

# CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

## Conversations with Bill Kristol

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### **I: The 2017 Transition (0:15 – 14:23)**

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined today once again, for a second time, by Elliott Abrams, who's had a distinguished career in government in both the State Department and the White House, and has written important books when you weren't in government. But I thought we could talk today about the next administration, the challenges they face in foreign policy, which you're uniquely qualified to discuss.

Maybe first, about how they're going to put themselves together to conduct a foreign policy. You've been through this. You came into the Regan Administration in 1981, right at the beginning, and then the Bush Administration very close to the beginning in 2001. So you've really seen this transition, and this year whether Hillary Clinton wins or Donald Trump wins, we'll have a pretty thorough government transition, right?

ABRAMS: This ought to be a better transition in one way. After 2000, we changed the law so that the transition is supposed to begin when you're nominated, not when you're elected. So you get that extra month of September/October – two months, 10 weeks, close to. So you have more time. I'm not involved in the transitions this year so I'm not sure what's going on.

The critical thing is probably personnel. It's the drawing up of lists of candidates for, you know, thousands of positions. Particularly if you're in the Trump transition, I would think this is a difficult task actually. You're new. You've never done this before, some of the people working for you have never really done this before because – frankly, because so many Republican veterans have checked out. Have signed letters saying, "We're not going to support Trump," and therefore, obviously, are not involved.

KRISTOL: Let's say either one wins and calls you in as a veteran. This is not really political advice or even substantive advice – it's sort of how do we have a competent team functioning on January 20th when we take over? What do you tell President Clinton or President Trump? What's the next two and a half months? Can they get a competent team together that fast? Could you have a new administration – How understaffed will they be on January 21st?

ABRAMS: They will be understaffed. The top positions are filled. The Senate, as a matter for courtesy, confirms Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense. White House staff, of course, does not need confirmation. So if you have found your people, they can start coming in.

The problem is that – so you're elected, okay, it takes a while for people to make decisions. You have to kind of trickle down here. That is, people want to hire their own number two, number three, number four. A Secretary – you can't hire Assistant Secretaries of State until you have a Secretary of State. Your first choice may say no. Your second choice may say no. For people who have to get confirmed, you know April is considered a speedy confirmation. It starts after January 20th so you really don't have everybody in place throughout the bureaucracy really until the summer.

Even the White House staff does not get fully filled up, I would say for a few months. My advice to the President-Elect – and I imagine Secretary Clinton knows this – would be to worry a lot about the White House staff.

KRISTOL: I'm curious about this because you served in both the State Department and the White House, and if they called and asked, "What should I do really first?" You've got to have a Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense, obviously, but –

ABRAMS: The old line – where you stand depends on where you sit – is right. Meaning your Cabinet Members are your key assistants, and they are your natural enemies. The minute they sit down in their departments, they will take on a different coloration.

It's not that they're disloyal, it's not that they're hostile, but, you know, some of them want to have careers after you're gone. They're the younger ones. Or they want to go out and make money after you're gone. They have a building to manage, which means they're concerned about the morale in their building. They want people in their building and in the relevant groups outside the building, whether it's business or foreign governments, whatever it is –

It's very different. Think of Condi Rice, National Security Advisor and then Secretary of State. When you're National Security Advisor, you're in the White House. The first thing you do in the morning, you go to the staff meeting with all the other people who work directly for the President. When you're Secretary of State, you're in a different building, you see the President sometimes, you travel a lot, your constituents are, in a way, other foreign ministers.

KRISTOL: And the staff meeting you have in the morning is of your Assistant Secretaries of State so you're looking down to your building and not worrying first and foremost about the President.

ABRAMS: Right. I mean, one piece of advice I would give them about the White House staff is don't allow holdovers.

I know everybody – continuity – but you want people who are loyal to *you*, just to you. So I'd worry about holdovers, and I'd worry about people coming out of the bureaucracy, too. At least at the senior level. Say, for the NSC, we're talking about the number one and two and three people. But also the senior directors, who have divisions, departments in the NSC, like Asia, Latin America, Middle East, narcotics.

Don't take people out of the bureaucracy. Don't take people who are seconded from State, DOD, CIA. Take loyalists who believe in you, who believe in what you're saying. Because there's a gigantic bureaucracy out there, and particularly if you're Donald Trump, they didn't vote for you.

How do you control that bureaucracy? How do you get them to do what you want? How do you even know what they're doing? White House staff is critical.

I would also say when it comes to the Assistant Secretaries – There are different theories here. Condi Rice's theory was you take the best people from the Foreign Service. George Shultz's theory, when he was Secretary of State for Reagan, was you don't take career Foreign Service Officers, you take political appointees who are Republicans, who are going to be loyal to the President. I think that's a better model, and that's the model that I would advise for both of them. Take political appointees who you think will be

loyal to you and your views. I know it sounds like a bad rap on the bureaucracy, but I think it makes the government work better.

KRISTOL: Say a word more about why – I think for outsiders, that’s not really how businesses – a CEO brings in his one or two favorites and all that – but I’d say normal people listening to this might think, “Gee, shouldn’t competence and qualifications count more than loyalty? That sounds like an awfully inside, personalizing way of thinking about it.” Why is loyalty so important in these jobs? Especially the White House staff. What does it guard against? What does it accomplish?

ABRAMS: It’s good to think there are normal people watching this.

KRISTOL: I came to Washington a little after you, in ’85, and I was at first bewildered by this a little bit. I kind of slightly rebelled. I remember I worked for Bill Bennet, and you know, this guy’s good, he was with us – Bill’s previous job at NEA – and I think he’ll be good. But I don’t know, maybe, there may be better people out in the country – and this is education – who know more about education policy, shouldn’t we get them?

It took me a while to realize this wasn’t just my boss, you know, a Cabinet Secretary, being clannish or just liking people who liked him. That there was a reason why you want loyalists, but I think it’s worth explaining.

ABRAMS: I think they are two things critical here. You need to get the job done. So you need people who can actually do it and work effectively in a bureaucracy.

We’re talking about a bureaucracy here. A huge, vast, bureaucracy. You can be highly intelligent; you can be, for example, maybe a fantastically brilliant academic, but unable to function in government. That’s one thing you need to do. You need to get people who can – now, some people come out of the academy, Henry Kissinger, who can instantly master the bureaucracy. But some people can’t.

Some people from business can’t. George Shultz, when he became Secretary of State, hired a dear friend who was a really successful businessman as Undersecretary State of Management, and he quit after three weeks and said to Shultz, “Government is hopeless. Nothing happens here, I’m out.” That’s first. Getting people who can function in the government setting.

The loyalty question is critical because the President’s team is actually quite small. If you think of roughly 10,000 people at the State Department, a million in the Defense Department, many, many in the tens of thousands in the CIA. Then, there is the domestic department. Your White House staff is a few hundred people. The NSC, I think, was under Bush was roughly 200; it’s now more than doubled. That’s too big.

You have, let’s say, 1,000 people, but the bureaucracy is millions of people. The President issues an instruction or guidance and goes over to HUD and goes over to HHS, goes over to DOD, it can be ignored. It can be given lip service. What’s the follow up? How do you know if maybe they’re trying and failing? Maybe they’re trying in good faith but it isn’t working? They will tell you. But they will tell you what they want you to hear.

How do you dig down a level deeper? In every administration, there’s an organization chart. You can look it up online, it’s in textbooks. The Secretary, the Assistant Secretary, the Deputy. That exists, and it’s important. But I think every administration has a kind of nervous system of loyalists that are in each department, that you know you can reach out to. Sometimes, people know each other from the campaign, other times, they get to know each other where you know they really want to do what the President wants to do. That the government can’t function unless that nervous system is also working.

KRISTOL: It does seem to me – to wrap up this section – it’s an asymmetric situation. Hillary Clinton knows, she’s been in the White House and has been in the State Department. She probably knows what

she wants at this point, and probably thinks she knows at least how to make the system work. Trump really would be the most outsiderish person to come in modern times, maybe ever.

Maybe Reagan is the closest comparison. He'd never worked in Washington, and he presumably had never done foreign policy as the Governor of California and was an outsider in his own party to some degree. Not in a Trumpy way. You were there as part of the transition team, and then became Assistant Secretary of State once you got confirmed pretty quickly, right? So what, I mean, particularly for Trump, I guess you can say loyalists, but how many foreign policy loyalists, does he have? There's a tiny team, I suppose, helping him on the campaign, but it's an interesting question, if Trump calls you in.

ABRAMS: You need a few people, and they may not exist whom you trust, who know Washington. Now, Reagan, for example, I remember after we won, I was on the transition team, but I wanted a job. Who did I talk to?

KRISTOL: You were on the State Department transition team?

ABRAMS: I actually was, actually AID transition team with Ed Feulner, the longtime President and then President of the Heritage Foundation.

I went to talk to Bill Casey who had been campaign manager, and Bill Timmons, famous Washington lobbyist of that period who had been one of the campaign's top people. Reagan was using them after the campaign was over to help with a variety of political and personnel tasks. And that was smart because they had been around Washington, Timmons permanently, Casey obviously in and out. But they knew how these things worked.

He will need – Trump would need to find people like that. Maybe Gingrich is one for him. You do find people whom you trust. It can take a year though. If you think of the first year of the Reagan administration, he hires out Alexander Haig, but a year and half later, Haig is out. Really after the first six or nine months, White House and State Department relations were terrible. So that can happen.

You have to be able and willing and able to correct mistakes, I guess the way Trump does on TV – “You're fired.” But I think he's going to have a problem because I'm not sure that most of the people we think of as his loyalists have ever had this experience of putting an administration together or even working in an administration to really know how to do it.

KRISTOL: I suppose Gingrich, I mean, Christie and Giuliani at least at the state and local level have put together governments. Washington is a little different, but he'll find people, I suppose.

ABRAMS: If he wins, he will find people.

KRISTOL: Everyone will suddenly decide they'll be happy to help, and they should probably since it's the President of the United States.

ABRAMS: I'm not sure that it's right. That is, I think a lot of people won't or have already in a sense from Trump's point of view cast themselves out. It is probably true that he ought to say, “Let's let bygones be bygones, and we'll forget about all those letters that said I'm the worst person on Earth.” Most politicians don't work that way.

KRISTOL: And Trump doesn't seem to have, to me, to be erring on the side of forgiving and so forth. That will be interesting.

## **II: The Next President's Foreign Policy (14:23 – 30:37)**

KRISTOL: Let's assume they get this administration together, the beginnings of it together, but let's assume the next President calls you in and they've got the Secretaries of State and Defense and the National Security Advisor and the key deputies there are appointed, and now he or she wants a private discussion of what about – so what is the situation in the world? What do I need to know, what should I focus on? What in the headlines really is important? What can I sort of ignore that everyone else is telling me – what do you say on January 19th?

ABRAMS: I think you've got two separate issues here, though obviously, they come together. One of them is the set of problems that we need to face – North Korea, Syria. Where do you need to make decisions? That is a critical thing that needs to be done during the transition. Is there anything you need to make a decision on on January 20th? Or in January. Or in February. What are the things that are going to come and hit you? So there are the issues.

But the separate set of things that I would say is, look, after eight years of Obama, the American position in the world is not good. Neither our enemies, nor our allies, feel that we are a rising power.

Our allies do not feel they can rely on us. They don't know where the United States is now. If you are facing Iran – Saudis, Emiratis, Jordanians, Israelis – if you were facing Russia – Poles, Czechs, Estonians – if you were facing China – Australians, Japanese, South Koreans, Taiwanese – you don't really know. You need to do something real or symbolic that begins to reassure them that the period of drift under Obama is over.

A part of this may be working with Congress on the military budget, I think that would be quite reassuring, but in one day, it doesn't change anything. It shows a trend. I think it's worthwhile looking for more dramatic ways to show that America is back. Reagan did it, oddly, you know, with firing the air traffic controllers, which had nothing to do with foreign policy, but it was demonstration of willpower.

There are things one could do. The two that would top my list on foreign policy would be the Persian Gulf and Syria. I think we need to have a different reaction under a new President the next time a ship is swarmed by a bunch of Iranian gunboats that pull up within a few hundred yards in a very dangerous fashion. I think if we sank one of those gunboats, it would be a shot heard round the world. I think in Tehran, of course, but in Beijing and in Moscow, and in all the allied capitals, people would say, "Whoa, they're back." And no, it does not lead to World War III.

On Syria – and I think the President would have to get to in the first month – our Syria policy, in my opinion, has been to do nothing that makes Iran angry. So we have no Syria policy. We send Kerry, or he goes on his own to Geneva, and it makes us look weak and foolish.

Do you want to do anything about Syria? Are you prepared? You're the new President. Are you prepared to see Assad use chemical weapons on your watch? Are you prepared to see these bunker busters hitting more hospitals and killing more civilians on your watch? And looking as feckless as Obama over this? If not, what are the options, military options, if any, that you have?

So I think there's that overall picture of reassurance of allies, deterrents of enemies and opponents.

KRISTOL: And you think that's – one would have that conversation with Hillary Clinton who was President Obama's Secretary of State and is from the same party, almost as much or in a similar way, maybe she'd frame it a little differently, but you think it's actually as important advice for her as it is for Trump? She needs to think of herself as a fresh start, not as somehow bound to continue?

Do you think that would be – it's hard if you're from the same party, right, to make that quick a turn or maybe not? I don't know.

ABRAMS: You know it depends what's really, what's her thinking. And maybe this is the wish being father to the thought, for me, but look, Syria – Petraeus, Panetta, and Clinton in 2012 actually urged Obama to take a harder line. When she was Senator, she was on the Armed Services Committee. She has some knowledge of the declining American military power.

Suppose, for example, that for the sake of continuity, she decides to keep on Ash Carter as Secretary of Defense for one year, not impossible. Obama did it. He kept on Bob Gates. I think the advice she would be getting from DOD, from him – civilian appointee, but from the uniformed military – is that things are bad, and there are options. Here they are. Obama rejected all of them.

You know, Bush – the last time this happened, if it is going to be Clinton, was, of course, George H. W. Bush following Ronald Reagan. It didn't go day/night, night/day, but he certainly changed the policy. He certainly changed the whole look of American foreign policy, I think, in an unfortunately way in some cases. But the fact that it's the same party, in a way, I think if you're Hillary Clinton, you very much want to differentiate yourself from Obama because you're *you*. You do not want to be seen as Obama's third term.

KRISTOL: You think as an analytical matter – leaving aside in some respects all the critiques you've made and I've made over the years – it really would be important for the next President to act pretty quickly in terms of the allies and enemies because the dynamic, I guess, if he or she didn't, would be if you're sitting in Japan or Saudi, or anywhere, or Iran, you sort of think, "Okay, I guess it's more of the same."

Obama wasn't very strong, and this next person – Trump, with the rhetoric notwithstanding, is on both sides of this since he's sort of an isolationist. Hillary Clinton, the fact that she was Obama's Secretary of State notwithstanding, would be more of the same. Your main advice would be it can't look like more of the same? As a policy matter, you do not want foreign capitals to think Obama was – four more years of the same direction, same path.

ABRAMS: I think that's critical, and I think if it doesn't happen, then let's say after a period of months, the summer perhaps, you will have people changing their policies to reflect what they expect to be a four more years of what I would call weakness or drift. If you're the Saudis and you're looking at Iraq or Yemen, or if you're in East Asia worrying about what we need to do to hold back China or worrying about Putin, you're going to change your policy.

What makes me a bit hopeful about this is the new President is going to sit down over relatively brief period, I would think, with the leaders of some of these countries – if you visit these countries, this is what they think. They're very worried about –

KRISTOL: Talk about that. You were being Asia recently, and of course, a Middle East expert, and you go there a lot. You were in Japan, which you hadn't been in years.

ABRAMS: And I talk to people as they come through Washington, and what's remarkable is if you talk to people from Australia, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Poland, the Czech Republic, Israel, Saudi Arabia, you hear the same line basically. Which is – I mean, they don't say this, but "Where are you guys? What's happening?" They're very worried about whether, in fact, this is isolationism.

Is the United States saying a version actually of Trump's statements about NATO: "We're carrying too a big burden, and we're not going to do it anymore"? You're on your own. They're very much worried about this. And they see a decay of the American-Western position over the last few years. Rising China, rising Russia, rising Iran. He or she is going to hear that politely put.

I think that push is, obviously, in the right direction.

KRISTOL: I suppose for our allies having the Republican candidate, in particular, be the more isolationist must be a little bit jarring because I think they've always thought Democrats maybe reacted against Bush and whatever, Obama. But the Republican Party is actually pretty strong, and then the Republican candidate is criticizing NATO and more anti-the Iraq war than Hillary Clinton, and so forth. Just curious, does this get raised a lot when you meet with foreign ambassadors?

ABRAMS: It gets raised, and the lack of understanding of Trump gets raised a lot. I mean, if you think of the last not only Presidents but defeated candidates for President – pretty, people they knew. John Kerry, John McCain, Al Gore. These were familiar figures to most foreigners. Reagan, an exception.

So the questions are – there is a question or two about Clinton, and “Do you think so-and-so will be Secretary of State or will it be so-and-so?” With Trump, we don't know him. “Do you know anybody we could talk to? Who might be Secretary of this or that?” They're just lost. These are very hard questions to answer because he has not put forward, you know, a 30-page position paper, and he doesn't have a long track record of, you know, of going to these various meetings that people go to in Aspen or in Sedona or in all these places, going to the security conferences in Europe and giving long speeches on these questions. So they're nervous.

KRISTOL: On the trade issue on particular, we're speaking about the same week of the first presidential debate where Donald Trump was attacking what had been bipartisan positions. Both presidential candidates of both parties, to my knowledge, have always supported NAFTA. Gore must have, of course, and then Kerry. Certainly, the Republicans did.

And other trade agreements. And the TPP, the Asian agreement, has had, I believe, Obama certainly supports it and negotiated it, and Bush certainly supported it when he was President, and I believe McCain and Romney supported it when there were challengers. It must be a little unnerving to suddenly see both candidates – well, one candidate just attacking NAFTA as the worst thing that ever happened, and Hillary Clinton being fairly quiet about what was a pretty big accomplishment of her husband's administration.

Then, on the Asian agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, both of them saying, no. I wonder how much that's got them under – how much damage has got to be undone just from that?

ABRAMS: It's a good question. I think they're hopeful that Hillary is lying. I mean, they're hopeful that it's campaign rhetoric, and it will be fixed if she's President. In my conversations, people don't, they're less concerned with the trade treaties narrowly defined as, “Gee, we really wanted provision five,” and more concerned about what it means about American politics.

Is the United States in some deep way, are the American people, in a way that's going to be reflected in Congress as well, changing our minds about the role we have played since World War II? Are we really saying we're tired of it and we're not going to do that anymore and take care of yourselves? That, I think, is the much deeper worry, that is, to say the trade agreements are seen as the product of this – potentially, the product of this deeper question that they have.

KRISTOL: It sounds like actually the advice that you have for the President would be pretty deep or thoroughgoing in the sense that you just don't have to deal with this particular problem here or change this whatever policy, tweak it there around Israel, Palestine, or a million things. But you really need to send a major message really around the world. I suppose at home, too, right? In a way you have to send a message to the American people? To Congress.

ABRAMS: In a way, it's harder. The best comparison is probably Reagan, and it's harder than it was for Reagan because that was the message of Reagan's campaign. Reagan said it a thousand times; therefore, it was to be assumed that okay, now he's won and he will do this. Neither candidate –

KRISTOL: Just on the 1980 comparison, Jimmy Carter – you and I weren't big fans of his administration, and I'm not even in retrospect – but he did pivot in 1980 after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian hostage crisis. He increased defense spending, said it was a new moment. It probably was even, I'm sure – I agree with a lot of criticism he made of Carter and the damage that was done under his watch, but you could say the Democratic Party was coming back –

ABRAMS: At least he was. And presumably as President, he could have brought the party with him. But the message of Reagan's victory was this was a turn. Neither candidate this year is saying that.

KRISTOL: What you're saying really is what the world needs to hear is we're going to have a major turn back to American leadership, and we're having a campaign in which neither candidate is saying that.

ABRAMS: They're saying, "I get it, we don't want to spend all this money, and we don't want to be on the hook, and we don't want to send a hundred thousand troops anywhere." It would require saying and doing some things early on.

The inaugural address is very important. First meeting with members of Congress and doing something that would suggest – even if your inaugural address says, "Sequestration has been terrible and there is a bipartisan agreement now that the defense budget needs to start rising. We need to rebuild – blah, blah."

That's a big deal. It's just words, but it's very, I think, would be significant to say that in the inaugural address. And really significant not to say it.

KRISTOL: And if the inaugural address has a lot of stuff about how people are hurting at home, that's got to be our focus, and very little about the world, I suppose?

ABRAMS: Nation-building at home, or as George McGovern said, "Come home America," I think would be devastating.

KRISTOL: That's really interesting. That's really a big-picture challenge to the new President, whether it's Trump or Clinton, for a pretty big pivot in American foreign policy. And important that it happen pretty quickly.

ABRAMS: I think so.

KRISTOL: You can't go six – I'm thinking about everything in six months, and that's not really –

ABRAMS: You can say this and then say, you know, "Now, this affects all of our key allies all over the world with whom we're going to be consulting. As a matter of fact, my new Secretary of State X sets out on Monday and will visit the following ten capitals, and the Secretary of Defense will visit these others."

So you can, in a sense, delay doing anything, and consulting will sound great also. You don't have to make all these decisions on January 20th. January 20<sup>th</sup>, you have a lot of parades, and you don't make any decisions. I think you have to show something very quickly, or people will be against will hedging additional bets.

### **III: Global Pressure Points (30:37 – 57:59)**

KRISTOL: Let's assume this new President is open to your advice to general project US strength, power, and leadership. Now, let's get a little more granular and look at regions of the world, challenges, crises. "I've got to begin somewhere; you never know what's going to happen."

Looking around the world, you've had responsibilities in government all over the world, and some of your secretary-ships were not regional, they were for human rights or whatever, for national organizations. What comes to mind given the unpredictability? Sounds like Syria from what you said earlier? And Iran.

ABRAMS: Syria, Iran, let's say Middle East is one thing. North Korea would be another.

On the Middle East, look, Iran is constantly challenging us in the Persian Gulf – not indirectly, not through proxies – *us*, capturing sailors in January last. Surrounding American ships. And more this past summer, the pace actually grew. I think you want to do something about that. And you want to begin by telling them through some channel, "Oman, Russia, it's over, guys. Don't do it. Don't do it." And then, of course, if you say that, then you have to be ready to act.

Syria is an incredibly difficult problem now. It didn't have to be in my opinion, in Hillary Clinton's opinion. She advised a different policy in 2012. I think we need first to increase our aid to the non-jihadi Syrian opposition.

If we don't, first of all, they'll come closer to defeat, but what will they do? Some of them will join al Qaeda-linked or IS-linked groups. The new President, if we haven't taken Mosul, the new President's going to be faced with a decision of what to do about Mosul, which is going to produce by U.S. government estimates something like 700,000 refugees. Where are they going to go? How are they going to be fed? What happens with the fighters in Mosul? Are they going to reinforce Raqqa?

And, if Mosul has been taken, we're going to have to deal with the aftermath of that. Are Shia troops killing Sunni civilians? If we haven't taken Raqqa, then that's going to be a big decision we're going to face. When I say we, who's on the ground? If it's the Kurds, you're going to have a problem with Turkey. If it's Shia militia from Iran, you're going to have the Shia-Sunni problem. That's a major problem.

I would say two things. The first, additional aid for the non-jihadi rebels, and they exist, and unlike – I mean, President Obama famously called them a bunch of worthless pharmacists – they're not and they're still fighting, and it's been four years and they're still fighting.

Secondly, I think the new President needs to confront Assad's continuing use of chemical weapons. Chlorine, that's the poison gas that was outlawed in World War I, and the barrel bombs on hospitals, what was done in Aleppo in September, just savage. What do you want to do about that? Do you want to do anything about that? Do you want to tell them to stop it? We have the ability to say stop it and make him stop it by taking out his air force. Bold? Yes, but again, it's not World War III, and it doesn't require troops on the ground to do that. That's Air Force, or cruise missiles.

KRISTOL: It sounds as if yes, the Syria-Iran-Iraq nexus, for all the next President probably doesn't want to even think about those countries – it's a mess, it's difficult, we intervened, it was difficult, we got out, it caused problems – it's very hard to signal American strength while doing nothing there, while the slaughter continues in Syria, while Iran continues to look dominant. Especially after the Iran deal, which was such a signature of Obama.

ABRAMS: Especially after our kind of pathetic performance with the Russians where Kerry negotiates deals, the Russians break them, you have a ceasefire, you don't have a ceasefire. We look like beggars actually. That's got to change. The question really is does the President recognize – I think Obama and Kerry don't – that diplomacy is not chatter. It's a way of using national power just as economic clout is, and military clout is. And they've got to go together.

If it's clear that the President never wants to do anything in Syria, you can send Kerry a thousand times to Geneva, he'll never get anything serious because why would the Russians give an inch? You've got to face that, and that's early – that's January, February.

North Korea is not your first day in office, but you're going to be there for four years presumably. And they are – maybe on your watch – they're going to have the capability of hitting the continental United States with a nuclear weapon. Is that acceptable to you? If it isn't acceptable to you, what are you going to do about it?

Again, these are hard problems or they wouldn't exist now. You're going to need to face the question of whether there is something you can do to get the Chinese to take it more seriously. We've had basically the same policy under really Bush, Clinton, Bush, Obama, and of course, it's failed. They get closer and to a weapon and delivery system that can hit us.

Is there a way of making the Chinese to take it more seriously? Here is the example I give. What if we persuade the Chinese that sooner or later the Japanese and the South Koreans are going to really start thinking about nuclear weapons? You don't want that, we don't want that, so what are prepared to do about it?

If they take it seriously, I think they would act differently. Maybe not. Worth thinking through. But North Korea, major problem.

KRISTOL: That's interesting the way you put it. It will happen on your watch in your four years. I guess presidents when they're newly sworn in, have something of that perspective. In your experience, do they think that way in a way? They don't just do day to day, week to week, there is a minute there before they get swamped by the office, you can raise a question and say, "If you don't change course now, you're looking at a horrible situation?"

ABRAMS: I actually think presidents are better at this than their staffs are. You know, there was James Callaghan who was Prime Minister of England at some point, had been minister of this and minister of that, and I guess somebody once said, "I guess being Prime Minister is much harder," and he said, "No, no, no. When you're a minister, you have a department, thousands and tens of thousands of people work for you. The workflow overwhelms you every day. When you're Prime Minister, you don't actually have to do anything, you get to choose."

There is some truth to that for the President, too. In a way, it's overwhelming, but on the other hand, your schedule's your own. Staff people, I think, tend to be swallowed by the incoming – what used to be paper, it's now emails – and worried about what's going to happen at 3pm. Presidents, I think, are generally better at stepping back and saying, "I'm President. That's Lincoln and that's Washington on the wall. Where do I fit, and what are people going to say about me 100 years from now?"

I think that's really goes with the job. If you think back to our presidents last – I don't know, 30, 40, 50 years – I think they all felt that. You can appeal to that. It's useful if the staff is not just sort of saying, "We need to squeeze in this guy at 3:30," but is occasionally saying, "Where are we? Where are we in the world? Where are you? How does it all look? How is it all going?" A sense of perspective. The President, in a sense – and you know, to some extent, it can be also, can be the President's family, or the President's spouse can sometimes help with this.

KRISTOL: President Bush, the one you – of the different presidents – you must have spent the most time with.

ABRAMS: He had a very good capacity for this. He thought about it a lot. Okay, partly because his father had been President, he had thought about this in terms of his own father. But he thought about this a lot. I think his religious faith matters here, too, because it gives you a sense of perspective on yourself as a person and on the job you're doing. I think Bush – you don't want to, you know, you don't want to be paralyzed by it, you don't want to start saying, "I can't do that, my legacy would be" – but I think it's useful to step back in a way that most of people who are working for you are not going to be able to do.

And to think about – not to think about “how many campaign promises can I keep, and which ones do I have to break?”, but rather to think you definitely have four years, I mean, God willing, you have four years, where do you want to be in four years? Which are the problems you think you can solve or significantly ameliorate? Obviously, we’re not talking about the domestic questions.

I should add one thing here, which is you’re going to have to deal with Congress on a lot of this. Obama’s way of handling all of this was to, I think, deal contemptuously with Congress and to use executive orders whenever he could in a way that I believe overreached and was often unconstitutional. In fact, he lost more cases 9-0 in the Supreme Court than anybody before him had ever done.

That’s something you, President Trump or you, President Clinton have got to try to do immediately. Repair relations with Congress and get the leadership in on foreign policy questions, particularly if you’re going to do something like try to improve the defense situation. If you are trying to do more anywhere, you’re going to need support in Congress.

So that’s something you need to change the tone fairly fast. I think by the summer of 2009, I think Republicans on the Hill and even Democrats on the Hill had already come to the conclusion that they were going to have trouble with the new administration. That’s not something you can do in year two, that’s something you do at the outset.

KRISTOL: You deal with Congress a lot – testify informally, formally, brief them. Generally speaking, compared to the 35 years you’ve been in Washington, decent Congressmen and Senators? Decent leadership on foreign policy and defense? In terms of a functioning American government, this is a Congress a good president could work with? I actually hadn’t thought of this question until I asked it, but my instinct is it’s not so bad.

ABRAMS: It’s probably not as good as it was. I mean, in the golden days, the olden times, the leadership was stronger in those days, and you could a deal. The Arms Services Committees were great empires.

I think it was actually – I think the congressional leadership was in a certain way more – I don’t want to say patriotic, that’s the wrong word – more responsible back in those days, and in a certain sense understood this is good for the country. My job is to deliver if for the President. That’s, I think, basically gone, partly because everybody’s an entrepreneur now. Parties are much weaker, you got to get yourself reelected so you’ve got to look out for yourself a lot more.

That said, if you go down the list of names – of course, this may change hands – these are sober people. And I think a president can reach out and say, “Look, we have problems, we’ve got to deal with these problems,” whether it’s Trump or Clinton. “I need your help.”

That was not the Obama way. Obama really broadcast a sense of Congress as an inferior branch, and “I’m really much smarter than you, and you need to get out of my way, and if you don’t, I’ll do what I want anyway.” Right from the start, you know, there were lots of stories from Democrats and Republicans about this. You’ve got to get away from that. I think people will react – of course, it helps if you had a landslide. One of the reasons people did that with Reagan is that the country had just said, “We want him.”

KRISTOL: And the Republicans won the Senate for the first time in 25 years.

ABRAMS: It looks now as we’re talking that the Republicans will probably keep both houses, which means that, particularly for Clinton, it will be important to reach out to these people, most of whom she knows because she was a Senator. That was eight years ago. She ought to be able to do this very important –

KRISTOL: It is important actually, I think. People don't appreciate how important it is. The other thing, of course, is it's harder for them to ask all these Senators and Congressmen to be responsible and to take tough votes in my opinion when both she and especially Trump have been so irresponsible in the campaign, though.

I can't get over quite the – I think in the old days – this is again the nostalgia, and there was Joe McCarthy and there were the McGovern Democrats and all this. If you had a pending trade agreement with major allies that the current President, Democrat, and the current Speaker of the House, Republican, and the Majority Leader in the Senate, Republican, are all for – so it's sort of bipartisan leadership agreement – you might have to rethink some points of it. But making it a staple, as Trump does on your attacks on the current administration and then having the Secretary of State from that administration flip her view and go along with the attacks and also be quiet while Trump attacks NAFTA? I mean, you worked on – you were Assistant Secretary for Latin America. What do they think down there in Mexico?

It's not like Hillary was really out there saying, "This is a very good thing, one of the things I'm proudest about from my husband's administration." That, again, was a good case study where Gingrich shepherded through the new Republican – or provided cover, I guess, for the lame duck session of what was going to be a Republican House, so forth with Dole in the Senate. I really –

ABRAMS: I agree with that. Part of the explanation for it is, putting aside the personal views of the two candidates, something seems to have happened this year that was not predicted in respect to Trump and Sanders, of Americans saying, "I'm really sick and tired of this; I think it stinks; it's not working, it's not working for me. This whole system is fixed." Some of that is because the two candidates were saying it, but Sanders got a much bigger reaction than Clinton expected and Trump won the nomination. I think both of them were sort of – and many members of Congress – are looking around wondering how large and powerful is this beast? Is it going to need up devouring me? People are less responsible in that sense. I wanted to add one other thing.

KRISTOL: Which makes it harder for the new President.

ABRAMS: It does make it harder. Again, we'll see what the election results are. The average American does not go around saying, "The problem is NAFTA, that's why I lost my job. The problem is this TPP thing." Leadership counts a lot.

You may be suffering economically, you're not an economist, I'm not sure who to blame. People will tell you or make suggestions. I think a new President has a real opportunity to kind of, if he or she wants to, lead away from that and back to a soberer and responsible view of the world, if that's the desire of the president.

I think there is another thing the President has to do. Stop apologizing. I think you will probably get that with either of them, but I'm really struck that, to me, the theme of eight years of Cuba policy and Iran policy has been to make up for past crimes by the United States. When we negotiate with Iran – we don't even negotiate with Cuba, I mean, we just hand them gifts to try to compensate for crimes committed by the United States in the past.

I think you kind of see this in Obama's last UN General Assembly speech, which was September 2016, which is a wonderful speech in a way if you love President Obama. It kind of summarizes his view of the world, which is one in which we need to move away from American power and leadership towards globalization of everything. You see that in the Iran policy, and you see that in the Cuba policy. We really have to reverse that.

Speeches can do that. The tone one takes can fairly quickly suggest the President and the new President doesn't believe that, and no more giveaways, we're going to – and the way to do that in Cuba and Iran obviously would be much tougher. Be much tougher. A lot of promises were made by the Obama

Administration in respect to the Iran deal that have not come true or seem actually to have been untrue and devious when they were made. Do we pick up on that, or do we make-believe it didn't happen?

Do we pick up on the fact that we were supposed to be helping in Cuba and the human rights situation is much worse now, or do we not want to hear about that? Hillary Clinton, she endorsed the Cuba thing, it's not her deal. Even she I think is free to move away from that kind of singular Obama view of America's place in the world.

KRISTOL: What strikes me, listening to this and thinking about what you're saying though is we have a double challenge, Obama's eight years – people like us think at least, and I think objectively one has to say has not produced a stronger America. It's produced an America that's feared less, some say respected less, a world that's in more chaos. Maybe Obama couldn't do anything about it; it's just life or whatever. But in the 21st century, it's objectively the case.

Then we have a campaign – and this is an important point you made, and unlike with Reagan in '80 – where the Republican candidate has run on more withdrawal from the world to some degree and more condemnation of bipartisan trade deals and all the wars we've fought, which were entered into on a bipartisan basis, I would add – Afghanistan and Iraq. A Democratic candidate might agree privately to a fair amount of what you're saying, but was Obama's Secretary of State so it's a funny situation where there's not a natural – it will take work to produce the policies and the support for the policies that you're calling for. It's not just the natural development.

ABRAMS: It will take work and people. Nothing that Hillary Clinton is going to hear if she is President-Elect is going to come as a shock to her, I think. Not just because she was Secretary of State, but she was in these circles, and her staff consists largely of people who were with her at State.

It's different for Trump. The information flow is going to be very different. I know he's getting briefings twice a week or something, but that's nothing. That's 30 or 60 minutes? Now, it is constant, and you're surrounded by people who are telling you things, and they may be telling you things you don't want to hear. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, your Defense Secretary, your National Security Advisor, Deputy National Security Advisor will be coming in all the time and be telling you things. And they may contradict things you've said during the campaign. They probably will.

They may contradict things you believe. You know, you can fire them. The President gives signals, I think. I hope this isn't too disillusioning for those watching, take the CIA. The CIA is pretty savvy about what the President wants to hear and not hear. They don't cut off the information flow, but you can emphasize things or deemphasize them. You can try to cater to the President's particular interest or views. You don't want to fight with him every morning when you're briefing him, that will affect the information flow. It takes a fairly brave official, permanent civil servant or appointee, to say repeatedly, "You need to read this," knowing that the President is going to like it and not going to want to hear it. Your job is ultimately at risk, maybe not that morning. Particularly a new president like Trump is probably going to be more willing than Clinton to get rid of people.

I do worry about that, I must say, that here's somebody dealing with a completely new world and there is the risk that the people he brings in with him will cater too much to what he wants to hear.

KRISTOL: Do you think in general that the institutions of government in foreign policymaking, national security, are functioning pretty well? Or could be made to function pretty well? I think we both agree that there should be increases in defense spending and defense capability, but as a basic matter with the right leadership and the right policies, does the U.S. government in your view work? People will say – it's become sort of commonplace to say everything's broken and you can't accomplish anything.

ABRAMS: I don't believe it. I mean, here's an example of why I don't believe it. Unlike Europe, we have not suffered these ISIS terrorist attacks. There's not been a Bataclan here because it works. There are

many reasons, but it's partly because the CIA and the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security are competent at doing this. Yes, they're going to keep on trying to hit us and maybe sooner or later they will, but we've developed an ability to do this.

These agencies function. In my experience, when you changed from Carter to Reagan, that was really a significant change the bureaucracy. If you take the State Department, probably everybody voted for Carter, or I don't know – 80 percent. But I found that people were pretty loyal if you treated them right, gave them leadership, told them, "Look, this is what the President wants to do and here's where loyalty counts." Haig fought the President.

I remember with George Shultz that people would sometimes say, "The President is wrong about this, we have to do this and we have to do that." And Shultz would listen and he would say, "You know, you may be right, all you needed to do is get yourself elected president. But Ronald Reagan got himself elected president, we're going to do it his way." You need a Cabinet office who can make those bureaucracies function because the people in them are often quite competent. I don't think the government's broken; I think it will respond to strong leadership on the part of the President.

KRISTOL: I want to ask about the world and how broken then world is and whether it will respond to our strong American leadership, which is sort of the flip side the question. I'm reassured about what you said about the institutions, but I can't resist, just as a parenthesis.

I don't think we discussed this the other time we went a little more through your career, what was it like being Assistant Secretary of State, working for a Secretary of State who was really almost at open war with the White House and surely you, of course, communicated with people in the White House – you did routinely for your job anyway, right? You were Secretary of State for this, you met with your counterpart at the National Security Council, you knew people anyway in the White House. What was that like? How tricky was it?

ABRAMS: It's very tricky, it was very tough. I was very young then.

KRISTOL: You were the youngest Assistant Secretary of State, right?

ABRAMS: Yes, I was 32 when I was appointed, and I would go in and talk to Haig.

KRISTOL: So you were Assistant Secretary of State at that point for?

ABRAMS: International Organizations. The first year. The UN. And we didn't know each other before. I met him when he offered me the job. Secretary Haig. I'd go into his office, and he would do a tirade about the President and the White House staff. I was pretty young, but I was smart enough to think to myself, "What are you doing? You shouldn't be saying this to me. You don't know me that well. I could be reporting back everything. What are you doing?"

It was pretty clear that that was doomed, and you're caught because he's your boss and you're loyal to him. On the other hand, you're a presidential appointee, formally speaking, and you're loyal to him. And there are moments, and I had some of these moments.

KRISTOL: That's an important point and people don't understand that. At that level of Assistant Secretary and up, you're appointed by the President, you're confirmed by the Senate and, of course, the Secretary of State is your boss or if you're in the Education Department, the Secretary of Education is your boss, but you're not really – you're not a staffer for the Secretary of State, you're presidentially appointed.

ABRAMS: Formally you are, and the thing that's hanging on your wall is signed by the President of the United States. You can get caught in the middle of this, and there were moments where I remember

thinking, “What do I do here, or who do I tell about this?” You can really get crushed in the middle of that. This happened throughout the Reagan Administration.

We remember it as perfect, some of us, but on the foreign policy here, Shultz, I think, was a very great Secretary of State, but in the White House, there was a constant turnover of National Security Advisors and their staff. No one served for more than a year and half, two years. It wasn't perfect, and the relations with the State Department were constantly up and down. That's going to be critical for whoever is president. Presumably Clinton knows this, but it's not all clear that Trump knows it.

#### **IV: Why America Must Lead (57:59 – 1:13:50)**

KRISTOL: The world – and we discussed briefly that in 1980 Reagan was able to turn it around pretty quickly by showing strength, I think, and, first, of course, the Iranians were preemptively worried enough about him to release the hostages and then, of course, all kinds of other things happened, and big defense buildup, and I think that sent a signal. Then the air traffic controllers.

How deep is the hole we're in? We talked earlier, and in a way, we made it seem that if the President does the right things in the first month, two or three, the Prime Minister and all of our friends are reassured and all of our opponents like Putin are, “Oh, it's a new U.S.” How bad is the situation though? How much –

ABRAMS: I may be overly optimistic, but it seems to me that there are things we can do in a number of these places, and a lot of this is the impression of who's rising and who's falling. I think that can be changed pretty quickly so that people begin to wonder, “I wonder what's going to happen here because the Americans are really coming back.”

KRISTOL: So it's direction as much as –

ABRAMS: I really think it is. Perhaps this is too optimistic, but it seems to me that you can begin to get people to recalculate. Again, they're always looking ahead one, two, three, four years. We should also add one thing here. We're making-believe that nothing unexpected is going to happen.

KRISTOL: That is my final question so let's talk about that some. What advice, and the President would say, “What else should I be thinking about?” And I take it one thing you might say to him would be –

ABRAMS: Black swan.

KRISTOL: Not even quite black swan, but routine unexpected things. Foreign leaders die, and people lose elections.

ABRAMS: One of the things that you should do, you as the President-Elect, well, you should do it in the transition. You should assign people to give you a list of things – you should have your National Security Advisor, “What do I need to focus on? What's coming in the first three, six months?”

Then, you need a separate conversation on precisely this. Of course, some things are totally unexpected like an assassination. But who is old and sick, and does it matter if so-and-so dies, if so-and-so dies? What are the kinds of events – terrorist attack domestically – what would happen if there were an ISIS attack? It's plausible. It's happened in Europe; it can happen here. 9/11, are you ready?

One of the things that makes this harder is we can make the list – let's say ISIS, God forbid, we have that Bataclan attack, 150 people killed, or 9/11, thousands killed. You have a menu of options, and you need to consider them with your advisors. But these are new advisors. You might be lucky, and nothing will happen for a year, but if it's February, and then you get advice from your new Secretary of Defense, and I think you're sitting there thinking, “I don't really know this guy too well. He's been in the building for a

month, how good is his advice? Who are you?” “You also, new Secretary of State, I don’t know.” It’s a problem because there’s no track record for you to rely on the people who surround you.

But you certainly need I think during the transition to have some sense of there are unexpected events, but – what if Putin sends little green men to Estonia?

KRISTOL: I was just thinking of that example. Test the new president. Take advantage of this organization and sort of wish to not begin your administration by getting in some tough confirmation with Putin, especially if you’re Trump who likes Putin.

ABRAMS: My answer would be, “Mr. President if you preside over the destruction – in essence the destruction of NATO – that will be your historic contribution and you’ll never recover from it.” But there is an example – Putin, green men, Estonia.

China, Southeast China, start making a few moves about Taiwan, tightening the noose in Taiwan. They seem to be unhappy about the current President of Taiwan.

There are a bunch of these that are – Iran, I think they’re not dumb enough to do this, but Iran in the Persian Gulf capturing some more American sailors or something like that. Major terrorist event overseas, blowing up an American embassy or something like that. There’s a list of things. There are not 200 of these, there are a dozen or so. Somebody ought to be sitting around thinking through options so this is not a complete blank slate.

In some of these, you don’t need to respond instantly; with Iran, you probably do. With a terrorist attack, look, 9/11 happened, and it was a while – it wasn’t a year – before Bush responded in Afghanistan, although he made the decision to respond in Afghanistan pretty quickly once we knew it was al-Qaeda. Make your decision and then give the military or CIA a few months. You really need to be ready because if you’re caught flat-footed in February, how does your administration recover from that? It might not.

KRISTOL: I was in the White House when Saddam invaded Kuwait, and that was two and a half years into a Bush Administration that was very – I guess, one and half years, I’m sorry I can’t get my math right – there was a very experienced foreign policy administration. He’d been Vice President before. I mean, with Jim Baker, you couldn’t have had more experience really – Scowcroft, Cheney. The degree of surprise and shock, and they had been signaling trouble about Saddam. Yeah, if you got that in the first month or two in your administration, that could really be something else. There’s not just Putin; there are other dictators.

ABRAMS: What do you do if Hezbollah attacks Israel and there’s a major war? What do you do if an American plane gets shot down over Syria or Iraq? Bush early on – I think it was March or something like that – had the Chinese shoot down an American jet. Again, this brand-new team.

KRISTOL: That’s where Trump is so different. Hillary Clinton is more like, Bush 41 taking over, good or bad, but nonetheless, experienced. She’ll have people with experience. She’s been through crises many times. A new President with a new team, with no Washington experience, that really would be – needn’t be bad, would just different.

ABRAMS: For Trump, it means the selection of personnel is doubly important, and it means the transition, the post-election transition, you’ve got 10 weeks, I guess. Critically important to raise the level. You’re not campaigning anymore, raise the level of foreign and defense knowledge. Spend a lot of time with, I was going to say with the CIA Director or Secretary of Defense. He may not trust these people. But find people you do trust. If it’s Trump, I’d say you need to spend a little more time with George Shultz and Henry Kissinger.

I would hope he would spend some time George W. Bush who would be his Republican predecessor. It can be very useful, and you know I don't want to be insulting him, but we're telling the truth here, which is he is less prepared for this job on paper than anyone has ever been. We've had people before who had not been in government office, but they tended to be generals – Eisenhower, Grant.

KRISTOL: People who hadn't been in federal office, like a Reagan or Carter, but they had been governors. And people who haven't been in executive office, Obama, John Kennedy in a way, they had been Senators. In some aspect or another, these people were at least nominally prepared, I suppose. Obama, you could argue was the least sort of you know –

ABRAMS: That is not a happy comparison.

KRISTOL: Iran happened, and the Green Revolution was three or four months in.

ABRAMS: He mishandled it badly.

KRISTOL: Whether that was his ideological preselection or just some degree of just being – I do have the impression some of it was kind of, you know, not wanting to deal with a crisis and pretending it wasn't a crisis, and he had his own thoughts.

ABRAMS: I think this is critical actually, part of it's his ideology and preparation, but there is another part of it, too.

Obama – this is I think is fairly apparent from things written about him – believes he can do everything better than everybody else. These famous quotes, "I'm a better campaign manager than my campaign manager," "I'm a better speechwriter than my" – His view basically was, "I'm the smartest person in this room, doesn't matter what the room is. I'm the smartest person here, and if you're so smart, how come you're not the President?" This is a very different from the view that presidents I worked for, Reagan and George W. Bush, had.

Their view was, "I need to surround myself with basically the smartest people I can find, and I need to listen to them. They have important things to tell me." It was not false modesty here; it's really a way of looking at solving problems. Every president needs help. Bush was a very confident man, but he didn't think he knew everything in the world. I hope that's true of Trump should he win the election, that he recognizes the dynamics between you and your advisors should be an open conversation. Period.

KRISTOL: And I guess the challenge for Secretary Clinton is more, at least from your point of view as I take it, and I would agree with it, to think of it as a fresh start. She doesn't have to do things in 2017 because not doing them, or because doing them, might call into question something she went along with in 2010 when she was Secretary of State. I think that's a bit of a risk for her and anyone like that you want to defend your previous positions and not cast doubt on them, but it would be bad to hamstring yourself in that way, I think.

ABRAMS: She would have a problem that the last third-term president, George H. W. Bush, didn't have. When Reagan left office, he was very old and his health was beginning to decline. After he left office, it declined in the couple of years a lot, and he was not seen – remember, he did that farewell address for the American people.

Boy, this is not going to be the situation for Hillary Clinton. She's got a young predecessor if she comes in, who's not even leaving Washington, which is unheard of. Everybody leaves Washington. He's going to be here. He's going to be around. He may try to discipline himself – I would certainly hope so – to keep his mouth shut, but you know if you're in Washington, that means that when you go to dinner and it's a completely off-the-record conversation, only 30 people hear it and repeat it to the press.

He would have to exercise exceptional self-discipline. If what's coming out of the Clinton White House, and this happened with George H. W. Bush towards the Reagan White House, if what's coming out is, "Thank God, they're gone, and you know, we're a lot smarter, and we're going to do a lot better, and they made so many mistakes," Obama is human, and he is going to react to that. Reagan didn't. He was gone. He is going to react to that, and his people are going to react to that, and they're not the same people.

I do think that if I were Clinton, there's a new problem that I think previous presidents haven't had. Your predecessor is young, healthy, vigorous, in Washington, likely to want to defend his record.

KRISTOL: And believes strongly in, I think, what he did and this was very important for the country to get out of this old-fashioned interventionism, etc. I think he believes even in Syria, which has been such a humanitarian and moral and political disaster that it was better than the alternative.

To a degree that someone like Clinton would have to rethink, you would think, Syrian policy, he will take it as a bit of a – it would be a reversal. People would see it as a reversal, it's not like it would be a big mystery, right?

ABRAMS: It creates problems for the White House and for President Clinton. But there's a deeper, maybe it's a deeper question, too, which is were that to happen, it's a very interesting division in the Democratic Party. There's the Clinton wing and what you might call, maybe, this would turn out to be the Obama/Sanders wing on foreign policy. How deep does that go?

Who is where on the Hill? What are you hearing from the grassroots? What does that mean? I think there are some people who could tell you she should be a one-term president from the point of view of age, maybe or maybe not. But you'd begin to have a fight over the future of the Democratic Party.

People talk about this fight more in terms of the Republican Party, which is fair enough, but you'd see it I think and it might – we think about Sanders and Clinton, and it might be Obama and Clinton.

KRISTOL: And with Trump? You think he would either stick to his campaign pledges or go back on some of them and turn into a more traditional Republican foreign policy? Either way, there will be people fighting on that, too.

ABRAMS: There will. Again, Trump would enter at 70. Is he a two-term president? I think many people would assume not. And if not, okay then again, we have a new generation.

There are a lot of Republican Senators. Some of them ran for president, others would step up that are in their 40s. It's not a new generation, it's two generations down. What do they think about foreign policy? How do they position themselves vis-a-vis a Trump presidency? Of course, it depends on how successful he is and how popular he is, but you know, the positioning for 2020 begins the day after the election.

KRISTOL: So really when you think about it, a new president would face a very difficult world, a difficult task getting his or her administration organized. Difficulties within his or her political party, I think, and explaining to the country even what you're doing because it's not as if the country will have been prepared by this campaign. Pretty daunting.

ABRAMS: It is pretty daunting. On the other hand, most people want this to work, and your citizens want this to work. I remember George Bush saying – this was during the Iraq War – but the difference between him and the Chinese leader Hu Jintao, at that time, was he said, "I've got 300 million people praying for me; he doesn't have any."

I think presidents can feel that kind of support and reassurance, and the truth is that the day after the election politicians may be trying to figure out 2020, but I think most Americans will say, "I voted for this person, I didn't vote for this person, but let's pray it works."

KRISTOL: That's a good note to end on. I hope the next President seeks your advice and takes your advice.

ABRAMS: After this, I don't know, but we'll see.

KRISTOL: Once this is on, it's inevitable. Easy. Elliott Abrams, thanks very much for joining me today, and thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]