

# CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

## Conversations with Bill Kristol

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Chief Strategist for Obama's 2008 and 2012 Campaigns  
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### Table of Contents

**I: 2017 and Beyond 0:15 – 43:44**

**II: On President Trump 43:44 – 1:22:06**

### **I: (0:15 – 43:44) 2017 and Beyond**

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol, welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined today by David Axelrod, the strategist behind President Obama's victory in 2008 and reelection in 2012. Many other campaigns under your belt. And now Director – is that the title? Chairman, *Éminence Grise*, Dictator. Of the Institute [of Politics].

AXELROD: I should get that on a card.

KRISTOL: That would be very appropriate of the University of Chicago, a French title. Anyway at the University of Chicago, here, in Chicago, where we are talking, in mid to late February. You've done an excellent job, and I want to congratulate you on bringing Republicans like me to campus.

AXELROD: And thank you for serving on the board of advisors.

KRISTOL: Happy to do it, and also for defending free speech. Which, I think Chicago, generally, as a university, has done in a more solid way than maybe some other colleges and universities.

AXELROD: I think, especially if you run an institute of politics that's committed to democratic institutions, then, certainly, free speech is one of those things you need to stand up for.

KRISTOL: I'm with you on that. So, what do you make of the moment here? It's a month into the Trump presidency, not something you or I expected, I suppose. I think President Obama – you and President Obama didn't sit around in 2014, 2015 saying, "You know, I think a Trump succession would be the way to go."

AXELROD: No, but you know – we should have, and I'll tell you why, Bill.

When I was talking to Barack Obama about whether he should run for president, what I told him was, my experience in participating in observing presidential politics, is that when an incumbent president leaves office, people never pick the replica of what they had. They almost always choose the remedy. I mean, not just so much about party, but about personality, approach, style. And I felt that Obama had a good

chance in 2008 because he was the most distinct option to replace George W. Bush – the antithesis of George W. Bush. He was thoughtful, deliberative; he wasn't impulsive. He seemed like a guy who really understood the nuances and the complexities of the world. And I think that bore out.

So, if the theory was then that people choose the antithesis, who could be more antithetical to Barack Obama than Donald Trump? You wouldn't apply any of the adjectives I just used to him. And, I feel deficient because I didn't treat it seriously enough early enough.

I think a lot of elites – and, sadly, I have to include myself in that regard – did the same because he seemed so improbable when you think about the presidency and what we've had before. We simply couldn't, we couldn't get our arms around it.

But, you know, I would go to – I have a home in rural Michigan – I would go, and I would see Trump signs in every yard, *yards* not lawns. Yards. Good people, hardworking people, good neighbors, and they'd just felt disrespected and kind of detached from American, from the economy and also from the culture that was growing up around them. And Trump spoke to them in a really, really big way. And I should have paid more attention to what I saw. If I was going to write a book about the election, it would be: *Who are you going to believe? Your lying eyes or this data?* And my lying eyes were right. These folks were very much with Trump.

KRISTOL: I was totally wrong, too. Another way to say it is: *Who are you going to believe? Your lying eyes or history?* When there's *never* been a president who hadn't been an elected official, or a cabinet officer, or a general officer, in the military. You sort of think, well, okay, it held for 44 of them, it's probably going to hold for the 45<sup>th</sup>. And we were wrong.

I mean, do you think – how much of it was, you know, right man in the right place? Lucky to have a Bush as his opponent, lucky to have Hillary Clinton? How much of it is a “big moment,” where it's changed the character, perhaps, of presidential politics?

AXELROD: Well, I don't think we should underestimate the moment, but I also think that he was awfully lucky. He was awfully lucky because the field, the Republican field laid out in a way that he was really distinctive and while the opposition to him was kind of Balkanized. As you pointed out, Bush started as the frontrunner, the sort of avatar of the Republican establishment. So he got lucky there.

And he got lucky with Hillary Clinton. I have a lot of respect for Hillary Clinton, I know her well. I think she was a fine public official and had a lot to offer, but she's not a good politician. She's just not a good politician. And that, I think, was reflected in this campaign.

I think the campaign made some mistakes. Remember, Donald Trump got 46% of the vote; 54% of Americans voted against him. And he won by the margin of about 70,000 votes in the three states that actually made the difference – Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. In the case of Michigan and Wisconsin, the campaign made a decision not to spend a lot of time or resources –

KRISTOL: The Clinton campaign?

AXELROD: The Clinton campaign. So, you know, they made Trump's job easy in that way.

The second way, and you and I have discussed this, is the message of the Clinton campaign seemed to be, “We have a new coalition: it's minorities, it's women, it's young people, and you, working-class white guys, we don't really need you.” And that just exacerbated the problem for them, with a group of voters that *already* felt neglected.

Barack Obama won two elections, and by significant margins. Just for those who are following along on the math, much more significant margins than Trump –

KRISTOL: That's not what Trump says. Trump says his margin was the biggest since Reagan –

AXELROD: Yes, I liked Stephen Colbert's cut on that. He said, "He got 365, you got" – what was it, 307? Whatever – "306, and you think 306 is bigger." He said, "Betsy DeVos is *already* having an impact on our education system."

So anyway, Barack Obama in our campaigns not only campaigned in these places, but he also had an economic message that spoke to these places. Even though he did target the same coalition that Hillary Clinton was going after, he didn't *limit* himself to it. Therefore, he did better than she did in, you know, there were 200 counties that Barack Obama carried that Hillary Clinton didn't. You look at –

KRISTOL: And those are mostly white, probably working-class counties?

AXELROD: Absolutely. Macomb County [MI], which is the kind of iconic white, working class, the Reagan-Democrat county that everybody studied forever, Barack Obama carried that county by four points in 2012. She lost by 14.

The area around Scranton [PA], he [Obama] won by, I think – I don't know what actually the margin was, maybe 5 points – Donald Trump won by 20 in those areas. So, all over the country you see that. And it's because Obama had an economic message, and it was an economic message that was resonate with those voters.

KRISTOL: You think it was the economic issue, primarily, for Trump?

AXELROD: Yeah, there's no doubt about it. But change in general. I think for voters who are frustrated – frustrated not just with the economy, although I think the economy was central, but the general drift of culture. The changing face of America, and so on. He represented change, and there was a great frustration with Washington in 2016, as there was in 2008. It's one of the reasons why there were these Obama/Trump voters. They're people who were voting for change in Washington. Barack Obama promised to bring people together in a new spirit of comity; he wasn't able to produce that, and so now they want an iron-fisted agent of change who will try and do the same.

So, I think there were elements of commonality in some of the reasoning that voters applied when they elected Trump, and it had to do with change. When you look at the exit polls, there were questions about what was the most important element in your decision – the one that carried by a plurality was "someone who will change," who will shake up Washington. Donald Trump won that category by, I think, I think he got 82% of those voters. So, I think that tells you everything you need to know, in a way.

KRISTOL: I mean, I want to get on to Trump and where we go from here, but just since you have such rare experience of running and winning two presidential campaigns, could – Hillary Clinton, obviously, is disadvantaged at trying to reach voters who care about change, a) because her party had been in the White House for eight years, and she'd been a part of that. But, mostly, because she was Hillary Clinton, yes, and had been around forever, and in the White House herself for eight years, before. So, how susceptible was that to – could that number have been knocked down by good campaigning? She never would have won the change vote, but she could have knocked it to 70 from 80 [percent] or something.

AXELROD: I think it's fair to say that she was probably the *least* capable candidate. You know, President Clinton, who is as clever a politician as we've seen in our lifetime, tried to rotate the prism, and he talked about her history, which – her legitimately honorable history – and, you know, working on civil rights issues in the '70s, and working on children's issues, and so on, and the change she's made. But that's not really the kind of "change" people were talking about.

Then there was the attempt to say, well, because she's a woman, she would represent change. But that didn't work for a couple of reasons. One is, I think, that after having the first African American president, electing the first woman president seemed a little less remarkable to people. It didn't have the allure. The second thing is that Hillary Clinton spent years sort of deemphasizing the fact that she was a woman and projecting a sense that she was tough enough and strong enough. I think it's one of the reasons she was eager to be on the Armed Services Committee. I mean, she wanted to be kind of a Margaret Thatcher-type character. And I don't think people thought of her in that way. That didn't work. She was not a persuasive agent of change. She was seen as a – as she was in 2008 – as an exemplar of the Washington status quo.

KRISTOL: Having Bush as his main opponent, at least early on, in the primaries, and then Hillary Clinton as his general election opponent, certainly served Trump well, I think we can agree.

AXELROD: There's no doubt. Because his case was a full-throated incitement of the way Washington worked, or didn't work. And to the extent that his principle opponents were seen as so connected to Washington over the last 30 years, it was a layup for Trump.

KRISTOL: Do you find it startling – I'm going to come back to Trump again, but let me just stay on 2016 for a minute.

AXELROD: Hard not to talk about him. He insists you do.

KRISTOL: He does. And it's a big deal he's president. But people say, "Let's discuss things, let's put Trump aside." Isn't that the elephant in the room? To use that cliché.

But Sanders also, I think that's underestimated. If you had told me two years before the election, 45% of the electorate, of the voters in the Democratic Party and Republican Party – it's almost the same number – were going to vote for Sanders or Trump, two people who, really, are outside the mainstream, I think it's fair to say, of either party. Sanders, a guy who wouldn't even call himself a Democrat – though he caucused with them, obviously – because it was too establishment, he wanted to still be a socialist, and Trump, who wasn't a Republican until five days before the Republican primaries began and had never been elected to anything.

AXELROD: As some Republicans, no names mentioned here, were quick to point out, often.

KRISTOL: That's pretty unusual. I mean, Obama/Clinton is an interesting race. There are many interesting primaries over the last 30 years, but I don't think we've seen anything quite – certainly, not in one year – of Sanders getting 45% of the Democratic side and Trump getting 45%, and *winning*, on the Republican side. What does that –

AXELROD: I think the common elements are two.

One is the economy. There is something big going on, not just here but all over the world. I think the march of technology, which increases at a more and more rapid pace, has had enormous impact on our society, on our politics. And it's moving so quickly, we haven't really gotten our arms around it. And so, you know, what's interesting is that both of them, Sanders and Trump, aim their ire at trade, and it's a big, big target in these working class communities where there used to be factories with good middle class jobs that disappeared.

But, in a sense, they're fighting yesterday's war. Because, the issue now, we've actually brought manufacturing jobs back as other countries raise their own standards. I think 800,000 came back under Obama. But the real issue isn't Mexico and China, it's robots and computers – which are a much greater threat to middle-class jobs and a much bigger depressant on wages than trade. And it really wasn't discussed.

But it's created, we have an environment in which there's enormous wealth being generated, but it isn't being generated in a way that it's broadly shared. So, you have 20% of the country that is doing very well and 80% that are sort of peddling faster and faster to keep their place. And there is enormous frustration with that. Both Sanders and Trump talked about it. They both – Trump called it “a rigged game.” Sanders had his own version of that, but it was the same idea, which is you're the working guy out there, and you're killing yourself to try and pay your bills, and you're not being treated fairly. And we're going to make a difference, we're going to change that. That was part of it.

The other thing that they shared, and I think this is a leading indicator in presidential politics, is authenticity. You know, if you look back, the most authentic candidate tends to win presidential races. Whatever you think of Barack Obama, he's a guy who's comfortable in his own skin. Nobody ever said, “Gee, he's not really genuine.” Whatever you think about George W. Bush, comfortable in his own skin.

And their opponents, for different reasons, did not come across that way. Mitt Romney, John McCain both having to accommodate their own views to a growing conservative movement within their party, and a more populist movement within their party. You know, John Kerry and Al Gore had these authenticity problems as candidates. I mean, I like them, but that's clearly the case. Hillary, herself, had enormous authenticity problems.

Nobody ever said, “Gee, I wish Donald Trump would speak his mind.” Whatever his shortcomings, *that* is not one of them. And Bernie Sanders, because he is so unlike the sort of cookie cutter image of a Washington politician, and because he is outspoken, and ruffled, and grumpy, was utterly authentic. I mean, who would have thought that a 74-year-old guy would become this pied piper for young people all over this country? But they saw in him an authenticity.

So, it wasn't just the fact that he was championing issues that they cared about, but it was that they felt that he wasn't like other politicians – that, frankly, he wasn't full of BS. He was just telling it like it is. I think that's – there's an important lesson in that.

KRISTOL: And going forward, let's take the Democratic side first.

AXELROD: That could be a short discussion.

KRISTOL: No. Well, where does the party go? I mean, typically, a party loses an election, even though it's after eight years, and you might say they are almost predicted to lose because there is a such turnover, usually, after, you know, the party in control for eight years usually loses the White House the next time. And Hillary Clinton was a flawed candidate and whatever. But, usually, there is a reaction and insurgents rise – the Tea Party in the Republican case. And often, the reaction is to push the party – even though a more conventional analysis might say stay close to the center, and make sure you get those swing voters who went from Obama to Trump. But often, the reaction, you might say, goes the other way, and it's more a Tea Party-type thing, or we've got to be true to our principles, and tougher.

AXELROD: Well, I think you'll hear that. Certainly, you'll hear that. And there are elements of the party that believe that. And you know, as we speak, there's a party leadership battle going on, and we'll see how that turns out. Some of it is, you know, a staging area for these arguments.

First of all, I would say Democrats should not overreact to what happened in 2016. We tend to, you know, do that. The fact is, if 80,000 votes had been different in those three states, we'd be having a discussion here on how the Republican Party recovers from this election.

You know, even though I think the party was too reliant on changing demographics to carry the day in 2016, the country really is changing. And that demographic change is not going to stop. I mean, we are

becoming more diverse, there is a younger generation coming along here that is more inclined to progressive arguments, and so on.

So, one of the problems for the Republican Party is, you know, is this coalition that elected Donald Trump a durable one? We can get to your party, but there are other elements that you know – you're right in the middle of some of these discussions. Is it coherent? How do you put free traders, immigration reform advocates together with the Trump wing and have it cohere? There are probably answers to that; we should talk about that.

On the Democratic side, I've been surprised as I move around. You know, you can imagine – in the days after the election, I was invited to a lot of kind-of counseling sessions for people who were beside themselves. But what's really been sort of surprising to me as I've moved around lately – starting with the day after the Inauguration, when so many people filled the streets in Washington – is that I was expecting people who were filled with anger and despair, and what I saw were people who were very determined and kind of taking solace in and strength in community. People were – you know, I've said, "I went expecting the aftermath of Waterloo, and what I found was Woodstock." People just really happy to be with each other and determined to move forward together. And I've seen it at a variety of different events, and I've seen it reflected – I can't say these haven't been angry crowds, but the consistent turnout at some of these town hall meetings that Republicans are going to. To the point where we have Peter Roskam, a suburban congressman here, now has cancelled his town hall meetings, now he's having "town call" meetings, where you can call into the congressman because he had a bad experience, after the election, at one of his town hall meetings.

There is, I think, a very determined mood among Democrats – and as you know, Bill, in many ways, it's easier to be the opposition party politically than to hold the White House. First of all, complacency sets in when you hold the White House. But, you know, governing has its complexities, and if you're not faced with that, it's easier to organize. So I think that Democrats are going to have a much better 2018 than they would have had the election gone differently.

The big question is who emerges as a potential candidate in 2020, and just – my guess is that, at the end of the day, the party is not going to go off the left [wing] cliff. I think people are going to be looking for someone who is the *antithesis* of Donald Trump. Someone who can bring the country together, someone who has an appreciation for our institutions, you know, someone who can bring relief this sort of primal scream that we have every day right now. And, you know. But who it is, is a mystery. I would only say that four and a half years before 2008, nobody knew who Barack Obama was.

KRISTOL: Don't you think that the modern media environment, and political and fundraising environment, too, mean you *don't* have to have been around a very long time, and you *don't* have to have had years of collecting chits from county chairmen and stuff, in the way that maybe –

AXELROD: For better and worse, by the way.

KRISTOL: Right.

AXELROD: No, if you hit the zeitgeist, things can happen. I'm kind of, I came to Chicago as a young man, as a student at the University of Chicago, and I came here because I thought it would be a really interesting political town. You know, they'd had the Democratic Convention here in '68 that was famously calamitous, and Mayor Daley was still alive, the first one, last of the big city machines. And I, like most young people my age, was very much opposed to all of that. Bossism. I wanted to open up the party.

Now I find myself a little nostalgic, because you know, for all the downside of the party leader system, it also produced some pretty good leaders and there were people who – there are certain virtues to a "smoke-filled room." Not necessarily when it produces Warren Harding, as it did here in 1920, but it also

produces – you know, John F. Kennedy benefitted from a Dick Daily. Roosevelt had his bosses, and you know, so [did] Truman. I don't know that reform, you can reform yourself into oblivion, you know.

KRISTOL: But on the Democratic side – who knows, of course, and who knows, if we have a big recession, that might change all this. But you think a sort of, I don't know how to put it, a nondramatic four years in the sense of opposition party: they oppose Trump, probably across the board, on everything. They do well in 2018 just because –

AXELROD: Relative to what would have been. Although, you know, I think that depending on what happens, and I think the economy has a lot to do with it, the conventional wisdom is that the Senate is always more in play these days than the House, because of redistricting and so on.

You look at the polling right now – and I'm very much of the camp that we are literally light years away from the next election, so we shouldn't over emphasize this – but Trump, his numbers are not good, once again, among college-educated, suburban whites. And that's where a lot of these swing districts are for Republicans. So, it could be a problem for them in 2018. I would not assume that there isn't a competitive race for the House.

KRISTOL: Oh, I think the odds are 50/50 Democrats win the House, at least. So much depends on how Trump does and how the economy is, but, I mean, history would suggest that if you have a president at 40%, you're going to lose 25 seats, and that would turn the House. At least 25 seats.

AXELROD: The difference here, though, is there's less elasticity in the system than there was.

KRISTOL: Fewer competitive seats.

AXELROD: So, history's valuable but it's not necessarily predictive, but Trump adds an element to this that may create opportunity for Democrats.

KRISTOL: [The] Senate map is tough. But anyway, they win one house, maybe they win two or maybe they win zero, but you sort of think you have a more traditional 2020 – not more, a *traditional* 2020 primary in the out-party between senators and governors? You don't think *everything* has changed?

AXELROD: The thing is – one of the problems for Democrats –

KRISTOL: You're not going to have a Trump, you don't think?

AXELROD: Well, you know, I really – four years out, you want to get out of the prediction business. One of the problems for Democrats is, the Democratic Party doesn't have very many governors any more. Governors used to be a wellspring of candidacies, you know? Now, Democrats have what, thirteen states or something?

KRISTOL: A little more than that, maybe. I don't know.

AXELROD: I should know this number.

KRISTOL: 17, 18? I don't know.

AXELROD: It could be. But in any case, it's not a great number of possibilities. So, that increases the possibility that someone could come in from the outside. It's not clear to me who, you know? Now, we always, in this business, we always sit on the back of the truck and look backwards and think that that's going to predict what happens next.

So, you know – like, is Mark Cuban going to run for president, because you need your reality show host to square up with their reality show host. I think that’s a little glib. You know, my guess is that people will want someone who is more steeped in institutions because Trump is so *not* steeped in institutions.

KRISTOL: You think the not-steeped-in-institutions celebrity, millionaire, billionaire candidate may be a one off? That it’s not likely –

AXELROD: I’m not saying it could never happen again, but I think Donald Trump may have ruined it for people for a while.

KRISTOL: Right. And the new campaign finance rules, plus the weakness of the parties, plus the importance of celebrity, plus social media – some people argue this, I have no view on it, but – it changes everything? I mean, do you buy that?

AXELROD: Well, no, no – look, I think that those things are real. It takes a prodigious amount of money to run for president *or* celebrity, so you can command attention. The other option is to leverage your way up and, again, hit the *zeitgeist*. Barack Obama raised a lot of money when he announced, more than we ever anticipated, online. And it’s possible to do that. And then, if you can use those resources to score a few upsets early and become the focus, you can hit that. So I don’t think you have to be, I don’t think you have to come out of reality TV or wherever else in this environment, or come with your billions of dollars.

One of the interesting things about Trump was that one of the many things that he upended was this conventional wisdom that money is everything. Because, he was vastly outspent by Jeb Bush, for example, in the primaries, and he threw his incredible facility for commanding attention – with the cooperation of media outlets, who were hungry for the attention that he would bring – really, turned the free media, what we would call “earned media” in politics, he turned that to his advantage in an unbelievable way. It kind of called into question whether, you know, what role money is going to play in the future. But I don’t think – I just don’t think people are going to want to replicate his path in 2020. Maybe in the future, but I expect someone to be more of a counterpoint to Trump than a copy of Trump.

KRISTOL: That’s interesting. And ideologically, just to finish up on the Democrats, maybe. Do you think, basically, it’s continuity? That if you take the Obama 2008 or 2012 platforms and adjust for changes in the country, obviously, and some things haven’t been accomplished, and so forth, it looks like pretty similar. Are there radical changes within liberalism? I’d say on the Republican, the conservative side, there are clearly big fights. I mean, on economics, on trade.

AXELROD: You know, I think there are gradations within the Democratic Party. There are people who are tougher on Wall St. or slightly less tough on Wall St. There are people who want more of a social structure, enhanced social structure to help people; there are people who are less committed. But there are gradations around the same themes. I think that Democrats, generally, are committed to the same progressive agenda.

And here’s the thing, Bill – I don’t think it’s a radical agenda. I mean, I think that it is a majority agenda in the country. Most people believe that, now, we actually shouldn’t have people who can’t get healthcare; most people believe we should have reasonable environmental regulations. You know, most people believe that if you work hard, you ought to be rewarded, and we ought to do what we can to promote those things.

I heard Mitch McConnell had a press conference this morning, I happened to be listening to it, and as often as he could, he talked about “the left-wing agenda,” which I think, probably, is fodder for the base. But I don’t think that’s the way swing voters in this country view the issues that Democrats are talking about. In that sense, I think Democrats are well positioned.



KRISTOL: Leaving aside the merits of all those positions, I rather agree with you. It does seem, just from the outside, that the Democrats, yeah, are differences in degrees along a progressive spectrum, but there's not much difference on some fundamental issues. There are some tensions within their positions.

AXELROD: Trade is an issue that does divide some Democrats.

KRISTOL: Will there be free trade Democrats left in 2020, you think? That's an interesting question.

AXELROD: Well, you know, we'll see.

The trade issue is so interesting to me because what is Trump going to do? He appears to, he wants to blow up and he has blown up the TPP [Trans-Pacific Partnership] and – he's obviously going to stop in its tracks the negotiations with Europe. But he seems to indicate, and he is going to do something with NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement]. But then, he suggests that he wants bilateral trade treaties, agreements. So, he's going to have one with Britain, and [on].

What's interesting is, all of these agreements then are going, I guess, to come before the Senate, right? Because they are going to have to vote on these things. I wonder how enthused the Republicans in the Senate are going to be to be hit with dozens of trade agreements to vote on. And I think Democrats will raise lots of issues about those.

The sad thing about it is, the reason that multilateral trade treaties are useful is that you can do like three-way trades in baseball – you need an outfielder, I need a shortstop, he needs a pitcher, and we can trade. So, Mexico lifts their standards but, in exchange, they get access to Vietnam. You have more latitude in multilateral treaties to actually score some victories for American workers and businesses, but that's not going to happen. But is he really going to come to the Senate with trade treaties, trade agreements?

KRISTOL: I don't know. Well, let's talk about Trump. Well, one more question on the Democrats, since I think, analytically, we're not far – I tend to agree with this and other people I've talked to, that it's ironic because people would have said the opposite 20 years ago. The big joke was, you know, "The Republicans have an organized party, and the Democrats aren't an organized party," whatever that famous line.

AXELROD: "That's just our tradition." Will Rogers, yeah.

KRISTOL: Actually, it's sort of now the opposite, it seems to me, and that the differences are more gradation – even, probably, on trade – among the Democrats. I guess there are tensions, you know, within the Democratic Party on identity politics, the importance of that versus more standard economic issues.

AXELROD: Well, I think that is big, because – I mean not a big difference, but I think it's a big question. Because I think, if we learn one thing in 2016, it's that if there is not an overarching economic message, you really suffer for that. So, you can't subjugate that to what you call "identity politics"; that is not a winning strategy.

You can still speak to issues of concern to various groups within our coalition, you know, within our society. But, if the impression you project – which is, I think, the one that was projected in 2016 – that the party amounts to dealing with the grievances of individual groups instead of addressing overarching issues of concern, then I think you run into problems.

KRISTOL: I guess on political correctness, too, probably. We were talking about freedom of speech at the University of Chicago at the very beginning, but it seems to me, Trump certainly benefited from the sense, among *Republicans* and conservatives at least, that there was this political correctness that

dominated the Left, dominated colleges and universities, permeated the media, and he was the guy who spoke up against it. I don't know how true that is as a voting matter, or whatever. Do you think Democrats have a sense, also, there, that they should step back a little bit, perhaps, from the excessive kind of—?

AXELROD: Well, look, I'm all for free speech. We had a protest at the university this week because we had Corey Lewandowski come [sic] interview by Bob Costa at *The Washington Post* about the campaign and about his insights into Trump. And that incited a protest, and I'm all for that. I mean, protest is a form of democracy. I am so – you know, my father was an immigrant from Eastern Europe, I am so proud and happy to live in a country where people can freely express themselves.

Where it gets off the rails is what happened in Berkeley, where – protest is one thing, vandalism is another. That, I think Trump was very well pleased by what happen in Berkeley because it gave him sort of a poster to position against. I don't think that's going to be the norm.

KRISTOL: Okay. So, the Democrats, that's interesting, maybe more – not *more* of the same, I guess isn't quite fair to say, but –

AXELROD: I don't think that – I mean, obviously, you always have to advance and move forward. You know, the test in 2020 will be, do you have a candidate who can articulate that overarching vision, that economic vision, speak to the concerns of constituencies within the party, but also offer a counterpoint to Trump in terms of civility, appreciation for institutions. And the notion that we are, at the end of the day, a united country. That's what Obama did so well.

KRISTOL: You see, that, I think, is interesting. Because I think that's where, I think, we – leaving aside the merits of it all, just sort of analytically – I think we Republicans and conservatives discounted that part of Obama as being effective rhetoric. But basically, to us, he was a pretty standard, you know, progressive, leftward side of the liberal spectrum, probably, compared to some of the Clinton Democrats. And I think we discounted, and discount too much, how important to his success it was that, you know, "There are no red states, there are no blue states, it's the United States."

AXELROD: Yes! I think people are hungry for that.

KRISTOL: I think, actually, in '08, that was important to his victory.

AXELROD: I think was Mitch McConnell's great insight, because what really propelled Obama in 2008, yes he spoke to the economic issues, but what really propelled him was this sense that we could somehow overcome this stultifying politics of Washington, red state, blue state, Republican, Democrat, and find common cause as Americans. And he really believed that. I mean, his whole career – he was famous in the Illinois legislature as a state senator for working across party lines with the Republicans. When I was doing his media in 2008, when I was putting together his message strategy, we had testimonial videos from Republican members of the – now, they ended up destroying their careers by doing it, for which I feel guilty, but, you know, he was famous for that. He really did believe that he could do that.

And there were a lot of reasons that it didn't come to pass, but one of them was McConnell's insight. We arrived there with, I think, 59 seats in the Senate and overwhelming majority in the House, we were in the midst of an economic crisis. He knew that we were going to have to do some things that were not politically palatable, and his basic attitude was, "Let him do it on his own." And he said in an interview with the *New York Times* in 2010, "If we had been putting Republican votes on these things, it would signified that he had figured this out. And we weren't going to do that." So, he understood what the power of Obama was, and he was pretty successful in blocking that sort of cohesiveness.

And the result of it was that he actually drove Obama more and more into the arms of the Democratic leadership and coalition, and became more and more reliant on them because they were the ones that

were going to deliver. If you were going to pass your program, then you had to dance with those who were willing to dance with you.

KRISTOL: And do you think that the next generation of Democrats understands what you just said about the importance of Obama's convention speech in '04, and the rhetoric in '07 and '08?

AXELROD: I think that a winning candidate will understand that. And I think it would be less important if Donald Trump weren't the president. But Trump's politics basically relies on surfing grievance, on inflaming rather than extinguishing conflicts between various segments of society. I mean, that's the nature of his politics. And I think that people are going to look for a counterpoint to that.

I don't believe that Americans, in the main, want to be bitterly divided. I don't think they want to feel, you know – and look, there are reasons that that is the case beyond politics. I mean, the kind of sorting that we've done, where professionals tend to live around – you know, white-collar professionals – around cities; rural areas feel more detached from all of that. There are reasons why we're divided, but at the end of the day, I think people – look at the Super Bowl ads, and one after another ads speaking to unity, speaking to diversity, speaking to – And I don't think they put those up idly; they spent lots of money testing those ads. Why do they test so well? They test well because people don't want to be in constant conflict; they want to believe that we – and I think Obama understood that to the end.

I know there are a lot of Republicans that see him as a divisive figure, but that's largely based on positions that he took that people objected to. His basic bearing, and his genuine orientation was one of openness to all of the country. And I think it's the reason he left with approval ratings, favorable ratings and approval ratings that were comparable to those of Clinton and Reagan.

## **II: (43:44 – 1:22:06) On President Trump**

KRISTOL: Well, let's talk about Trump since we've avoided him pretty well so far. This is the longest non-focused on Trump discussion I've had in three or four months.

AXELROD: You know, I'm sure he watches this because he watches everything. He'll probably be –

KRISTOL: He has a long attention span, too, so an hour and a half long conversation is just his taste.

AXELROD: He'll be bitter about that fact that it took this long to get into the meat of the discussion about him.

KRISTOL: You've cheered me up even more now. I kind of enjoyed this discussion, and it was interesting, very interesting. And I think you're onto something.

AXELROD: "Bill Kristol has a lousy show. Nobody watches it. And in minute 37, he said –"

KRISTOL: Right. "The FAILING Conversations with Bill Kristol." That would be great. If we can get Trump to say that or tweet that, I will feel like I've been vindicated.

So what happens? You've been both, obviously, around American politics at a high level for a long time, and in the White House in the first two years of an administration, so I mean, we're only a month in, and we don't have to talk exactly about everything that is happening –

AXELROD: It's not a "finely tuned machine."

KRISTOL: Right. But how does this go? Let's assume some of the obvious errors get sort of fixed, and it functions, and some of the ridiculous stuff stops happening.

AXELROD: I assume that that is the case.

KRISTOL: Is it doable, though? Does he have a government agenda?

AXELROD: First of all, let me say this, I think we always should add this disclaimer: the thing you learn very quickly when you work in the White House is that every day is Election Day in Washington. Every event is a transcendent event in the minds of the political community and the news media, and there's a vested interest in making it so because if you're a news outlet you want people to watch. And Trump obviously cooperates in this because he's such a show.

But the truth is, as I said earlier, there is so much to go before we even begin to think about what elections are going to be like and so on. And a lot of the things that seem extraordinarily important now may fade into obscurity as other events take hold.

So, there's still – you know, we're a month in. There's an opportunity for him if he produces in a big way on jobs, if he is able to accomplish some of the other things that he promised that seem hard to me, you know, who knows?

But I think the big concern that I would have watching his first month is every organization takes on the personality of the person on top. The Obama White House was, by White House standards, it was very tranquil, you know, in the sense that weren't knife fights going on all the time. There weren't a lot of leaks out of the White House. There were high ethical standards. And the "no drama Obama" thing was not just a line, it was a reality.

Trump is *all* drama. He has run, you know – he has a big name, but the truth is he had a small business, from the standpoint of the operation that he ran, and it was largely his family. And he could operate on whim with some impunity. You know, now, he's an entirely different place. I don't think he really knows; I don't think he totally understands what the presidency is.

People wanted someone who was from the outside who would kick the whole thing in the ass, and he was the guy. But the flip side is that is he has no understanding of the institutions that he's leading and that he has to deal with.

It makes for a chaotic situation, as does having all these competing power centers in the White House. You worked in a White House, I worked in a White House, White Houses have to have a structure to run efficiently, and there has to be someone in charge other than the president, who is the filter through which a lot of this goes – and it's generally the Chief of Staff. You can't have all these different, competing power centers – Steve Bannon, Jared Kushner, Reince Priebus, Kelly-Anne Conway – and have an efficient operation.

And the question is – this is the way he's like. People close to him say this is how he operates, creative tension and all that. You know, I don't know if he can fix that, but he's going to have to, I think, if he wants to achieve what he wants to achieve.

KRISTOL: What also strikes me is the extent to which – Obama was in sync [with the] base, and Biden, in sync with their party and on the hill. I mean, they both came from there. Rahm [Emmanuel] came from there, as Chief of Staff, from the House, so they had both bodies covered pretty well. And I mean, they had arguments about tactics and about degree, but they didn't fundamentally disagree on where they should be going. I'm not so sure that's true of the Trump and Republicans, in either house.

AXELROD: What was interesting to me in this McConnell press conference was he chastised Trump for what he called these "extra conversations." The tweets, the press conferences. He said, "You know, I have no problem with what he is doing, it's what he's saying."

And then Pence came up, and he could not be more effusive. “We love working with Mike Pence. Mike Pence is great. I can’t say enough about Mike Pence.” And that is one of the peculiarities of this situation. I mean, Pence is totally in tune with the leadership in Congress, and he’s clearly someone they’re having conversations with. I suspect Priebus is their agent within the government and all the people who came with Priebus.

But, it’s not clear where Trump fits in here. And obviously, they’re dealing with the things right now that Trump agrees with. You know, the Supreme Court justice was a big win, Gorsuch, for the right, and for conservatives, and for the mainstream conservatives in Congress.

You know, we’ll see where the tax issues goes, but if they get a big tax cut, that would fine. Deregulation, they’re all down with that. It gets complicated on some of these other issues, you know, including fiscal issues, because for years we’ve been hearing from Republicans in Congress that they want to balance budgets, and they want to bring down debt and deficits and so on.

KRISTOL: And entitlement reform.

AXELROD: Well, that’s part of it. He wants a trillion-dollar infrastructure program. I think a lot of Democrats will go along with that. He says he won’t touch Social Security and Medicare; though, as soon as you repeal the Affordable Care Act, you’re touching Medicare, because you’re repealing some prescription drug, a part of the prescription drug program. Senior costs are going to go up. You’re destabilizing Medicare finances, in a way.

But you know, obviously, Paul Ryan has been a zealot on entitlement reform. Trump has promised not to do that.

So you’re having a massive tax cut, no entitlement reform, a trillion-dollar infrastructure program – honestly, if you repeal Obamacare and the taxes and revenues within it, and I don’t know if they’ll do that, you add to the fiscal weight.

So how does this all cohere? Obviously, the trade issue, that ship has sailed, but Paul Ryan is a free trader, McConnell a free trader; so, there’s a lot of incoherence here. And you see it, the Freedom Caucus has already been agitating, not moving fast enough on the healthcare reform on repealing Obamacare.

I think that, my sense is, and you would know better than I, Republicans in Congress basically said, well he’s there, he’ll sign some stuff we want; we’ll tolerate a lot in order to get it, and you know, if the thing gets completely nuts, we’ve got Pence waiting there, you know, maybe he can take over. Which is an odd thing. As you and I have talked about, we’re not a parliamentary system. People keep saying, “Will he serve his full four years?” Yeah, I think so. I mean, he was elected to a four-year term. But even Republicans are saying, “Well, you know, Pence is our backup plan.” So, I think this is all going to be very interesting to see how this coheres.

KRISTOL: I don’t think you get that by backup plan so easily, though, without going through quite a lot of chaos and probably damage to the party.

AXELROD: And to the country.

KRISTOL: This is where I think people, there’s like this huge in-between period, between “Hope we can work with him,” and “Gee, if it goes terribly, we can just turn to Pence.” And the in-between period is, I would say, would be a failure of Republican governance, which would be extremely damaging, I should think, to the party.

I mean, whatever the voters think, they've been told over and over again, "Hey, Republican president, Republican Congress," just like they were told in '09, "Democratic president, Democratic Congress." They don't fully appreciate that Obama had much higher margins in the House and the Senate, and in terms of the vote, actually, than the Republicans do now.

But nonetheless, and the Republicans have certainly been very enthusiastic about this moment, biggest Republican moment in decades. It certainly is the biggest in a decade, just literally, there hasn't been a Republican president and Republican Congress since '05, '06, but that didn't turn out so well.

What if they just can't pass stuff? I think people are underestimating the volatility of the situation. What is the country, what is the – Where is Trump's approval rating? Where is the Republican Congress' approval rating? How much does the party start becoming a circular firing squad in, I don't know, October of 2017 if the healthcare thing has just kind of collapsed? If the tax plan – That would be the question, I think, you know?

AXELROD: It's important to keep in mind that the principle instinct of most politicians is survival. Right now, Donald Trump is sitting with a 40% approval rating nationally, but mid-80s among Republicans. So, in most of these Republican districts and most of these red states, he's still quite popular, and therefore, those representatives and those senators are going to be reluctant to go too far in opposing him. If that number begins to slip, I think it's fair to say it's not love that binds most of them to Donald Trump. He doesn't inspire great loyalty, personal loyalty. He ran against the party. You know, I think it's fair to say that he is not particularly fond of Paul Ryan, and Paul Ryan's not as much, as rosy as he projects. Right now, he's not fond of him. Steve Bannon has been a sworn enemy of Paul Ryan's. I think, if Paul Ryan got in a jam, I'm not sure that they would throw him a life preserver either.

It's going to be challenging. And you're right about the legislature. As I said to you, we had vast majorities in 2009 and 2010, and it was *still* difficult to get some of the things done that the president wanted to get done. You know, Democrats have a much stronger hand in the Senate right now. There are some rule changes that have helped, but by in large, they still have the ability, as you've said, just because they're able to get appointees through doesn't mean that they're going to be able to get policy through. Particularly, if the policy has some really thorny elements to it.

I've been watching with interest the repeal and replace movement, and what they're discovering is what those of us who worked on the issue knew. First of all, healthcare, generally, is a really difficult issue. Secondly, it's hard to take stuff away from people. Now, you see – I saw Congressman Sensenbrenner, up in Wisconsin, had sizable crowd at his town hall meeting, and he ended up telling them, "We're going to keep all those things about Obamacare that you like. We're just going to fix the stuff you don't like." Well, it's not that easy to keep all the things that they like without keeping major elements of the program.

Mike Leavitt, who was Health and Human Services Secretary under [George W.] Bush and, obviously, is an expert on these issues, was at the Institute of Politics a couple of weeks ago. And he said, "Look, the only thing I know is that for six years, Republicans were dining on this notion of repealing and replacing Obamacare, so there will legislation that is called 'repeal and replace'." He said, "That's the only thing I can tell you." He said, "Beyond that," he said, "it's anybody's guess."

And so, it's not just that issue but other issues. Governing is hard. Having the White House is hard. It's much easier to be an opposition. And a lot of these Republicans haven't had the experience of being there when they had the White House. They're going to get an education in the next few years.

KRISTOL: I think most of the Republican members of the House, and maybe of the Senate, as well, were not there the last time they had both majority and the White House, which was in '06. So they've just never gone through it before. And you have a White House, and this is very different from your White House or from the Bush White House, with very few people with any experience in doing this.

AXELROD: Yes! I mean, you look at the senior people in the White House, *none* of them have much experience. None of them have worked in a White House before. Very few of them, I don't think *any* of them have experience on Capitol Hill.

KRISTOL: Well, Pence and his people.

AXELROD: Reince Priebus is a technician. A very proficient political technician, who was a lawyer in Wisconsin and chaired the RNC. He's never been a member of Congress; he's never been on a staff, I don't think?

KRISTOL: No.

AXELROD: And you know, Bannon, Kushner. So, it's a really challenging time.

KRISTOL: I suppose, for me, I think one way things could go is he calms down a little, they pass most of the big stuff they have to pass. Sort of comparable to Obama, you know – get one or two things, but you get the big stimulus, you get Obamacare; you get a version of –

AXELROD: Dodd-Frank.

KRISTOL: Dodd-Frank, that was the other big one of the first two years. You got a slow but decent economic recovery – we can argue forever foreign policy, but whatever – I mean, you got a rough midterm election anyway. But the wheels didn't come–

AXELROD: The midterm in 2010 was a really difficult one, not just because of the healthcare fight but because the recovery, you know, it was difficult. We hadn't yet picked up the momentum that we would pick up. One of the things that we *knew* – like, I told Obama, before we ever took office, that we were going to have a disastrous midterm.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

AXELROD: Because, you know – and I told him that when we came out of an economic briefing, the big economic briefing we had and we heard how desperate the situation was. And it was clear. Larry Summers said, this is, you know, "recovery from economic crises that were caused by a financial crisis tend to be very long. They're not V-shaped recoveries." So, we knew we were in for a long haul. If you're the governing party in the midst of a bad recession, you're going to feel it. So I knew, and one of the reasons why, there were many reasons, some of them personal, that I only committed to stay for two years was I figured that if I didn't limit myself, that after the midterms there would be others that would eager for me to return to Chicago. So I was going to leave under my own volition.

KRISTOL: That's interesting that you saw that coming so early.

But I was going to say, despite that, Obama dropped down to mid-40s, maybe low-40s approval. He was, maybe, an underdog by the summer of 2011 for reelection –

AXELROD: Summer of 2011 was rough because of the shut down and the debt ceiling fight, which seemed like we were on the precipice of a major crisis.

KRISTOL: But I would say the wheels never came off. You know, you always had a pretty good chance of reelection; you held the Senate there until, through 2014. Really, we haven't had much experience of the wheels coming off of a presidency. I guess, you could argue the last two years of Bush was close, and then the financial crisis. But that was the last two years, not the first two.

AXELROD: It's interesting. You're right about Bush in the last two years, but his government itself was *better* in the last two years than in the first six.

KRISTOL: And the Surge and all that worked, I think.

AXELROD: But you're right. Politically, he was in the 20s on Election Day in 2008.

KRISTOL: But we have not seen sort of a – I just don't know what it looks like, analytically, for an administration to be, for a president to be in the mid-30s, let's just say, and for failure in a couple of your big legislative proposals – like Obamacare repeal and replace, which is kind of central to the Republican agenda for the last six years. If that's at the end of the first year, I just think we don't have much experience of how that works. What do they do on the hill? Do they run away from Trump? Do they turn against him? Do they double down with him? Does he turn on them?

AXELROD: Let me say this, if he doesn't get the stuff he wants, I don't think he'd have any problem running against the *whole* Congress, Republicans and Democrats. He has no investment in that institution.

KRISTOL: And how would that work? So I guess, would he recruit challengers to Republicans in primaries or, at least, support them?

AXELROD: Well, I think there's that fear, you know, that I'm sure that Republicans who are pondering how far they should go in criticizing Trump are also measuring the potential for primary challenges that he could encourage.

But I just think, you know, if things go awry, he will turn it into a parable about how screwed up the town is and that you know voting for him is a way of protesting. I think it's hard. I think this is the fundamental challenge for Trump, is it's hard to *be* Washington and *fight* Washington at the same time. By just by dint of living there, even if you take weekends at Mar-a-Lago, it's very hard to present yourself as a kind of third party in all of this.

KRISTOL: Though, it is amazing how far he's gone in that direction. He had a tweet the other day, and not to over-interpret his tweets, but it does, probably, reveal his mindset since it's unscripted, in a way. He attacked the FBI and the NSA, the National Security Agency, for leaks that had to do with Mike Flynn and all that. And it was, you know, "they've got to stop these illegal leaks; it's an outrage or disgrace," something with exclamation points and all that.

He's the President of the United States – they kind of work for him. He appoints their heads, and he appoints to whom they report, the attorney general or the director of national intelligence. If they're doing illegal leaking, he should probably do something about it as president, right? He's supposed to be making sure the laws are actually – And I really do think he doesn't think of himself – I think this is unlike every other president we've had, recently, certainly – he doesn't think of himself quite as the guy in charge of the executive branch, and if something goes wrong in the executive branch. And I mean, every president has techniques to deflect responsibility, and, "Oh, I didn't know about that, and I'll have to look into that, it's a big government." But at the end of the day, you are, you know, if something goes wrong, whether it's the Veteran's Administration, you guys had your issues. Or the healthcare website, you've got to act – you fire someone, you don't fire someone, you take responsibility, you try to make excuses. But he seems not to quite appreciate that he's in charge of it.

AXELROD: Well, I think it's bigger than that. We've had this discussion. We're contemporaries, we've seen a lot of history, we've read a lot of history. You know, the nature of democracies is administrations change, polices change. As we sit here recording this today, Congress, the Senate on its way out the door, confirmed [Scott] Pruitt as EPA Director, and I thought, I'm looking out the window, it's 60 degrees



in Chicago and snowing in the UAE, and this guy still doesn't know whether climate change is real. I don't like that.

But, I understand Donald Trump won, and he gets to appoint who he wants, and they're going to make the policies they'll make, and there will be another election and some of those policies will change. That's all part of the system. I don't think we've ever had a president who's come to office with less appreciation for what the presidency actually is, for how democracy works, for the importance of institutions. I thought his approach to the judges after the order was alarming. The "so-called judges," and you know.

The thing that separates us from, let's just say Vladimir Putin's Russia, is that he [Putin] used the courts to disqualify his principle opponent for running for president. Our courts put laws ahead of men, laws ahead of party. And you know, I'm grateful – I think we all are grateful to live in that kind of a country. He doesn't seem to get that. You know, I don't think he has *any* appreciation for it. And my big concern is less about party and more about the country and whether our institutions – how badly will our institutions be damaged by having a President of the United States who has no appreciation for them.

KRISTOL: I think that's why a lot of us who are anti-Trump on the Republican side, why we were *so* upset about him – it wasn't just that we didn't agree with him on trade or something like that – and remain upset. I wouldn't say – A lot of people hoped that, "Well, when he's elected president, he'll change some." "When he becomes president, then he'll change some."

AXELROD: He's not changing, man. This is who he is.

KRISTOL: No. He has not internalized at all the notion that he has to behave differently as president. And you know, maybe he'll get away with doing things that people like us thought you couldn't get away with. But I do think, at some point, the institutions have a certain weight.

AXELROD: Well, look, the courts worked. Whether you agree with their decision or not, or anybody agrees with their decision or not, you had four judges involved in that decision, the initial judge and a three-judge panel. Two of them happened to be Republican appointees, two of them Democratic appointees, and I thought that was a great moment, actually, for American democracy. I was actually proud that the world saw how our system worked. That you simply couldn't ordain something that was maybe contravening our laws and have it move forward as you deemed if you're President of the United States. That was great.

I think our institutions are strong, but I think they're going to be tested, and they're being tested at a time when there is diminishing trust in institutions, generally – not just here but around the world.

So, we can either have a president who helps strengthen belief in institutions or a president who helps diminish belief in institutions. And I fear we have a president right now who will, for his own political purposes, try and diminish confidence in institutions, including the news media.

KRISTOL: Yeah, and Congress – which is a pretty big institution, which I think Trump will find – they ratified his nominees, that's one thing, but I think they will not be as compliant on various issues and legislation as he hopes. And even the bureaucracy and his own appointees are going to be careful not to break the law and not to just randomly do things if he issues, tweets, or has a thought about something.

I'm less worried about him, an authoritarian Trump, in a way, than a chaos-creating Trump, which has its real dangers and damage – one of which would be to sort of erode trust in the government, as a whole, and in the institutions. I don't know that he'll destroy the institutions or take them over. I don't think that's going to happen. But you could just have a generally diminished respect for them, and a sort of chaotic situation.

AXELROD: I think that's one of the great challenges of our time, you know? There is a concern that because things are moving so quickly in the world, because, as I said, technology is driving change at such a rapid rate, that our institutions are not agile enough to deal with them. And so, that's where I think – That's where the hunger for more authoritarian leadership comes from. And you see it in Europe, as well, and elsewhere. One of the concerns I know you have and I share is that I believe in liberal democracy, and I see the attempt to erode it in places where it's been strong, and I think this is part of Putin's objective. Because the more chaos that he can create, the better off he is in the world. From his standpoint, the more he can diminish America's leadership in the world, the better off he is. So it's a concern.

KRISTOL: I just want to ask you about the White House a little bit. I mean, you've done a huge amount of politics, you've covered politics, studied history, but you hadn't worked in the White House until you worked in the White House. So what was different from what you expected?

AXELROD: First of all, look, I have to tell you, and I know it's a cliché, but as someone who – I've been steeped in this since I was 5 years old. My interest in politics goes back to John F. Kennedy, 1960, campaigning in Stuyvesant Town, New York, where I grew up, in Manhattan. As you know, a place built for returning war veterans, so there were a lot – it was in the middle of the day, so there were a lot of moms and kids. And I've been steeped, just absolutely devoured history and politics since then.

But, there's nothing like walking into that White House, and it's an honor to work there. Every day I walked in there, and I felt the history of that building. Working there is extraordinary. You learn more in a day in the White House than you would – not to impugn my university or the ones you've worked at – anywhere. Because the issues come, they're all weighty, you have access to the greatest experts, and you're serially dealing with them.

KRISTOL: What personally surprised you the most, or what were you least prepared for? You had met presidents, and you had met senators, worked very closely with them, obviously.

AXELROD: The things that I think were most challenging that may have been surprising to me was just how insular the White House is. When you work there you rarely leave. You take your meals there. And even though people come in to see you, you're largely talking to the same people.

And I always thought that I was most effective as a political strategist because I was based in Chicago and not Washington. I always wanted to hang around with people who weren't talking about, you know, the *Federal Register* or, later, *Politico*, but who were talking the things that were impacting on their lives. It was hugely valuable to me. I felt like I lost a little of my feel.

And I used to have meetings, the president used to ridicule me for it because he said it was an opportunity to eat take-out Thai food, but I used to have meetings at my apartment every week or so, or every couple of weeks, with some of the strategists and people who had worked on our campaigns, just to hear what they had to say and to tell them what was going on. Often times, they would make points that I would have known or I would have made to myself if I weren't stuck in that building. So that was kind of a revelation.

The other is how easy it is to chase rabbits down the hole. As I mentioned earlier, Washington is – every day, you know, Washington is frantic with whatever the story of the moment is. And so much of it vanishes quickly. Keeping your head about you, not overreacting to any given event and evaluating it over time is a really important thing to learn if you're going to work in the White House. And I wasn't as attuned to that until I go there.

KRISTOL: Young people, if they asked your advice? Anything in particular to study, or character traits they would need, or people's careers to study?

AXELROD: You know, I don't think you study your way into the White House. I think that there are various routes to jobs there. Campaigns are one. Working on the hill is another. Getting internships. You know, at the University of Chicago, we invest a lot of energy and resources into creating paid internships for young people throughout the government. Those are often door openers. But they all require passion and interest. And I hope people, one of the reasons I started the Institute of Politics at the University of Chicago is there's so many disincentives for young people to get involved in politics and government today.

There's been so much ugliness, and so much, you know, just negativity that when I ask kids today about a problem, their first instinct is, "Well, let's start an app. Let's engage in social media." Both of which are really powerful tools, and ones we shouldn't disdain, but they are not a substitute for government; and they're not a substitute for what politics should be.

So, I would encourage young people to turn in and not away from the system. If you don't like the way things are going, then redouble your efforts to get involved and change them. You know, Congress is going to meet with you or without you, and if you don't involve yourselves, then Congress is going to make a lot of decisions, presidents are going to make decisions that you don't like. And that's the beauty of democracy, I mean, there is a way to change things.

KRISTOL: You were a journalist before you came into politics. I guess I was a professor, and of course, this is self-serving, I sometimes tell people you don't need to go into politics when you're 21 years old. You probably should be interested in politics, but you don't need to like start climbing the greasy poll at that level. Did you find that? That it sort of helped you to come from a slightly different –

AXELROD: Oh, absolutely. My route was I started working at the *Chicago Tribune* as an intern, speaking of internships, the summer I graduated from college, and I got a job at the *Tribune* and spent 8 years there and became a political writer, became a political reporter, city hall bureau chief. And it broadened my horizons. I learned so much as a journalist. I also learned the art of telling a story. And part of communicating in politics is the ability to tell a coherent and compelling story. Much of what I did for the next 25 years in my business working with candidates was to help them tell a coherent and compelling story.

So, when I left the newspaper and went to work a gentleman you and I had talked about earlier, Paul Simon, who is sort of an original. You know, bowtie, horn-rimmed glasses, this great baritone voice from southern Illinois, southern-tinged voice. But Paul is a really honorable and interesting guy, and when he asked me to make the move I was beginning to see the way journalism was going to change, and I thought if I'm going to make a move into politics, do it with a guy who will make you proud every day. And it turned out to be a great move for me, but I definitely came to politics through journalism.

KRISTOL: So, you worked for him on his Senate campaign in '84?

AXELROD: Yeah, in 1984 I went over there, he was running against Chuck Percy, who you'll remember, Charles Percy, who was a 3-term senator from Illinois. As you remember, he accumulated some opponents within the Jewish community because he was seen as too – he called Yasser Arafat a moderate and that got him in trouble. So, it was the Reagan year, Paul got nominated, I went to work for him after the nomination, and they had what would become one of the great Senate races in the country that year.

I won over his communications director through a series of calamitous events, I ended up as the campaign manager a few months out of journalism. And I had working for me this young group of people; I was 29. David Wilhelm, who went on to become Bill Clinton's campaign manager and chairman of the Democratic National Committee, was the executive director of the campaign. A fellow named Forrest Claypool, who is now the CEO of the Chicago Public Schools and has had a number of, a long and

celebrated public career here in Chicago, was my deputy. And then we had this young field guy named Rahm Emmanuel working in that campaign.

It was really quite a crew. It was a very close, closely fought race. I'll tell you an interesting thing about it, Bill. The way it ended was this. It was very, very bitter campaign. Negative ads back and forth. A series of vituperative debates. Unlike Simon, who was a very civil guy, and so, Percy was for that matter, as well, but the two of them were just going at it. We had a final debate in which Simon decided he was going to take the gloves off, and it was just brutal. I remember, they both had hearing issues, and Percy mischaracterized something Simon said, and Simon said, "Chuck, I'll make you a deal, I'll turn up my hearing aid if you turn up yours." It was really brutal. And Simon, after that debate, his poll numbers just collapsed. It was two weeks out, and our media consultant at the time, brilliant media consultant, Bob Squires, his recommendation was we just have to redouble our negative.

I said no, we're going to do something else, we're going to go positive. And Simon cut a direct to camera ad in which he completely owned who he was, and said, you know, "I believe everybody should get a fair shot and government has to play its part in that, and my opponent says that makes me an old fashioned liberal, but I don't care. I'd rather lose with principle than win by standing for nothing. I want to be a senator you can count on." You know, we came back and Simon ended up winning a quarter of the self-described conservatives, partly because he was from southern Illinois, but a lot because people said, "You know, I may not agree with him on everything but I trust him." It was something that, you talk about authenticity, you know, I learned that lesson early in that campaign.

KRISTOL: That's maybe a nice story to end on, a sort of slightly upbeat story, here, in this age of Trump. David Axelrod, thanks so much for joining me today.

And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]