

# CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

## Conversations with Bill Kristol

**Guest:** Jonah Goldberg, Senior Editor, *National Review*

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### **I: On Trump and Conservatism (0:15 – 41:02)**

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to have with me today Jonah Goldberg, Senior Editor of *National Review*, author of two bestselling books, at least two. Very much worth reading, *Liberal Fascism* and *The Tyranny of Clichés*, which I recommend to everyone.

And I want to say I recommend particularly – all of your stuff is excellent, of course – but your newsletter – as I've had to, or not had to, but I've written a newsletter on my own the last year or two. Yours is so superior. Really the best of the genre. I think you're the newsletter-ist of our time. People can, I guess, subscribe to it, but they can also read it on *National Review's* website.

GOLDBERG: Yes, it's called "[The Goldberg File](#)," and I was actually arguably one of the very first political bloggers. Mickey Kaus got his idea for "The Kaus Files" from "The Goldberg File," and then Andrew Sullivan got his idea for his blog from Mickey Kaus –

KRISTOL: When did you begin that?

GOLDBERG: '98. In Internet years, I'm Methuselah, right? And so it originally started out as an ur-blog before the word *blog* actually came up. And then – I want to warn viewers, because you have very high-minded, serious viewership on the show, and they will think after watching you talk to Harvey Mansfield and all these *éminence grise*, and then you recommend my newsletter and they find that I'm writing a lot about my dog and about women's prison movies. They might be a little – get a little whiplash. It's an irreverent newsletter at times.

KRISTOL: It's a mix of high and low, but only you're excellent at pulling that off and teaching people something with a very light touch.

I don't know if a light touch is what we need now. It's July 12, it's the Tuesday before the Republican Convention. You and I have been recently prominent critics of Donald Trump, but I think we've tried to analyze what's happened. And so let's begin with that and then we'll go back to discuss liberalism and conservatism. But what happened?

GOLDBERG: Clearly, ours is the God of the Old Testament; he's a vengeful God. No, you know it's funny. It really depends on where you – it's one of these things – well, first there was the flood, right? It's one of these things you can go way back on.

I think that it's a little pat to say it now because a lot of people have said this, but I think on the political

side one of the things that's been going on for a long time is that elites – and by elites I mean pro-Trump elites and anti-Trump elites. I mean people at Fox News. I mean Ted Cruz. I mean Rush Limbaugh. But I also mean Paul Ryan. Everybody. Everybody has overpromised and under-delivered, at least on the conservative side. But also on the liberal side if you look at Barack Obama who came riding in on his Pegasus and his Greek columns and he was going to heal all our wounds and all that.

Washington and politics in general has been overpromising what it can do. The disconnect between the progressive, pragmatic cult of expertise, “we know how to manage everything.” Or the Republican disconnect between being able to kill Obamacare and all that. Massive disillusionment particularly in the wake of a financial crisis.

There is actually an interesting article in the *European Review of Political Science* that has a dataset going back to the early 1800s of what happens to politics after a financial crisis. It is a pretty strong, robust showing. I never trust when – particularly Europeans ones – but when academics say they have a definition of right-wing because when you start peeling it back, going back to Theodor Adorno, you find out it's not right. But they say politics gets more right-wing, it certainly gets more populist. You have this financial crisis that really wiped out the net worth of people at the bottom half of this country.

Then, you had a guy come in and promising to do all these things and couldn't deliver. And the Republican Party, I think, somewhat cynically, because a lot of conservative people in the media said Obama can be stopped in every way, shape, and form. There is a massive sense of disillusionment, and we need some outsider. That's the political part of it. But I also think –

KRISTOL: I do think Republican elites and candidates – I guess Romney in 2012 particularly as the one Republican presidential candidate between the financial crisis and now – just didn't show that they'd come to grips with it. I always thought this.

George Bush, we might have fancy arguments on why it was caused by liberal policies and Barney Frank and the Fed. The Americans looked up, and there was George W. Bush, President of the United States, his Secretary of the Treasury appointed by him, seeming Republican at least. Republicans had held Congress for 12 years, basically until the year of '06. Then the whole would financial system is falling apart, and if you're the party that has presided over that, you need to have an explanation of what happened.

GOLDBERG: There was nothing. My esteem for Mitt Romney in the Trump moment, and for Stu Stevens, his campaign manager, or senior advisor or whatever his title was, has grown dramatically. But at the same time, I think Stu Stevens and Mitt Romney subscribed to a theory that it was simply a referendum on Obama, that they were going to be vanilla. Vanilla is the most popular ice cream in America even though it's nobody's favorite flavor, but it's everybody's second favorite flavor. That's the kind of campaign they ran. You were writing about this. Steve Hayes was writing about this.

They didn't put forward big serious ideas, they didn't make a serious argument, and I think that was part of the problem was that he seemed milquetoast against Obama. The Republican rhetoric of four years is how we're losing our country, and then Mitt Romney kind of runs this Hallmark ad of a campaign, and there was a lot of bitterness. I think Ted Cruz comes out of that, and a lot of things come out of that.

But I also think it's worth getting outside-of-the-beltway analysis for this. Probably the most important book in the last ten years is Charles Murray's *Coming Apart*, at least in terms of the issues that it addresses. The unraveling of the social structure for people in what he calls Fishtowns, lower-end, non-college educated. He only concentrates on whites, which is the base of the Trump support. They aren't church-going anymore, their family breakdown is as bad as it is for blacks when Moynihan did the Moynihan report.

If you look at the Pew surveys and the Gallup surveys going back 30 years, we have never had such lack of faith and confidence in major institutions in American life. Last time I looked at it virtually every institution in America – except for two, small business and the Army – were underwater. Cops are right

on the bubble. Obviously, the media, no faith. Congress, no faith. But also, doctors, lawyers, educators, primary schools. Religious institutions. Every institution you can think of people have lost faith in. That is, I think, the feedstock for populism, both on the Left and on the Right. That's what we had in the 1930s, that's what you get when people feel deracinated and alienated.

We can talk more about that in a bit, but I think that was going on right in front of everybody's eyes, and we were talking about it in a very AEI, analytical way, and Charles gave wonderful speeches on it. I think if Charles has been more a political analyst rather than a social scientist type, he might have just added a last chapter on there saying something terrible was coming. And we kind of missed it.

KRISTOL: It is amazing, 45 percent of the voters of this primary season, 2016, voted for Sanders or Trump. A socialist who hasn't changed his mind about anything in 50 years.

GOLDBERG: Since his honeymoon in the Soviet Union.

KRISTOL: I would say his economic views, which were already somewhat discredited you might have thought when he adopted them, now seem ridiculous. And Trump, who is kind of an authoritarian populist with also a smorgasbord of views, many of which are not credible, really. It does say something about a degree of alienation from the establishment and the mainstream. It's a little worrisome, though. 45 percent of the electorate.

What's weird is it's not the 30s. It's one thing if you're having a Great Depression and unemployment lines and the Dust Bowl. For all the trouble of '08, things have recovered. Why is that though do you think? I'm very struck by that. One can take the attitude that people are just spoiled and expect too much and should toughen up. Your colleague, Kevin Williamson, has written in that vein, I think, quite powerfully. Or one can say no, you've got to be more sympathetic and somehow there is suffering sort of out there. I don't –

GOLDBERG: Again, I'm sort of with you. I'm not an economic determinist on these sorts of things. But I'm also not someone who discounts the economics either. If you saw your entire net worth, which is basically invested in your house disappear in 2008, that is going to have a lasting impact on the way you see things.

KRISTOL: Especially after the experts told you it couldn't happen anymore, we've got everything under control.

GOLDBERG: I think the Brexit stuff is illuminating on all of this as well. I've been writing about this for a long time and probably not stridently enough. But there is a real sense in which – Ross Douthat had a good column about this – which is the Davos-attending, New York/London top 2%, right? Or 5%. They just simply look down their nose at the idea of national culture, nationhood – this “make America great again” is clearly an appeal to white lower-middle class, white middle-class memory of nostalgic – bogus memory – but a memory of what they think the 1950s and early 1960s was like.

The sort of contempt for notions of sovereignty both legally and culturally. Supreme Court Justices saying they consult laws and polls in foreign countries. We can go down the list. I remember saying about Barak Obama's speech in Berlin that it was better in the original Esperanto. I think that if you're struggling to make ends meet and you get this real sense that the elites, cultural elites, people who hold commanding heights, see themselves as better than you and better than America.

Whether it's a fair or out-of-context thing for everyone to beat up on, Obama saying, “I believe in American exceptionalism the way that British do,” it reinforces something that people suspect, that there was a lot of people who don't like America. I remember when Obama first came in I was writing about this a lot because part of this tied into my book – there's a history of progressivism in the United States that has always thought there is nothing wrong with America that being more like Europe wouldn't fix.

I think we've seen that time and again, and it comes in waves and when you have the “juice-box mafia,”

wonky Washington expert types, really looking with disdain down on people. You say, “I don’t want to be Europe; I want to be America. I like America. And I like the way America used to be more than the way it is now.” There is a cultural ferment that comes from all of that. It strips people away from an ideological attachment to a more nativist, nationalist attachment.

KRISTOL: The normal conservative candidates somehow didn’t speak to that enough? Maybe because they were – the accident that Bush and Rubio especially were liberal on immigration. Trump benefited a lot I think from having Jeb Bush as his kind of alter-ego. Third Bush, the establishment personified.

GOLDBERG: And also the prospect of watching a Bush-Clinton race was so disgusting, particularly for conservatives. We don’t do that here. I do think that Mike Huckabee has figured this out a long time ago; he just has too much baggage and too many other problems with him as a candidate. I think Ted Cruz figured it out. The problem with Ted Cruz, and I’ve become much more of a fan of Ted Cruz –

KRISTOL: And Rick Santorum semi-figured it out.

GOLDBERG: First of all, there was a problem of breaking out of the – this idiotic thing – one of the reasons why I think the primaries went so badly is everyone bought into this theory about lanes, and Trump at least had one message for everybody. I think a lot of these guys – Ted Cruz is kind of a global elite kind of guy, but he’s figured out this formula about cultural Texan stuff, and it just doesn’t translate well. The media wouldn’t give him the kind of play he needed to do it. Meanwhile, Trump could because he had this celebrity status.

It is a bizarre thing, you said before about Sanders and Trump getting 45 percent of the electorate. I’ve read a lot about populism over the last 100 years, and the notion that the two populist firebrand candidates, one would be a Jewish socialist from Brooklyn and sounds like a Jewish socialist from Brooklyn. He sounds like he wants to send back soup at a deli. Then, Donald Trump, a billionaire from Fifth Avenue. These are the guys people are normally pointing the pitchforks at not having them on their own side. I think it speaks to something that has changed in the media landscape as well.

KRISTOL: Don’t you think the populist rebellions are sometimes led by these wealthy people who are sort of semi-faux populist? Sometimes, it really is the person with a pitchfork from modest origins, but often it’s a kind of someone who exploits –

GOLDBERG: I think that is right. There is a certain – There is a French intellectual who says, “The people have decided, and I must go with them for I am their leader.” I also liken it to Ferris Bueller; he sees a parade going down the avenue in Chicago, and he runs out in front and pretends he’s leading it. Trump saw this thing and got in front of it.

KRISTOL: That’s what he’s good at. He’s a marketer, he sees trends. The reality TV thing helped him.

GOLDBERG: He’s been a New York City populist, he’s a *New York Post* populist. He cares more about the *New York Post* and what the cops and construction workers and doormen and Howard Stern, what those guys care about and never liked the sort of Park Avenue real estate elite. He’s got a huge Queens chip on his shoulder. As two guys from Manhattan, I think we can recognize it a little bit better than some people can.

KRISTOL: Even sympathize with it in a certain way. Huckabee, I do agree, really saw this with the economic populism in ’07 and ’08. My first column of my somewhat ill-fated, weeklong column stint with *The New York Times* was a semi-defense of Huckabee and taking him seriously as a candidate. And I think correctly predicting he’d do better than people thought because of the economic populist message. One forgets how much disdain that was met with from conservative elites. They were right to be disdainful from the merits, but also politically just a total lack of understanding that he was hitting something there.

Then, Santorum, the same. People thought their appeal was social conservative, which it was to some

degree. But the big development this year strikes me – from an intra-conservative movement dynamics point of view – Trump, weirdly, brilliantly figured out that populist conservatism would work better when it was detached from religious conservatism and social conservatism. Before they've gone together. Did anyone predict that?

GOLDBERG: I didn't see it coming. But it's also – It's important to remember that there is an aspect of cult of personality here, right? And so we like ideas, we tend to be like the guy who looks for his car keys where the light is good. We want to see these things as – even his separation from ideas we think is an interesting idea, right?

And it's important to remember that a lot of people – One of my favorite lines is from William Jennings Bryan where he says, "The people of Nebraska are for free silver. Therefore, I am for free silver." There is – one of my first big "Goldberg File" newsletter things attacking Trump, I was pointing out that Trump is corrupting conservatism to a large extent.

They did a poll last summer where they asked Republicans whether or not they were in favor of single-payer healthcare. You and I can probably recall that conservatives and Republicans spent a good deal of time talking about this. Forget Reagan's Medicare speech and all that stuff, just the fight over Obamacare divided American politics for a long time. You would think, even though we didn't persuade enough Americans, even though a majority still don't like Obamacare, that we pretty much persuaded our own side about this. Fourteen percent said they were in favor of single-payer. That's too high, but that's manageable. Then, they were then told that Donald Trump was in favor of it, and the number went up to 44 percent.

I think what Trump is doing is in the classic sort of populist tradition of just simply being a vehicle for resentment and rage. If he changes his mind, who cares? If he becomes pro-life, or he says he's pro-life or pro-choice. We spent 10 years talking about how terrible eminent domain abuse was, and all Trump had to do was say, "Oh, I think it's wonderful." And all of the sudden my Twitter feed is lighting up with people saying, "You're an idiot, you don't get how great eminent domain is."

What is dismaying for people like us and for a lot of people, we actually are principled conservatives, and we actually do wear this stuff fairly close to our hearts, and to discover a lot of our comrades in arms don't – or at least they're willing to jettison it when you get this reality show celebrity to come along – it's a very depressing thing. It tells you how quickly countries can go in a bad direction given the right set of circumstances.

KRISTOL: Let's talk about those. You've written very eloquently and powerfully on that. I think intelligent conservatives, and I'd put us, maybe, in that category – let's say perceptive conservatives. There's populism and there's conservatism, and obviously, one of the tasks of politics is if you're a conservative leader – this would-be true on the Left, too, of course – is to harness, educate, refine populism, but also respect it in a way and make it part of a broader movement. Obviously, Reagan did that, Gingrich in the 90s and others.

I don't really – it's sort of silly to blame the populists. Trump is a celebrity; people are interested in celebrities. There is the intermediate layer, which I would say is the elected officials, prominent conservative leaders are supposed to both educate the populist sentiment and also check it at times and also at times say no, that's unacceptable. I think you and I have both been struck at how few people have done that. That is depressing, don't you think?

GOLDBERG: It's terrifying. What I find particularly amazing is the number of people – because my position has always been "I don't like either of them. I'm just going to tell the truth; let the chips fall where they may." My only job is to tell the truth as I see it. Doesn't mean I have to say everything I believe, and it doesn't mean I can't change my mind. My only real definition of journalistic ethics is don't write or say things you don't believe to be true. It is amazing how many people who are longtime fans are disappointed in me because I won't live down to their expectations.

They just sort of assumed implicitly, or explicitly, that I was in fact a Republican hack. And that if ultimately, it was in the interest of the Republican Party for something to go one way that I would, of course, rejoin the fold and start writing things that I don't believe to be true, and we don't need to name names here, but it has been dismaying and shocking and revealing how many people are perfectly prepared to do exactly that.

Bill Rusher used to be the publisher of *National Review*, he would always tell the young staffers – he'd give them the same piece of advice – he would say, "Look, politicians will always disappoint you." It wasn't to say that politicians were bad people. It was just to say their incentive structure, versus yours and my incentive structure, is different. And they're going to go, their first priority is to win elections and that requires compromising on principles in a way that huddled-away writers don't have to do. I respect that and I understand that, but there's a difference between bending your principles and defenestrating your principles.

KRISTOL: That's what strikes me. Reagan wasn't a pure free trader and everyone, Bush had bigger government programs than he probably would have liked. That's all a matter of accommodating to political reality while staying basically on a path that is reasonable and defensible from our point of view.

I think for us, I guess, Trump just seems utterly unacceptable, more almost because of his personal character and judgment. Also because he's not a conservative in 18 different ways, but that's actually less important for me and I think for you than just the basic unfitness for office. And the willingness for people who in the past have written eloquently about fitness of office and disdain for Clinton and disdain –

GOLDBERG: Or the need for conservative purity. All of these supposedly high priests of conservatism who've been yelling at reform conservatives like Yuval Levin and Ramesh Ponnuru, always saying "You're just a me-too Republican," and suddenly they just completely change courses is shocking to me.

It's funny, though. I know you've always had a sympathy for populism and shaking things up and not being constrained by a silly Overton window on this issue or that issue. I call it the Trump non sequitur. I am really sympathetic to most of the arguments for Trump until you get to the "and therefore Trump" part. So if it's we need to shake up the Beltway elite, yes, absolutely; we need to talk more about national sovereignty, sure, absolutely. We need to do this; we need to do that. We need to break out of the nostalgic window of 1981 Reaganite tax reform and apply Reaganite principles to new problems, absolutely. Then they say, "And therefore, we have to vote for Donald Trump." I'm like, are you high? What are you talking about?

I think it's been a kind of an amazing thing to see the extent to which the power of Donald Trump – and this is something I write about a lot in *Tyranny of Clichés* – we all talk about that phrase "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. That's not what Lord Acton meant when he actually coined the phrase. He was writing to a friend of his who was writing a biography of the popes, or a history of the popes, and Acton was cautioning him to say you can't forgive really powerful people of sins that you wouldn't forgive in other people.

What he's talking about is not that the power corrupts the powerful, it's that it corrupts the people chronicling him around him. You start to bend your principles to power. You can see that all over the place these days. Because he got the nomination or because he gets good ratings on TV all sorts of people are willing to throw aside things that they believed in for a long time.

The way I always try to describe it to sympathetic audiences because it's harder and harder to find them is that all my life – I was a huge disciple of your dad's and my first job in Washington was at AEI – all my life conservatism has – strip away the context and the day-to-day arguments or the yearly arguments – conservatism only stood for two things. The idea that ideas matter. That through a contest of rational debate and the application of evidence applied to theory that you can come to optimal solutions to problems.

And the idea that character matters. You can define character as sexual mores, or you can define character as business practices, or you can define character as public integrity or private integrity or honesty. I have yet to come up – it's sort of a challenge. I keep asking people and with the exception of his allegedly wonderful children, who may in fact be wonderful, no one has come up with anything close to a definition of character that Donald Trump doesn't fall far short from.

I plan on being in this business for a while longer. I think you plan on being in this business for a while longer. I would like to be able to say that character matters and that ideas matter five years from now when Trump has faded away. If you don't want to say that those things matter and it's just a hammer-and-tong battle for power, make that argument, but don't pretend that Trump is this vessel of great ideas or of great character, or with him in power, the wheat harvest will be wonderful and all this kind of stuff.

KRISTOL: How much of a crisis is this for conservatives? What do you think is going to happen? We can stipulate we don't know, and we've been wrong. What's the safest bet, I suppose, is Trump loses in November. What happens? It happened; it was weird. It was a very unusual election, 17 candidates, etc. Republican elites out of touch. We're back to where we were or how much of a moment of crisis and inflection point is this?

GOLDBERG: I think there is a significant silver lining to Trump in the sense that there is going to be – sometimes you have to burn the village to save it kind of thing, right? If Trump is the nominee and he loses, the idea that first of all some of our friends on talk radio, or some of my colleagues on Fox News can go back to arguing for a doctrinaire definition of conservatism, I find unpersuasive, right? As a friend of mine, a colleague of mine at AEI, likes to say, what we're seeing is a bubble. When you have a bubble in the private sector, the smart money goes to quality. It doesn't try to chase the bubble, it says we're going to double-down on the Warren Buffet school of fundamentals, right?

So if and when the bubble bursts, I think people are going to be looking around to the people who first of all didn't lose their heads, and second of all, have serious public policy proposals that they can bring to bear. I think there is robust debate on what those proposals are. I'm very sympathetic to the reform conservative guys. And the guys who write *National Affairs*. Too many magazines with the first name "National" out there.

I think that you know one of the things that has been crippling for conservatives is that we keep trying to replay this 1981 tax reform model as a solution to all of our problems. I will name two names – they're friends of mine, at least I hope they're still friends of mine – but Steve Moore and Larry Kudlow, who I do not think have covered themselves with honor in all of this, they've been at the forefront of arguing pure, Reaganite cut marginal income tax rates and all that kind of stuff. And they've thrown in pretty emotionally for Donald Trump.

It will be very difficult when even Donald Trump hasn't really come out for that, or at least not plausibly come out for that, to say that argument, we have to revert back to that sort of argument. *The Wall Street Journal*, which I have immense respect for, has also been sort of hard to peg on a lot of this. I think that's good. I think that's good. I think it may just be rubble but at least when everything is reduced to rubble, you have clear lines to fight from.

I think the people who stuck to principles and stuck to the importance of arguments and character will be better equipped. It's just a hunch, but I don't think Donald Trump will comport himself well in defeat. If he wins, well, then I think it's time to restart the Liberty League and go back to the notion of being in exile. I've been rereading Mencken and Albert J. Nock, and what they both – more Nock, I've always loved Nock, I wrote a long piece about him in *National Review* a few years ago.

They were simply outside of the political consensus of both parties. Statism was running amok everywhere, and they simply said we're not going to be a part of that. It could be traditional fusionist conservatives become a lot like the Libertarian Party has been for the last 40 years where they're involved in the argument, but they're more at the periphery than certainly we're used to. That's okay. I can live with that. In terms of my career, I'll enjoy the arguments, but I do worry what it means for the

country to have two competing brands of statism between the two parties. I think that's a really bad prospect for the country.

KRISTOL: For me, what's so shocking is if the Tea Party was about anything, it was about constitutionalism, sometimes maybe a little simple-minded, but an attempt to rediscover the Constitution and limited government. If you think about the conservative intellectual movement for 20, 30, 40 years, different aspects of it in different ways were about this. Certainly, on the legal side with Scalia and Bork and, you know, originalism, the Constitution, limited government. Libertarian side of that or a traditional side of that. The Hayekian side, the limits of central planning.

If someone asked me, What is modern American conservatism about? There would have been other things as well, the anti-Communism and hawkishness, but that would have been a big part of it, you know. Trump has no interest in any of that. It's a little shocking that no one seems to care. Not no one, but so many people don't care.

GOLDBERG: I sometimes wonder – and I was very pro-Tea Party, it was the first populist movement in American history that I was in favor of. I thought they were going to fulfill the ancient libertarian prophesy of the libertarians taking over the government and then leaving everybody alone.

Normally, populism is about imposing will, using the state as a mechanism of power, or a lever of power for one specific constituency that defines itself as the people. Historically, all populism means is people-ism. Hitler was a populist and nationalist. Hitler liked to say he was a nationalist, but not a patriot. I think John Lukacs has written a lot of wonderful things about populism. I had high hopes for the Tea Parties as well, and I wonder if the sense that they failed, the sense that they failed to get Mitt Romney elected, the sense they were betrayed by the Republican establishment caused a lot of them to say, "You guys told us that if we doubled down on our principles, we would solve everything. We delivered, and you guys failed us. Screw it, now I just want to win."

That's what Trump's message is. Strength, will, where have we heard those themes in politics before? Winning. He says winning solves everything. And I think that that's really dismaying. I've been planning on writing this piece in *National Review* for a while on sort of revisiting *Liberal Fascism* almost 10 years later and what I've learned. Because the book was largely written to hold off Hillary Clinton. I had never heard of Barack Obama when I started writing that book. Here comes Donald Trump, and he's proved me wrong about some things. It's dismaying, but I should be honest about that.

KRISTOL: I want to hear about that in just a second, but the only other thing – my footnote to what you were saying, which I very much agree with. I do think religious conservatives – the Tea Party conservatives in a way got frustrated – some of them, not all of them because some of the leaders of Never Trump are Tea Party types. To their credit, I think. This is not why they got involved as grassroots citizens fighting against Obamacare.

GOLDBERG: That's a very important point, there are many rooms in the mansion of Tea Party-ness.

KRISTOL: But some did, of course, go in a Trumpian direction. I always used to say that – you and I were very similar on this in '09, 2009, 2010, when the Left was just deriding the Tea Party as incipient fascism – to the contrary, this is a healthy populism. What does it believe in? It believes in dealing with the national debt and restoring the Constitution. You should be happy we have this kind of populism, not European populism. It turned out, unfortunately, five years later we have a European style –

GOLDBERG: Because the Tea Party failed. Or didn't succeed. Whether it was their fault or somebody else's fault. Historically, populist movements do not want to be constrained by the constitutional bulwarks of democratic liberalism. This was one of the first movements that said, no, constrain us! That is why I thought it was healthy.

KRISTOL: Then, the religious conservatives, which is a cousin you might say of the Tea Party, but it goes back much further as part of the Republican and conservative base. For all the complaints – and I



was occasionally sympathetic of some of them; I was mostly a defender of the Religious Right and social conservatism and part of it really – the complaints about the dogmatism, the moralism, the religious focus, and imposing religion on society, it turns out the only thing worse than religious populism is nonreligious populism.

My friend Gary Bauer has an interesting perspective on this, and he's much more sympathetic to Trump than I am. When explaining why so many of his people, his supporters, and people who, you know, subscribe, get his end-of-the day fax and – email, I guess now; originally, it was a fax. Why they are for Trump? I said, he's not socially conservative, he's not religious, his personal behavior is the opposite of what people uphold. Gary's line was "Look, they told us to vote Republican, vote Republican. At least we'll be in alliance, we'll save traditional marriage, we'll begin to roll back *Roe v. Wade*." It turns out that none of that worked.

So religious conservatives decided apparently they'll try to take care of their communities as best they can, protect them from the forces on the outside. Meanwhile, they're just going to vote their economic interest or grievances, so liberated from the constraints of a kind of religious view of politics, they become just populist conservatives.

GOLDBERG: Which gets back to my point earlier that everyone overpromised and under-delivered. Everyone's says, "We're going to get rid of *Roe v. Wade*." Everyone says, "We're going to save marriage." Then you don't do it, and you get –

KRISTOL: Republican Chief Justices, Obamacare or Reagan appointee Anthony Kennedy –

GOLDBERG: That's one of things that I think – there are a lot of people who think – I'm sure you get this, too – who think we're snobs because we don't like Trump or that we hate Trump supporters. Yeah, there are jackasses in the mix as there are in every movement. The typical person sympathetic to Trump or frustrated with the GOP – I think some of their arguments are wrong, but I have nothing but sympathy for them and their frustrations. I think they're coming from a right place.

Again, I just think it's the Trump non sequitur. If the argument didn't end with "and therefore" this corrupt, flimflam man, who takes advantage of ignorant or desperate people as his business model and who has more ex-wives than the previous 43 presidents combined, makes things up, and lies. If it had been somebody of serious character, but of real populist sentiment or someone of serious ideas but of populist sentiment, I wouldn't be making these arguments or I wouldn't be standing athwart the GOP, but sometimes you just have to.

KRISTOL: The person matters. The truth is you can go too far in the kind of "I like the sentiments, but not Trump." If the sentiments become allied to and embodied in someone who now is likely to be the nominee of one of the two major parties for President of the United States, you don't get to separate.

Ultimately, you can separate them next year or something like that. But for months they don't get separated. I think that's a real problem. I think people are underestimating the negative effect actually on conservatism and on the Republican Party – I'm curious what you think of this – of Trump as the nominee. It's one thing for him to be the presumptive nominee, win some primaries.

Speech at a convention. Assuming he beats back the delegate revolt, which I hope he doesn't, but let's just say he does. Speech at a convention watched by 15 million people, debates watched by, God knows, how many people. The Clinton-Trump debate would get a big audience. I don't know. How do you tell 25 year-olds he happens to be the nominee of the Republican Party and every Republican you've ever heard of, with very few exceptions, is supporting him, but he's not really what the Republican Party is about? What does that mean at some point?

GOLDBERG: It means that he's the chief spokesman of the party, and everyone is wearing loyalty to their standard-bearer. I think that's exactly right. Again, one of the sort of silver linings to all of this is we may go back to the days of reinforcing this important distinction that I think got way too lost in the Bush

years that there's a difference between being a Republican and being a conservative.

Again, if it weren't Donald Trump, I've been arguing for years that I think we'd be better off if we had more of a transactional relationship with the Republican president. We say these five things are nonnegotiable. You can't betray us on Court appointments – you can come up with the list. And then everything else you can go and talk to Democrats, or you can talk to Republicans and we can have an argument. You don't have to be a movement guy. We don't have to – because part of the problem with Bush – there was a certain populist element to Bush where because of the born-again Christian stuff, because of being sort of a Texan populist figure who speaks American and all that, he got away with a lot of things that as a conservative, I didn't like.

The compassionate conservatism thing I never liked – I wrote about it a lot, I got a lot of grief over it at the time. It may have been politically necessary, but as a conservative, I didn't feel like I had to agree with it just because it was tactically or strategically something he needed to do to get elected. If he wanted to use people like me, not that I matter that much, but my view is – Bill Buckley understood this – that sometimes criticizing Republicans from the right helps Republicans.

That's what Bill Clinton understood implicitly. That being attacked from the left helped him win over people in the middle. If Trump were more politically sophisticated, he would understand this and actually have something of a Faustian bargain with places like *The Weekly Standard* and *National Review* and say, "Look, I'm not that rightwing; those guys are attacking me." I never thought I was betraying the Republican Party by criticizing the Republican Party; in some ways, I thought it was kind of helping. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter whether I'm helping or hurting the Republican Party, my job is not to do that.

KRISTOL: We criticized Harriet Miers' nomination by George Bush, and I remember, by God, the White House was furious. We ended up with Justice Alito. I always cite that as an example of "Oh, you shouldn't go against – you're on the team, you got to be on the team." The country is much better off with Sam Alito as the Justice.

## **II: Liberal Fascism Revisited (41:02 – 57:38)**

KRISTOL: You said earlier you thought you'd now gotten some things wrong in *Liberal Fascism*, it's so rare for an author to ever acknowledge such a thing. Talk a little bit about the book, obviously. What have you thought about – what it is a decade about when it came out?

GOLDBERG: Came out in 2008 so eight years ago. Coming up on nine. For those who don't know the book or have only heard what the Left has said about the book, I'm not saying that all liberals are fascists, I'm not saying they're like Nazis.

The phrase "liberal fascism" actually comes from H. G. Wells, who people forget – now, people just remember him as a science fiction guy. He was actually, arguably, if not the most important, clearly one of the top five most influential figures on a whole generation of progressive writers. Both in America and in the UK. He's quoted from the pulpit and sermons by progressive preachers, social gospel preachers all across the country. When he met with FDR, it was treated like a papal visit.

In 1932, H. G. Wells was asked by the young liberals, or the youth arm of the Liberal Party, whatever it was called, to come speak and lay out his vision for the future. He says, "I've been struggling to come up with a label for what I believe all my life, and I think I finally figured it out. We have to be liberal fascists."

KRISTOL: This is after Mussolini is in power as a fascist?

GOLDBERG: He also said we have to become enlightened Nazis. I always thought what would be the reaction to my book if I called it "Enlightened Nazism."

KRISTOL: Is that right? I guess that's before the Nazis came to power.

GOLDBERG: On the cusp of power, but it's not Kristallnacht.

KRISTOL: He means "National Socialist" in the early sense.

GOLDBERG: If you go back and you read H. G. Wells, it is full of guys in black turtlenecks, supermen, Übermensch coming in – Morlocks and Eloi. Lots of populism, lots of technocracy, lots of progressive experts and technocrats. What matters is will, and using political force to bring us into the sunny uplands of history. All that kind of stuff.

But in no way did I think H. G. Wells want to round up Jews or any of that kind of stuff, and frankly, Mussolini didn't want to round up Jews either. The chapter of Italian fascism and what we think of when we think of fascism does not coalesce very well, or comport very well. Mussolini opposed all the Nuremberg Laws for a long time and Jews were overrepresented in the Italian Fascist Party, but that's all digression, which you can happily cut out. Anyway.

KRISTOL: That's why people like Franklin Roosevelt could say or people close to him – I don't know if he ever said it – that they all admired what Mussolini did.

GOLDBERG: They all did. Even my sainted Winston Churchill called him one of the great lawgivers. FDR had said that we were doing a lot of the things they were doing in Germany and in Italy, just in a more orderly way. I always loved the word *orderly* like that the main critique of fascism was that they weren't orderly enough.

Hugh Johnson who was the head of the War Industries Board under Woodrow Wilson – part of my argument is basically, FDR is just a continuation, he's a Wilson retread. We tend to think of these things as two different eras, but it was only 12 years separating the Wilson Administration and the FDR Administration. The things that happened under Woodrow Wilson should make every American shudder. First propaganda ministry in the modern world. You had goonish thugs who were beating people up in public, working under the cover of authority of the state. You had massive waves of censorship. We put a lot of political prisoners in jail, had to be released by the Republicans, by the way.

KRISTOL: Isn't Eugene Debs the socialist leader was released by Harding?

GOLDBERG: The terrible fascistic things that if you described them objectively you'd say, "Wow, that sounds pretty fascistic." But Hugh Johnson who ran the War Industries Board under Wilson, was the head of the NRA under Roosevelt. National Recovery Administration, not the National Rifle Association. He hung a portrait of Benito Mussolini on his office wall. This was the guy who was Man of the Year in 1934 of *TIME*. When he gets to his office, he hangs a picture of Benito Mussolini; he hands out tracks printed by the fascist regime in Italy to fellow Cabinet members, and during the Democratic Convention, he had issued this sort of somewhat jokey memo to all the Democrats saying what we need to do is get FDR in office and then ship Congress and the Supreme Court off to an island for 90 days so we can really get things done.

So there's this tendency in liberalism to idealize what William James called "The Moral Equivalent of War." Once you start listening for it, it is everywhere in the rhetoric and the writing of American liberalism going back 100 years. FDR explicitly said that we're going to take the war powers that Wilson used to fight the Great Depression. Woodrow Wilson was supported by the progressives not so much for his foreign policy stuff, but because of this moral equivalent of war argument. John Dewey and Jane Addams and all those guys liked the idea that war would cause regimentation, and I think Dewey has this line where he says, "War will cause everybody to lay down their personal interest and rally around the state."

JFK has his New Frontier, explicitly moral equivalent of war. Jimmy Carter and his fetching sweater in the Oval Office when he's talking about making the energy crisis the moral equivalent of war. Barack Obama with his Sputnik moment, all this Cold War nostalgia that we have to rally around.

Or what I thought was, and this would be a better topic to discuss with Mansfield, one of the most disgusting State of the Union addresses given at least since Wilson – or no, since FDR’s 1944 address, which was really disgusting, too – was Barack Obama’s – I think it was his 2006 address – where he says, “Wouldn’t it great” – not 2006, 2010 – when he says, “Wouldn’t be great if we could all be like Seal Team 6, where we just put down our partisan interests and our petty disputes and fought together as one people for a cause?” He goes on with this extended metaphor –

KRISTOL: This was after Bin Laden so maybe it was 2012.

GOLDBERG: This extended metaphor about how Seal Team 6 optimizes what America should really be like, and it is a complete inversion of the Founders’ idea of what America should be like. We have a military to protect our liberties at home, not to provide a model for best practices. By definition, militaries sacrifice personal liberty for a specific purpose, and they take orders from the state because they have to. They do that in America at least so that the rest of us don’t have to. This theme runs straight through American liberalism.

KRISTOL: I think in one of Obama’s 2010 address – I think Mansfield wrote about this in *The Weekly Standard* at the time, and I think others commented on it. He says, “Let’s pass healthcare reform – I want to be the last president who has to call for passing healthcare reform. Let’s end it here.” When you think about it for a minute, it is a deeply undemocratic and illiberal thing to say. This is the sort of the expertise will be imposed and that’s it, the debate is over.

GOLDBERG: This theme runs through American liberalism going way back as well. You had what was his name? I think Stuart Butler was one of the brain trust-ers who said we simply needed to give over to an economic dictatorship where we just took it out of the hands of democracy. JFK at Yale – and again at a commencement address at Yale, and again at a press event at the White House – talked about how some issues are too complicated to leave to democracy. Look at Gruber, Jonathan Gruber, saying it’s okay to basically lie to the American people about all of these things because we just got to get it done. Or Nancy Pelosi saying what’s in it.

You go down the list, and there’s this technocratic, authoritarian tendency. They don’t like war, but they like everything else about war. John Dewey and William James were at least open and honest about this. That is sort of the liberal fascist tendency; there are other things I get into and all that. The arguments that I made – there are a bunch of different arguments I made that annoyed people – but part of the – implicit in this arguments is I view fascism and Nazism as not being rightwing if you define your terms as being or if your definition of conservatism is in the Anglo-American tradition.

In the Anglo-American tradition, there are essentially two pillars of conservatism. We can call it the anti-statist or libertarian tradition, which says limited government, the sovereignty of the individual, free trade, free markets, free minds, all that stuff. Lots of different labels for it, whether it’s Herbert Spencer or Jefferson. That’s one strain of it. The other strain is the social conservatism. Traditionalism doesn’t necessarily have to be open faith in God, but it has to be respect for tradition, respect for the transcendent. That is why William F. Buckley always said Ayn Rand couldn’t be a conservative because she had a contempt for the transcendent. You could be a nonbeliever, but you can’t hate the believers.

KRISTOL: That also limits the state and limits politics.

GOLDBERG: Both are checks. That’s right.

KRISTOL: So Hayek and Burke or whatever you want to say.

GOLDBERG: Going by that definition, fascists and Nazis were just simply not conservative. You could make an argument about them being rightwing, but even that, we can go deep in the weeds on this, the whole reason they were originally called rightwing is because Joseph Stalin in 1932 or ’28 – I can’t remember now – issues his social theory of fascism.

As you remember, Communists used to issue theories as if they were fatwas or encyclicals. He issues this theory of social fascism, which basically said any progressive leftwing movement anywhere in the world that isn't loyal to Moscow is objectively fascist. All of the sudden overnight Moscow is saying FDR is a fascist, John Dewey is a fascist, that Italian fascism is obviously fascist. The reason is there was this deep split between statists around the world, between nationalists and internationalists. Trotsky lost that fight, right?

For a while, what the Communists said was you have to be loyal to Moscow if you are going to be a legitimate left-winger. American useful idiots, Western useful idiots, intellectuals throughout academia bought into this line. Norman Thomas, according to Moscow, the head of the American Socialist Party, was a fascist. Had nothing to do with objective criteria of what the fascists believe in. If you go back and look at the Nazi platform, take out the stuff about the Jews, it's all about socializing department stores and getting rid of their Wall Street. It's all this fascist economics stuff. Same thing with the Mussolini program. Although that kept changing. They were statist.

This is something that Albert J. Nock recognized, this was something that Mencken recognized. They were just different kinds of statists. And so going by the lodestar of what I consider to be a conservative in the Anglo-American tradition, this belief that our rights come from God, not from government, that we are citizens, not subjects, these guys just simply aren't conservative.

And, so the problem was – here's what I got wrong, right? In this context, and I'm sorry for rambling. What I got wrong was I basically exonerated a lot of the Right from these sorts of tendencies. The way I always put it, and I exonerated America from these sorts of tendencies. I always said, "Look, I am not afraid of the sort of Orwellian conception of the fascist dictator ever taking over here. I think the American people are too good. We're too dogmatic about our understanding of the state and our liberties. But what I was always worried about was the *Brave New World* version, the Aldous Huxley version of this." You do see this around. I haven't changed my mind about this. This is a real danger.

KRISTOL: The nanny state. The Tocqueville kind of soft despotism –

GOLDBERG: The soft nepotism, the delivering of prepackaged joy to people, where you don't have to work for it. We try to take the struggle out of life out of it for people. In 10th grade, English majors have been vexed by the question of what is wrong with *Brave New World* if everyone is happy? You take your soma, and you're all happy. And you could see virtual reality and all of the things that are coming down the pike how this is a real threat.

The only way I ever thought you could get a man on a white horse kind of fascist dictator in this country is that first, you had to breed a whole generation of what C. S. Lewis called "men without chests." They will look for a man of vigor and become a cult of personality. But that's a long way off. I always thought this country could break the back of a dictator. I always thought – at least when I was writing the book – that conservatives in particular are simply too beholden to our ideology to ever countenance somebody who would essentially promise to be an authoritarian who didn't care about our principles and all that.

I want to be very clear, I don't think that Donald Trump is a Hitler. I think if Donald Trump turned into a Hitler this country would chew him up and spit him out in about five minutes. I don't think he's an anti-Semite. I think the problem is he thinks a lot of his followers are anti-Semites, and he doesn't want to offend them. Which is not as disgusting as being an anti-Semite, but it's only one or two notches down. At the same time, he is playing upon themes and making arguments and bringing out of many of the most loyal conservatives on the Right aspirations and desires and emotional tendencies and states of mind that I really thought couldn't be brought out.

As a trial run for a post-Trump Trump figure who – I imagine if some serious general wanted, a Douglas MacArthur guy with somewhat less patriotic inclinations came in, you could see – going by the ardor for Trump, I could see people falling for that. I just did not feel that was in us, and I was wrong about that. It's dismaying.

I should be very clear about one thing. I see no meaningful distinction between socialism and nationalism. If you read any speech by Hugo Chavez or Fidel Castro and you replace the word *nationalist* with *socialist* and *socialist* with *nationalist*, the meaning changes not a wit. When you nationalize an industry, you're socializing an industry.

We have at this moment, Hillary Clinton fended off Bernie Sanders, but he clearly captured the hearts and minds of that party, and she had to move to where he is. We're living in a moment where one party is being taken over by nationalism, and the other party is taken over by socialism, and maybe, because my last name is Goldberg, but I tend not to like it when our politics give over to National Socialism. It's not the National Socialism of the Nazis, but as a small-government, traditional conservative guy, I feel homeless in a way that I never have in my entire life.

### III: Liberalism, Conservatism, and 2016 (57:38 – 1:16:03)

KRISTOL: That's well said. What do you think about the argument – I've sort of been toying with this recently? Conservatism is a funny term to capture what we mostly think. It's sort of an accident of history that the conservative party became the bearer of some genuinely traditionalist conservatism, but also a lot of liberalism. Belief in liberal democracy, belief in liberty, what Hayek called "the party of liberty." And Hayek wrote that great essay, "[Why I'm Not a Conservative](#)." Sometimes I toy with the notion that maybe we need to recover and re-appropriate the term *liberal*.

Or maybe it's been so destroyed by American liberalism, and progressivism has coopted liberalism. But now that the liberals want to be progressives, maybe we should – in a way as an appeal against what you just eloquently discussed, both nationalism and socialism, liberal is in a way, it captures more of what we're –

GOLDBERG: I think that's exactly right. And this is huge peeve of mine going way back because many libertarians will cite the Hayek essay and say, "Oh, you can't quote Hayek or something like that." If you actually read the essay, the conservatives he's talking about are people like de Maistre, Continental conservatives, blood and soil.

He says America's the one place in the world where you can call yourself a conservative and be a defender of liberty. For young viewers out there who are interested in this stuff, one of the greatest essays ever written on this subject other than the Hayek one was Sam Huntington's "[Conservatism as an Ideology](#)," I think its 1956 or something like that. In which he argues that conservatism and radicalism are the only two schools of thought that have no implicit and inherent content. They are entirely contextual.

I'm sure you had the same frustration as my dad did and as I did. I remember my dad just getting so furious the way *The New York Times* would call the staunchest Bolsheviks in the Politburo the conservatives. But there is a certain truth to it. They were conserving their political faith, and in America, we're conserving a liberal revolution, the principles of a liberal revolution. I think the libertarians might want the word *liberal* back too. We could have a fun argument with them about that. But it is a weird hiccup of history.

In Europe, if you call yourself a liberal, you're one of us, for the most part, depends on the country. But if you call yourself a conservative in Portugal, you're for the monarchy. This is one of the reasons, to beat a dead horse, Hitler was not a conservative. Hitler hated Weimar democracy, but he was always dead-set against restoring monarchy, he was a radical.

KRISTOL: His greatest opponents in some ways – he had some on the Left, to be fair – but some of his greatest opponents, most courageous opponents were the conservatives. The sort of old-fashioned conservatives who did not believe in National Socialism. Well, this is where I suppose if Trump loses or wins, the amount of rethinking that could happen and maybe renaming almost of ideologies and of parties and of movements could be quite interesting. It could be quite a big moment, I think. Don't you think?

GOLDBERG: I think that's right. There is a great frustration, right? The whole reason why liberals call themselves progressives now is they claim it's because conservatives ruined the word *liberal* and said it's something it's not. That's not the history of it. The history of it is they called themselves progressives – Joseph McCarthy and Taft used the word *liberal* positively as late as 1954 or something like that. What happened was that what Woodrow Wilson did in this country in World War I was so horrible and so discredited that the progressives realized they had to start giving up on the term.

They went casting about for a new term, and it was FDR, it was a big part of the movement to call themselves liberals, but the irony is by abandoning the word *progressive* then you had Henry Wallace and the crazy Communists come in and take *progressive*, and the only reason the liberals gave up the word *liberal* is that once again they so discredited the term that everyone forgot what *progressive* meant. What drives me crazy about this –

KRISTOL: Where do you think in the modern West – have you looked into of this? Where did the decision on the Left to become progressives again, where does that really come from?

GOLDBERG: I did look at this a while back, but I can't remember.

KRISTOL: It's sort of revealing, isn't it?

GOLDBERG: I'm open to correction on this, but it came from this sort of Green Party Left. Ralph Nader used it a lot. One of the things – there was this boomlet, and it was on the Right, too. In the early 1990s, I remember Newt Gingrich and a lot of these guys, they started looking back at the Progressives very fondly and the Left did it too even more aggressively. First of all, the word *progressive* is just a good brand.

KRISTOL: Progress is a good brand.

GOLDBERG: They started using it as a way to sort of triangulate against the liberals and distinguish themselves from Clinton.

KRISTOL: I suppose, I mean one reason why I like the term *liberal* is the other connotations of it are positive. We're for liberal education, we're for a liberal society, we're for liberality as a general virtue of the people.

GOLDBERG: The liberal arts.

KRISTOL: The liberal arts. Which does actually get to the one thing Trump hit on that was so helpful to him – it's been underestimated, people think immigration helped him and trade, maybe. Political correctness, that was a genius of his. Not that he'd spent any time helping all the groups that you and I have been associated with and the magazines and the people on campus fighting political correctness for 15 years. He wasn't exactly a big donor to my knowledge to the legal groups that were trying to help students stand up against it or the journals and think tanks that were providing alternatives to it.

Nonetheless, he somehow saw that that was something that really annoyed tens of thousands of Americans. You've written a lot about political correctness; in a way, your book *The Tyranny of Clichés* is about –

GOLDBERG: To a certain extent, yes. I'll offer a slightly different take on this. I think this is another example of how of the sort of Ferris Buellerism, where he just stumbled into this thing.

I think it was one of our first Twitter fights between me and Donald Trump.

KRISTOL: Not between me and you.

GOLDBERG: We use Myspace for that. In one of my first Twitter spats with him, he was just going nuts

about I had to be fired and it's outrageous and I'm idiot and I'm a fool and no one watches me and no one reads my stupid magazine and all this kind of stuff. Whatever. But at one point, I made fun of him and I said something along the lines of don't you have better things to do than stay up all night Tweeting like a 14-year-old girl?

Trump goes ballistic about how sexist I am and how I'm making fun. *National Review* has to fire me because this is just such a violation. Once you look for it, you realize – remember when Jeb Bush in the primaries just had a typical stupid gaffe where he said something about he's not going to fund women's health or doesn't care about women's health? He was clearly talking about abortion and Planned Parenthood. And Trump for a week kept talking about "This guy doesn't believe in women's health" and blah, blah, blah.

Trump is a nearest weapon to hand guy, there is no actual principle governing him. The problem is, and what appeals, is he's so politically incorrect, he's political correctness for me, but not for thee. And since he's got such a huge megaphone, when he says outrageous and disgusting things, and he says, "You guys are way too politically correct," his fans love it.

When he uses political correctness against his enemies, his fans are either oblivious to it or they're just so happy – because they love that he fights because that's his big thing. It worked really well. He completely stumbled into it. The idea that he had this really well-drawn-out theory about political correctness and all that, I don't think is true. I think he is much more of a steroidal, Chauncey Gardiner character who just has a natural gift from coming out of the fighting pits of reality TV and New York media, and it's suited him.

There is a study out of Harvard, which confirms what we've been saying all along, which is the mainstream media gave him incredibly favorable coverage up until the moment he became the presumptive nominee, and now they're turning on him. We all saw it and predicted and joked about. And so there was a real breakdown in the system where *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* didn't care about what a terrible person he is, or the terrible things he's done until he became the Republican nominee and now all of these things and everyone like Joe Scarborough all saying, "This is working for him, he's got this incredible sort of Svengali sense of where the culture is and where the zeitgeist is."

No, it turns out everyone was giving him special treatment, and now that the special treatment period is over, it's turning out that his supposed brilliance is really kind of an albatross.

KRISTOL: But still don't you think no Obama, no Trump. The degree to which conservatives watched Obama as a kind of – policies that were governed by a certain – maybe political correctness isn't the right word. We can't say it's radical Islam, and we have to be very touchy about everything.

GOLDBERG: I agree with that entirely. I think that's one of the classic hallmarks of a populist who doesn't care what the establishment thinks. I'm going to tell the truth. I'm going to poke fingers in eyes and all that kind of stuff. That was certainly a huge part – we don't need to get back to fascism, but a lot of the fascists' appeal, that they were just just going to overthrow the aristocracy and all the rest

I think that's a big part of it, and I also think – we began this conversation talking about how everybody overpromised and under-delivered and that starts in a lot of ways with Obama who just wildly overpromised and allowed others to – Whenever you say that Obama overpromised and he promised to end racial discord and all of that, people say, "Where did he say that? Where did he say that?" Obama was – and that's a fair response – but I think it's equally fair say that he knew exactly what people were projecting upon him and he took advantage of it. He was a classic charismatic leader in the sense that a diverse group of people could all project upon him their own expectations. I think that is also true of Trump.

KRISTOL: I've been struck in that respect – they're so different in many ways. What was the Obama phrase in 2008? "We are the one we've been waiting for." Which is a weirdly fascistic, I would say,



sentiment. Then, Trump now, “I love the people, the people love me, I love the people.” I saw he said that recently. Which is also a very weird, inappropriate in a liberal democracy. You aren’t supposed to love the people; people aren’t supposed to love you.

You are supposed to be a representative of the people who acts according to his own judgment and so forth. Both Obama and Trump have obliterated, or at least, minimized the healthy kind of distance, you might say.

GOLDBERG: They are both manifestations of what I’ve been calling for years “the cult of unity.” Right? There is a place for unity, but it’s one of these things, and it’s taught on college campus. The single most fascistic thing that is said on a college campus every single day is, “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.”

This idea that there is no safe harbor from politics, all oars must pull in the same direction is so profoundly anti- and un-American in the strictest sense. The symbol of fascism is a bundle of sticks around an axe. That is what a fascist is. It goes back to ancient Rome and the Etruscans. It simply means strength in numbers.

When you hear Barak Obama say “Government is just another word for those things that we do together,” right? Or the opening words of the Democratic Convention in 2012 were “Government is the one thing we all belong to.” Which I always joke as a Tea Party guy, that makes me want to flip the safety on my rifle. We don’t belong to the government; the government belongs to us. It gets to the fundamental problem with the cult of unity, which we’re now seeing manifest itself on the conservative side, but has been central to progressivism and liberalism for 100 years, if not more, is that it is fundamentally not an American value.

The reason why we have a Bill of Rights is that some things – the majorities need to be prevented from being able to decide certain things. You read the *Federalist Papers*, *Federalist* 10, *Federalist* 51, the reason why we have divided government and faction against faction and checks and balances and the executive competes with the legislative is precisely because unity is not the highest value.

The highest value in the American political tradition is the individual who stands up to the mob, not the mob. You can go back to Julian Benda. There’s this thing that has been in mass politics since the rise of mass man. This comes up time and time again, it’s what populism is all about. Where politics from time to time becomes what Julian Benda called the organization of political hatreds. Julian Benda, for those who don’t know, was the author of *The Treason of the Clerks*, or *The Treason of the Intellectuals*.

KRISTOL: In between the wars in France.

GOLDBERG: He sort of predicted everything in general terms. He was looking at the populism that was taking over throughout Europe. The treason that he was talking about was that all the intellectuals had given up believing in universalist principles and instead were buying into particularist principles. The socialists now said that Jesus was a socialist, and the Germans said Jesus was a nationalist. And everyone was taking to their corners and arguing against the notion that there were universal human rights, or universal human principles.

That there were natural rights that applied to all, and instead, it was my masses versus your masses. And he has this great line where he says, “For the first time in 2,000 years. the intellectuals are siding with the people who gave the hemlock to Socrates.” When you look for it, this is what comes up, and I think we’re going to get more and more of it when you get a flattening of hierarchy, when you get radically disruptive technologies, when you get new industries that come in and come out.

There is a reason why fascism comes in Italy, Germany, and the liberal fascist version in the United States when it does. These are the three last big powers to industrialize and urbanize. And you have millions of people moving off of farms and out of settled traditional communities and they were thrown into the switches of industrial capitalism and urban America, often separated from their families,

separated from their traditions, and they felt alienated and deracinated, and they looked about for a new sense of meaning and belonging.

FDR – certainly, morally way better than the other guys did – nonetheless caught onto this and he started to talk about how he appealed to “the forgotten man.” And I’m glad he did because he headed off worst populists. Father Coughlin and Huey Long and all those guys. I think we live in a moment with the changes in technology, the changes in the way, and with family breakdown where there are not the institutions that traditionally give us a sense of meaning, and that is the feedstock for populism. The way I always put it in speeches is the Democrats have a much better story to tell about how the government can love you. You belong to the government. Robert Nisbet, who you probably knew, I loved Robert Nisbet, wrote a wonderful book –

KRISTOL: Died about 15, 20 years ago. Great sociologist.

GOLDBERG: Wrote a book called *The Quest for Community*. He argued that every totalitarian movement in the 20th century was fundamentally an attempt to in a modern age deliver a sense of community that people felt they had lost.

When Barack Obama goes around saying government is the one thing you can belong to, he is not talking about you being a serf, he’s talking about your feeling like you belong to something. My problem is that siren song. The federal government can’t love you. You can only be loved by family, local institutions, and places where you physically live. You can’t be loved as an abstraction.

I think that Donald Trump has figured out in his thumbless grasp of politics a rightwing version of this, or a conservative version of it. To say, I’m going to take care of you. You can belong. Your passion is my will, and all that. It clicks with people. As someone like you who just feels – who’s not – I look at this thing, I don’t get it. What do you see in this guy? We’re just on the sidelines for a while.

#### **IV: Suggested Reading (1:16:03 – 1:32:20)**

KRISTOL: We’ve tried to oppose it, and people might come to their senses.

Let me then close with this question. So young people especially, I think – let’s say you’re not thrilled with this campaign if it ends up being Clinton and Trump, and there is no good third party, and Trump is the nominee, and you want to not focus entirely on this dispiriting prospect for your own country’s future so let’s say, you mentioned very interestingly several books and authors, but if I was a young person I might take the fall and try to read one good book every week or two, instead of focusing obsessively on the Electoral College map between Clinton and Trump.

You mentioned some authors, but I was just curious what would you suggest as kind of – you’ve read widely and obviously been influenced by a lot of authors and people who’ve influenced you the most, people you recommend the most to young people, or not young people. People who are obscure, who are ignored, any of those categories.

GOLDBERG: I’ll sort of free associate for a second. For those who don’t know in my post-college life, probably one of the big influences on me was actually your dad, which we’ve talked about before. I remember coming to AEI as a Xeroxing policy gnome and just sort of being blown away listening to your dad talk. I ended up going back and reading a lot of his stuff. *Reflections of Neoconservative*, it’s not really about neoconservatives, there’s one chapter. Some of the essays in there, particularly “The American Revolution as a Successful Revolution” was really eye-opening to me and really useful. Beyond that, if you’re actually –

KRISTOL: Of course, people should read *National Review* and *The Weekly Standard* and read the books and other articles by people who write for those magazines. That’s good way to start.

GOLDBERG: One should read or at least buy any book I’ve written.

KRISTOL: Very cheap if you want the used copies.

GOLDBERG: If you're actually interested in the populism stuff, I'll do a little bit on liberal writers just to show that I'm an ecumenical mind. Alan Brinkley's *Voices of Protests*, which is basically on Huey Long and Father Coughlin, and that genre is fantastic, readable, very scholarly, sound book. A good reader could read it very quickly. Another history of liberalism that I really loved, which no one remembers anymore, Goldman's *Rendezvous with Destiny*. Eric Goldman. He was a Columbia University professor. I really loved that book.

Beyond that, I am a major Hayek nerd. I can't say that I've read every page of [Law, Legislation, and Liberty](#) or [The Constitution of Liberty](#) and all that stuff. A great introduction to Hayek is [The Fatal Conceit](#); it was his last book, there is some controversy about how much of it he completely wrote, but it doesn't matter it's a great book.

I think it's a little heavier-going, but [Conflict of Visions](#) by Thomas Sowell is very useful for college kids to read.

KRISTOL: I came to it late. I'd already studied all kinds of stuff, but it's extremely clear somehow. I've run into more people than I would have expected who really were influenced by that book, including I was teaching something in Israel three months ago, and someone who was a young kind of liberal in an old-fashioned sense, sort of libertarian and conservative type, trying to advance that in Israel, not a country that has, unfortunately, as much of that tradition that it should have. I asked him, did you read Hayek, did you read Bill Buckley, Milton Friedman? No, it was Thomas Sowell. What's it called?

GOLDBERG: *Conflict of Visions*. And I think it's one of those things that once you get the idea he's talking about the rest is just examples of what he means by it. It's a very useful way of thinking about the sort of psychological differences between Left and Right or conservatives or liberals.

KRISTOL: Growing up is there one or two books in college or late high school or early post-college that had the most influence on you? Your parents were intellectuals of a way.

GOLDBERG: My dad was definitely an intellectual. One of the reasons why I loved Irving so much it was like listening to my father reason through an argument, absent my father's shyness about public speaking.

I have to say, I grew up – my family, we subscribed, and this was part of my dad's job, he ran newspaper syndicates and before that was a newspaper editor. We had 10 newspapers and 35 magazines in the house, and my dad's idea of a vacation was going from one side of the couch to the other side of the couch to read a different book, or a different magazine. Big part of my intellectual education came from the fact that my dad's favorite hobby, really other than the reading part, was going on long walks with his kids and explaining why *The New York Times* was wrong and why Stalin was a bad man, and all this kind of stuff. I kind of fought becoming a conservative, I didn't plan on being a professional conservative or a journalist. I wanted to write comic books and science fiction growing up. I kind of fell backwards into it.

KRISTOL: Is that right? Who were your favorite science fiction writers?

GOLDBERG: I loved Frank Herbert.

KRISTOL: Not something I was ever into.

GOLDBERG: The old joke is the golden age of science fiction is 16.

KRISTOL: Whoever was big then?

GOLDBERG: Whatever you read when you were 16, your mind is open to that stuff. What *Game of Thrones* is for a lot of teenagers today, Frank Herbert's *Dune* and all that kind of stuff was very big for

me. I actually think at least the first installment of the trilogy – the series got really silly after a while – but the first installment of that actually has some wonderful treatments of politics that were really kind of interesting.

KRISTOL: Do you agree that a lot of science fiction, it does seem to be libertarian in its impulse? Am I wrong about that? It's dystopian about planning and this excessively progressive view of the future. I haven't really read much about it, but Heinlein and Philip K. Dick and all these sort of well-known writers

GOLDBERG: It's funny you say that because I think it comes and goes. Certainly, if you look at like Edward Bellamy, who wasn't really a science fiction writer, but he has this futuristic vision, *Looking Backwards*. The greatest image – Edward Bellamy, who nobody has heard of now, wrote a huge bestseller called *Looking Backwards* and was set 100 years from 1890 or whatever.

The greatest image in it is how we have finally overthrown the stupidity of liberal democratic capitalism and solitary individualism, and the symbol of this is how we've all gotten rid of individual umbrellas and instead canopies come out and cover everybody.

KRISTOL: But he was H. G. Wellsian.

GOLDBERG: Then, there was H. G. Wells who was thorough-goingly fascist.

KRISTOL: I'm thinking of people in the 50, 60s, post-World War II, post-Stalin, kind of their reaction.

GOLDBERG: There's a pendulum to it. I'm not a huge student of the politics of science fiction, but the funny thing is because I'm working on this other book, which I hope I'll come back on to talk about someday if I actually finish it.

KRISTOL: Don't put pressure on yourself.

GOLDBERG: Must get it done. One of the things that I think is fundamentally conservative of science fiction, in the small "c", sort of most philosophical sense, is one of my favorite definitions of conservatism that I think I first heard from Glenn Lowry is this idea that human nature has no history. Right? That as your dad always loved to quote Ayn Rand. He always used to say, "Every generation, Western civilization is invaded by barbarians, we call them children." You get modern democratic man if you raise children to become modern democratic man. If you don't and you leave them to their own devices, they become *Lord of the Flies*.

One of the things I love about science fiction – even though I haven't read much of it in 20 years I have to say – while technology and landscapes and environments, these things all change, the one constant is human nature. That's what makes it accessible. That's what's so fundamentally conservative about it is that I think at least these days, it's very bad science fiction to have characters that don't seem like human beings. To write about how politics or technology is going to make us all better and make us perfect – first of all, it's really boring science fiction, and second of all, it violates this notion that human nature actually has a history and that the eternal questions, the things that philosophers and writers have been dealing with for thousands of years, these eternal truths, they endure.

That comes through in science fiction, and I don't think people take it – that's one of the reason why politics and science fiction can be so interesting because all the technology is different and they've got these spaceships and they've got these bombs, and yet the same issues about mobilizing coalitions and dealing with intrigue, those are endemic to human nature and they come up in any climate or environment that you put them.

KRISTOL: Well said. Any other books? I took us off on a slight digression. Since I know so little about it. It's interesting. Essayists that affected you.

GOLDBERG: I grew up reading a lot of *Commentary*, a lot of *New Republic*. I didn't read that much *National Review*. I really didn't. I went back and sort of –

KRISTOL: *National Review* had a big effect on me. I'm older, but there Buckley just the intransigence of *National Review* was bracing. I always thing Bill Buckley does not get enough credit. Bill Rusher and the early people at *National Review*.

It wasn't where my parents were, and there was a certain tendency after the rise of neoconservatism to say, well, that kind of early conservatism was a little simple-minded and too anti-American in certain aspects and anti-New Deal. There were some truths to some of those criticism. It was a complicated thing. I thought they never got enough credit for just being willing, as Buckley said, to stand athwart history yelling stop.

As a young person, for me, that was very important, just the notion that you could do that. That that was – a very smart well-educated guy and his cohort who were very smart and well-educated, if you read the early *National Review*, was willing to say to all the progressive wisdom, no, just no. That was, I think, a very great contribution they made. They were wrong on a whole bunch of issues, civil rights, the philosophical basis was a little murky at times, but it was very important, I think.

GOLDBERG: *Witness* is an important thing for people to read.

KRISTOL: That is an amazing book, I think.

GOLDBERG: I've got to say the audience here will appreciate it more than the average, even literate audience, but George Nash's *Conservative Intellectual Movement Since 1845* is still sort of – it's one story about conservatism, and there are other stories that kind of get left out, but it's really brilliantly done. If you want to understand where the sort of deep roots of the icebergs that we see today, how far they go back.

Wilmoore Kendall going from being a populist to a Straussian and all these things. Partly it's my origins as a comic book guy, but there's a certain kind of comic book guy that's just obsessed with the origin stories. When I fell over backwards in '91, '92, starting to become a real conservative and being interested in this stuff – I was always interested in philosophy, but I didn't see it as a conservative versus liberal thing – I did huge deep dives into this stuff.

The first book I tried to write was as really stupid book. And I mean that in the most technical sense. I got a contract in '96 to write the 100 most influential conservatives of all time. There was a big series in the 1990s, the 100 most important Jews, the 100 most important blacks, or whatever. I was going to do the 100 most important conservatives. The idiotic conceit of it is it had to be a ranking. So you had to do Aristotle first or whoever it was, and we can have that argument, but they also wanted 50 percent of it to be contemporary conservatives.

They wanted me to basically say, Irving Kristol is the 17th most important conservative of all time, and then, of course, there's Pliny the Elder the 18th most – totally arbitrary nonsense, but what it helped me really do because I overdid it, because I thought if I read enough books and read enough stuff I'd know this. I had already been at AEI for a few years as a research assistant sort of obsessed with unraveling all these knots that I had encountered. And I hung out with all these young Straussian kids and all that.

And I got to say the Nash book is just a great book for that. There's also a wonderful short book called *The Conservative Tradition in America* by two guys we know whose names escapes me. Almost 20 years old, but it's a very useful book.

KRISTOL: That's good – the last thing I take – I hadn't known about the book you didn't write, but the lesson I take from that is once you read a lot, one probably shouldn't write the first book that one thinks one should right.

GOLDBERG: I remember when I was working on it. I said to my dad –

KRISTOL: Or shouldn't publish –

GOLDBERG: I couldn't finish it because I was a television producer at the time, and I couldn't do everything. I said, "Dad, I'm just too busy, I can't get it done. I got to read all these things, and it's such a weird book." My dad said, "You know Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote his book on a roll of toilet paper in prison. I'm sure you're having an easier time of it."

KRISTOL: He wasn't a big buck up the kid with a lot of warm, he was a little more tough-love guy?

GOLDBERG: He was tough, but I shot back at him. I said, "Dad, Solzhenitsyn had nothing else to do."

KRISTOL: Solzhenitsyn is worth reading.

GOLDBERG: Solzhenitsyn is absolutely worth reading.

KRISTOL: That Harvard speech commencement speech of 1978 is bracing even today.

GOLDBERG: I was always more of a magazine guy. Or essay guy. Your dad, one of the reasons I love your dad's stuff. Especially for college kids because I guess that's part of the emphasis here. Robert Goldwin's "Why Blacks, Women, and Jews Aren't Mentioned in the Constitution." Incredibly useful thing for college kids who are being told that leaving out black women and Jews is a sign of the inherent evilness of the Constitution. It was just one essay, but it was also the title of a collection of essays. It was the chief essay, it's a great essay, it helps you understand thing like the Three-fifths Clause and things like that.

KRISTOL: Slightly bizarre, but good note to end on. I very much admired Robert Goldwin who edited a whole bunch of essays that people should get back and look at. He had an annual conference. Many people – Walter Berns, my father, Martin Diamond – would come to these conferences and give papers. And I think they were collected often in volumes, annual, whatever. If one goes back and looks, you can find an awful lot of good material in those volumes. One can't read everything, one learns that. Can't rank 100 top conservatives of all times.

GOLDBERG: I have many rough drafts of lists somewhere.

KRISTOL: You should publish that sometime. Will you tell at least the title of the next book and –

GOLDBERG: A working title, and it's very much a working title, is *The Tribe of Liberty*. We'll leave it there.

KRISTOL: I look forward on having you back on CONVERSATIONS to discuss it.

GOLDBERG: I would love that. Jonah Goldberg, thanks very much for joining me today, and thank you for joining me on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]