

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

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Guest: Mark Blitz, professor, Claremont McKenna College

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I: Natural Rights and American Government (0:15 – 27:24)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined today by my old friend and teacher, Mark Blitz, Professor of Political Philosophy at Claremont McKenna College, author of important books on Plato and Heidegger, and also on liberal democracy, which I thought we would talk about today. Welcome, Mark.

BLITZ: Thank you.

KRISTOL: Freedom. I thought we could talk about freedom. America is about freedom, I think. Is that true, incidentally? People say that all the time. Is that true, and how did that happen?

BLITZ: Yeah, it is about freedom. And the heart of it is individual and natural rights, and you can basically substitute the word *freedom* for *rights*, if you'd like. Look at the ground of the country and the Declaration of Independence, which speaks, of course, of natural rights, speaks of liberty. The Constitution is meant to be a structure of government that secures individual rights for all of its citizens. So really the ground of the US is freedom because it means to secure as a country, we mean to secure as a country individual, natural rights.

And it's also in a certain sense a theoretical country because this notion of basing government on individual, natural rights, rather than on tradition, rather than on history, rather than on ethnic differences, rather than on groups is really fundamental. It comes from the thought, ultimately, of John Locke and some of the thinkers preceding him as well, which tried to defend the natural existence and importance of individual rights. If you look at yourself, you understand you have the capacity, which can't be taken away from you, to reflect and to choose and to decide. You can't always act the way you'd like, but you have independent choice and independent reflection. And preserving that for everyone is really the key to the country.

KRISTOL: So that really is the – it sounds highfalutin, and I guess one of the criticisms is, well, people say that, but really it's a capitalist system or we're socially conditioned and all that. But you think the core belief is there has to be there is an individual autonomy and dignity that is real.

BLITZ: Absolutely. Something that you can see in yourself. Just by reflecting on yourself. It's not something that you need really to argue. It's as they say, "self-evident." Obviously, there are certain things, which block you, prevent you from seeing it so clearly. Traditionally, what blocked you was certain theological or religious views, but if you look at yourself, you see you have this individual right to and freedom of choice and decision and ultimately, of action.

You also see that you have it equally with others. That kind of equal individual freedom is really the only ground for sensible equality and sensible government because it prevents you from, first of all, thinking of yourself in religious terms or ethnic terms or gender terms or any group terms. Those can become important to you if you choose them to be important, but at the public level the defense of individual right and freedom is the heart of things.

KRISTOL: And you think it's a solid ground despite the many criticisms that have been made of Locke, let's say, and political philosophy over three centuries. And beforehand, so to speak. People who weren't Lockean. It's not just a thing we want to say we believe, but it's a real –

BLITZ: It's not just a thing we say we want to believe though because of all that's happened in thought and action afterwards sometimes that what people think. Yes, it's a solid ground, if you consider the formula of "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." It's not the whole truth about human beings, but it is part of the truth, a genuine truth about human beings. It's the most solid and substantial ground of actual equality.

We're obviously not equal in a series of concrete characteristics that we have. We have different talents, it's obvious. Different skills, it's obvious. But what is equal about us are these equal rights, and the ground of it is to observe yourself where you see this freedom of direction. This self-direction that you have. This choice that's always before you. This judgment that you can always exercise about which way to go or not go. It's hard to see how there could be a more solid ground, actually, for equal political common life. Obviously, it's not enough to say this to determine your own individual choice. You have a million concrete choices, but it's the basic ground for common political equality. And it's a solid one. In some ways, the only solid one, I think.

KRISTOL: Modern psychology, modern philosophy – you don't buy the argument that it's kind of discredited that?

BLITZ: A lot of those arguments come from the dislike of the term *natural*. The notion that somehow these rights or these freedom or this self-authority, you might say, exists among all human beings, and it's not made by us. But it's not made by us. We are what we are, not as we've self-created ourselves. These rights cover all of us, and they're essential to us because without having such rights and such freedom we really can do nothing else basically for ourselves.

Something essential that's not made by us, that in a way covers all of us, that's what one means by *natural*. And the evidence for that, as I've in a way just given it, is every bit as great, indeed much greater, than the evidence against it. The notion that we have these natural rights has faded from view because of the attack on the notion of nature, intellectually and philosophically from the 19th century on and then that, of course, seeps down into everybody's thinking after a while. But those arguments are not correct.

KRISTOL: The Declaration, the two implications, as I recall that the Declaration takes from this – All men are created equal with these inalienable rights – is government by consent of the governed. The right to say something about how you're governed, self-government. And then the purpose of government – or a purpose, maybe *the* main purpose – is to protect, to secure these rights, to protect these rights. Talk a little bit about the consent side and the securing rights side. How much does it tell us about how to organize the government? Is it just a broad but very important limitation? How much guidance does it give?

BLITZ: Consent of the governed comes from the fact that the only natural authority, and therefore, the only authority that you can justify reasonably, ultimately, is this natural individual authority or this natural individual right. Therefore, you have to understand government to be something chosen by the individuals who belong to it. Consent is just another word for choice or election in the broad sense. Nothing can govern you properly unless in some way you can be understood to have chosen it. As opposed to notions that you can be properly governed by those who are or who think themselves to be more intelligent or wealthier or more pious and more pure or simply more powerful.

KRISTOL: Or of a certain ethnicity or race.

BLITZ: Or of a certain ethnicity or race. Any of those things are illegitimate as grounds for properly governing you because the only true authority is individual authority. You have to be understood as having selected in some way those who govern you as opposed to all of those other differentials. And that's absolutely fundamental. That's what consent means, and that's what consent of the government means. It doesn't just mean, although it also means, you have to have popular agreement, if you're going to do anything politically. It really means that the source of justifiable authority is individual choice because individual authority is the only natural authority.

These other authorities, which are all forms of inequality, are ultimately incorrect as grounds for governing you. Greater wisdom of a certain sort might be the sensible thing for you to choose when you have a choice about going into a business with someone or hiring someone, but nonetheless unless you've made the choice no one else has the right to govern you. That's the heart of consent of the governed. From that you develop various systems of periodic consent through elections.

KRISTOL: But it allows for a broad – and I want to come back in a way to the question of how best then to structure a government that preserves these rights – it allows for a broad range of structure. Supreme Court or no Supreme Court? Two-year terms or six-year terms?

BLITZ: If you look at the American Constitution, the root of authority is in individual authority, but then you do have to worry about the question of the right kind of government. Why is government intelligent government? For the purpose of the securing those rights, and the mechanisms for doing that can be very varied.

In our country, we have this kind of constant election cycle. There's always some election or another going on but with different constituencies. The House, the Senate, the President. Then we have this institution, the Supreme Court, which is even more remote from that. So the mixture –

KRISTOL: And the federalist system of state governments.

BLITZ: And the federalist system of state governments. So the mixture of all that comes from an attempt to have free government based on individual consent, which is also reasonable government, or wise government or intelligent government, and also limited government. Limited in the sense that the purpose of government is to secure individual rights.

KRISTOL: Let's look at that side of it. The consent of the government, which there is a wide variety of ways to hopefully make it wiser rather than less wise. It's not simply whatever the people want we're supposed to – is right by definition. It's legitimate, I guess, but it's not correct.

BLITZ: That's the difference. Unless the people have chosen, you're not in authority legitimately. A remarkable thing in this country is that we accept legitimacy of people who right before they're actually elected many of us thought were terrible. Something like half of us voted against. That's the power of legitimacy, however, because it's important to have that kind of security in government rather than continual revolution.

That doesn't guarantee intelligent government, for sure. The securing of individual rights –

KRISTOL: Talk about that. What are, you know – some libertarians want to say it's an unfree government if it deprives you of this, this and this right or taxes you too much. And other more collectivist types will say, as long as there are elections – How much of a –

BLITZ: The goal has to be to secure as much individual choice and freedom as you can within the ongoing day-to-day life that people have. But you have to do that equally because you're securing equal rights, not just my rights. That's what you always have to think about in any public policy, it seems to me. The standard is, am I securing rights equally? Am I securing as much individual choice as I can?

Obviously, taxes are legitimate because government needs some wealth in order to secure us abroad. Government needs some wealth for public projects, which are better done by a public authority than a private authority. Government needs wealth in order to secure individual rights equally. Police, crime, the right kinds of economic regulation. Those can go pretty far, but nonetheless the standard is always the securing of equal individual rights. So everything that government does simply as government isn't illegitimate, nor is it necessarily wise, but the wisdom of it has to ultimately come back to securing individual freedom. That's the purpose.

What is human happiness? What is human excellence unless it's connected to doing things for yourself? Form your own character, with your own freedom. That's the heart of things. For that to happen, sure, you need certain things taken care of by others you choose, but ultimately unless you're doing things for yourself, taking your own responsibilities, relying as much as you can on yourself and those closest to you, what is the point or the purpose of government? Or in a way of human life?

KRISTOL: But a progressive income tax. Public schools. All kinds of things that equalize the playing field a little bit – that’s fine in terms of – may be prudent, may be imprudent, but it’s fine in terms of the fundamental natural right? Securing rights framework of the government.

BLITZ: You need to –

KRISTOL: Or conversely not equal. Not equalizing as much as some other people want is also fine. These are all within the spectrum of acceptable –

BLITZ: Sure. Because you need to provide people the tools and opportunities so that they can exercise their own freedom.

You need to provide people the tools and the opportunities so that as citizens there’s a chance that they’ll act intelligently. So education is a public responsibility, but you can perform this public responsibility in many ways. School choice, charter schools are every bit as legitimate as a bureaucratic public school system, but often a bureaucratic public school system is what you need to do. The goal is one thing, and the public responsibility is one thing, all to be differentiated a bit, however, from the literal public division of services.

One of the things that has happened, maybe in the past 30 or 40 years even, is a recognition that you can deal with your public responsibilities as a government, but often less directly than actually through bureaucratized public services. Progressive income tax? Not unreasonable to expect those who are wealthier to pay more. The danger, obviously, is that you begin to so reduce the incentives for work that you destroy the whole purpose of having a progressive income tax to begin with, which is to get yourself as much as you need.

When John Locke thought about these things, one of his goals was to allow the accumulation of greater property among those that are more reasonable, or rational, he said, and industrious. Hard-working. You want to do that, but you also the need to find the right way to have that distributed so that you’re preserving rights equally. No magic formula for doing this in terms of policy, but nonetheless that standpoint, I think, is fundamental in figuring out what to do politically.

KRISTOL: Just to take this example, and some greedy people are going to get a lot of money, and some lucky people, and some people who cut corners but don’t get caught by the law. And I suppose the answer to that from a sort of Lockean, if I can put it that way, point of view, or the point of view of the basics of securing free government is look, this is sort of the price – you try to make it – this is the price you pay. I guess people do balk. It’s not just. Look at the current rich people in the US. Are they all industrious? Do they all deserve it? What’s the common-sense answer to that?

BLITZ: So maybe two versions of a common-sense answer. It is a good thing if people remember how much luck is involved in success so they have a degree of modesty about their own success. It’s easy to forget that. It’s easy to think that somehow the path you’ve taken is exactly the right path and there’s not a whole lot of luck involved. There’s almost always a lot of luck involved. As I said, that should make you modest.

In a way more fundamentally than that, greed is a vice, so you should do something with what you've accumulated. That is, also good for others as well as being in a way good for yourself. You can't really succeed unless you have enormous good luck. For any length of time, unless you have a certain set of virtues of character. Industriousness but also a kind of responsibility where you develop the habits, which enable you actually to be successful. When you really think about that and develop that, you also worry about the common good. The common conditions for excellence. Politically, you worry about the right way to use your freedom. Therefore, you think about education, you think about art. And the more that people think about that, the more wealth that they've accumulated can actually be used for commoner public purposes. I think that's important. It's not enough just to say greed is okay.

And it's not enough simply to talk about it in terms, literal terms of justice. It's a question of what you do with the wealth you have in order to aid the common good, as you understand it. It's an expression of your own responsibility. Not if somebody else tells you about it. Not as government wants you do it, but as you yourself understand it.

And that's why you've had in this country always a huge tradition of philanthropy. A wonderful book about all this is Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. Franklin is the first great example of someone who made a lot of money and made himself successful financially and then engages in a variety of actions that serve public goods but not in a direct political way. Founder of the University of Pennsylvania, founder of a public hospital, founder of a notion of a kind of public safety, street lighting. Founder of public libraries. Franklin is a marvelous model for what you should do if you happen to be successful. How to exercise your responsibility.

So that's, I think, a crucial kind of answer to this question of the inevitable financial inequalities, which occur once people have some freedom. Because they have different talents. They start in somewhat different places, however much you equalize opportunity, and you have this feature of luck and chance and good fortune.

KRISTOL: And it seems to be implicit in your answer though also a kind of anti-utopianism as no actual society is going to be perfectly just in the sense that – some people will be doing better than they deserve or really deserve. I don't know how you judge that exactly. Others will be doing worse. You have to have a certain kind of hardheaded appreciation that – and I suppose the subsequent argument would be if you try to micro-adjust things according to some notion of justice, you end up infringing on freedom and probably messing it up, making it even more unjust because you don't have perfect knowledge of what could be done or should be done.

BLITZ: There are a bunch of difficulties. First of all, who is the impinger? The impinger is government, and nothing makes those who are actually managing the government wise about these questions. People always tend to forget this somehow. You have this great difficulty always of who's making these judgments.

KRISTOL: The grass is always greener. This isn't perfect so let's fix it.

BLITZ: And human imperfection rears its head everywhere. That's always a fundamental difficulty. The other difficulty with this question of whose going to decide and then thinking of it as government is deciding again goes back to the point that the purpose of our government is to secure individual rights, and happiness and excellence is something which requires individual judgement and individual choice.

You want to leave as much of that open as possible even though there are always difficulties. The broader question of justice is something, which indeed shows you it's necessarily imperfect. Aristotle's *Ethics* is a good place to look for this. Book Five of Aristotle's *Ethics*. On the one hand, justice is equal to equals and unequal to unequals. So in a sense anyone can understand that, let's say, the better violin should go to the better violinist. And the inferior one to the inferior violinist. You can see that in a way right away.

KRISTOL: Or if there is only one violin teacher in town he should spend more time –

BLITZ: On the other hand, what if that excellent violin is owned by someone who doesn't play it well? The other ground of justice is property. What you own and what you've earned. And there's always going to be some discrepancy between justice as keeping what is your own and justice as proper distribution of things to those who can use them best. No perfect solution to that.

On the other hand, the right kind of responsibility in philanthropy helps so that if you're wealthy enough to buy a Stradivarius, let's say, you should also arrange for it to be played by those who can actually play it. Which is what a lot of people do who own these things. If you're wealthy enough to buy a Picasso, a good Picasso, you should arrange so that others can look at it, view it, and enjoy it. Again, an imperfect solution, but not a bad solution to this necessary discrepancy between justice and freedom even as holding on to what you own. And justice as distributing things so that they belong in the hands of those who can use them best.

KRISTOL: It does seem that a lot of the criticisms of liberal democracy since it was set up do come from a utopian – I guess we would call it utopian – critique. It seems to appeal to people, though, it's not, liberal democracy is not humanly fulfilling, it's not perfectly just, it's not perfectly equal. All these other things. What's the answer to those critiques, I guess?

BLITZ: Nothing can be perfect, it's a mistake to think that anything politically can be perfect. And it's even more the case that you can't impose some view that you have of greater perfection and also preserve sufficient individual freedom. So one just has to recognize that.

You certainly also can't enjoy the material wealth that we enjoy unless there's a large degree of individual freedom. People to some significant degree have come to take that for granted as if it drops from nowhere. It doesn't drop from nowhere; it comes from all of this fabulous human talent that you liberate in a liberal democracy by giving people so much free rein individually. The spiritedness, the entrepreneurial skills, the intelligence. The true understanding of the beauty of every human being comes in a liberal democracy when you see the enormous talents that people have once they're allowed to express

those talents. But that also means there'll be outcomes and results that in some areas one doesn't like. And that's something one simply has to deal with.

It's also the case that one has to remember that equality fundamentally means equality in rights, equality in individual freedom, equality in authority. The purpose of government is not equalize resources simply. It's not to equalize talents simply. It is to allow people to secure and enjoy those rights, which then means some degree of concrete either equalization or, really more to the point, public provision, as we were mentioning, in schooling, in the right kind of regulations and access to the economic markets, and so on. That's necessary. But again, it's really for the purpose of allowing individual freedom, which is something that in principle is naturally equal to exercise itself. That's, I think, central to remember. People talk so much about equality, but they don't remember equality in *what* and why it is that it's important and significant.

KRISTOL: And the threat to liberty of trying to fix these things people don't like, too?

BLITZ: And they don't recognize enough that it is a threat to liberty in a sense. Liberty also has risks. Over time, people become less easy with, and more disturbed about, the possibility of risks, which means the possibility of failure. So that part of freedom, where you do have to take a chance often, and the chance doesn't always work out, often leads people to be themselves somewhat less concretely interested in liberty than they may be verbally and rhetorically.

On that, you know, that often does mean that the provision of resources begins to rise to a level that it constricts liberty more and more. But it happens piece by piece so people just don't recognize it so carefully and clearly, or are even willing in larger numbers than, let's say, at the beginning of the US republic to allow that to happen.

II: Criticisms of American Liberal Democracy (27:24 – 1:02:33)

KRISTOL: Let's look at some of the – I guess I would say – critiques of liberal democracy from friends of liberal democracy who worry about various tendencies that are unleashed. They would agree with almost everything you've said at some level of political theory or foundational principle, but in practice doesn't liberal democracy have a tendency – equality becomes egalitarianism, and individual freedom becomes individualism – what Tocqueville calls individualism – materialism.

Maybe we can go through each of these. The threat to the family. Egalitarianism. Isn't there such a strong tendency towards we say equality of rights, but then it becomes everyone is equal, who are you to say something is better than something else? Isn't there a kind of dumbing down and a huge pressure against excellence in a modern liberal democracy? Or is that overstated, and how could it be combated?

BLITZ: It's both real and overstated, I would say. It belongs to improper utopianism, again, to think that there wouldn't be such difficulties. Yes, it's the case, of course, that when people begin to forget that equality fundamentally means equality in rights and equality in liberty, they move in the direction of thinking of it as equality simply. The antidote to that has to be education, first of

all. The second antidote has to be less government so that you're more self-reliant and forced to develop the character and the virtues, which come with responsibility and self-reliance.

Those are the antidotes. Imperfect, but nonetheless real. There's truth in the criticism, but a lot of it I think is a criticism that you could answer in those concrete ways. If you consider someone like Abraham Lincoln, both who he was and what he advocated, it was a vast degree of the liberation of individual skills and talents, but it was not the wrong kind of egalitarianism. A vast degree connected, obviously, also to the liberation of slaves. So that's what I think I would say about this question of egalitarianism.

A related criticism is the fact that freedom means satisfying the desires you seek to satisfy, people become more and more vulgar, one might say, in their understanding of what they want to do with themselves. That's also, in a certain sense, if not inevitable, reasonably predictable. What one needs to do about that is to, again, educationally, remind people of what's really high. Not be afraid to say that. Not be afraid to say that we're equal in our rights, and we're equal in our freedom, but there is some music better than other music, some thinkers better than other thinkers. Some art more beautiful than others, and as much as possible expose people to that and lead them in that direction.

An interesting thing about liberal democracy is that though we often talk about the reduction of excellence there are some remarkable statesmen in liberal democracies. Lincoln, Churchill. In real life, what's better than that? You really do have that kind of height. We've had some remarkable philosophical and artistic activities as well.

Nonetheless, there is this kind of tendency, and congruent with liberty, the only way I think to deal with this is serious education and not being ashamed to call some things better and worse, better than other things, and to give the argument about why that's so. Why it is that the rational use of one's skills, the complexity of the mind as it forms the senses, you might say, as it forms what you hear, as it forms what you see, as it forms how you act. Human virtue is better rather than worse. One has to say such things and take the very mild risk of saying such things. I think that helps to a degree with that question. Maybe the toughest is institutions.

KRISTOL: I guess in leaning against the leveling down, one advantage I always think one has, that many people don't talk about enough, there's just a natural appreciation of this. We have sports, let's say. Easiest one to make. Some players are just better than others and one admires those who are better, and it's not unjust that one is better, and it would be crazy for a manager not to play the better hitter 160 games a year.

There is a certain kind of way in which one doesn't have to convince people of a highly theoretical argument and let them see that one wants a society in which the better are rewarded and encouraged and allowed to flourish. Don't you think that it gets part of the way there?

BLITZ: Sports is a good example. My favorite sporting event of the year is the NFL draft.

KRISTOL: It's unfortunate that you're such a big football fan and don't fully appreciate baseball.

BLITZ: I used to, but I was spoiled because the Yankees always won when I was young. All of these general managers, coaches, scouts, professional personnel people spend an infinity of time looking at and judging all these players. Obviously, try to select the best. There, I think it's fairly visible who's better. In art and music and thought, it's a little less visible. It's visible, maybe, in science as well. And people are more attached to the art or, especially, the music that they like. But it's perfectly possible to be attached to that while also recognizing what's better just as it's perfectly possible to spend your Saturday or Sunday mornings in your own softball league, recognizing that nonetheless there are a lot of people who do it in a better and more beautiful way.

One needs somehow to convert the appreciation of excellence in the areas one appreciates it to these other areas where it's a little more difficult to see. But, sure, there is a natural understanding of better as opposed to worse. But you also have the attachment in many ways to yourself and to what you like to do, which you feel might be challenged by an understanding of what's better. Nonetheless, certain things are better, and you can continue to enjoy the things, which are not so good as well.

KRISTOL: I suppose then the follow-up question is the institutions of somehow liberal democracy – modern commercial, bourgeois liberal democracy – in theory, yes, you could have the greatest of –everything flourishing at the same time, you have a high common standard, and so forth. But in practice, people don't, aren't encouraged to study ancient languages or difficult subjects, or there's a kind of –everyone coast along and there's a just of leveling and relaxing of effort and so forth that's hard to push back on.

BLITZ: It is hard to push back on, but what else can one do? One has to push back on it. One also has to recognize that one is comparing the decline to a high point, but never a perfect point.

What are the other communities in the history of the world, which have had higher points? Not many. What are the other ones, which have had higher points so generally? Certainly, not many. I think there were higher moments in art, music, and thought, and some elements in the US in the past. Great Britain. But actually for a fairly short period of time.

So one also needs to be not utopian about that either. If at the end, one can't kind of elevate the whole, one has to at least use the freedom that one has to keep in existence the areas of excellence that one oneself engages in. And you see plenty of that still in our country. It may be that high thought, such as it is, and art and music has less influence then it once did. Though as I said, that's to a degree debatable. Lots of it still exists. It's just less general than it used to be.

It's under threat, under challenge also, but not so simply. So you still have islands of this kind of excellence, which still receive often the necessary support. Let's say, for example, the level of musical talent in this country and other countries, as well, is enormous. We were mentioning the violin earlier. Well, the number of superb violists, pianists, and so on is a huge number in absolute terms.

Within these particular areas, which is something that liberal freedom actually protects and advances, things are not maybe as bad as they seem. Nonetheless, one has to be cautious and wary and continue to push back. And continue to push back in the general community as well.

KRISTOL: And the freedom is so important to preserve. I guess I've been struck by that more in the last 10, 20 years. They'll be periods of political correctness where things will fade from view, but as long as it's a free country and as long as books are available and these conversations are available and students can study what they want and be provoked to read stuff that's available, there's always a chance of a kind of rebirth of certain thought and appreciation, which is terribly important, I think. Even if it's not at the same high level throughout, right?

BLITZ: Absolutely so. That's why even though a kind of equal freedom and equal rights lead to many of these tendencies you've discussed, nonetheless, the protection of freedom is the fundamental, necessary condition of any kind of excellence. Together with being taught and seeing that there's something high at which to aim. And also together with the development of a certain character of responsibility and self-reliance.

But without that kind of freedom, there's nothing. That's the single most important thing. Freedom and equality in freedom. That's still central whatever the difficulties. One just has to recognize these difficulties and not be Pollyannaish and act as if there are no problems at all.

KRISTOL: I suppose in the last, maybe, decade or two, conservatives having focused for many, many, years – centuries, I guess – on these kind of threats to excellence from a modern bourgeois, commercial, liberal democracy. Now, there's, in a way, more of a sense – and maybe this really is a more fundamental threat, but a different threat – which is what one had thought the solid ground at least of stability and moderation and kind of the system just chugging along with whatever deficiencies it had seems a little more at risk. The break-up of the family, the sense of individualism, and a kind of radical sense of people being unmoored from history and their communities.

How worried should one be about that? Again, we're a free country. Are there easy solutions? You've been stressing individual freedom – I was struck by that – but a more traditional conservative might say, what about the family, isn't that the more fundamental institution of society and not the individual? Clearly, the family is under some pressure and threat.

BLITZ: It's always worrying that it takes, maybe not one generation, but two generations, two and a half generations to lose everything. Because you have to work on the basis of things that you take for granted. Expectations that you take for granted. Trust in others that you take for granted. If you can't trust and take for granted a certain high level of responsibility, self-reliance, good character, appreciation of the basic principles of the country, and so on, it's very difficult. And obviously the place in which one learns that, first of all, is the family. The family is the heart of trust and protection and education and teaching. And the family is under threat.

The good news, again, is that just as, but even more clearly than there's a natural love of excellence, there's a natural attraction of the family. It's a natural institution. It's not nearly a conventional institution, even though the way you organize it can be conventional in various ways. People who come from strong, and often even not so strong, families remain very attached to their families and seek them for themselves.

There's may be something of a class divide in the country in terms of the withering away of the power of the family. Middle, upper-middle class, upper-class family, I think remains pretty strong, but less so otherwise. So yes, it's a fundamental institution, but you can't very well ask government to come in and remake that institution. That's a place in which government needs to get out of the way. The main thing that you need to help resuscitate the family where it's weak is to partially at least recreate a situation in which you need to rely on the family for many of the things that now can be provided by government. Piece by piece and slowly, of course, it becomes important for government to pull back a little and hope that the family strength replaces that again, at least to some significant degree. If it doesn't, then one has to readjust again perhaps in the other direction.

A certain natural strength of the family is something you can see, especially, as I said, in kind of the middle class, and upper-middle class, upwards. But sure, also, there's a tendency not just to, maybe, weaken the family, but especially in liberal democracy and individualism, to weaken neighborhoods, to weaken religion, to weaken local institutions, and those all play an important part in giving people an understanding of what their freedom is, how best to use it, what its limits are. To give them a kind of the set of attachments and even authorities, which are important. And, that is a tendency of – there's a tendency, obviously, of a kind of industrial and capitalist economy to weaken that. Modern communication, transportation can weaken that. So it weakens those kinds of local attachments.

It doesn't necessarily, however, I think weaken the family quite so much, but it weakens what surrounds the family. It's also the case that modern communication and transportation can often strengthen a different kind of friendship. If you look at young people, young people are very attached to their friends with whom it's very easy for them to continue to be touch in ways that are stronger even, I'd say, than in my generation.

Why? Because again there's a natural attachment that people have, which will resurface in some way or other as long as it's not completely blocked. So again, I don't want to be Pollyannaish about this, it's a real problem. But the natural love of family, the natural connection of friendships that people have, some degree of government pulling out of areas where it replaces the family and a degree of self-reliance or reliance among those you love, if not simple self-reliance, all that I think would help without my wanting to argue that that help would lead to anything close to perfection or even considerable improvement. It would certainly lead to some improvement. I'm not quite so dispirited about the future in that area as maybe some others would be.

KRISTOL: I think it's important that you're laying out a vision or whatever that's a little different from the standard conservative account. There was all this social and moral capital accumulated from olden times, from religion, from tradition, from a different kind of society, from aristocratic society, perhaps.

Certainly, from more traditional societies. And now it's just been relentlessly eroded by modern liberal capitalism and liberal democracy, and there's no real path back.

I've always thought that's been a little too simple. The social capital has been eroded, but other forms maybe grow up anew in a liberal, bourgeois democracy. And it's a little utopianism about how wonderful it was in whatever this magic time was when there was all this social capital. But it seems to me that's an important corrective to a kind of, perhaps, conservative romanticism or fatalism.

BLITZ: A lot of that so-called social capitalism was built up on the backs the poor and the unequal. There was a large degree of inequality, especially if you think of the European conservatism that many people harken back to. A lot of limited opportunity, and especially a limited economic opportunity. So you had a lot of agrarianism, you had a lot of class division, you had a lot of inequality for women. You had a lot of undesirable elements that you wouldn't simply seek to return to. That's one point.

The other point is, yes, a lot of this, in my judgment, so-called social capital has a natural basis, which will return if it's allowed to return, at least at some significant and high level.

KRISTOL: And modern liberationism doesn't bar that?

BLITZ: It couldn't simply bar that.

KRISTOL: Sexual Revolution, the women's revolution.

BLITZ: It maybe makes those things more difficult, but it doesn't simply bar that. You see the attachment of family still as something that is extremely strong, especially among those who are most successful in our country. Again, the natural power of that, the natural power of friendship – and again, government may be pulling back a bit from what it does to replace the family – I think will bring out some degree again at least of a kind of institutional structure that the genuine freedom and the excellent use of freedom requires.

So I like a path of individual freedom, which is not libertarianism, and attention to institutions, which is not traditional conservatism. That's where I think we should be politically and morally.

KRISTOL: And in particular what institutions do you, you know, if one could direct people to strengthen certain kinds or build certain kinds anew, where would you be focused, and what's most doable do you think? Education? Family?

BLITZ: Education is extremely important. Higher education is hard to change, but it's not so hard to work around it with a variety of programs and modes of teaching that replace some of the emptiness or even harmfulness that you see now. So that's one thing one can do. One has to get outside of the dominance of the most dominant institutions. One can't ignore them, the great schools and the famous schools.

But one has to work around them as well because it's very hard to change them internally. One can try to do that, however, and one could do that more

than one thing with the right kind of administrations and a couple of good faculty members. The chances of that are not great. I think education is central, but one needs to work around that, the dominance of the dominant institutions in a significant way. That's one thing that I think is certainly doable.

It's certainly doable with the right kind of government to pull back from the excessive regulation and replacement of individual responsibility or family responsibility. Again, one has to see what the results are and readjust as necessary. That's certainly doable because it just requires a couple of sensible elections. Now, will there be such things? That I don't know. Nonetheless, it's not, you don't need to look to something magical somehow happening.

I think those two areas where one can affect things privately, and where one can affect things politically, are good. And the third thing is sensible philanthropy. As long as we still have both the tradition and permission for real philanthropic efforts in this country, if they direct themselves in some substantial degree to excellence in art, music, education, and so on, it will at least preserve those areas or islands, which can then have a useful effect as well.

Those are the things that I would do. Once you have, as I said, a sensible government, it's not that difficult to understand the grounds for intelligent policy and the goals, which are to secure individual rights. The details can be difficult, of course, but one can find people and deal with people who know something about that, properly guided.

KRISTOL: You mentioned Lincoln. I think one reason he's so powerful, he's American – he grew up America, he wasn't like Churchill, where you could argue that his great achievements depended, maybe, on his coming from an aristocratic background and being educated and shaped in an aristocratic age, to some degree. If you were to teach this or if you were to recommend to young people books to read, either biographies or for that matter other kinds of achievements in this whole question?

BLITZ: They should still look at Churchill, especially his book, *My Early Life*. Because in addition to this aristocratic or this quasi-aristocratic background, he's half-American and has all of the spirit and enterprise that you associate or traditionally associate, and we hope will continue to associate, with Americans. Churchill was extraordinarily energetic and self-reliant, but that also means he dealt with the good things that he had in front of him. What differentiates him simply, of course, from this American enterprise is that his expectations for himself were formed in a way from his aristocratic background. But his autobiography, *My Early Life*, is a book one should read.

Lincoln is, of course, the most amazing story of self-reliance, of intelligence, and especially also of deep political activity. Lincoln is a very, very political in the concrete way – the dominant figure among the Whigs, and then the Republicans in Illinois. Someone who worked and campaigned for all sorts of candidates. A very, very political figure –

KRISTOL: Figured out how to get himself the Republican nomination in 1860 in what the third ballot or fifth ballot? Not a trivial matter. In the course of becoming President –

BLITZ: Figured out to do that. Figured out how to deal with all the positions he didn't quite get. Not quite becoming Senator and so on. In addition to all these other fabulous things about Lincoln – the Emancipation Proclamation, the winning of the Civil War, the understanding of equal rights, the great depth of his grasp of equal liberty and the Declaration of Independence – one needs to remember how deeply, concretely political Lincoln was. And also then look at his concrete political actions. So one could never go wrong reading Lincoln's important speeches or any to the good recent biographies of Lincoln. That's what I'd say students should look at.

They also should look at, to really understand the character and the meaning of individual natural rights, Fredrick Douglass. His narrative, his first autobiography where one will get a real understanding of the horrors of slavery, but also what slavery does to the masters, and especially what it means to seek one's liberty, to recognize the connection of liberty and education, to recognize the connection of liberty and responsibility. To see what it means to love liberty. but also recognize that one is someone with unequal talents. That's another book I would recommend.

Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, still another fabulous book where one understands both what it is to make one's way up, to accumulate one's wealth, and then to think about the public good in a concrete and useful manner.

If one starts with those, in addition, always, of course, to reading John Locke and Aristotle and the Declaration of Independence, that's a very good start.

KRISTOL: And I think the Hamilton musical, which as we speak in May of 2016, remains a huge phenomenon. I've always thought that Hamilton was the least appreciated of the Founders, and they've each had their renaissance in the last 10, 20, 30 years. Jefferson, maybe first – I don't know the history of this exactly – my sense is. Then, bestselling biographies of John Adams and others.

BLITZ: And George Washington. There's a lot of new appreciation over the past 20 years or so of what a significant and deep figure George Washington was.

KRISTOL: With Hamilton, I guess – yeah, I guess that's important, too, because he was such an object of the debunkers and all anyone knows about him now is wooden teeth and sort of stiff fellow, very formal. I guess Hamilton does speak to a modern sensibility because he was an illegitimate child who came over here when he was 12 or something like that to New York, an immigrant. Made his own way. Such an American story. Dramatic ending, obviously.

BLITZ: Made his own way and was – became and was very close to George Washington. One of Washington's great abilities was to recognize the talent of those around him, to use it properly while still recognizing that there were others that had some talents that he himself did not have. Hamilton is a fabulous figure, and one could do well by reading biographies of Hamilton as well. He also, of course, had this deep understanding of what a modern economy requires.

Lincoln also had an understanding of that. And those things need to be remembered. Again, as I was saying, people take for granted material success, but you can't take that for granted. It needs certain things that government does and, especially, certain things that government doesn't do. It needs the proper appreciation of entrepreneurial excellence. Lincoln was a very successful attorney. He defended all sorts of people, but among these people were wealthy corporations. The railroads, for example. Lincoln understood all this was necessary, too, and of course, Hamilton even more so.

One doesn't need to worship these figures. One simply needs to read about them and think about them in an objective way, and then one will actually see their merits and why they really are worth emulating. All of them, they're different. One can choose the one one is closest to as an object of emulation and imitation and one will do just fine.

KRISTOL: But the ambition and risk-taking, too, I think is something that people today are more sort of planning ahead and, you know, waiting their turn. Obviously, you don't always have a founding moment where people can rise so suddenly or a revolution.

BLITZ: Look at the amazing ambition of Abraham Lincoln. Part of worshipping Lincoln is to downplay that ambition, just as part of worshipping Lincoln is to downplay the nuts-and-bolts political actions in which he was always engaged and his amazing abilities there.

But one shouldn't downplay that, one should recognize that Lincoln was very ambitious. He needed to be very ambitious. He was interested in a country in which others were ambitious and were able to exercise their ambitions successfully if things worked out. That's part of the generosity of equal individual rights and liberty. But ambition is extremely important. Ambition understood responsibly. Similarly, the Revolution, it was an enormous risk. It was successful so, therefore, one can downplay the risk.

It was an enormous risk taken by many who had lots to lose. Washington would be a good example of that, Jefferson too. One had to recognize that great things often require real risk, and especially human excellence, human virtue, human happiness requires that one takes some risks out in the real world, or if one is more academic, at least in one's mind.

KRISTOL: Absolutely, and one shouldn't underestimate the difficulty of intellectual risk-taking and the pressure against it, I think, in our age and maybe always in a democracy, or maybe always, period.

BLITZ: Always, period. Because the intellectual life – this is true of art, too – is a world in which success, in the conventional way, is granted by others. Where will you teach? What students will you teach? Where will you get a chance to play? What kind of solo career you have?

Those rewards and stations, one might say, are granted to some large degree by others, and others are usually conventional. It can be a high convention, but it's still conventional. But genuine thought – and I would say even genuine artistic excellence – requires that you think hard about the best things to do and then go your own way. It's not merely going your own way in some ridiculous

series of idiosyncratic efforts. But you really have to go your own way when you've really thought out what that way is.

And if that turns out to be largely conventional, that's okay, too, but normally it won't, especially intellectually. You really have to think for yourself because that's what the whole purpose of the activity is. It's not merely to have good opinions, it's to understand the ground of those opinions. It's not merely to have a conventional artistic achievement, it's to really create something that you think is truly striking or beautiful. You do need to take those risks. But again, as I said, you need to take risks in the direction of something that's worth the risk, not simply kind of idiosyncratic individualism.

KRISTOL: I guess one defense – additional defense of modern liberal democracy – is that it, presumably, allows more people more of the time more opportunity to take those risks and to do something worthwhile with their lives. Very worthwhile with their lives.

BLITZ: That's certainly true. It allows more people to do that because it liberates all of this human talent, and the downsides in terms of the weakening of institutions, that perhaps lowered understanding of what excellence can be, those are downsides one needs to deal with and manage, but the upside is this freedom that you have to think and to exercise your responsibility, to exercise your talents, if you've actually got talents.

KRISTOL: I think that's a good note on – sober and realistic, but hopeful – note on which to end.

BLITZ: Sober, realistic, and hopeful. That's exactly right. You know, everything is a balance of courage and moderation, and these are versions of it.

KRISTOL: Thank you so much for taking the time today, Mark Blitz, and thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]