

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

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Guest: Vin Weber, Former Congressman, (R – MN)

Table of Contents

I: On American Internationalism 0:15 – 49:48

II: Trump and our Parties 49:48 – 1:33:52

I: (0:15 – 49:48) On American Internationalism

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol, welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined today by Vin Weber, an old friend. A 12-year congressman from Minnesota, 1980 to '92, in which role he was a key player in the Reagan revolution – both in legislating it and thinking it through, I would say, from the beginning. And then laying the ground work for the Republican takeover of the House a couple years after you left. And now a general *éminence grise* in Washington; conservative thinker, strategist, on the board of many philanthropic and not-for-profit organizations, including the National Endowment for Democracy – which, I think, you're chair of – which is a good organization, promoting liberal democracy.

WEBER: It is a good organization. An organization proposed by Ronald Reagan.

KRISTOL: President Ronald Reagan. Not quite consistent with Donald Trump's foreign policy.

WEBER: That's actually a big question in my mind, but let's talk about that at some point.

KRISTOL: Let's begin – you came in 1980, you were elected at the same time as Ronald Reagan.

WEBER: I always say I dragged Reagan in on my coattails.

KRISTOL: Had you been in elected politics? I can't remember.

WEBER: I had managed a Senate campaign for Rudy Boschwitz in Minnesota, who was the first Republican elected in 25 years in the state. Who is still doing very well in Minnesota, a great friend of mine. I thought that I was probably going to either work for him throughout his career or maybe go into professional political consulting or something like that.

And he talked me into to running for Congress and which – I'm not like one of these people that you read about that got up every morning since they were 7 years old and thought, *I'm going to run for office, I'm going to be a congressman*, blah, blah, blah. That was really not me. He talked me into it, and I did it, and I got elected.

KRISTOL: Was it a Democratic seat? I can't remember.

WEBER: It was the 6th District of Minnesota. It doesn't really exist in the form that it did then now, but it was held by Rick Nolan – interestingly enough, a liberal Democrat. I announced against Rick Nolan in

October of 1979 and was expecting to run against him, and in February of 1980, unexpectedly, Nolan announced that he was *not* going to seek reelection. And so I ran for an open seat and won.

KRISTOL: Let's talk about Ronald Reagan – not so much about him, but about Reaganism. There is a book that I was – not reading, but *looking at* when I was in grad school – by some Italian in the early 20th century, I think Croce was his name, *What is Living and What is Dead in the Thought of Hegel?* It occurred to me today, what is living and what is dead in Reaganism today, so many years later, in your judgment?

WEBER: I think – First of all, I think you have to sort of put Reagan in the context of a longer process, maybe beginning with the establishment of the *National Review* magazine in the '50s, and certainly, including Goldwater's nomination in 1964. And we all had a general sense, or actually, a fairly specific sense, that we were – that Reagan represented the replacement of the dominant liberal-social-welfare-state-theory that had really dominated American politics from the New Deal on. Including through Republican administrations.

We had – there was one philosophy that governed America, and Democrats may have pursued it a little more aggressively and Republicans a little more conservatively, and Republicans didn't want to spend *quite* as much money and they wanted a little more effective management, but there was a not a big difference between the basic political philosophies, as we saw it, of Roosevelt, Truman, Nixon, Eisenhower.

And Reagan did represent something very different. We thought that that liberal welfare state had sort of run its course; it was no longer yielding returns, and that this was the start of the new era. And I think that there was a lot of legitimacy to that.

We also believed, absolutely, that it was better for all people. I make that point in contrast to what I hear from a lot of conservatives today, which is they certainly believe that liberal politics, Obama politics, are bad and not helpful to the country. But there's less certainty, in my conversations with them, that if we actually implement the things Republicans want to do or conservatives want to do, that it will make life better for the vast majority of the people. There's a sense that, well, maybe we'll just have to eat our spinach. We're not going to like it, but it's better than the alternative.

We really thought, we believed that the Shining City on a Hill was symbol in many, many ways to us. Not just of the country in the world, but of what we thought we were building in the country itself. And I think some of that's been lost recently. But that's what we were all about. We were all about trying to change America to a different governing philosophy, based on a different set of principles.

KRISTOL: Economic policy and foreign policy? Which was more important?

WEBER: We always talked about –

KRISTOL: For you and for most people?

WEBER: We talked about the three-legged stool of Reaganism, which was a strong foreign policy that believed in defeating communism and advocating democratic and American virtues, and ideals, and principles around the world. That's still a very important concept.

Growth oriented economics based on free markets and what we now call supply-side economics.

And the third piece of it was a little less defined, but it was very important intellectually: that is, an approach to social policy based on the strengthening of what academics would call mediating institutions. Reagan talked about the family, the church, the neighborhood, and the workplace. All as nongovernmental institutions, but also, different from sort of an atomistic libertarianism, where there's an

individual here and the state there and nothing in between. That was a very important principle to us. And it still is an important principle, except it's much harder in policy to figure out how you actually do things through government to strengthen those nongovernmental institutions.

KRISTOL: So, I mean, do you think Reaganism: A) does address the issues of the day, or what parts of it do? I suppose, then we can talk about *politically* is it alive? I mean, is it alive substantively, and is it alive politically, I guess? Take that whichever order you want because those are both big questions.

WEBER: I still think the structure that we just talked about, of Reaganism, makes a lot of sense. I think, like any other political philosophy, the actual application of those principles changes with circumstances and time.

But there isn't a whole lot – I always laughed a little bit at Obama and the people saying, well, this is a new day and new ideas. There's really not much difference in the principles that Obama applied from those that Franklin Roosevelt applied. And I don't fault him for that. There's only a limited number of ways a government can approach solving problems, and they're based on a set of core principles and you adapt them to circumstances, but it's not like you invent some new approach to government, totally.

KRISTOL: I totally agree with that, and this probably both reflects the fact that we came to Washington in the '80s, but I guess I got sort of annoyed over the last few years because it was like, "Well, I mean, *everyone knows* you can't just *go back* to Reagan." And, "*Everyone knows* you can't just apply Reagan. It's a new era." As if, first of all, 30 years is a brand new era compared to 200 years. And secondly, as if, as you say, the principles are basically correct, there aren't *that* many alternatives, really.

WEBER: I always like the quote that's attributed to Zhou Enlai. Someone asked Zhou Enlai what he thought about the French Revolution and he said, "It's too early to tell."

Americans have a little different idea of how long a political philosophy or theory gets to be tested before you see it works; we want to have immediate results. But I still think the basic core principles that he talked about, with different applications for different circumstances, make a lot of sense today.

Take foreign policy, for instance. I still believe in strength, and I think that a military buildup is as necessary *now*, as it was when Reagan came in. I think that's almost becoming a consensus position.

Less consensus, but I believe it strongly, is I think that political stability still requires us to figure out how to promote democracy and human rights around the world. It is not easy, and we've learned some hard lessons and had failures in our attempts to do that over the last several years, that is to be sure. But I still try to think of a way that you can have stability, and prosperity, and peace in countries that are not governed the way our country is governed. And I don't see that there is an alternative anymore.

The days when we could put the Shah on the Peacock Throne and have stability through military power in Iran – those days are pretty well gone. So, the notion of exporting, if you will, democratic values, or helping to establish what we believe are *universal values* – and that's what Reagan believed – is still an important thing. As opposed to throwing that idea out, we need to figure out how we do it more effectively and better.

As you mentioned in introducing me, I've spent, now, 17 years on the board of the National Endowment for Democracy, including being its chairman. And so, I'm very dedicated to this idea. But I also realize the limitations of it, having seen things that didn't work. But it would be a huge mistake to turn away from it at this particular point in our history.

KRISTOL: More broadly, but in the same vein, it seems to me – I think we agree on this – the degree to which American power, and standing by our allies, and being willing to deploy forces and use force if necessary, and also, stand up for democracy around the world, is key to whole world order, which has

done a lot of good things in the last 70 years. So, again, I get so annoyed when people are, you know, “That was then, and this is now, and everything is a failure.” The cost of abandoning, it seems to me, that basic view –

And that is more bipartisan. That’s not just Reagan. Truman, and you could say that’s the Truman-Reagan view. And I think Obama began the departure from it on the left and, now, Trump on the right. How worried are you, sticking on foreign policy for a while, about that?

WEBER: I’m very worried about that. It was a bipartisan view for a long time – initiated, probably, by the Democrats, who were in power after World War II, and Harry Truman, and people like Scoop Jackson in the United States Senate. But it began to unravel near the end of the Cold War.

I always infuriate my Democrat friends by saying, you know, “This was a bipartisan effort at the *beginning* of the Cold War, but it was pretty much a one-party effort at the *end* of the Cold War.” Democrats lost their heart for fighting communism. They had turned – they weren’t pacifists, but they had turned in a decidedly anti-militaristic direction, and those last battles – like the battles to put intermediate-range missiles in Europe, the fight over the nuclear freeze concept, which was basically the Soviet negotiating position in arms control talks – the Democrats were all on the other side of those issues. *Most* of the Democrats, there’s always notable and honorable exceptions. But most Democrats were not there, and that’s why, when people say that Ronald Reagan won the Cold War, I think that’s a fairly defensible statement.

KRISTOL: And I do think it’s to the honor of the Republican Party that it really carried the burden for those last dozen years or so – *literally*, in the sense that it was Reagan and Bush who were president.

And if you want to go back, almost, Nixon – think about it, 20 of the last 24 years of the Cold War Era were under Republican presidencies, and with, fair, as you say, not as much Democratic support for this allegedly bipartisan view of American power, and the centrality of America standing up to the Soviet Union and so forth.

WEBER: I think it’s important to make the point. I don’t think the Democrats, in this period we’re talking about, concluded that America was equivalent to the Soviet Union. I don’t believe that. They believed in America as much as any of the rest of us did. But they’d lost their heart for the fight. And they lost confidence that we could wage the fight successfully.

So Republicans, led by Reagan, really had to do that more or less by themselves, against a lot of opposition from the left-wing base of the country. Opposition – I mentioned the missiles in Europe; aid to the Contras in Nicaragua was one of the most vicious fights of all the time that I was in Congress. Most of these battles that we look historically at, in terms of the Cold War, the Democratic Party either vacated the field or were overtly on the other side.

KRISTOL: And then, post-Cold War, it seems to me, from about ‘94, ‘95 and the Balkans through early post-Iraq, 2004, 2005 – so it’s a decade, I guess – you had a pretty good bipartisan consensus about American leadership, both in terms of deployment of force, trade, the whole kind of structure of global order?

WEBER: One of the interesting things about that period of time, the Clinton period, really, and I’m sure you remember this, but in the 1992 election, a lot of the people who were referred to as Neo-Cons – and I think that term no longer really applies to the people to whom it is applied – but at the time, a lot of those folks had a hard time choosing between Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush, because they thought that the Bush foreign policy was too much realpolitik and not dedicated to spreading American values, and they thought maybe Clinton would be better than that.

A number of them backed Clinton. Jean Kirkpatrick did not back Clinton but was famously courted by Clinton and thought about it. And he did, indeed, come into office doing a lot of things to spread American values around the world. He made some mistakes, to be sure. He backed democracy, and he completed the two biggest trade agreements – both of them initiated by Republicans, NAFTA and GATT – but the two biggest trade agreements, maybe, in the post-World War II era to that point.

KRISTOL: And expanded NATO, with Republican's support in Congress.

But that's - I guess, Iraq? - What's the moment where people say, in both parties, that started to fray? I guess, the difficulties in Iraq, then Obama's presidency? And how worried are you, now, that 8 years of Obama and 4 years of Trump really means a break from what had been pretty consistent pattern?

WEBER: All those things matter. I think you have to be honest, though, on our side of the ideological aisle. I thought George W. Bush was a fine president, and I defend a lot of things that he did. When he ran for office, though, it bothered me that he said we needed a more "humble" foreign policy. And I respect him greatly, and I respect his motivations in saying that, but it grated against me. I thought, you know, "humble" sounds like the word *apologetic* to me, and I don't think America needs to be apologetic for our foreign policy. I think America, the world needed American leadership then as much.

So, that was just a little tiny thing, but we began introducing this concept that America can't overreach and can't – we have to point out some of the flaws in our history and there was a whole cultural thing behind this, as you're well aware. It was an unraveling of kind-of the view of America's role in the world. The view that America had of itself.

Then Obama comes into office and just validates all of this negativism about American's history – the so-called "Apology Tour," which he doesn't like to acknowledge. All of us, particularly, you know, people like you and me that went to college in the '60s, '70s, you know, we know what the people on the left at that time really believed. It was an indictment of America from top to bottom.

I don't say that Obama believes all of that, or that Bill Clinton believed most of that, but there's that element of thinking there that "America, we really have done a lot of bad things." It ran out of control in the Obama administration; it gained dominance, it seems to me, in the Obama administration, that thinking that America has been more of a problem in the world than a solution to problems.

KRISTOL: And then the reaction to it turned out to be Trump. Not, you know, let's say, the reaction that we would have preferred. I mean, Romney's reaction in 2012 was very consistent with the sort of Reaganite vision of America. The kind of critique that you just made of Obama.

But having beaten back Buchanan in the '90s, if I can put it that way, and then Ron Paul, and it's always been that element, obviously, in the American right and the American public, "Fortress America" kind of isolationism, "America First." I would not have predicted, though, that the ultimate, the first Republican president after Obama would be someone who criticized Obama for doing *too much* in the world, not too little.

WEBER: I would have never have thought it either. There is an inconsistency – *internal contradiction* is probably a better term – in Trump's approach. Yes, he criticizes all of our "failed" foreign military adventures – I don't think that's entirely fair, but that's what he says. And he appeals to a lot of people when he says that.

But at the same time, what is his theme? "Make America Great Again." Normally, you would say that a part of a theme like that would include leadership in the world. And I think that, for a lot of people, it does, and it's an example of the ability, maybe, of the country, or the polity to hold two ideas in their head at the same time.

We're concerned about overreach in the world. We're concerned about draining America's treasure to pay for everybody else's problems. And at the same time, we're concerned about the fact that we've lost influence in the world, and we want to restore that leadership. Those may be contradictory or they may simply be two different ideas existing beside each other, but I don't think that Trump's campaign resolved that at all, and I still don't know which way he's going to go as President of the United States.

KRISTOL: I was going to ask that. So, which way does reality push him? Does it turn out to be politically easier not to get involved in things, because perhaps a war-weary American public won't make him pay a price. Or does it turn out to be easier, when reality shows you what happens if America doesn't get involved? Does he end up defaulting more to a foreign policy that we would like?

WEBER: I think everybody's learned a little bit about the limitations of intervention. So I suspect that military and foreign policy advisors are going to be a little more cautious about advising intervention regardless. But beyond that, you know, President Trump's signature is strength. How many times are we going to be challenged around the world before he figures out, *I've got to respond to this, or I'm going to look weak*? So, I would bet that before he's done, he finds that the uses of American power are pretty important.

KRISTOL: And Russia? While we're still on foreign policy and now on President Trump. You've actually done a lot of work on many of these, been involved in Russia, and you've done a lot of work on Putin and Putinism. Say a word about that, and how big a threat is it, and how worrisome is it that Trump seems to have decided to be friendly to Putin?

WEBER: It's very substantial, as a threat. And I think, in the context of the Cold War, I remember the comment – and I'm sure you do, too – people made about why are we so worried about – I can't remember the thinker that said that. Why do we not worry about the British or French nuclear arsenal? Because we don't have any concerns about the British or French intentions and motivations. *That's why we worry about the Russians.*

Now, there [are] substantial reasons to question the motivations and values of Vladimir Putin and the Russians when it comes to democracy and political order. It's not just that they have a different system than we do.

When I started as Chairman of the National Endowment for Democracy in the Bush Administration, we worked all around the world; there were a few places where the government made it impossible to work – like Cuba, North Korea, Iran – made it very, very difficult to work in the country, but most places we could go in. And our work, by the way, was funding *local* activists, not sending Americans in to do the work. We fund people from the country that want to build human rights, and independent media, and move towards democracy. But we didn't face, in most places, active opposition of the governments except in those exceptions I mentioned.

Putin really initiated a change in that, that has now spread to many places in the [world]. He passed what in the trade we call the Anti-NGO Law – it's still on the books, and people are prosecuted under it – which basically makes it very difficult for foreign-funded NGOs to work to promote human rights, democracy, or political activity in Russia. It was picked up by Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and, now, has been replicated by autocrats in many other places in the world.

It's not just that he is not himself a democratic leader, but that he has a philosophy of stopping the spread of democracy. That's why we worry about him. And that's why I don't know where the president will go with this. To say that a relationship with Russia would be a better thing is hard for anybody to argue. I'd rather have better relations with, I guess, everybody. But the question always is: at what cost? There's not much evidence that we can do deals with Russia for which we do not pay far greater cost than we get back in terms of benefits.

KRISTOL: And I think, judging also strategically, he's some [who] wants to undermine NATO along his borders. So it's not just that he's abstractly spreading the idea of autocracy or funding somewhat autocratic types around the world, he's then got a practical agenda that cuts against NATO as a core part of security structure.

WEBER: I think that's exactly right. We know that he's famously said that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was the worst disaster of the 20th century," so he wants to – he'd love to push NATO back. He was KGB. If you are a KGB agent, NATO is the ultimate enemy. I mean, it is, in that case, there is sort of an equivalency, not moral equivalency, but an equivalency in that they view NATO the same way we view the KGB and the Warsaw Pact, as the ultimate enemy. The difference is that NATO still exists, and he's frightened by it.

KRISTOL: You were an elected politician, and you're in touch with a ton of elected politicians, I mean, how much of this is just, gee, if we had a good articulator of the kind of foreign policy that you and I would like, the public would rally to it? And how much is there genuine public resistance, and "war weariness" and so forth, in your judgement?

WEBER: I think that there's a little bit of both. I think that there's a skepticism of our ability as a country to do things effectively in the world. That's more than, I would say, "war weariness." There's a doubt that we're going to succeed.

Even – the most classic example is the Iraq war, and it's – I do not believe that public opposition to the Iraq War is because we didn't find weapons of mass destruction, *so much* as it is because, in the aftermath of the war, we failed to stabilize Iraq.

I think there are a lot of examples. You get into the democracy promotion world, which I'm talking about, and they say, "Well, we promoted democracy in the Middle East, Hamas wins the election in Palestine and things are worse. We promote democracy in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood comes to power. We can't do anything right, and hence, we shouldn't do anything."

I think the notion that we *can't succeed* in doing things is much more important to understanding the public's mood than simply a war weariness, implying an "I can't take this anymore." I don't think that's it.

I do think that a president who articulates the need for America to get involved in the world is going to find that the country rallies behind him.

You know, this is not, really, without precedent. When Saddam Hussein went in and took Kuwait, we were still in the period that we talked about as "the Vietnam Syndrome," where Americans were not going to be in favor of intervening anywhere in the world because of the horrible experience of the Vietnam War. And Bush articulated the reasons why and strategy for pushing Saddam Hussain out of Kuwait, and the country rallied behind him very strongly, and we succeeded.

I still think that that's likely the case. If President Trump found a place in the world where he thought American interests needed us to intervene militarily, and he explained it to the country, I think the country would back him. I don't think this is – This is not a reflexively isolationist or pacifist country, in my view.

KRISTOL: And it wants to succeed.

WEBER: And it wants to succeed.

KRISTOL: I find one problem is trying to step back one foot and say, "Look, over 70 years this general mix of policies" – let's call it internationalist, somewhat interventionist, free trade – "has succeeded." I mean, just, historians are going to look at 1945 to 2015 and say hundreds of millions, maybe billions of

people come out of poverty; there are very few, really, major wars. It's very hard, I just think, it's very hard for people to make the case that the US-led post-Cold War order hasn't been a historical success.

But you make that argument, and somehow it's, "Well, that's backward looking, and it's complacent, and all you're doing is asking people to keep on doing what they've been doing." As an actual politician, I'm just curious, is there, I don't know – do you have advice for people on how to make that argument going forward in a way that's more compelling? Does one just have to wait until there's more disasters in various places and say, "Hey, look!" you know?

WEBER: It's a tough situation. I'll take the conversation in just a little different way. You used an important word, *internationalist*, which I always describe myself as being a Republican, conservative, internationalist. But the word that has become discredited now is *globalist*. And I think, there's the distinction between those two words actually leads to a fairly important discussion.

People like you and me believe – and Ronald Reagan – believe that the United States needed to lead in the world, and we needed to lead through trade, and political activity and, if necessary, military activity. We were *internationalist* in that sense.

A lot of the reaction, though, of the last few years, whether it's the Brexit vote in Britain or a lot of the reaction to Trump, is a reaction against not just American leadership in the world but America, or a nation, sacrificing sovereignty to, quote, "global institutions." That was a big part of Brexit. I was over there quite a bit in London in the lead up to and aftermath of the Brexit vote. I didn't hear so much about manufacturing jobs and things like that. I heard about unelected bureaucrats in Brussels taking away our sovereignty. And I think you've heard bits of pieces of that in this country and the resentment of the United Nations.

I think that we have to differentiate between what I would call "internationalism" and what has been discredited now as, quote, "globalism". I am a nationalist, I believe in America, I don't want America to sacrifice its sovereignty to the UN or anybody else. But I'm also an *internationalist* in the sense that I think America needs to be involved in the world, lead in the world. If we can make that distinction, I think that's still where most people in this country would be. But they don't want to give up control of their lives to multinational, international institutions, which are, in many ways, anti-democratic or at least undemocratic.

KRISTOL: I guess the political question is, does that, let's call it Reaganite internationalism – which is different from both liberal, globalist, citizen of the world, worldism, on the one hand and, let's say, narrow ethnic-nationalist, nativism on the other, to caricature a little. Do you think, going forward as a practical matter, is that a Republican, will that find itself in the Republican Party? Or, conceivably, could Democrats rediscover their inner Harry Truman or Scoop Jackson?

WEBER: I think that's very unlikely. I think the Democrats have gone way to the left and, you know, you've got a couple of generations of Democratic leadership now that have come up very suspicious of America's past leadership as well as their current leadership in the world, and I think that it's highly unlikely the Democrats are going to move [that way]. The Democrats are moving to the left. I don't know how far, or radically, but I don't think that they are likely to rediscover their Trumanesque past; they're more likely to go the other direction.

There is a question about where the Republicans are going to go, though, and I think that's a big question facing the country. And it sort of leads to the question does the two-party system itself, you know, make as much sense as it has throughout most of our lives?

The president, President Trump, has an opportunity to give definition to that. The people most suspicious of globalism, obviously, are Trump supporters. If he can articulate a role for America in the world that is consistent with sort of an anti-globalist view, he may well unite the Republican Party around a vision

that brings back those people that most feel like American sovereignty has been lost. I don't know if that's what his goal is, or if that's what he wants to do. But I'm an optimist, and I think he can do that.

KRISTOL: That's sort of a fight for the future of the Republican Party, presumably – bracketing the question of the two-party system, which we should come back to because it's very interesting as a speculative, maybe not just a speculative, matter.

But trade, I was thinking as you spoke – trade, which there had been a bipartisan consensus on, eroding on the Democratic side, pretty strong on the Republican side. I mean, TPP, the Asia deal – which you were involved in making a case for and arguing for with your former colleagues – got big support among Republican senators, as recently as, what, 2015? Didn't they vote? I guess they didn't vote on the bill, but they voted on –

WEBER: The trade promotion authority.

KRISTOL: The ability to pass the bill.

WEBER: The ability to pass it, which was, in many ways, key vote. It was assumed that if you gave the president the authority he needed to negotiate it, that Congress would ratify what he negotiated.

KRISTOL: And that got, I don't know, 80% of the Republican senators, or something? But then to nominate, and I do – so, just getting back the Democrats for a second. I kind of agree with you, just to move from national policy, to geo-political policy, to trade, will we see a free trade presidential nominee again in the next couple of cycles? I doubt it, right?

WEBER: Not a chance.

KRISTOL: Though, there was one if you think about it.

WEBER: Bill Clinton.

KRISTOL: Even though, Obama – He was careful. He ended up being in that tradition. So, that's a huge change. And of course, even more striking on the Republican side, the party that had stuck with that throughout, really, Trump runs explicitly against. It wasn't a little part of Trump's message, either, right? The "horrible trade deals," NAFTA.

WEBER: Right. NAFTA, "the worst agreement in American history." Now, let's see what actually happens.

In the first weeks of his administration, President Trump didn't change his mind on NAFTA, but he described it very differently: "We're going to make some adjustments to it here." He's met with the Canadian Prime Minister. He's met with the Mexican President. He's talked about doing and altering the deal in ways that are good for both sides. That's very different than calling it "the worst agreement in American history" and saying we're going to rip it up and throw it away.

By the way, it wasn't the worst agreement in American history; it was a very successful agreement in just about every way. So, not throwing that away is a really important thing.

One of the things that's frustrating about the debate about NAFTA – I was involved in and co-chaired a group on the outside to help the Clinton Administration to get NAFTA passed, and one of the things that we always said explicitly was, yes, this is going to be good for America. But it's also good for America *precisely because* it's good for Mexico. We didn't want 120 million poor people seething with resentment of America and our southern border. Now, it's sort of like if we give any benefits to those Mexicans, that's incomprehensible and it's unfair to American workers.

You have to think about, as I'm sure you can remember, all those decades when Mexico was nothing but a problem for us on our southern border. And, really, to rise their standard of living is in our interests. And I think that kind of underscores a lot of our approach to trade, which was, yeah, this is going to be beneficial to other countries; it's not a zero-sum game. We'll be better off, they'll be better off, and we'll be better off *because* they're better off.

KRISTOL: And even in China, where there has been, I would say, more damage to parts of the American economy than from Mexico, it's in our interest, presumably, to have a China that's getting more prosperous, and probably, therefore, more open to political liberalization, as well, than a place that's just a horrible, seething mass of –

WEBER: Exactly right. And it's in our interest to try to bring them into a rules-based trading system. There's no question a state can unfairly compete, and the Chinese do that. I don't know if they're currency manipulators or not, but they certainly use the power of the state to advantage themselves as much as they can. But that's an argument for integrating them into a trading system based on rules, and law, and transparency, as opposed to trying to isolate them.

KRISTOL: I've found the debate over the TPP, the Asia deal – with our democratic allies, not with China – particularly depressing in that respect. That's a deal that was negotiated by presidents of both parties, really. Begins under Bush, I think, and then Obama finishes it. With democratic nations in Asia, so from a geo-political point of view, it's a sort of pro-democracy, strengthening our relations with our allies, Japan, Australia, etc.

And from an economic point of view, who knows if it benefits us much or a little, but pretty hard to make the case that it hurts us in any serious way; we already have a huge amount of trade with those countries, anyway. Then for both parties to stand up – I found this personally kind of unnerving – in 2016, in the debates, and agree: “This TPP, that's no good.” If you're a foreign leader, what does that say about what's happening in America? It's *such* a reversal from 70 years of movement in that direction.

So, I want you to address that, because you did a lot of work, I think, in trying to sell the TPP, but also more broadly – sort of the earlier point I made – free trade, it's become so unfashionable to make the perfectly common-sense point that, you know what? It's been kind of good for the world to have, more or less, free trade and free movement of capital for the last 70 years.

That's not to say that tiny tweaks and little things can't be adjusted, and not to say there aren't losers from free trade. But the degree of apologizing for something that has been, on net, a pretty big benefit to the world, I find that a little startling.

WEBER: I very much agree with that. I don't know exactly what the remedy to all that is, but people have been convinced of something that's just not true, which is that their lives have been disadvantaged, on balance by, quote-unquote, “free trade.” It's preventing discussion of some more serious, underling *issues*, not problems, but issues that people need to deal with. Like the fact that we're not educating people properly for the jobs in the future, that we're not training people to utilize the technologies that are, indeed, displacing people from lots of jobs.

These are complicated issues. It's much easier to have sort of a bumper sticker campaign that says, “the Chinese and Mexicans are taking your jobs. We're going to stop that.”

It's disappointing in the sense that it's always required sort of leadership at the top on trade. There's always been the possibility that you could rouse people at the grassroots up against trade, but we had responsible leaders in both parties that came forward and resisted that, pushed back against that and tried to argue strongly for the benefits of Americans. And we haven't seen much of that from either parties' candidate in the last election.

I will say, in one regard, Trump's position is more admirable on that than Clinton's, because I think he *believes* it. I don't think Mrs. Clinton believed what she said. She simply vacated the field on a set of policies that her husband had embraced and successfully ushered through the Congress of the United States. But she caved in the face of pressure from the Democratic left, and as a result, there are no voices anymore articulating the case for trade. The case for a liberal, global order.

Our friends, my friends, your friends on Capitol Hill, Republicans who believe what we believe, are notably silent at this point. At some point, they're going to have to find their voice.

KRISTOL: I suppose if we can just avoid regress in the trade issue for the next 4 years, it's not the end of the world? Do you think? How worried are you that you really get a kind of genuine spiraling of protectionism and so forth?

WEBER: I guess I'm less worried than I was during the campaign. I was despondent during the campaign, because the rhetoric from both candidates was so horrible about trade. Now, what's happened since the election, though, is that the Trump administration, in describing their trade policy, particularly to Republicans on Capitol hill, have been very careful to not describe it as a protectionist policy and simply describe it as a better strategy for trade promotion or liberalization. I don't want to try and put words in their mouth, but it's not implausible.

I believed in GATT, NAFTA, TPP, TTIP, all those multilateral trade deals. But the president has really said is, not that he wants to be protectionist, but he doesn't believe in multilateral deals, he wants bilateral agreements. Okay, that's not the strategy that we've been pursuing, but it is a strategy that we have pursued at times. We did free trade agreements with Canada before we did NAFTA; we did free trade agreement with Israel.

The notion that you would pursue bilateral agreements as part of a strategy of trade promotion and liberalization is not necessary implausible. And if that's what President Trump, and Wilbur Ross, and Bob Lighthizer, the new USTR, are going to pursue, you know, we'll see if it works. I think people who believe in what you and I believe, in what Paul Ryan believes, and in what most Republicans on Capitol Hill believe should try to support that kind of a strategy, with the thought in mind that this is the new way in which we're going to continue to pursue the old goal, which is a liberalization of the world trading order.

KRISTOL: How about the liberal order at home? That was very much part of Reagan, and I'm not sure how much it fits into the three stools, exactly, maybe it's been neglected a little bit, which is basic rule of law, basic limited government. Obviously, that's something that's never quite – government's never as limited in practice as in theory, and there's always been picking of winners and losers, and some you know – But the degree to which, I'd say, conservatives and people who allegedly care a lot about that, and just to finish that point – the Constitution, constitutionalism was a key part to the Reagan agenda in the sense that the Supreme Court, the critique of judicial activism, and the commitment to judges like Scalia and Bork and now maybe Roberts – I think Roberts would fit, still – and Alito and Thomas and all that – and, there, Trump has been consistent in the sense of the Gorsuch nomination and sounding that way, at least, about the courts.

But then he berates individual companies, and praises individual companies. And that's something that really would have been – conservatives would have been allergic to that before. I mean, how worried are you about the sort of internal liberal democracy question? I don't know if that's a coherent way of putting the question, exactly.

WEBER: I know what you're saying. I choose to not believe that President Trump is going to fundamentally violate internal rule of law. I just don't think that he's going to do that. They are a new administration, they're not experienced, they may stumble, but I just believe they're going to act consistently with our traditions and our values.

I do think – a little different way of looking at your question is this – one of the things that has always been interesting to people is the fact that you elected Ronald Reagan, the most “anti-government” president, you know, since Coolidge, and during his presidency, confidence in government rose dramatically. I don’t think those two things are at all inconsistent.

I think Americans, contrary to what our most libertarian friends would like to see, do think that there is a role for government. And they are ready to support governmental action – probably more than most very conservative Republicans would like. But their confidence in government has to be premised on the notion that the government itself understands its limitations. And I think that’s what they saw in Reagan. They saw that, well, “We don’t need to worry about government getting too far out of control. We’ve got Ronald Reagan in the office. He can do the things that he wants to do, we’ll support him, but we know he has a sense of the limitations of government.”

Maybe that’s what helped Clinton a little bit when he said, “The era of big government is over.” Ah-ha! We have a president that recognized the limitations of government.

I think the Obama suffered a lot because that notion was erased, and the public did not think that he had any sense of the limitations of government. That he would raise taxes as much as he possibly could; that he would spend as much as he possibly could; that he would regulate as much as he possibly could, and that he would expand executive authority as much as the law would possibly allow him to do. And it’s why confidence in government – it’s one of the reasons why confidence in government is very low.

I think President Trump ought to kind of think about that. He needs to reassure people that he understands the limitations of government. Certainly, there is a lot of things in the way he’s conducted himself that lead you to believe that. I don’t think he’s a conservative ideologue, but he’s appointed a lot of people that are very much limited-government conservatives. He’s talked about deregulation and things like that. It’s not quite the same as reassuring people that you understand that there are limitations to your power as an executive.

KRISTOL: And rules and regulations, even if they’re sometimes tedious and stuff, are kind of important in a democratic process.

And I’ve been a little startled by how many members of Congress who talked a lot about that – government can’t pick winners and losers, not just because it won’t work economically, because it’s sort of inappropriate. There’s a reason we believe in free markets beyond the economic utility of markets. It’s because we think it’s a fairer way for decisions to be made or impersonal way of letting decisions be made, as opposed to, you know, a third-world kind of thing.

I guess I’m struck how many people are willing to excuse Trump’s third-worldism on our side. But maybe they think it’s sort of episodic and a little bit of an initial – he’ll move away from that, I don’t know.

WEBER: I take heart from the fact that when the president has scored victories with companies, he always describes their activity as being premised, at least partially, on the fact that they’re going to have an administration that reduces their tax burden and reduces their regulations.

That doesn’t answer your question about the propriety of a president targeting individual companies, but it puts it into context that it’s more consistent, I think, with the way we think economic policy should be conducted.

KRISTOL: So, it seems that Reaganism, you think, is alive and well or, in principle, can be and could be? Do you find it hard among younger, you spent a lot of time on the Hill, younger members of Congress, younger Republican activists, people in your state of Minnesota who are thinking of running? You know, the young Vin Webers of today? How old were you when you got elected to Congress? The 28-year-olds

who are thinking of running today – you’re in touch with them, right? They come see you to get advice and stuff. What’s your sense of that general—?

WEBER: I think they’re very idealistic, and I think, in this sense, just having a Republican president is going to be really helpful.

During the Obama years – we started off talking a little bit about this at the beginning – I talked to so many people that didn’t really have any positive vision for what their kind of government, their philosophy would accomplish. Because the objective was we had to stop Barack Obama, who people believed was going to overreach to the far left, you know. And average people said he was a socialist; the elites would never use that word, but that was a lot of grassroots – And the objective of people running for office was “We have to stop this.”

That’s not a positive, or idealistic approach; it’s also not a bad approach. I mean, if you can stop government from doing bad things, that’s an accomplishment. But it’s not a coherent governing philosophy going forward.

And I think the very fact that we have a Republican president now is changing that a little bit. As I’ve talked to people in my home state and elsewhere that are thinking about running for office, they’re encouraged. They think we’ve got a Republican president, they’re open to our ideas, we can actually do good things. Let’s think about some good things we can do now! We don’t need to worry about stopping all these horrible expansions of the state and retreats from the world that Obama was presiding over; we can actually think about doing some good things in the world, consistent with values of limited government, and market orientation, and traditional values.

KRISTOL: When you were in Congress that was a key thing, you didn’t limit yourself to supporting Reagan – you had the Conservative Opportunities Society, and various groups, and forums, and books, and publications and conferences that were trying to make the case, really, for younger, I’d say, conservatives, Republicans. A positive agenda.

WEBER: Right. Thinking politically about what was accomplished from Reagan on, and then what was not accomplished.

One way of thinking about it is this: most of my life, and yours, until Reagan got elected, it was a Democratic country. And if you asked people which party they had confidence in on virtually any issue, they’d say, “Well, I have more confidence in the Democrats.” They may have behaviorally gone to the polls and voted for Richard Nixon or Dwight Eisenhower, but they’d say, “Which party is better for the economy?” “Well, it’s the Democrats, because the Republicans gave us the Depression.” “Which party is better for foreign policy?” “Well, it’s the Democrats, because they led us through World War II.” That’s why they were Democrats.

By the time Reagan got through his first term, even, that had changed in some very substantial ways. The majorities in the country, big majorities, believed the Republican Party was the party of prosperity, the Republican Party was the party that was better able to handle the economy, the Republican Party was the better party able to create jobs – really a remarkable accomplishment from the party of Herbert Hoover.

And of course, we owned the national security issue; George McGovern and Jimmy Carter gave us that. So, in these two great big zones – foreign policy, national security, and the economy – Republicans had transformed the image of our party in substantial ways.

Where we had not done that was in a kind of a third zone, or what we’d call “social policy.” Not in terms of hot-button issues, but in the way that political scientists would talk about social policy. Democrats were still the party for healthcare, the environment, education, and all those issues. That’s what we thought, by

the end of the Reagan administration and the Bush administration, that's what we thought the new frontier was. If we can figure out how the Republican Party can propose solutions – again, consistent with our values – and programs to address those issues, that's how you achieve some dominance for the Republican Party. And it hasn't happened, and it didn't happen. That whole zone of issues is probably, today, why people say that the government has failed so much.

KRISTOL: People tried to make it happen, I guess. Intellectually, there were “reformicons” who were similar, I would say, in spirit, to what you did in the '80s, but somehow it never –

WEBER: Well, George H.W. Bush talked about “1,000 points of light,” and George W. Bush talked about “Compassionate Conservatism,” and we had a reform agenda in the W Bush administration on education and healthcare, but it didn't quite get there.

KRISTOL: That's interesting.

II: (49:48 – 1:33:52) Trump and our Parties

KRISTOL: I guess we've been discussing Donald Trump as a kind of Republican president, but that's half – that's true, of course, but we've sort of neglected the other side of the equation, which is he's an extremely unusual Republican president, having had no particular affiliation with the Republican Party until very recently.

Obviously, the first president ever, I guess, not to have held either elected office, or cabinet office, or having been a general in the United States military, so that's a part of even a broader novelty of Trump.

On the issue – I want to talk generally about the party and the party system, which you and I, I think, both have the instinct *could* change in a pretty big way. But what about Trump's election? Not so much on the issues, but who he is. Not a party guy, a huge celebrity – we really haven't had someone like that elected president since Eisenhower, but he was a general, that's kind of different. So, ever, really? In our lifetime, certainly, and before that, really.

WEBER: There's always been, the American system has always been, potentially, a little more lax in enforcing your party choice than other systems around the world. You're – I'm a Republican because I choose to be a Republican. I guess, not because I've been sorted out of being something else.

Normally, people that run for office, you know, sort of adhere to sort-of a tradition of being in the party. And even Reagan, who was maybe the most famous party-changer, he started backing Republicans in 1960 when he backed Nixon for president and spent, you know, it was 20 years that he was a Republican or, at least, behaviorally, before he actually ran for office and got elected president.

Donald Trump pushed it to a different level. Although, he was basically a Democrat not very many years ago. But that's not the important thing. The important thing is that in his coming into the Republican Party, he didn't really try to establish himself as a true-blue convert to Republicanism or anything like that. He basically said, and I think he was saying more or less, “Unlike most of you, you know, I don't buy into this whole two-party system. There are flaws with both parties. I'm running for president. I'm going to run for president as a Republican and try to make my peace with the Republican Party, but I am basically an independent.” Those are not his words; those are my interpretations of how he approached it.

And it makes some sense if you think about it this way. The Gallop Poll last year showed that the number of independents, self-unidentified in our political process, is at a record level, 41% – more than either Democrats or Republicans. So, President Trump was basically reflecting what was going on in the country. Most people were saying I don't have much use for the two parties, but we do have a system where it's pretty hard to get elected if you're not part of one of the two parties. Donald Trump said I'm going to be a Republican.

KRISTOL: What he did say, and this was important, is I will be good on the gun issue, so one of the major Republican interest groups was fine with him. I'll be pro-life and I will appoint pro-life or Supreme Court justices consistent with not embracing Roe V. Wade, let's put it that way. And on a couple of other issues, he kind of –

WEBER: Issues, by the way, not embraced by the Republican establishment when Reagan ran for the nomination.

KRISTOL: Doesn't that show – you made this point in a separate conversation we had – the interest groups are, in a way, more powerful than the party? I don't know if he could have gotten away with not being "sound" on the gun issue.

WEBER: I think you're totally right. I think that's an important thing to understand, just in the context of what's happened to partisanship in this country.

It always strikes me, we decry the partisanship of recent years, we decried it when Bush was in office, and we decried it when Obama was in office, and we're already hearing people decry it now that Trump's in office.

What we describe as "partisanship" has been accompanied by the weakening, not the strengthening of our political parties, in my view.

Many of the functions of political parties have been taken over by interest groups. Yes, on the financial side – that's what a lot of people focus on because you can now raise money quite independent of parties – but I'm thinking more on the issue side. If you're a Republican, as your comment about President Trump indicated, you want to make sure that you're okay with the gun people; you want to make sure you're okay with the pro-lifers; you want to make sure you're okay with the anti-tax cut. All of which, by the way, happen to be my positions, so I'm not saying these are illegitimate positions. But they have supplanted party leaders in terms of determining the agenda of candidates.

And on the left, you better be right with feminists; you better be right with the LGBTQ lobby; you better be right with the most extreme environmentalists, and public employee unions. They've taken the place of the Democratic Party. That's led to a weakening of the parties substantially, and parties don't mean the same thing as they used to.

Yet, we have a system in America, particularly, where it's very difficult to come to power outside of the two party structure. And I've believe that's coming, maybe coming to a breaking point or to a point of rupture.

KRISTOL: And celebrity, presumably, helps bring it to a point of rupture, right? You don't have to work your way up and get the blessing of the party bosses. That's partly because of the nominating practices of primaries, not conventions, and primaries of the presidential system. So you're from Minnesota, now that it occurs to be, Jesse Ventura actually won as a celebrity third-party independent candidate, against a pretty well-respected Republican, actually. And a Democrat.

WEBER: He ran – that's, the story on Jesse Ventura has been misinterpreted. When people say, "Well, he beat two weak candidates." That's not true at all. Norm Coleman was the mayor of the city of St. Paul, clearly the most popular Republican figure in the state at that time. Skip Humphrey was the incumbent Attorney General, son of the late Hubert Humphrey, *the* most popular elected official in *either* party in the state. *Those* are the two people that Jesse Ventura beat.

KRISTOL: And what happened in '98? I mean, the rest of us sort of watched it – governor's races, if you don't live in the state, you don't pay much attention – and he's like a wrestler, and it seemed like, "Oh my God, these fluky things happen occasionally." But was it a precursor or something?

WEBER: You know, I think at a certain level, it was. Not at every level. It's not a perfect parallel, obviously. I think the level at which it was a precursor was, if you listen to him talk and how he talked politically, he didn't talk like any other politician. I think that's true of Donald Trump, as well. And people resonated to that not because he said things so much that they agreed with, although they probably did, but more because he's not talking like those typical politicians.

Norm Coleman, my dear friend, and Skip Humphrey's my friend, too, they were very good but they were very good *conventional* politicians. They talked like politicians.

And Jesse Ventura would say things that just offended people, you know, all over the place. He was asked by a group of students, famously, what he was going to do to finance student's college educations, he said, "If you're smart enough to get into college, you ought to be smart enough to pay for college."

Nobody else would say that! It's insensitive, it's sacrificing our future, or you can say that because you're a wealthy performer. He said it, it was just fine. He insulted welfare mothers.

And, yet, nobody put it into an issues matrix and said, "Well, he's wrong on this, and he's wrong on that," they thought he was refreshing, in a strange way, and you might call it a vulgar way. But he's refreshing. He's not talking like a politician.

We saw a lot of that with Donald Trump. How often did Donald Trump say things that we thought were offensive and that were going to disqualify him? I don't think, to the average person, they said, "Damn right, that's what I think." They sort of said, "Finally, somebody that's not talking to us in this political blather that we've become accustomed to." So I think that was a forerunner in that way.

KRISTOL: Schwarzenegger, I guess, a little bit, too, in California. So I wonder, so is that – Okay, so we have a president, he's governing now as a pretty partisan Republican, ironically, not having been a Republican. He does less outreach to Democrats, I would say, than a typical beginning of a Republican administration, or even the reverse, or even Democratic administration less outreach to Republicans. He really is – maybe that's just because he thinks he can't get any votes from people, any support from the current Democratic Party?

WEBER: I think that's an important point. It's hard to say.

You can imagine a scenario in which he would come into office and had a very *non-partisan* administration: reached into Congress and grabbed a bunch of people on infrastructure and other things, and appointed a Secretary of Labor that was blessed by the AFL-CIO, because, after all, he got a lot of working class votes.

He didn't do that at all. And you're left wondering, well, is that because we maybe didn't quite understand him, or because he understands how polarized this political environment is and he couldn't get anywhere with those people?

I don't know the answer to that. He has, you're right, started his administration, at least, as a conventionally conservative Republican, with a couple of little exceptions around trade, maybe. Other than that, a very conservative Republican administration.

KRISTOL: Still, the way they got there was defeating Bush, the heir to the Republican throne, and then defeating Clinton, the heir to the Democratic throne. I do think in 2016, Sanders getting 45% of the vote

against Clinton, Trump getting 45% against the field, does suggest a lot of dissatisfaction with the orthodoxies of both parties and a willingness to look outside. I mean, Sanders was an independent.

WEBER: Sanders never said he was a Democrat.

KRISTOL: So you had this – so 45% of the electorate voted for someone who hadn't been a Democrat until the year before and someone who hadn't been a Republican until a few years before, in the Democratic and Republican primaries. So where does that go?

WEBER: People have commented for years that in any other country, we would be a three, or four, or even five party political system; that the artificial duopoly that exists doesn't really reflect the range of opinions in the United States. I think that there has been some truth to that. And I think it's getting to the point that people are not going to accept that anymore.

We do have structural impediments to a third party candidacy – mainly, geographic districts, the Electoral College, winner-take-all elections makes it very difficult for a third party to do anything other than be a spoiler.

But if you think differently about Donald Trump, and you think of him not as a Republican president but as an independent president who took over the Republican Party, you can think a little differently about that. You can see how other candidates could come forward and say, "That's my party." However, you want to describe it. The Trump Party, or the Sanders Party on the left. Make their own decisions about whether or not they want to use the Republican Party and the Democratic Party as a vehicle as Donald Trump did, but maybe not.

There are challenges to the efforts, challenges to the existing two party duopoly, if you will.

Our friend Peter Ackerman has been challenging that. (For your viewers, [he is a] businessman, scholar, former chairman of the board of the Fletcher School of Diplomacy, also a hugely successful businessman). He's been trying to find an avenue for third parties to succeed at the presidential level for a long time. He had a big victory this year, in that he won a lawsuit against the committee on presidential debates. There is now, I'd say a majority likelihood that in the next campaign, four years from now, there will be more than two candidates on the stage in the national presidential debates, which is a very big deal.

The commission on presidential debates, in my view – and I don't want to get too far off our topic – the commission on presidential debates did one very important thing, and in so doing, they created, in my view, a problem. The important thing they did was they institutionalized the notion that the presidential candidates will indeed debate, which had been in question from time to time. There's no question anymore. You're going to debate; you're going to debate because we have this organization.

But the negative side of that was that they institutionalized *only* Republican and Democrat candidates. The last candidate to be in presidential debates was Ross Perot and, under the current rules that the CFPB has sent down, Perot would not have qualified. In this campaign, Gary Johnson did not qualify. Now you can say Gary Johnson said a lot of goofy things in the campaign; he wouldn't have been a good president, but that is not the point.

The point is that a candidate, who was thought to be a credible candidate at some point, did not get chance to succeed or fail in front of a national audience, and the country tunes them out. If they don't think you're going to be on the stage debating, you're not a real candidate. And you can't raise money, and you can't get volunteers, so it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that there are really only two candidates.

And the CFPB, having institutionalized the notion that we will debate, has now frozen out anybody other than the Republican or Democratic candidate. Peter Ackerman is challenging that, perhaps successfully.

KRISTOL: So going forward, how does it happen? It's hard to predict these things, of course. Could Trump, for example, *himself* break up the two-party system as president.

WEBER: I think that is a really good question. It depends on how he feels about the Republican Party. He clearly has a hugely independent spirit. I think he's accommodated himself to the Republican leadership, and they've accommodated themselves to him. But, you know, you don't know how that relationship is going to develop over the course of the next three, four years.

And I don't know what he's going to do about reelection, but an incumbent president deciding to run outside the two-party system is very different than a first-time candidate trying to run outside the two-party system.

KRISTOL: Very different in the sense that [it's] much more doable. You mentioned to me – I think it was last night, honestly – so you deserve all credit for thinking this, I had never really speculated about that, but why couldn't he do it? He fights Republicans in Congress, let's say. Let's say they have a bad 2018, so it's not such a great brand, so to speak. You sort of want to be the Republican in 2016 after 8 years of the Democrats, but, usually, the 8-year cycle holds, and so it's probably not bad to have that party nomination. I think Trump thought that way. And it's easier than getting on the ballot as an independent, and then you're Ross Perot and you probably don't make it.

But if you're an incumbent, and then you get into a fight with Republicans, and you're in a fight with the Democrats, but you're still reasonably popular, but maybe, you kind of think deep-down, maybe I'm more likely to get 40% of the vote than 50% of the vote, and you're rich – why don't you just get yourself on the ballot as the Trump Party or just "Donald Trump"?

And there is going to be a Republican primary against you by someone serious.

WEBER: And the party label under which you're running is probably less popular than the Democratic Party label. It has been for a long time. You can make an argument that it would be very attractive for the incumbent president, after 4 years, to say, "I didn't get into this be a Republican, I got into this to Make America Great Again. I'm committed to that mission, and I can better accomplish it if I'm free of party labels."

I think that could be an appealing message to a whole lot of people. If he's trying to expand his electorate working-class folks that are not necessarily tied to the Republican Party, he may be *more* attractive to these people not as a Republican but as an independent instead.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's interesting. Do you see much of it happening at the state level? One thing I'm struck by is how little – we've had these flair ups of third partyism. The way you described Trump, incidentally, reminded me of Eisenhower, a guy who wasn't really affiliated with either party. But after all these, either Eisenhower, himself or Perot, or even Ventura or Schwarzenegger, it's surprising how *little* there's been at the state level. I guess, maybe, that's the institutional barriers?

WEBER: Yes, there are. First of all, Eisenhower is an interesting example, and this is a question about President Trump. Eisenhower, you're right, was not really a Republican or Democrat. He chose the Republican Party for a variety of reasons. But, once he became president, he decided it was his mission to "modernize" the Republican Party. He became a very loyal Republican while trying to change the party into something better.

Maybe that's what Donald Trump will do is try to devote himself towards transforming the Republican Party. I don't know, we'll find that all out.

It's harder at the state level. My part of the country, the upper Midwest, has traditionally become a home of third party candidacies. The progressive movement, the farm labor movement, the nonpartisan league, and things like that. They come and they fade, and they come and they fade. Normally, they're absorbed by one of the two parties, and you know, I think that's why.

I also think, at the state level, it's easier for the parties to accommodate those impulses. State parties look like their states much [more] than they look like the country. At a national level, if you're running for president, you know, you've got to be "the party." You define what the party is.

So, I think it's harder at the state level, but I still would expect we're going to see more of it. It's not exactly the same, but you see efforts in municipalities to change the way in which we elect people, rank-choice voting and different experiments with different ways of electing people. This reflects an unhappiness with the simple two-party system that we've had in the past.

KRISTOL: I think you'd have to be a big enough celebrity, or have a distinct enough issue to overcome the two party, you know, the Coke and Pepsi problem. It's just hard to break through against Coke and Pepsi, even if you have a slightly better soda. It needs to be really different, or some huge problem with Coke and Pepsi.

WEBER: The people we've talked about who have succeeded – whether it's Donald Trump, or Arnold Schwarzenegger, or even Ross Perot, who didn't get elected but it was a successful candidacy in many ways – they were those kind of celebrity figures.

KRISTOL: The celebrity plus money, you'd think, could really do it. If you could find the right state, that would-be an interesting question for 2018. If one were advising some super rich businessman, a Bloomberg-type or a Trump-type, whatever their views, to run, I guess most of the time, one would advise them go into this party, try to win the primary, and then you've got a good shot because this party in your state is either the majority party or close to being the majority party –

WEBER: I think that's true. I think we also, though, there's sort of an assumption in that you have to be rich to do it, but both Bernie Sanders, and Donald Trump, and Barack Obama showed that there are different ways of raising money now than there used to be. That leads to the question of, well, can you only raise that kind of money if you are a huge celebrity and everybody knows who you are, and they'll punch send and send you \$25? I'm not so sure about that.

It may be a whole different way of structuring political fundraising that enables an independent candidate – obviously, you have to have something going for you, but I think it remains to be seen. It's an open question. Can you mount a candidacy? Certainly, the barriers to political fundraising have fallen a great deal because of the internet. You can raise money now, and because of the changing nature of the media. It's, at least in theory, possible for candidates to come forward and fund a campaign without being personally wealthy.

KRISTOL: I suppose people on the Republican side like us, and we've been so obviously, and the country has been, as obsessed with Trump, and he won, so it's a whole different level, I mean it's important.

I think the Sanders phenomenon, do you agree, has been just under-covered and underappreciated as a fact? I mean, no one thought two years ago that Bernie Sanders, the most left-wing member of the Senate, presumably, someone who is too left-wing to be comfortable calling himself a Democrat so he ran as an independent, though he caucused with Democrats, would, you know, he didn't really quite come close to beating Clinton but he put a scare into her. And he got 44, I think, 45 percent of the vote nationally. It wasn't as if he was a charismatic young guy, and he wasn't an ethic candidacy or racial candidacy or something distinctive, the first woman, that was on the other foot, you know.

An old, Jewish, left-wing socialist Democrat gets 40 percent. What does that say? People haven't, generally, not internalized what that could say going forward.

Me and most of my conservative friends, we sort of look at the left as kind of a spectrum anyway. So Sanders, of course, is to the left of Obama and Clinton, but it's all kind of one swamp of big-government progressivism. And he's a little more extreme and maybe we're underestimating the distinctiveness and importance of the Sanders phenomenon.

WEBER: I think there's something there for sure. I guess what I would grab onto is that, as much as you and I may look at, certainly Obama and maybe even Clinton, as being on the left, there was no sense that they were trying to reject the American economic system.

Every now and then somebody would say, you know, "Is Barack Obama a socialist?" And the push back on that was very, very strong. How could you say that?

Well, Bernie Sanders *is* a socialist. That's, I think, the key to sort of beginning to understand the difference between his movement and others. It's a movement of people that are ready to reject the basic tenets of Americans capitalism. We haven't really had that before in a major party candidate.

A major candidacy. I don't even know how to describe it because he is not a Democrat and yet, maybe, he's the most influential figure in the Democratic Party today. He's the first person to endorse Keith Ellison for Democratic National Chairman, and he's not a Democrat.

KRISTOL: But he has become, in effect, a Democrat. It speaks to your point, which I think is a very important and I think is a huge contrast to foreign parties, is we absorb our insurgent movements, and that's very much, I think, because of the federalist nature of the party.

They don't have to absorb them in Europe, where it's centrally controlled parliamentary parties, and therefore, they don't choose to absorb them; therefore, you've got third and fourth parties on the right.

I think, generally, it's been a healthy thing in the US that you get – The Tea Party emerges on the right and it becomes part of the Republican Party, which, I think, both allows you to get, hopefully, the best of the new thinking and the insurgency, but also to not let it go off the rails into craziness. So you get Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio in the US Senate instead of having some, you know, Le Pen-like third or fourth party against the established conservative party.

And the same on the left – Sanders would be the perfect example of that. I guess if history were to obtain, I guess Sanders should be like Ted Cruz and they both ran and lost, but they're major figures in their party and one assumes they'll stay in their parties and have heirs, or in Ted Cruz's case, maybe run again four years or eight years from now.

But I don't know, maybe, as you say, with the barriers being lower, one could imagine an issue or two coming up which really splits a party, I suppose that's possible.

WEBER: Also to think about what seems to be different about this particular moment in our history. You've often had movements of people on the left or the right into party politics and they always cause alarm, whether it's the anti-war movement, or the Civil Rights movement of the Democratic Party, or on the right, the Tea Party. Goldwater, Reagan, the movement of evangelicals into the Republican Party in the 1980s.

What usually happens is you have an election or so and all those people come in and they raise hell and people get alarmed by it, and then after the election, the more irresponsible elements fade out and they go back to doing their own thing. But the ones that stay have figured out how the system works, and yes,

they want to change it and they want to improve it, but they become parts of the party and become the new party leaders.

The question is, is that still what's going to happen with the Trump phenomenon and the Republican Party? And even more the question might be with the Sanders phenomenon with the Democratic Party. Because Sanders does not appear to be trying to lead his people into being absorbed into the party, he wants to fundamentally transform the Democratic Party into something very different.

KRISTOL: I suppose one question will be, will there be real primaries in the Democratic Party in 2018? They have a bunch of moderate, sort of moderate Democrats from, at least, Trump states, red states who are up for reelection.

The normal political analysis over the last – now that people have begun looking ahead at 2018 as well – Do the Republicans have a chance to defeat Heidi Heitkamp in North Dakota, or Tester in Montana, or Joe Donnelly in Indiana?

At least, maybe we conservatives don't read the left-wing press as much as we should, I don't know, are people also talking about – I mean, these guys, once they vote to confirm a couple of Trump cabinet nominees, or vote for some Trump legislative initiative, conceivably, will they get primaried? Are we looking at a possible big fight in the Democratic Party coming up?

WEBER: I think they're headed for that. I don't know if that's going to generate candidates like that or not, but they're headed for a position where you have to be against everything that Trump wants even if you believe in it. There's no exceptions. If you're for anything that the president wants, you're going to be primaried or we are going to threaten you with primaries.

Whether they can actually recruit people, I don't know. But we saw in the Tea Party right the intensity of opinion-produced candidacies. We didn't know who was going to be running, but it produced candidacies. And it may produce them on the left.

KRISTOL: And very suddenly. We take it for granted now that it happened, Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio, I don't recall much of that happening in 2008? Was there any? I don't think so. Then, suddenly in 2010, in state after state, they're running. Some of them winning, some are costing Republican seats in Delaware and stuff. But it can happen pretty quickly.

WEBER: Some of them were people who had been gadflies in the party, and suddenly they emerged as serious candidates. And in most cases they didn't win election, but that could well happen on the left – it wouldn't surprise me at all.

And the narrative that the Democrats lost to Trump because they weren't true enough to their principles – meaning far enough to the left – has really won the day. Which we might have anticipated. That's usually the incentive, the way the dynamic discussion goes in a political party, but not always.

After the Democrats had been out of power, as you well remember, from Reagan and Bush years for 12 years, the argument by Bill Clinton, that we needed to basically move to center as Democrats, was the powerful argument. But that argument isn't even advanced in today's Democratic Party. It's all, "We haven't moved far enough to the left."

KRISTOL: That is really striking. And then, so I suppose you could have, let's say what happened with the Republicans in 2009, 2010 happening with the Democrats in 2017, '18. That would be somewhat parallel: Tea Party equals Sanders followers.

The difference would be that Obama did unite the Democrats as president, partly by bringing Hillary Clinton in, and partly because he did unite them. He was in the center, probably, center-left but enough

center that he didn't terrify centrists Democrats – there weren't many left anyway. He certainly dominated the Democratic scene. There was never serious possibility that he would get primaried, it didn't seem.

WEBER: The left and the Democratic Party felt like their guy was in. He may not have done everything they wanted, but at the end of the day, he was their guy. It's like conservatives in the '80s thought Reagan was their guy. Reagan compromised on an awful lot of things, but there was never going to be a full-scale revolt because, after all, he was our guy.

KRISTOL: And the centrists weren't going to oppose Obama because he was centrist enough. And he had Geithner and Bob Gates and people that, the first term, at least. The way Reagan, there was not going to be another John Anderson-attempt to go after Reagan in '84 because he had done well enough, and did very well, actually.

I guess the difference *this time*, the point I'm getting to: so we have, let's say, the normal fight within the out-party to define the future and, partly, disgust with the losing candidate. Just like they were disgusted with McCain in '08 and the Tea Party came up. And so the Sanders supporters this time, disgust with Hillary Clinton.

But we also have an incumbent president who it's *not* clear will unite his own party as Reagan and Obama did, and where you could imagine splits within the Republican party and primary challenges.

Now, do you see this much in 2018? Will there be Trumpite – in open seats? So, there were all these Democratic senators in red states, or purple states, open to challenge. Will there be a "Trumpite Republican" and, let's call it, an "establishment Republican" running against each other in Indiana, and Montana, and Virginia, and all over the place? Minnesota?

WEBER: We don't know. I mean, we don't know that. I think that the answer to that will become clear when we see what kind of fights emerge in the Congress itself over issues. And what kind of compromises the president is willing to make, what kind of successes the Congress has in enacting his agenda.

If you get too many votes that can be determined as "selling out" to the establishment, then you can see a Trumpite coming forward, but not necessarily with the encouragement of the president. They just assume that this is what would be good, and they're going to challenge Paul Ryan in a primary or something like that.

I think the bigger question is what happens if, for some reason, the Trump agenda falters badly in the Congress? I, by the way, like the Trump agenda by and large. I like the tax reform idea. I'm sure that whatever Betsy DeVos wants to do in education I'm going to like. Lots of things here that I think are very positive.

But what if the Trump agenda in Congress falters? Either because he doesn't lead it effectively, or because Congress is dysfunctional, or whatever reason. Is he at that point going to assert his independence, basically, and will a lot of people come forward and say the problem is we have a Congress that can't enact the president's agenda. We have to challenge Republicans in the Congress. It could happen.

KRISTOL: And does he encourage such challenges?

It's not like that never happened in American history. I need to go back and read about Roosevelt in '38, but they all got overtaken by the war, obviously, and so one doesn't know what the Democratic Party would have looked like in 1940, I think. Roosevelt having challenged a bunch of sitting senators in '38 and lost, you know, he probably wouldn't have had the 3rd term. He would have had a huge blowup. It's not inconceivable, right? It's hard to rewind the history on that.

If Trump fails in Congress, let's just say, or if Trump and the Republican Congress together, which, right now, I think most Republicans are thinking – as you said at the very beginning – Republican president, Republican Congress, might have our doubts about one or both but hopeful, better than Obama, maybe we can get some stuff done. If that is not the mood a year from now, because the tax plan is falling apart, and nothing got passed, and the Obamacare replacement wasn't agreed upon and so Obamacare still exists, or *has* been repealed but nothing is replacing it, what does that world look like, politically?

WEBER: Here – yeah, that's exactly right. What you're describing is *if the Republican Party fails*? The follow up question, then, is Donald Trump going to remain loyal to a failed Republican Party that he wasn't really part of?

I don't know the answer to that question, but I can image that maybe he'd decide *no*. "You guys couldn't get your act together. You couldn't get my agenda passed. I showed you how to win in the last election, and you failed."

KRISTOL: That's very interesting, actually. Just to close, maybe, then, by looking at the next year – we're speaking in mid-February. So, what are the, just analytically, kind of the odds of, let's just call it, "success" or "failure," to over simplify it a little bit here?

I mean, there's been a huge amount of enthusiasm, Republican president, Republican Congress, first time, obviously, since 2006. Not that 2005, 2006 was a model of success – incidentally, quite the contrary. So, maybe that's a warming sign. Still, first time in 10 years. First time, I think, for most members of the House. And maybe for most Republicans in the Senate, even – though, there is much less turnover there – that they've had a majority *and* Republican president. Since you had to have been there in 2006 for that to have been the case.

First time certainly they've had a *new* Republican president with momentum, so to speak, in the majority. What would be the moments to look for in the next six, nine, 12 months, where we could start to say this is – we are on one path or the other? What are the two or three big inflection points, or tests?

WEBER: I think the success of the Republican Party and the success of the president are tied together. And so, you have to look at the president's agenda in front of the Congress. And we can say that much of this is going to be shaped or influenced substantially by, particularly, Paul Ryan. But the question is *what happens to the president's agenda*? And the president's agenda includes reform and repeal of Obamacare, an infrastructure bill, tax reform.

KRISTOL: You think it is the president's agenda? Just to be clear. Because some people are talking about, you know, Ryan and McConnell will work it out, and the president will kind of give speeches.

WEBER: It will be seen as the president's agenda. And I don't think you can accomplish that without substantial presidential leadership. Democrats have slowed that down by obstructing the confirmation process for cabinet secretaries, but it'll go forward.

But I think they've got to do those things; I think they've got to succeed. And there are big unanswered questions. The financing of infrastructure is a big unanswered question. Implications for the deficit of all this is a big unanswered question. But I think if the Republicans don't come out of this having done some very big things, I think they're going to suffer.

I mean, we know, the normal midterm dynamic is bad for the party of the president. There's at least an outside chance the economy will sour rather than strengthen, that would be really bad. The only alternative they have is to say, you sent us the Washington to change things, and we did a number of things that are very positive.

Taxes and infrastructure are biggest on that list. I think the best you can do on healthcare is kind of neutralize it as an issue. It's not going to be a winning issue for Republicans. So they need to get past that, and then do something on tax reform, like the president wants to do, and figure out how they can deliver on infrastructure. And that is a pretty good agenda, actually.

KRISTOL: Obviously, things will happen in the world, and there will be crises and Trump will respond well or not.

WEBER: A good national security team, let's say that. For all the concerns people have expressed and the dusting up in the news of all the problems, Russia, all this other stuff. We've got really competent people at State, and Defense, and at the CIA. I feel like the national security, foreign policy complex is coming together. Maybe with a little more controversy than we wanted to see, but it's coming together pretty well.

KRISTOL: Okay, well, I hope that continues to come together. And then, of course, the world is the world. I have hope, just the world is the world. You just don't know. And the president matters.

WEBER: You're right. The world is the world. I've thought for a long time that presidents and presidential candidates, for a long time, have gone way too far in blaming everything wrong in the world on their predecessor. I think that Obama really was guilty of that with Bush.

But I think that we have been guilty of that with regard to Obama. There are some big problems in the world that are simply really difficult to solve, and, you know, I'm not pessimistic or fatalistic about it, but you have to acknowledge that this is a difficult, turmoiled time in the world.

KRISTOL: To get back to, I think, your very interesting scenario, it does seem to me – and I had not thought about this – a year from now, there could be a moment, let's just say, if the Republican agenda "fails" on the Hill – however you define that and whoever is to blame. People feel there was united Republican government for the first time in a decade, and they had big promises, big hopes of change, this was a change election and it's not happening.

Then, on the Democratic side, one has big fights, still, within that party between, let's call it, the Sanders Wing and Clinton Wing, I guess, just to make it simple. They were evenly divided in 2016, basically. Why won't they remain evenly divided? Maybe Sanders picks up some momentum, so he has a slight edge, but still there are plenty of states where, presumably, there will be resistance to that part of the party.

WEBER: As long –

KRISTOL: 2018 could be an extremely unusual year, don't you think?

WEBER: Yes, absolutely.

KRISTOL: Have we had a year when both parties were sort of battling about their identity and with primaries raging in both parties? That seems unusual to me. Usually it's one or the other.

WEBER: One or the other, but it could happen with both. I think that's entirely possible. The only advantage the Democrats have is if you have these two factions, the Sanders faction and whatever you want to call the other faction, it's easier for the more establishment faction, since they are in the minority, to accommodate the Sanders people.

If they were in the majority, which is a problem the Republicans had when the Tea Party emerged, it creates a real problem – because you can't accommodate your more, if you will, extreme faction because you've got to govern the country. Democrats don't have that problem, so it's going to be easier for them

to paper over some of these difference. Now, the downside is they will become a real left-wing party in the course of that, and I still don't think that America is a fundamentally center-left country.

KRISTOL: Which, then, just to finish up on this, if you look ahead to 2020 and that happens. Let's just say the Democrats go down that course, they don't win the majority, maybe because they're too far left or for other reasons, in 2018, where they only win one body. And then they nominate a left-wing presidential candidate in 2020. Then I guess, the question is, is there a market for a centrist? I don't know, so much depends on what Trump has done, of course.

There could be a market for a centrist against the left and Trump. Trump could be the kind of populist centrist against a conservative and a left-wing Democrat.

I mean, this is where Trump is really – I say this – and I think you and I have had this conversation before, too. The conventional view of what a third party or independent candidate would look like has always been Michael Bloomberg. It's the upscale, liberal on social issues, allegedly conservative on economics. Sort of internationalist, traditional internationalist, I would say. And there is a market for that in a world, maybe, if Bernie Sanders and Trump, I think that's really the Clinton, and Jeb Bush, and Marco Rubio, and Scott Walker and John Kasich voters, who were a lot of voters, if you think of the primaries.

But Trump has made it so complicated because he's a kind of weird sort of centrist, sort of radical populist version of something, which how does that fit into that equation?

WEBER: Well, I think you're right. I think one of the things – Trump has finally given definition to a term that I've never quite understood. But we've heard over the years, the term *the radical center*. It never made sense to me, because, you know, I'm conventional in my thinking. My politics goes from left to right and the center can be anything but radical. But I think I understand that now. Donald Trump is kind of the radical center. He's certainly not a left-winger, but he's really not a right-winger either. And yet, he's not a mushy moderate without opinions. He's a radical centrist, and stay tuned for the further definition of that term.

KRISTOL: I guess that really is the opposite of Eisenhower, and I suppose you could argue, in that respect, Eisenhower was a non-radical centrist. A responsible centrist.

WEBER: One of the problems we've seen, I think, in the – I can think of my own state of Minnesota, where *since* Jesse Ventura, no one has succeed on his party, the Reform Party's ticket, of winning the governorship. Despite the fact that some very good people have run. Tim Penny is a friend of mine, Tom Horner was a Derenberger aide, and they were both candidates who ran.

And it always struck me, as I said to one of them, I said, "The center has to be something more than splitting the difference between the left and the right." And that seems to be the problem. That's why this term *radical center* was always, at least, in theory, very appealing to people. It was something not on either of the extremes but with a very clear, definable message. Trump is the first person that's come forward to do something like that.

KRISTOL: We'll have to get back together in a year.

WEBER: And see what happens.

KRISTOL: No, seriously. Because I think this has been, for me, useful, and I always sort of say, formulaically, that I think the range of outcomes now is greater than it usually is, and we're in uncharted waters and various other clichés.

But I think this has been useful, for me, at least, in making more concrete the ways in which one has to think about that – especially the question of the party system. And especially the question not just of the Democrats having their own tensions and possible break-ups. The Republicans, though, having the same with an incumbent president possibly being the spark for the breakup – that’s very unusual, I think.

WEBER: It’s totally unusual, but, you know, we have to try and figure out what the best reflection of America at this point in time. I don’t think – people like you and me, I suppose, tend to look at it from the top and say, well, here’s what’s happening, and how’s the country going to react to what’s happening? No, it’s “how is what is happening a reflection of what is already going on in the country?”

That’s what people like you and me, who have been his critics, that’s what we probably don’t understand, is the degree to which he is a reflection of something deep in the country that we didn’t fully understand.

KRISTOL: And if it’s deep and unhappy with a two-party system that we’ve been part of and that we, you might argue, has served the country pretty well for a long time, nonetheless, it might break through those kind of various boundaries and – what’s the word I’m looking for – sort of barriers that have kept it up, whether they’re legal, impediments – But then, they were real but it may also be, as you say, with fundraising, and celebrity, and other things, they are less strong than they were, and it looks very strong until it falls apart, right?

WEBER: That’s exactly right. Then, it becomes a Potemkin village.

KRISTOL: On that note, thank you, Vin, for joining me today.

WEBER: It’s a really good discussion, lots of fun.

KRISTOL: I enjoyed it very much. And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]