good data on reading groups and soccer clubs and so on, and it turned out when you counted everything, I had underestimated the decline. So actually I think that's probably now what the – I think the scholarly consensus is there's has been a movement toward greater individuation. That's the jargon that sociology would use.

KRISTOL: Individualism. So it's not that far from Tocqueville.

PUTNAM: The answer is yes, I do.

KRISTOL: And it's gotten more that way probably.

PUTNAM: With the one important question about the Internet, because the Internet is a big deal. The Internet is a network, and therefore, in principle, maybe connecting with people over the Internet could be just as good as or even better –

KRISTOL: Let's take a minute on that. The counter-argument would be, obviously, there are these new kinds of communities online, these virtual communities, people finding people sharing interests and hobbies and what not.

PUTNAM: There was a debate for about 10 or 15 years actually after the Internet came into creation about whether the Internet was real social capital, as real connections or not real connections. And that I think was a misplaced way of phrasing the problem.

I think because nowadays, almost all of our human networks – social networks, yours and mine and most people's – are simultaneously real and face-to-face, but also electronic, right? My daughter is a writer and historian, and I'm a writer and something of an historian, and she writes or – at least, did for a long time – lived in the jungles of Costa Rica, and I live in the jungles of New Hampshire, and we're both night people and we have a lot of email, go back-and-forth talking, "How's your chapter going?"

I'm sure I'm much closer to my daughter than I would be with the email than without the email. I did not meet my daughter on the Internet. This is a relationship that has a reality that is not limited to the – and therefore, conceptually, let's think about connections as alloys. An alloy is a mixture of two metals that has characteristics alike. I never remember – copper and tin or something, you mix them together and you get bronze or something. Has different properties than either of them had separately. We have mixed now real face-to-face connections and electronic connections in ways that create new alloys. They're good for some things, they're not good for other things. They're not all – I happen to be one of the oldest users of Facebook in the world because it was invented by someone who was a roommate of a person taking my seminar at Harvard and so my seminar was a beta tester for Facebook.

I've been on it forever, and initially, Facebook was limited to campuses so everybody, all of your friends, were real friends. That is, all of your friends were real friends. Then, they opened it up to anybody, and anyone that is visible – I'm sure that this happens to you, it happens to me all the time – you get asked to be friends with people you've never heard of. Hans from Berlin last night wanted to be a friend of mine. I have no idea what Hans had in mind, didn't know for sure what gender Hans is. Is he planning to meet me with flowers if I show up? If I get sick, will he bring me chicken soup?

There's been a divergence between friend and real friend, and that represents – I'm not negative about the Internet, I'm not. But I don't think you can phrase it in just we're no longer bowling, but we're surfing. Because we know – I'll draw you a graph here very quickly. It turns out having more friends makes you happier. There's really good research on this, and I can draw a graph. Each additional friend makes you happier.

KRISTOL: These are real friends?

PUTNAM: Real friends. The graph goes up like this: three friends, you're happier than with just two; 12 friends, you're happier than just with 11; stops at 20. The 21st friend does not make you any happier. The 20th has gone up like that. The line goes up.

Now, what does the line look like for happiness and friends on Facebook? Absolutely flat. You're 400th friend doesn't do anything for the first friend – I mean Facebook friends. What I'm trying to say is the Internet is really interesting, and it's very early days so we don't know how it's going to transform – it is transforming our society. I'm cautioning against the idea that it's a one-for-one replacement of having dinner with your family.

KRISTOL: And in some ways, it increases – it's complicated because it cuts both way. Okay, so that there's the problem of the decline of community, which is also the decline of social capital. Then, you wanted to see the effect of that on families and kids, especially.

PUTNAM: There are several big things that have happened in America over the last 50 years. As I say, some of them are good. Three that I think are not so good are, first of all, the growing income inequality in America. People on the high end have gotten really quite wealthy. People who are well-educated have done very well. That's me and you; we've done really well compared to other folks. But people from the median income down have not done so well over the last 30 or 40 years.

A second trend is the decline in social capital, the decline in connectedness. A third trend is the growing segregation of American society. And this is something that Charles Murray talks about. Charles and I – interesting, we have very different politics, but we both agree almost entirely on the facts of what's happened, including the collapse of the working-class family. And so and Charles wrote this great book, *Coming Apart*, that documented many of those trends, and *Our Kids* talks about many of the same themes that his book talks about.

We differ in two ways, I think. One is – which we can get to later – he and I have very different views of what you can do about it. But a second – and way more important from my point of view – is I'm focusing on the kids. All of my attention is asking what difference does this coming apart of American society make for kids? What we've found – and this is what's written in the book *Our Kids* – is that all of these trends together have meant that kids coming from educated backgrounds, upper-middle-class kids – my grandchildren, my children, and my grandchildren – are doing better than ever. Right?

Better than their counterparts, you know, 30 or 40 years ago. Higher test scores, better track records, better, you know, track and field records. In every way, they're doing better and better. But on the same measures, kids coming from working-class backgrounds of all races in America are doing worse and worse. And that's what *Our Kids* is talking about.

The reason I'm focused on that? A lot of people talk about inequality nowadays, and they're talking mostly, they're talking about inequality of income. That is, you know, rich folks and poor folks. And that's relevant but historically Americans have not cared so much about there being rich folks and poor folks; we figured everybody gets on the ladder at the same point. We all get a fair start. Some people climb higher – Warren Buffet, Bill Gates. Fine, they work harder, they're better climbers. Why shouldn't they be well paid?

All the assumption that we're all getting on the ladder at the same place, but we've cared more than most other countries about that kind of equality. Equality of opportunity. Do all kids basically have a fair starting point in life, regardless of what their parents did or didn't do? And that's the core of the American dream – I really do. That everybody here ought to get a fair chance, start at life, and we are never perfect at that, but I think what the evidence says is we're getting worse fast on that, and I think, and thought, that that ought to be of concern for everybody, not just progressives. Everybody ought to worry if that fundamental

core idea that just because you're a kid in America, you ought to get a fair start.

KRISTOL: Your concern is not simply, is that the relative – I mean, obviously, I suppose the kid of two college educated professionals is going to have a start higher on the ladder than the kid that doesn't have those advantages. But one wouldn't be so worried about that, perhaps, as long as the kid who was lower on the ladder still had a good shot to make it up, but I think your argument is not just the gap but that actually, absolutely even the kid lower on the ladder is now facing obstacles he didn't 30, 50 years ago. Is that right?

PUTNAM: That's right. And it's not just there is a gap but the gap is growing, and the whole book is encompassed in that. Things getting better and better for kids from educated homes, and kids getting worse, things getting worse for kids coming from less well-educated homes. And the kids had nothing to do with it. It's not their fault. People joke, the most important thing now is choosing your parents. Well, that's just wrong. I can joke about it, but at some deep level that just feels to me deeply wrong. And to go back to the link in the decline of the community, there are many reasons for the growing gap between rich kids and poor kids, many. The core underlined reason, in my view, is captured in the title of the book. That's why it's called *Our Kids*.

Because when I was growing up in the 50s, in a, you know, a different world, and when my parents talked about doing things for our kids, we know we've got to have, invest some money so our kids could have a swimming pool. They did not mean having a swimming pool in our backyard for my sister and me, they meant "Let's pay higher taxes so all the kids in town have a swimming pool at the high school." The term *our kids* meant all the kids in town.

And the proof of it was they kept doing those things when my sister and I were long gone. They were doing it for the other kids in town. But as a result of the "bowling alone" phenomenon, over the last 30 or 40 years, the meaning of *our kids*, the meaning of what our obligations are to one another has shriveled, and it's become now focused, when people talk about our kids now, they mean their own biological kids. And if you go back to my hometown and talk about poor kids there now, they say about the poor kids, "Well, they're not my kids, they're somebody else's kids. Let them worry about them." You see how that sense that other people's kids don't really belong to me. Of course, we pay attention to our own kids. I do and you do, and I'm not trying to say that's wrong, on the contrary. I'm trying to say we ought to have some regard as Americans historically have had for all the kids in town.

KRISTOL: And to what degree does the data suggest, if you're a working-class kid growing up in an intact family – I think this would be an obvious question for conservatives who put much a lot of emphasis on family breakup – that certainly is the theme of Charles Murray –

PUTNAM: I agree that –

KRISTOL: This is an empirical question, but I mean how much data, if you are a working-class from an intact family, does that ladder still look the way it did 30 or 40 – your argument is that it does go beyond –

PUTNAM: I'm going to be falsely quantitative here. But of the total growing gap, maybe a third of it is due to the family, the intact families.

KRISTOL: The differential family breakup of –

PUTNAM: And then you still have to ask why is the differential family breakup – and there's two schools of thought of why the working-class family has collapsed. It has. It's an interesting case in social science. There used to be disagreement about whether that was true, there now isn't disagreement that the working-class family is really breaking up. Of all races. White and black.

KRISTOL: And that was controversial, wasn't it?

PUTNAM: The thing that's even more surprising – there's now pretty broad agreement that that matters. That is, it matters for kids whether they're growing up in an intact family that is – it's the stability of the family structure that is really important as kids. Progressives like me say that just as firmly as conservatives do.

KRISTOL: You were saying, anyway, before the parenthesis that only a third roughly of the explanation is due to the family make-up. So that isn't the bulk of it. Or the most of it.

PUTNAM: It isn't. To put it statistically, if you look at kids coming from intact upper-class families and intact lower-class families, there's a gap. The gap isn't growing, it isn't quite as big once you've taken out that fact, but, of course, you can't take out that fact because it's an important fact.

KRISTOL: So that's genuinely worrisome, obviously.

PUTNAM: Of course, you have to ask, because here's where Charles and I do disagree actually. Where did the breakup of the family come from, and how much of that is the 60s, by which – whatever we mean the 60s? The moral collapse and/or the welfare system – that is theory about it. And how much of it is the 80s? How much of the breakup of the working-class family is because the de-unionization of America, which meant all those working-class guys no longer have steady employment and haven't had a raise for 30 or 40 years? I think the honest answer that is it's both.

It is partly the normative question, and progressives have to talk honestly about that. It is, partly, this now 30-years-long, grinding lack of economic opportunity for working-class, less educated guys, and when I talk to thoughtful conservatives, which I do all the time actually, they say, of course, that's right. And, this seems to me in principle, this whole problem of the opportunity –

KRISTOL: And incidentally since those people have moved conservative or Republican in their voting habits in the last 30 or 40 years, it's actually something Republicans, in a way, feel more probably day to day, in the sense they are their voters. Ohio and Pennsylvania and stuff. The disparity between Trump supporters – which speaking here in January – and more conventional Republican voters, there's a huge class difference now and education difference in the Republican primary. So that's a way of manifesting, a political, I suppose, manifestation, of what you're talking about.

PUTNAM: I think the problem that I'm talking about, which is this opportunity gap, which I know I'm going to sound hyperventilating here. I think that's a fundamental problem because it goes to the very legitimacy, core of the American state.

And that's not just me talking – and this is going to be terrible name-dropping – President Bush invited me to come to the White House to talk to him about something else, and I did, and then I talked to him about my graphs, and he kept me for a half of an hour. I'm not a major Republican campaign contributor, and I'm not a major conservative intellectual. Why did he keep me for a half hour? It's very simple. Because if I was right about the growing opportunity gap, nobody in that building, nobody in that office could dismiss that because it goes to the very core of the legitimacy of this system. That is, this idea that everybody gets a fair shot.

I do think this is a problem that ought to be of interest across party lines. It's a problem, in my view, a purple problem. By that, I mean parts of the problem you can understand most clearly through red, conservative lenses. You can see the collapse of the family most clearly through red, conservative lenses. Parts of the problem you can see most clearly through blue, progressive lenses. You see the closed factories and the shutdowns and deunionization and so on.

Purple problems – a lot of the problems in the world are purple problems, and in a different kind of America to solve that is you and I would sit down together and I'd say, "No, Bill, come on. Part of this is

really is the minimum wage. We've got to talk about that." And you'd say, "Bob, but part of this really is the value stuff. We've got to talk more about the values of stable families and so on." And then in a realistic world we'd both say, "Yeah, you're right, let's figure out how to do that." The problem with this extreme polarization of our politics now is you can't have that kind of a conversation.

KRISTOL: Even if we could, I suppose it would be another thing to prove the policies we might each want to do will do much good. I guess that's another question we could get to in a minute. But just to be clear, what you're saying – and I think that's powerful about what you're saying – is not just is evidence of family breakup and/or social lack of social contact and bowling alone – and we suspect this will have bad consequences down the road. It seems to me what you're saying is what you've discovered and I think others are not eh same path that it is happening or has had already bad consequences. It's not that sort of we speculate that people growing up in this environment, or people growing up in this society, are not going to be in as good shape 20 years from now as people growing up 40 years ago or 20 years ago if I got the math right there.

You're saying that you can see the actual evidence.

PUTNAM: You won't be able to see it in their lifetime incomes until they become adults. But if we wait until then it's – it is like global warming. If you wait until you're absolutely certain that it's happening, you've lost another 30 or 40 years.

KRISTOL: But you do see evidence in school performance, and even income. It's not like people who are 20 – you see the effect of this. Or incarceration. I guess what you're saying is there is real, this is a real problem, not a likely problem we're going to confront in the future.

PUTNAM: No it's a real problem that we're already confronting and if we don't get a about it wit's going to get much worse before it gets better because this is a problem that has long deep roots and you can't turn it around. This is a ship of state that you can't turn it around quickly. We're talking about the structure of families, we're talking about the built deeply into our society, these trends are.

And so even if you think as I do that there are things that we can do about it. And when I say we I don't only mean the state I also mean churches and other organizations. That's not going to happen overnight. This is a problem that's a big problem that I think the country ought to take seriously.

KRISTOL: Social capital side is it the case that I guess this would be a question conforming your initial hypothesis, the wealthier types have more social capital and are bowling alone less so to speak, and that's helping keep them afloat. You said they're going up actually.

PUTNAM: Their kids are going up.

KRISTOL: Their kids are going up? They don't need – they don't need bowling leagues in a sense. That's more important to the less well-off?

PUTNAM: Let me give you a very simple example actually. One of the reasons, one of the graphs that looks like this is taking part in extracurricular activities. Taking part in band or football or chorus or basketball or soccer or whatever has gone up for kids from college education homes, it's going down for kids for working-class homes.

Even sports. And we have to ask well why is that? And an important part of the answer turns out to be that 20 years ago we started charging kids for taking part – it's called pay to play. If you want to play football in my high school, my high school in Brooklyn Ohio in the 50s, you want to play football now you've got to pay a fee. Nationwide, the average fee for a year of sports is something like \$1,600 dollars. If you're annual income is \$160,000, that's a rounding error, but if you're annual income is \$16,000 dollars who in their right mind is going to spend 10 percent of their family income on football?

You might say, “Come on, Bob, worry something else, don’t worry about kids playing football.” but what we know actually is that playing sports and taking part in extracurricular activities has real measurable benefits on lifetime income. Holding constant test scores, college degrees and so on, people take part in extracurricular activities and not just football but band and chorus, do better. Why is that? Because they have soft skills. That the market is willing to pay more. They know how to do teamwork, they know stick-to-itiveness, my mom’s term for grit. That’s what people learn in extracurricular. So extracurricular are not a thrill, they’re an important part of the skill package that all kids nowadays have to have.

People coming from well-to-do backgrounds know that and they’re now paying a ton for their kids to have coaches and you know special summer camps for learning to sing or whatever. And working class people don’t. And that’s because we’ve, and this may be controversial with some of your audience, we’ve privatized the provision of those kinds of services. We’ve said it’s up to the parents to decide if they want to pay for their kids to have those skills. We don’t say if they you know, algebra, if your parents want you to have algebra they should pay for you to have algebra courses.

But, by the fact that it’s not that the upper-class hasn’t suffered from the decline of social capital, it’s they’ve been able to buy their way out of. I’m talking about me and my kids. I’m not trying to talk about somebody else. We’ve been able to buy our way out of this collapse of social connections. Does that make sense?

KRISTOL: I’m just curious, leaving aside the who provides it, whether it’s the public or the private or charitable organizations and one could imagine all kinds of mixtures and practical arguments about which way would work better. You could give people vouchers, there are all kinds of market friendly ways I suppose –

PUTNAM: By the way, the leading advocate for fixing this problem in the country is a Republican Secretary of State in Ohio, who’s trying to abolish pay-to-play in Ohio for exactly the reason I’m talking about.

KRISTOL: And what would be most important though? Is it extra activities – that’s interesting, I didn’t know that’s such a predictor. Other things if you were advising a country somewhere or a city somewhere or I suppose even a family there or a church that got requested \$10 million that could spend it on anything it wanted to in terms of helping the families or people in its purview. What levels does intervention help at? Where would you focus?

PUTNAM: I’d focus on a lot of levels is the big problem, so if it were me I’d worry about how we could improve the economic conditions of the dads in these families that would enable them to stick with their families, encourage them to stick with their families, and provide more stable homes. That’s part of what I would do. I would also – wouldn’t mind preaching more about the importance of stable families, that’s what people on the Right are more likely to say, and I think that’s fine. I don’t object to that. Certainly don’t object to that.

But then coming away from that question, I think there are a lot of things that the private sector could do. Fundamentally, they involve – the technical term is mentoring – but that means having a stable adult in the lives of these poor kids. The one single fact that you can carry away from any of these stories in our book is it’s not just data, it’s stories. The data is there, too, but there’s stories. The poor kids in America are alone, they’re really isolated. They can’t trust their families because their families are breaking up. They can’t trust their teachers because they’re going to very poor schools. They can’t trust their churches because they’re no longer at church. They can’t trust their communities, because their communities are falling apart. They can’t trust their coaches because they’re not in sports. They lack any caring adult. I know that sounds like I’m exaggerating, but I’m not. They lack any kind of support that you gave to your children and grandchildren, that I gave to my children and grandchildren. They don’t have that in their lives.

I start with the premise, all kids do dumb things. Rich kids, poor kids, black kids, white kids, brown kids, your kids, my kids. Kids get involved in drinking or they, God forbid, they get involved in drugs or they make a dumb romantic decision or they get in a fight with a teacher, or God knows what. When one of our kids – that is the upper-class kids – does a dumb thing, instantly airbags inflate to protect the kid from the consequences of the bad decision. So if one of my grandchildren, God forbid, should get involved with drugs, the first thing I'd do is find the best lawyer in the town, and the second thing is I'd find the best rehab facility in town.

If a poor kid of any race does exactly the same dumb thing, no airbags because they don't have the same density of caring adults in their lives. I don't mean – often, it's a single mom and often she's doing everything she can to try and hold her family together and earn a living and so on, so I'm not trying to demonize the mothers of poor kids. I am sometimes trying to demonize the dads of poor kids, but the fact of the matter is these kids in a way – that poor kids in America in the 1950s were not bereft of social support. This what the feel of what it's like to live in a "bowling alone" society if you're at that bottom of the heap.

If I had a magic wand, I've give every one of these poor kids a caring adult who could provide airbags. I'm talking in a million different ways could provide guidance to the kids, could do what I would do for my kids or grandchildren. What you would do for your kids or grandchildren. It's not like this is rocket science there is nobody in their families who do that. Churches and synagogues in religious communities played a very big role in that historically, I've written a whole book which we haven't talked about religion in American society.

But the churches – whether it's the churches' fault or not is a different question – have gotten disconnected from the working class. There's another one of these graphs just like that, and therefore, if it were in my power, I would say to every clergy within America, "Think about not the kids who are already in Sunday school, but the kids in your community who need that kind of caring."

KRISTOL: And you would not privilege, if that's the right word, three-year-olds, or eight-year-olds or 15-year-olds. You would do it at every level, I take it. Is there data that shows it's particularly effective or difficult to –

PUTNAM: Children need different kinds of things at different stages. We now know a lot about early brain development. And we know that it starts very early and we know that paying attention to kids, reading to kids, really young kids, makes a big difference.

So we know that there are huge long, really frightening, long-term effects of differences in care for kids. I don't mean just custodial care, I mean interacting with them. In the book we call it goodnight moon time. Goodnight moon time has really a lot of power. The data shows this, they don't have as much goodnight moon time as rich kids do. That's the early stages. It's not reading to them when they're 16, it's more providing role models and as I say airbags to help them – everybody makes mistakes, but the kids in poor circumstances live in a much less unforgiving world.

KRISTOL: How much – I was talking to someone who's an Army officer actually, and we were chatting about this set of issues and he said – he has a hypothesis – he said his platoon was full of enlisted – he was an officer, a college graduate. His platoon was full of enlisted soldiers, and a lot of them came from difficult family situations. If you're enlisted, you probably haven't graduated from college, and maybe a lot of them haven't gone to college and so they were enlisted because they were in tough scrapes when they were 16 or 17, and some adult told them, or maybe they just had the thought, the Army or Marine Corp would be good for them.

He said their lives were fairly – by conventional middle class standards – were messed up. You know, for a number of pregnancies out-of-wedlock that they had been involved in when they were a kid, or it just

didn't work out age 17 kind of thing. But he said he sort of thought these kids, that they would be okay. He said they're not going to be okay the way we sort of expect a kid to smoothly progress through schooling and through marriage and kids and all, but – there would be kind of messy situations – but they would end up, you know, as valuable members of the community with jobs and with families, maybe they would be a bit messier than the families of 50 years ago and so forth.

I – one hopes that's true and obviously, that's going to be true with a number of them, but I guess what you're suggesting is the data are not encouraging about the – You can't just sit back and sort of think that this is going to work its way out in the wash.

PUTNAM: For several reasons. First of all, I do think the military has powerful benefits for many kids. I can tell you stories – I spoke at West Point about this not long ago, and I won't filibuster but I could tell you stories about kids at West Point who have been able to turn their lives around. So I'm not on the other side of that issue.

KRISTOL: He wasn't making a military point, but I guess you could argue it's better to them to have been in that.

PUTNAM: The military is paternalistic. Paternalistic, as you well know, means parenting. But the first thing to say is because we have an all-volunteer Army, they have high standards, and the bottom 15 percent of the population couldn't get into the military.

KRISTOL: So he's already getting a sort of better –

PUTNAM: He's getting the upper half of the bottom third. Can I put it that way? That means there's a lot of kids down there who couldn't even get it the military. Then, there are a lot of kids who don't get in the military. I mean, I actually would be in favor of universal service. In fact, I would be. But in the real world that's not going to happen. So in a way I'm completely agreeing with what he said, but saying that's not – it's a small sliver of what we need to do. And realistically, we're not going to have, you know, 80 percent of all of our kids serving in the military so we have to have a plan for the not-military.

KRISTOL: He was making a point, which I guess you're saying probably isn't the case, that he wasn't really – I mean, he believes also that the military is a good institution in that way. But I think he wasn't making a military point, but maybe that we upper-class people who are more used to a more bourgeois kind of family life and career path, maybe we're over-elite, pessimistic about the ability of these kids with less fortunate backgrounds to make their own way, in a messy way, to a pretty decent outcome. But you're saying we're –

PUTNAM: Come on.

KRISTOL: I think he was trying to look at the bright side.

PUTNAM: That could easily have been true in the 1950s when people were working in my hometown in the UAW and were working on assembly lines, and they could do well for themselves and do well for their kids. That isn't true now. It's a fairy tale. Partly because those of us on the upper branch have been getting better and better, we're investing more time in our kids, more money in our kids, more and in productive ways. I don't mean we're just buying them things to say, "Go away," but we're very focused on our kids.

And I know you don't want to be in the position of saying, "Well, it's good for my kids that we're doing all of these things for them, but these poor kids we don't need to it for them." That's not what you're saying, but somebody has to be worrying about these other kids.

KRISTOL: Final point in this but now immigrants, I suppose, will be an interesting. They're interesting,

just interesting, they're part of the country so they're important, but interesting as a social science question because you're getting people coming in as. Well not all of them but a lot of them as adults. I guess you do get a little bit of a snapshot of what the mobility, possibilities are for economic mobility and for succeeding in many cases without some of the advantages of the language and so forth.

PUTNAM: The opportunities – sorry.

KRISTOL: Just curious what the data suggest about that. Was it better to be an immigrant 40 years ago than it was today? Sort of the way it was better to be a poor kid I guess 40 or 50 years ago than it was today?

PUTNAM: The two cases are quite different for several reasons. First of all immigrant families are much more intact than poor native born American families. Of all races, this is not about race. And therefore immigrant kids of immigrants are to some extent shielded from the larger for reasons that conservatives fully understand. They're growing up in more intact families.

KRISTOL: But it's not an answer to the problem to say, "Hey, look how well immigrant kids are doing." If someone says there is no room for mobility in your society and we say, "Wait a second, we know in Fairfax County, Virginia where I live there are all these people who are the sons and daughters of Vietnamese who came over who were very poor by definition when they came over since they didn't exactly weren't invited to take their belongings out of Vietnam or Cambodia, or even Southeast Asia and so forth."

And they're doing well. But what you're saying is that's fine, that's good if that's the case, but it doesn't really answer the problem you're pointing your finger at.

PUTNAM: No, and while it's true that some immigrant groups, especially from Asia, the adults have high upward mobility, it's not true for all of them because all of them don't have the same. They're a self-selected group – that is we get, contrary to what some political candidates have said, we get the best Mexicans that come across the boarder.

KRISTOL: The ones that have the ability and the drive.

PUTNAM: They're starting with a very low level of human capital. That is they don't, most of the immigrants from Latin America who have come in have not been engineers or anything like that. In their first job, probably their lifetime job, is in manual work. And their kids are going to do better than the kids of native born annual workers because they're families are more intact but they're also kids are starting in poverty. And the poverty part of it doesn't help the kids. So the next generation – Do I think immigration is a big success story in America? I absolutely do. You won't find me not saying immigration is a big success story in America. But it's not a way of saying stop worrying about these other poor kids, the immigrants are going to fix it for us.

And by the way, family stability in the second generation of immigrants goes, they revert to the American pattern, that is, families become less stable.

KRISTOL: Assimilation in this respect is bad for them.

II: Social Science and American Politics 43:21 – 1:10:26

KRISTOL: You've alluded a few times to your own youth, and I'm just curious how did you get in this business? Did you want to be a social scientist and academic, a professor when you were growing up? What were the key influences and decision points? I'm interested. Lots people would be.

PUTNAM: I described this a little bit in the opening chapter of *Our Kids* because I decided to try to do a

little history of my hometown. I grew up in a small town in Ohio called Port Clinton, Ohio on Lake Erie. Kind of Lake Wampanoag on Lake Erie. Nobody really rich, nobody very poor. This is what it seemed as a child but also not I know because I've gone back another day and it was a very middle class town.

And very high, I would now say, high social capital. Lots of people, and again, this is not golden glow. I've looked back at the data. High rates of churchgoing. High rates of volunteerism. People connect with one another. And I'll carry this story forward in a bit – my own personal story – but I think I reflected a lot – because when you get older, you reflect on your own life – and there's a certain sense in which much of my own academic research can be read as saying, "I grew up in a really neat time and place. It was pretty equal, not a lot of class divisions, not very politically polarized, not even very racist. There was some racism, of course, there was but less than you might think."

And a lot of sense of community. And, the books that I've written have been cataloguing the ways in which we no longer live in that kind of America. I hope that all the data in my books says it's not just Putnam ruminating about this golden age that he grew up in. He can show us the data that America's become less like that and is different. And some ways better, but in some ways worse.

So I grew up in Port Clinton, went to Port Clinton High School. Did pretty well in school. Got a fellowship from a local company. Went off to college. I was coming right out of the Sputnik Era, so I remember when Sputnik was announced, and I was going to go into science and help save America, working in science, and I went to college, and as a physics major – went to a small college outside Philadelphia called Swarthmore College – and I did well in it, but that was then becoming the 60s.

So I went to college planning to be a physics major, maybe a chemistry major. I went in '59. And then in the fall of my sophomore year, I took a political science class – this was the Nixon versus Kennedy campaign. I came from a solid middle-class Republican background so I had actually written a personal note to Nixon saying I would like to volunteer. Just this kid, I'm sure he never read it. But I was stuck on the Nixon mailing list forever, I could never get off it.

I took a class in political science in the fall of 1960. There was a cute girl who sat just in front of me. We got in the habit of having lunch together after class. This was the 50s or the 60s, and so there was one time a year called Sadie Hawkins Day, when women could ask men out so she asked me out on a date. And the first date she would take me – and she was a firm Democrat – first date was she would take me to a – she sprang this on me after I had agreed to do it – take me a John Kennedy rally in one of the suburbs of Philadelphia. The next week turnabout was fair play, I took her to a Nixon motorcade, going right by. That fall was, really, was a very interesting fall. I'm still married to this woman now, 55 years later.

On the 20th of January, we took a train from 30th Street Station down to Washington – really snowy day, I remember that snowy day vividly. Stood in the crowd on the east front of the Capitol because that's where the inaugurations were held then. I heard with my own ears Kennedy say, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." And honestly, Bill, I'm embarrassed to say this, even now – I'm 75-years-old – the hair on the back of my neck goes up because I thought he was speaking to me. I know that sounds really corny, but I was a kid, right?

And I thought I want to use – I'm embarrassed at how self-congratulatory this seems, but this is a true fact – at that moment I said, "I'm smart. I want to use my scholarship to try to help the country, not by, you, know building –" Not war at all, I didn't want to do it in the lab. I wanted to do it working about social science. So I gradually switched across from biology to psychology to political science to history, actually. I ended up with a minor in history. And, then went off the graduate school and did the standard academic thing.

KRISTOL: You got interested in politics before political science. It wasn't one teacher who got you fascinated?

PUTNAM: Then, once I was in the field I had really good teachers at Swarthmore. Swarthmore is a very high quality undergraduate institution. Small so that you had really good relationships with your teachers. I happened to have really good teachers, including one extremely good political theorist, Roland Penick, who was important to me. But there were others too. Remember I had come into this whole story as a scientist.

I was very interested in the way societies and policies fit together, but I carried with me from that scientific background the idea that you ought to be able to distinguish between nifty ideas I just had and whether this nifty idea was really true. So that led me to be caught up in the quantitative, behavioral, as it was called then, revolution of political science which was – The behavioral revolution and quantitative revolution of political science which was then assuming the field, and seemed to hold promise of enabling us to distinguish between groovy thoughts that might just be groovy thoughts that actually were true or at least they corresponded to the best evidence we could get.

That's kind of the role I meant to be playing. In all of my scholarship I have worked several times I've worked in government, but actually once I was working in government I realized that's actually not what I'm really good at, what I'm better at is trying to think about big questions. I try always to think about big question, not about little toy questions, but to think about them in my terms as rigorous a way that I can. That's why there are all these charts and graphs and everything I write, even though I'm in some sense writing in the tradition of Tocqueville.

KRISTOL: The quantitative work is in the service of understanding reality, not so much, it seems to be from reading your work in the service of you know answering some question form within the discipline that the discipline has decided is important and needs to be advanced. So much of social science it seems to me today, and this is true of all fields I think, all sub-fields almost, it's not about understanding society better. It's about some internal social science discussion of you know scholarship –

PUTNAM: Oddly enough. You won't know this, when I was president of the American Political Science Association, my presidential address was on exactly this question. And it sometimes phrased in terms of rigor versus relevance and I reject that. Because I think you can at least some of us some of the time ought to be working on problems that are really highly relevant to ordinary people but also in a very rigorous way. Sometimes the internal disciplinary debates are actually quite useful in sharpening our intellectual tools and methodical tools and so on.

But here's what I said when I was, almost not quite in these words, but this is the idea I was trying to convey in my presidential address. Professors live an incredibly cushy life. I mean if people lived what a cushy life professors live. I get paid actually a decent sum for doing what I would do, I would pay people to allow me to do what I'm doing now. So I live a really cushy life. And that's being paid by tax payers. And I try to contribute back but it's being paid by tax payers and by parents and foundations and so on.

Part of the deal ought to be that at least part of the time our energies ought to be devoted to problems that ordinary people care about. So I don't think everything that's done in social science, just like everything that's done in English literature doesn't have to be immediately legible to the reader of the daily news, but some of the time we ought to be working on problems that my mother-in-law who – God rest her soul, she's no longer with us – but she was very smart and dismissive of academic stuff, Zelda. And I often think, what would Zelda say? Would she think that that was working on an important problem? Or would she think this was some academic stuff?

KRISTOL: And you, yourself, attain great distinction. I'm curious, do you think generally has political science or broadly the relevant social sciences kind of gone in the right direction? Do you look around at what's happening at the prestigious departments and prestigious universities and think, yeah, this is kind of what should be happening? Or do you think, a lot of this is – I don't know not what you would think very intelligent people living nicely supported lives, as you say, through the opportunity to teach

extremely intelligent undergraduates and grad students should be doing? I'm just curious. Not that anyone has a solution to this or that we want to be dictators.

PUTNAM: As you are, I'm quite pluralist actually. My view is you need a lot of people with different kinds of interest in any discipline doing things. So my work it's no longer at the front of the quantitative frontier because I'm old, but my work draws heavily – I'm able to say with confidence the things that I did, for example, saying that the family structure was maybe a third of a problem, I'm able to say that and I didn't mean it in a highly quantitative way – because I've done the data. Because I and my team have done the data. And that I wouldn't have been able to do a generation ago because we didn't have the tools mathematically for being able to understand that.

I do think that there is a role for work that is really only immediately readable by other people in the profession. I do think, as a now repeating what I said, I do think however that as a profession, not everybody in the profession has to do this but as a profession we have to be driving towards answering big question. I got into this field in the 1960s, and 75 percent of Americans trusted the government in Washington to do what's right most of the time. Now, that's sort of – it is 19 percent trust the government. I got in this field and American politics seemed to be working well, and I have not done my job because I've not somehow enabled people to understand what's gone wrong. That's what I'm trying to do.

I do think some things have deeply gone wrong. I don't mean just calculating regression questions. I think we do have to think about that question as a profession. What's gone wrong and how could we begin to turn it around? This is the one way – I want to go back just a second to this disagreement between me and Charles Murray, who's a wonderful social scientist and a friend. Charles and I have independently come to a very similar – and it's not an accident – a very similar account of some of the things that are going wrong in American society today. We don't agree on all the details but the big picture we agree on.

When I'm asked, what do we do about it? I can give you a list of answers, and they may not be perfect answers, but at least I think we ought to try and solve the problems. When he and I were on a stage together a year or so ago talking about this, people asked him the same questions and he said, "I'm a Libertarian, I don't do solutions." And, I'm not making an argument, I just couldn't say that. I come out of a Midwestern, pragmatic, "let's see if we can fix the problems" kind of background. And so the idea that I'd be able to describe some big problem that's happening, and then say "Who cares what's happened?" That's not me.

KRISTOL: You have an interest in actually, you know, helping deal with these problems, not simply describing them and leaving it others who allegedly would know better. That distinction really doesn't exist either. If you understand the problem better, you probably have a better sense of what might work.

PUTNAM: I don't think for a second that the solutions to these problems are going to come out of some academic's brain. I think it's going to come out of a lot of people talking hard about it. In an older American political system, we had the capacity to have a serious conversation about a problem that was not just a blue problem or a red problem, it was a purple problem.

And try out different ways of approaching the problem. That's what I regret, that we don't have that at least right now, don't have that culture of having shared problems that we ought to work somehow together to figure out what can we do about this.

KRISTOL: You would think there would be more experimenting even in the private and philanthropic sector what to do about it. Someone could learn a lot, there are a lot of huge foundations and a lot of very wealthy people, leaving aside the federal government. There are states that are not paralyzed, presumably. You'd think you could actually get a lot of trial out of things, and some would work and some wouldn't work, and then you'd be much better off. I don't know.

PUTNAM: I completely agree with that. I really think the solution of the problem I'm talking about, this

opportunity gap, is going to come first at the state and local level and eventually come to the national level. I want give one, give you one specific example of why I'm optimistic that we can solve these problems because we've been here before. Previous periods in American history when we've had exactly this problem especially at the turn of the 19th and 20th century, especially the gilded age. Lots of problems like ours, high rates of political corruption, high rates of economic inequality, growing gaps between different parts of American society.

But then, and this was across parties, we began to solve the problem. I want to give just one particular example because it's I think very illustrative. In response to the growing gap among kids, Americans invented the high school. Invented the – for the first time in world history, it began in small towns in the Midwest, in Kansas and Nebraska. For the first time in world history people said every kid in town ought to have four years of post-primary comprehensive education. The high school.

Nothing was happening in Scandinavia or Germany or Britain, anywhere. These folks, farmers and small towns, people, said we ought to do this. And it was not an easy sell because you had to say to the local bankers and businessmen, who had already paid for their kids to have a private secondary education, and were now off in Chicago making money. You had to say to them, "You have an interest in these other kids getting –" The public high school, right. I meant to say the free public comprehensive high school. It turned out to be the best decisions Americans ever made.

KRISTOL: So when is that?

PUTNAM: 1910.

KRISTOL: Is that right? Wow.

PUTNAM: It was the best decision America ever made because it did two things simultaneously that economist tell you you can't have. First of all, it raised the growth rate of the whole economy so much so that the best calculations by the economic historians are that that one decision, giving a free high school education to every kids in American, gradually, it began to accumulate. That accounts for most of American economic growth throughout the 20th century. It was a huge effect. Essentially doubled or rate of growth so everyone was better off and at the same time it leveled the playing field because the poor kids got it just the same as the rich kids.

Economists say you got to choose efficiency or equity, but that kind of investment was both. It raised equity and raised efficiency. But here's the point I want to make from a political science point of view. It did not come from Cambridge, Mass. or Washington. It came from folks in small towns in the middle of America trying to figure out how can we solve this problem of our kids here in Topeka, or East Elbow?

KRISTOL: It was mostly at the state level or you mean the local level?

PUTNAM: Local level. Spread to the state level, eventually was such a good idea that it spread across the country and eventually you know became normal. And then by our time you think God must have invented the high school but no, it was invented by people trying, Americans trying to solve a problem very much like the problem we have now. I think we can do this. It's not like I'm saying America has to become Sweden, I'm saying we have to become like we have done in the past.

KRISTOL: That's so interesting. I haven't really – I should read something about that. Is there one moment where it succeeds and catches on or is there one proselytizer for it or is it just a more general grassroots kind of thing?

PUTNAM: There are a number of books about it. We're going to have to take a minute because I'm having an Alzheimer's moment.

KRISTOL: That's okay. We can revisit it.

PUTNAM: Actually, this is the one, it's too early you say much more than what I'm going to say now but I thought that *Our Kids* was the last book I'd written but I've gotten interested in how that turn at the turn of the last century happened and so maybe I'm going, that's going to be the next project.

KRISTOL: That does sound interesting actually. I've not read this in any careful way but I don't have the sense that that's been the focus of most of the historians or social scientists who've worked on the period so in that respect it would be very interesting.

PUTNAM: The experts know it's true, I'm not making this up.

KRISTOL: It's not the kind of if you just read up on that period, that's not the focus of it in normal history books or in biographies or whatever.

PUTNAM: It's so relevant to try to think how we solve our problems now. Which is why I'm now spending most of my time, I do get called by people in congress on both sides of the aisle and by presidential candidates and so on, but really I'm – if the problem I'm worried about and indeed if the resolution of these big negative changes that I've talked about. The collapse of community, and the growing inequality, and the segregation of society and collapse of the family and so on. If we're going to solve those problems, I honestly think it's going to come from decent people in local and state level affairs. I don't even just mean government. I'm working with a group in New Hampshire, which is a cross party group with lots of senior political leaders from both sides of the aisle and local religious people and local business people and so on. Their object is to try to narrow the opportunity gap in New Hampshire.

I don't mean they're going to do it. I don't know if they're going to do it. They've spent hours and hour and hours planning experimental projects. Let's try early childhood educated here, let's try mentoring here, let's try community colleges here. And I'm betting that out of that will come some interesting ideas which then maybe get picked up you know in Arizona or Massachusetts or whatever. That's the way Americans have historically solved problems.

KRISTOL: Let me ask sort of this is related but slightly different. You've talked for many years, many decades, and seen many generations of college students and grad students come and go. Just curious as someone who hasn't been privy to that on a regular basis for decades, I think a lot of viewers might be curious, what conclusions do you draw?

I think your own story is so interesting, from the late 50s, early 60s of changing your focus and sort of going off what must have been an unexpected path I suppose. It sounds like your mother-in-law didn't think it was maybe the right path. What has the sense, maybe this is totally unfair, that the kids are more attracted today and more purposeful, for better and worse I think, and less likely to take risks and to experiment in terms of their own careers. Maybe that's not true. I'm just curious what you think and what you would recommend to people. Some 20-year-old or 27-year-old watching. How to think about their own careers and their own public lives as well as their careers.

PUTNAM: I have to begin with some qualifications –

KRISTOL: With the caveat is you'd have to know each kid to give them good advice.

PUTNAM: It's not only that, I mean I do think that there has been a narrowing of people's horizons. But that's not their fault. That's because I was coming at a really great time at American history. I mean we thought we were – this is the early 60s, this is not the late 60s – we were coming out of a pretty comfortable period, we knew there were major problems the country had. That was the generation that gave rise to the women's revolution and the civil rights revolution.

We knew there were racists, and we knew there were problems, but we also thought we can fix this, we were sort of basically comfortable because we were coming out of an era of prosperity, widely shared prosperity, that we both had an obligation to try to figure out how to solve some of our country's problems. And also had the ability to do that. We were not at all cynical. I'm not saying we were right, but we just – I heard now if somebody said the same thing and went to the inauguration they would say, "Oh, politicians are always saying that." But they didn't have the almost religious experience that I had, right? I'm not – he persuaded me. And he was a flawed person, I'm not trying to say he was not a flawed person, but the fact of the matter is, I'm so upset that my kids that age now don't have the possibility of experiencing that sense that I did, that I could use my talents to try and help the country. They don't have that.

KRISTOL: Do you think they did for a minute in 2009? People did compare Obama to John Kennedy.

PUTNAM: I do think they did actually. I do. But you know, we know, I want to make sure I'm not blaming those kids. I'm trying to say they come out of an experience an much more intense and economically fraught and politically fraught period than I came out of. It's not like my generation was great and their generation was bad. It's their experience led us to have one kind of outlook.

Look, the kids that I teach at Harvard and I teach my undergraduate seminar in my home and it's like out of the 1950s and we take a tea break and my wife bakes fresh cookies and we all – And those kids are just wonderful kids. I would pay Harvard a lot to be allowed to teach those kids. And they do go on.

KRISTOL: Harvard doesn't need the money. So don't volunteer it.

PUTNAM: They go one to do wonderful. I'm really privileged, right? Three of the people now serving in Congress came out of that little seminar. It's a seminar of 15 people. Three people in Congress. When I spoke to the White House not long ago, 10 percent of the White House staff – of senior staff – came out of that seminar. So these are wonderful kids. So I'm seeing a select portion even within in Harvard I'm seeing the people who are most interested in solving public problems.

Let me put myself in the shoes of, let me try to be Bobby Putnam for a moment, from the 60s, but now. I hope I would have enough self-confidence and enough knowledge of history – this is not science fiction I'm talking about. Americans have done these kind of not every day, not perfect people, we have actually looked at problems and figured out how to fix them and that sense is so missing from our current dialogue today that if you're lucky enough to go to college, any college, a good college, a not-so-good college. If you got to go college and you finish college, you're automatically in the top third of American society. Period.

All this talk about college degrees not worth anything. Not true, you're going to do fine. Relax a little bit and think not only about how you can make a living, I understand the importance of that, I've got seven grandchildren. They're all worried about how to make a living, but relax a little bit and think about how you can help the country. And, that's what I was fortunate enough to be able to do. It's been fun.

KRISTOL: That's a great way in which to end, and I think that's very good advice actually. Thank you for joining me today, thank for giving that advice, but more importantly letting people see what it means to seriously investigate these problems and do so with a view towards solutions.

Even though I'm a conservative, I'm probably closer to you than Charles Murray on this. There's something – maybe Charles was half-joking or of course, being whatever, didn't want to get into the argument then. Part of America really is feeling we can analyze these problems correctly, but then do something about them, understanding all the limitations.

Thank you Bob for joining me today, and thank you for joining CONVERSATIONS.

[END]