

# CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

## Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Ben Sasse, U.S. Senate, R-Nebraska

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### I: (0:15 – 39:39) The Vanishing American Adult

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol, welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined today by Senator Ben Sasse, who's agreed to be my guest and whom I've asked to be on despite being a senator. We've never had an elected official, but you're not just a senator –

SASSE: Really? I didn't know that.

KRISTOL: Yes. I don't know why; it's sort of an arbitrary rule, but we're breaking it for you. You're a historian and former college president – not a former college football coach? That was your ambition, I read somewhere.

SASSE: That is still my ambition. I'm not giving up on the dream.

KRISTOL: Is that right? Good. Well, I hope this conversation helps you somehow in that effort. And a very thoughtful analyst of America. Author of a new book, *The Vanishing Adult*.

SASSE: *The Vanishing American Adult*. I try to be parochial, if we can.

KRISTOL: Yea, that's good. And a long subtitle.

SASSE: I think there's a requirement, actually, that your subtitle has to have more than a dozen words, so I had to meet that.

KRISTOL: "Our Coming of Age Crisis – and How to Rebuild a Culture of Self-Reliance." Well, there's a lot in there, and I look forward to talking more about that. The thing that struck me the most reading about you – we've known each other a little bit, but I hadn't realized this until recently: You have Senator Pat Moynihan's desk in the U.S. Senate. How did that happen? I worked for Pat Moynihan when I was in grad school and the Democratic primaries in 1976 in New York, so I knew Pat for the next 30 years, I guess. How did that happen? Talk about that.

SASSE: Well, first of all, I'm a regular listener to CONVERSATIONS, so thank you for having me. It feels different with all the cameras, because usually when I'm hearing your voice and your guests' in my ear

I'm weeding or doing some other "Honey-Do" assignment around my property that my wife says, "You've been away Monday thru Friday, now get your butt outside and make this place look less crappy."

KRISTOL: And the Conversations make that task less onerous?

SASSE: It's almost like a bass drum in the midst of weeding. So, thanks for having me. I intentionally sit in Moynihan's desk on the Senate floor. I asked for it.

KRISTOL: How does that work? Is it a place or is it a desk?

SASSE: The desk. The desk moves. People care a lot more about their place on the floor than they care about their desk; so, I evidentially got prime picking in wanting a particular desk, but my place was in the deep, deep back corner. I was 99th in seniority 27, 28 months ago, when I arrived here, and I think 91st now, but the pecking order on where you can move on the floor didn't change much, so I stayed there.

But I wanted Moynihan's desk. He is the author of the quote that's actually attributed to half a dozen people, but he's the one who actually said: "Everyone is entitled to your own opinion but you're not entitled to your own facts."

And I guess, sort of in advance of the "fake news" crisis, I've believed we're headed toward a place where there is just more and more subjectivism and we don't have a lot of shared dialogue, and it's because we don't start with shared facts. In the Senate, we rarely agree what problem we're even tackling before we start bickering and arguing about process. So, partly that, and partly because of Moynihan's concern about family structure in the mid-1960s. Even though I'm the third most conservative guy, I think, in the Senate by my voting record, I've been a big fan of Moynihan's since my undergraduate days.

KRISTOL: That's great. I think you were ahead of the curve on the fact-based problem. I remember discussing this with you when you were running in 2014, and then you spoke about it when you got to the Senate, I think, in 2015.

SASSE: I did. There used to be a tradition in the Senate that you'd wait an entire year before you spoke. Freshmen just, you know, deferred to their elders for a long time. I think the country has lots and lots of crises, and I think the Senate is a really important institution, but I don't think it's very urgent. I don't think it's focused on the most important things we face. And so, when I got there, having been a turnaround guy – I'd been a college president but I'd also done a lot of corporate strategy and not for profit strategy and interim president of x, y, and z when things were on fire – the Senate was a 6-year term, and so it provided a luxury. Sort of also a panicked Albatross, in a way. Six years is a really long time to stay in a place when you don't think it moves quickly enough.

But I knew that I had the opportunity to get to know the institution and build a work plan and an agenda. So, I interviewed I think a pretty hefty majority of the senators in private before I ever spoke on the Senate floor. And one of the things that I tackled in my maiden speech was the problem of declining shared discourse in America. I think media fragmentation is going to accelerate, and there's lots of opportunity in the digital disintermediation of lots of sectors, but not having shared facts is a really big problem for a republic.

KRISTOL: I recommend that "maiden speech," I guess. Is it still called that? That's very old-fashioned.

SASSE: That's what they call it. People can google it, it's on [YouTube](#) from November of 2015.

KRISTOL: You did wait almost a year, right? Which was unusual, I would say, in your class.

SASSE: The tradition sort of began in the 1790s and lasted until about 40 years ago.

Nothing wrong with people taking a different track, but now, some people will dive right into whatever the policy fight of the day is and speak in their first week. But I wanted to take a year to interview people and learn about the institution – what motivates people who serve there and what do they think the biggest problems are.

One of the surprise takeaways for me was that, in private, most people in the Senate believe that we have big, national problems and that the Senate isn't actually tackling those big, national problems. But everybody feels a little bit helpless on how to fix it. There's a collective action problem.

KRISTOL: Let's talk about that for a minute, then we'll get to the actual problems. So, what about that? Is it as broken as it looks from the outside? Broken in different ways? What is your analysis of the actual Congress as a whole or even our governing institutions, as a whole? Should one be in despair or in anger or –

SASSE: I don't believe in despair. I think anger's pretty unproductive, but I'll say that I think the problems are at least as big as people think, maybe bigger. I had kind of a 2x2 matrix before I got to the Senate, and maybe I won't typologize – I used to work at the Boston Consulting Group and there was this sort of cash-cow matrix.

But, I won't put people's pictures in the four quadrants, but if you had a sort of self-interested, Machiavellian dimension, and a let's call that "efficacy." And then there's a self-absorption dimension, I kind of thought that everybody in the Senate was really, really able and competent but not all that public minded.

Being in the institution, I actually think it's filled with really, really fine, well-meaning people, but maybe not quite as talented or urgent about the magnitude of the problems we face as far as what leadership is required to really tackle big, national problems.

KRISTOL: It's funny. The system is set up to deal with the problem of ambition. Ambition and counteracting ambition. But it therefore presumes a certain kind of talented, ambitious person who then, in the clash of ambitions, can be channeled to the public good. But, in a way, the failure of ambition maybe is more of a problem. Right?

SASSE: I worry that this can come-off wrong from how I mean it to sound. But I think that in lots of sectors, people are motivated by their ambition to say, "If this doesn't work, we'll figure out how you leapfrog three or four steps of incrementalism that won't work to have the big strategic conversation about what's needed." And in a weird way, even though the country is becoming, I think, more and more politically disengaged – national-media elites tends to talk about polarization, but that tends to be national-media-elite consumers that are hyper-polarized – most people don't think this city is urgent about anything that really matters to them, and so they're checking out more and more. But of the reminder – which may be declining share of the populace – that is hyper-engaged, there, there is lots of polarization and partisanship, and I don't think either of these two political parties are really up the magnitude of the challenges we face right now.

KRISTOL: It seems to me the key to this argument, and your speech, and now to your book, is that the challenges are both great and urgent. Is that fair? And under-appreciated.

So, talk a little bit about why that is. Why can't one take the attitude of, you know, "Look, we had a tough crisis in '07, '08, but we've come through that pretty well. We won the Cold War, the world is more peaceful than it has been; there are problems that we all know about – Charles Murray, Bob Putnam-type issues with working class America – but we've kind of gone through those before." I don't know, why not sort of – why are we in a period where the problems strike you as being particularly urgent and large?

SASSE: Those are useful thinkers to tag right there – sort of Murray and Putnam. I think Arthur Brooks does a great job of tackling some of these issues. So, behind whether or not you get to a partisan fight or not, and behind something like my book, which isn't at all about politics, it really is about the upstream cultural crisis about what it takes to have people that, in sort of a Tocqueville American sense, believe in their local communities and in their entrepreneurship and in their initiative and family, and in the Rotary Club, and in their places of worship.

The really important things in life, in the American view, are not political things. Whether you're talking about those cultural challenges and passing on a sort of robust sense of the meaning of America, which is not primarily about government. Government is about power; it's about compulsion. Or if you're talking narrowly about the subset of life that can be affected by power and compulsion, I think we just don't do a very good job of talking about the moment we're at in economic history.

I think you had – you've only had four kinds of economies in history. You had hunter/gathers. You had agriculture. You had industrialization and the rise of the big-tool economy, mass urbanization, mass immigration – both from countryside to city and across the oceans to American cities. And then you have this forth thing, and we don't know what to call it. Sometimes it's the "knowledge economy," the "IT economy," the "digital economy," the "service economy." Sociologists have kind of just thrown in the towel recently and started calling it "the post-industrial economy," which is a way of saying we don't know what to name it.

KRISTOL: That goes back, I think, that was sort of big when I was in grad-school. Daniel Bell.

SASSE: Daniel Bell, yea. You get this from the '50s, '60s, '70s. But, Hunter/gatherers, farmers, big-tool workers in cities, and this thing. I think this thing really is quite different. I'm not a Luddite, so I believe there will be greater economic productivity coming out of this new era, indisputably. The computer revolution is going to produce that. But it isn't clear that the benefits of it will redound to the median worker anymore.

I think the Republican Party has done just a terrible job of ceding the field about income inequality to Democrats, as if we shouldn't all be hyper-concerned about the median American family. We should. We can have a different debate about what the government's role is to intervene in the midst of that, but I think that we should acknowledge that one thing that's happening now that is new in human history is we have a shrinking duration at jobs in such a way that people are going to have to cycle through lots of different jobs and industries and vocations in their lifetime, and that's really never happened before in human history.

Hunter/gatherers and farmers, throughout most of history until 1870, you didn't pick a job. I mean, maybe somebody was a lawyer in your family, or somebody went into the clergy, but by and large, you didn't start to have a new profession: you became seven or 10 or 12 and you did more to earn your keep in the calling of your parents.

Industrialization saw people pick a job, but one time. They moved from the countryside to the city, or they finished high school, or some subset of them went to college and they got a job, but they had that until death or retirement. What's happening now is we're going to have 40 and 45 and 50 and 50-year-olds get disintermediated out of their jobs, and they're going to have to go find a new one, and there's never been a society of life-long learners and people who get job retraining in human history. It's never happened. And we have to build that now? We don't even talk about it.

KRISTOL: So, what, I mean is this – it's not hopeless, obviously. But you think this really is a huge deal, in other words. This isn't just a minority of people, and they'll adjust, and maybe people did have more than one job, even in the past. You're a historian, and I think you pointed out – maybe in the book or a piece I read – that as a historian, you're slightly prejudiced against the argument that, "Oh, this is new;

this has never happened before.” But, in this case, you’ve looked at the data and really are convinced that it’s new.

SASSE: I think so, yes. I think a historian’s job is usually to be a killjoy at a party. Right? People always think that there’s tons of discontinuity in this moment. Probably they think it’s a unique moment because we’re narcissists and we happen to be at that moment. But, usually the historian’s job is to say “actually, there’s probably a lot more continuity —“

KRISTOL: And it allows for more creativity if you’re a politician: “New moment requires new solutions!”

SASSE: “It’s never happened before, you need my leadership now!”

This is different. Because, you really haven’t had the experience of job change happening *intragenerational*. That is what’s going to happen here. It isn’t the case that the farmers were 60 and they moved to the city. It was that there [were] declining AG opportunities because there was a lot of technology that made agriculture so much more productive, the yields were higher and there was technological substitution that made labor inputs lessen. There was less need – and the cities were magnets. You had push and pull, but it was the next generation that went to the city.

What’s going to happen now is that college kids, when they graduate, they don’t just change jobs, they change industries three times in their first decade post-college. As recently as the mid-1970s – I was born in 1972. When I was just, you know, pre-entering grade school, average duration of a primary bread winner at a job, or at a firm, was still decades. Average duration at a firm now is about 4 years, and it’s going to get shorter forever more.

So this is a new thing. We can have lots of debates about what the governmental and policy response it should be, but I think the prior step, and why I wrote this book and why I intentionally made the book not at all about politics, is we need to have a conversation about the fact that self-reliance and a work ethic, and vigor, and reflection on the meaningful life, and literacy –

I mean this country is, we’re the grandchildren of Gutenberg. Gutenberg is the true American forefather; that’s the one person without whom you couldn’t have had the rise of this republic of letters, and this Republic.

And, right now, we’re not talking about all that vitality, and entrepreneurship, and innovation, and Tocquevillianism that this country was based on and how you pass it onto the next generation. We’re not doing it. So, therefore, we’re not inculcating those habits in our kids. My book is about those habits.

KRISTOL: So, explain the connection between what I think you describe as primarily an economic, I guess people would say, phenomenon – more economic/sociological, on the one hand – but the title of the book and the bulk of the book is more about, let’s call it, culture, or habits, mores, you know, Tocquevillian sort of stuff. What’s exactly the connection there?

Normally a person might hear you say what you said about jobs, and there’re all kinds of economic and job retraining programs and other ways to adjust unemployment insurance to make sure that it takes care of people in-between the jobs. There are obviously a million things, you’ve heard them all, that people could stay on that level of, let’s call it, economic or job policy. But that’s not what your book is primarily about.

SASSE: My book is about the sort of preconditions for work anchoring lives. Because it isn’t just about how do you put bread on the table. We’re the richest people in human history. Right? We live in the richest time in the richest nation the world has ever known, and in a weird way, we have all of the symptoms and dysfunctions of affluenza.

I mean, if you think about trust-fund babies across the world, or folks who've had inherited wealth in the Saudi empire, it's usually not very good for your soul, when you're 12 or 14, to just be incredibly rich. Wealth should be the fruit of your labor. And it's wonderful when people can have leisure, and when you can have time and space for reflection and for consumption, but it's production that makes people happy.

I mean the data is really clear on this. If you have a meaningful job, if you get up on Monday morning and you need to go somewhere and you think that someone needs you, by and large, you're going to be happy. If on Monday morning you don't think you're needed and there's no one that needs your work, you're almost certainly not going to be happy.

So, the correlation there isn't "is my job hard?" Do my ankles hurt, or my knees hurt, or my back hurt? Do I think I get paid enough money? Do I sit next to some jack-wagon at the office who just annoys the tar out of me? It's none of those things. Those things matter, but by and large, people in America have enough money. The median American family still has a lot of resources at their disposal. But I think, we're lonely. I think there's a lot of data that shows that we've got a problem with this disconnect between production and consumption.

One anecdote. When I became a college president I was 37. I was one of the youngest people in the country, not because anybody thought I was a genius, but because I was good at turning institutions around and this 130-year-old liberal arts college was in danger of going bankrupt, and they asked me a bunch of times to –

KRISTOL: This is in Nebraska?

SASSE: Yeah. My parents met at this school, my grandpa –

KRISTOL: What's the name of the school?

SASSE: Midland University, a historically Lutheran liberal arts college founded in 1883. When I was a high school kid and supposed to deliver my valedictory address from my high school and it poured rain and we got kicked out of the football stadium, we moved into the gym in this college across town. My grandpa fought in World War II, never went to college, but ended up for 35 years being the business manager of this school.

So, I grew up in and around this institution, and my wife and I live on a river five miles out of town from this school, and I was flying all over the country to do turnaround stuff. And so, I'm a guy who has a connection to the institution, I live down the street, and I'm a turnaround guy, and they asked me to help lead this place. I thought they were crazy for a while, until they started missing payroll and I realized they were probably going to go under, and it just meant too much to me to see that happen.

So, I agreed to take over the school, but nobody on the Board of Directors thought, "bring in this 37-year-old kid because he'll be a genius about student affairs." Student Life, the culture of the school, none of that had to do with why I was there. I was there to restructure the debt, and rebuild student recruiting, and to think about a long-term viable financial plan and to raise money. As soon as I got to the college, one of the things that just hit me like a two-by-four to the side of the head was that these kids coming into our college – you know, I'm 37, they're 18, I really don't think of myself as being a "get-off-your-lawn screaming old man, what's wrong with kids today."

KRISTOL: That's more my persona.

SASSE: When I'm gardening and I listen to you, that's kind of what I hear you screaming.

What shocked me about the experience of arriving at the school is that, overwhelmingly, the incoming students had never worked before. They'd never done any hard labor. I don't mean getting a lot of dirt

under their fingernails or actually having to work in the fields, which is what I grew up doing. I meant they just never really had to do any work of any kind.

When I went off to college in 1990, everybody that I went to high school with, whether they were going to college or not – and I lived in a pretty working class town an hour outside of Omaha – or people that I got to know at school when I arrived my freshman year with, all of them had worked. I don't think I knew a soul who hadn't done some hard work before. These kids, by and large, hadn't done it; and we're not a socioeconomically elite school.

And I felt like I was discovering in a lot of the students a kind of passivity, where so much of their life was a consumer life. What they did was make different choices about what to consume at different times, and it felt hollow and empty, and not rigorous enough. And I faulted them in a way, but mostly, I faulted their parents and my parents and our grandparents to say, "Wait a minute, what have we done to lose the transmission of a work ethic to these kids?"

You realize that some of this is a sociological problem. We live in a time in history where work has been so separated from the home that there really isn't much work for kids to do when they're 10, or 12, or 14. You don't grow up around a house where there's a lot that needs to be done. So, consumption, passively, becomes the thing that you use to fill your time. I think it raises all sorts of fundamental questions about meaning, and the soul, and scar tissue.

KRISTOL: You spent what, four or five years at the college?

SASSE: Yeah, five.

KRISTOL: What did you learn? In this respect. I mean, it's a very interesting insight that you have about consumption, and worth talking about. People become consumers not citizens, I suppose is one way of saying it. Is there some way to turn it around? Did the college do something about it, these kids you were getting? –

SASSE: Our college is a special place, and we did lead – We were blessed to have put together a good team and a lot of donors and supporters, and it became the fastest growing school in about nine or 10 Midwestern states by the end of our third or fourth year; so, it was gratifying to be a part of a team that did something special.

But I think the problem is much larger than any one institution. It is that we've created this category in our minds without reflecting on it much. We've created a kind of endless, perpetual adolescence. And now I'll be historian-nerd here, for a minute.

There has never been a civilization that's had perpetual adolescence before. Adolescence itself is only about a 2,500-year-old concept. And it's a pretty special gift. If you live in a place, for the last 2000 years, if you live in a place that doesn't have abject poverty or war, you're probably likely to have had an adolescence category – which I define as you arrive at biological adulthood, you hit puberty, but you're not required to become financially, emotionally, or in terms of household structure, education and economically, you don't have to be a fully independent adult right away. You get this greenhouse phase. Maybe it's two, three, four years, I don't know.

You can look at different times and places about how they've handled adolescence. But, usually, you have sort of birth to weening; you have weening to apron strings cutting, you go to about age 6 and kids realize they can be away from mom for 8 or 10 hours a day and they might not die. Then you go from apron strings, at age six, to puberty, and we've created – we, civilization – have created this new idea that you can have a greenhouse, sheltered environment for two, three or four years.

And it's great. It's glorious. And yet, it's always been a transitional state. It's not supposed to be Peter Pan. You don't want to be stranded in Neverland; it's a hell, if you don't get to become an adult. Childhood can be great. Adulthood can be great. Transitioning between the two intentionally, that's a gift. But, to be stranded, such that you can't distinguish 10-year-olds from 15-year-olds, from 20-year-olds, from 25-year-olds, that's pretty weird.

We have, the number one address for college graduates in America right now is moving back into their parent's basement. By far the number one address. We have 18-24-year-old males, a large share of whom play video games, a majority of their waking hours. I don't want those guys marrying my daughters. I mean, my kids are 15, 13, and five, and I look at my little girls – my girls are the older ones, a 15 and 13-year-old – and I want them to be sort of, I want them to be innocent and protected and yet I want them to be anxious to have the training wheels taken-off and go and tackle life. I don't want them doing this as if there is meaning to be found right here and you never move again. I don't think we're doing a good job of thinking about the habits of travel, of literacy, about learning to work, about the dangers of gluttony.

This tone truly in the book is not moralistic hectoring, it's not get off my lawn, but I know how I feel when I ate way too much food, two or three or four meals in two days, and I don't feel good. I feel a lot better when I strap a backpack on my back and my kids and I go hike a mountain. I don't think we're having a deliberate conversation about the fact that we are rich, and we are sort of collectively spoiled. Again, this is not just a rich person's problem, this is a civilizational problem where work is a not a part of our coming age experience.

KRISTOL: How much of this is a work question, and how much of it's an education question? I guess they overlap quite a lot. You must have been a critic of the American – I think in the book you stress the importance of reforming – in a pretty big way, both substantively and in terms of process – the education system, both K-12 and after.

SASSE: The thing that scares me is this new concept that's emerging right now called "grade 13." I think about 40 governors in the country are remaking – Again, clear commercial on this. The book is not about policy. But this worry about the passivity, about "grade 13", motivates a concern about the habits about what do we want our 13 and 15, and 17-year-olds to spend their time doing?

KRISTOL: Explain grade 13. I am blissfully ignorant of this.

SASSE: Grade 13 is a problem. Most state governments have a K-12 bureaucracy. Kindergarten through graduating high school. Right? Right now, more than 80 percent of states have blown that up and they're rebuilding something called "P-16."

"P" is replacing preschool with kindergarten to think more about early literacy and early childhood intervention. Important debates to have there. Lots of meaningful stuff that most people can agree on with a goal and then maybe debates the means.

I have a big problem with the idea of grade 13, 14, 15, and 16. I have some anxiety about grades 9, 10, 11, and 12. This is a new thing. The modern high school has been, on net, a blessing. No doubt. But it's a mixed blessing. And it's helpful to be able to reflect on what the institutionalization of age 14 to 18 has done.

So, at the end of the Civil War, only about one percent of Americans are high school graduates; by the end of World War II, it's about 78 percent. Today it's slightly over 80 percent. So, it hasn't really changed much from World War II to the present.

KRISTOL: When did we legally require people to stay in school through age 16? That's kind of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century thing?



SASSE: It's all state law. I think either Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama – I'm married to an Alabamian so let's just slap them around a little bit if we want. But, I think in the late 19-teens, the last couple of southern states passed compulsory education laws, and the age varies. But 14, 15, 16, 17-years-old, most places in the country.

The passing of compulsory education laws was partly a byproduct of progressive concerns, noble concerns, about mistreatment of young people in factories, but the accidental byproduct of that is an assumption that somehow, we need to protect kids *from* work as opposed to free them up to find meaning *in* work.

So, I think it's highly dangerous to think that the main thing 14 to 18-year-olds should do is sit still and be in a classroom, inside, for the majority of their waking hours Monday thru Friday. I think most people who come to be really interesting and curious and creative and dynamic – and by the way, it's not a choice between creativity and actual, objective, knowledge-content appreciation and understanding. I think most people flip a Socratic switch at some point, and they realize that when they're the questioner, they're going to go and shake the trees of the world and find a whole heck of a lot of fruit. Right? This is what Socrates is telling us when he says, "If the questioner isn't asking the question, my answer's going to fall on hard soil."

And so, I think we need to be sure that we're trying to do is expose our kids to a world that's a cornucopia of opportunity. You want to open the doors to the library and have them fall in love and be curious enough that they want to peruse it with vigor and abandon, but you got to have that creative spark.

I think we have false choices all over the place in the ways we think of institutionalized schooling. Here's the grade 13 problem. Grades 9 thru 12, and again, there's no skeptics here, on my part, of public funding of all of this stuff, of education broadly. I'm a small government guy but I believe in education. I believe in the positive externalities about educational investment and job retraining and whatnot.

But, one, monopolized, institutional form of secondary education, I don't think serves us very well. I think we should have more experiment; we should have more debate; we should have more choice; we should have more institutional pluralization. The idea that we're going to take 12th graders and create college freshman experience to be more like high school when high school's failing so many kids? Grade 13 is a really passive concept. What I'd rather see happening is the dynamic, symphonic experience of great college should be fighting its way down into grade 12, and grade 11, and grade 10.

KRISTOL: No, I very much agree with that. I mean, I'm sort of struck, and again, this does sound like an old guy saying get off my lawn. It does seem to me college has become more like high school in many, many ways since my day.

My day was maybe a little too much sink or swim – good luck, it's college, some professor is going to read the same lecture he's had for 30 years and they'll be no guidance for students. It was too much that way, at least in some elite colleges; and I guess, in state colleges, it was probably too much that way in a different way – kind of a zillion kids and just good luck, do well, study what you want to study.

But now, it is so sheltered and sort of worried – don't you think some of the political correctness, safe space stuff is related to that, in a way? Sheltering these tender young people at an age where, you know, where soldiers are fighting and where their predecessors were doing God knows what, settling the west.

SASSE: I was in Israel, I don't know, been there at least once a year in my two and a half years in this office, and so it must have been about the beginning of that. So, two and half, three years ago I'm in Israel, and we went out to a missile, Iron Dome installation and I'm getting ready to see these hulking, 30-year-old macho men. I have all these visions in my mind of – stalling here to think of the right metaphor, but I can't get it, so – I envisioned these strong men going to come out of this installation, and

all of the sudden, these two 16, 17-year-old girls with long hair come out and my daughters are 15 and 13, so – at that time my oldest was 13 – and this gal, this girl, this soldier comes out and she shakes my hand and tells me the story of how this place works and the way the missile works x, y, and z and all the effective knockdowns that they had last year. It was really, really impressive.

Later that night, we're back in Tel Aviv and I'm at a dinner with some people in a house, and there were teenage boys in the house, and I said, "So tell me about your schooling and your choice of military service and what kind of selection role do you have in it," and whatnot. Along the way, I asked them some question about, "What do you think American high school kids?"

They said, "Well, we have a bunch of cousins, we have cousins on Long Island, so we spend time in the US. And it's great, America's great, we love your pop culture. But frankly, what's weird to me," one of these kids, he's 16, 17, said, "is that I play an online video game with a lot of my cousins and their buddies, and we play through the internet and it's great and we have this relationship, but I realized that, next year, I'm going to put down the video game and I'm going to be at real war and they're still going to be playing a video game." And he said, "I don't know if your kids would be able to defend the world, if they needed to defend your country, the way my friends here and I have to do. A video game is an escape, but we don't think it's possibly the actual meaning of life, and some of our cousins on Long Island don't seem like they know that." It was telling.

KRISTOL: Yeah, going into the military right after high school is impressive in so many ways. I've met many, many of these young people. You can argue that they get out, they have sometimes families already, they're less open to education. They may pay some price on the liberal education side, I would say, because there is nothing like – nothing like, but it's probably better to have a bright 18, 19-year-old who's, in a way, has experienced the world less, to fall in love with literature or philosophy or classics. I'm not sure. But maybe not. Maybe not, incidentally, that could be wrong, too. That's at least the conventional view, that that's the tradeoff.

SASSE: I'm sort of the view that a kid who has done some sort of work, some sort of travel, has an appetite awakened.

KRISTOL: It's true, if you look at the GI's who came back after World War II. A lot of the scholars who taught us, or who probably taught people who taught us, the great scholars – you read their bios, you know they went to college on the GI bill when they were 20 or 24, or 26, even. And then, you know, in a way had more a sense of urgency, but also, maybe more of a sense of what mattered and less just –

SASSE: I had a lot of friends from grad school who you know went to graduate school because they wanted to be history professors, they wanted to be teachers, not because they wanted to write the great dissertation that would be read by dozens. And when they left and they realized the publish or perish life of a lot of big institutions doesn't give you credit for teaching well, and doesn't really penalize you for teaching poorly, a few of them I know that ended up in community college feel really fulfilled, because they have a lot more sort of late-20, early-30, and late-30-something students and they're there on purpose. If they're taking your history class as a 30-year-old in community college, they've actually chosen that they want to read your books; they want to hear your lectures.

KRISTOL: Don't you think that the internet and modern technological changes that go with it, I'll just say the internet, really helps in this respect, though? It does allow for a breaking up of a really silly, at this point, and somewhat damaging, monopoly in the K-12, not just monopoly but sort of uniformity, I guess, in the K-12 scheduling of everyone and everyone learns something in the same time and the same place?

And, for that matter, colleges too. It does seem like the education system has been amazingly resistant to the kind of transformation that we've seen in other walks of life. But you've got to think it's going to happen. Maybe a few policy changes wouldn't hurt there either.

SASSE: I do think it's going to happen. The two most broken sectors of American life in terms of where do we not get higher quality, lower cost goods and services over time, the two most broken places are K-12 education and healthcare and our health insurance, in particular. For the very similar reasons, which are that they are dominated by third-party payment. So, it's not you, and it's third-party payment that's often the government.

And they're places that are hard to measure quality outcomes because it's a symphonic production. We tend to think of the rock star surgeon like he or she is a fighter pilot, but really, it's the continuity of care, and it's the overall community of people that are educating you in an institution or the community of people that are delivering care in a healthcare institution.

We have insulated that in a way that has created a monopoly where it's hard for people to see alternatives that deliver high quality, lower cost overtime, and then you'll have a shock to the system like Solomon Kahn. I don't know if you're familiar with the Kahn Academy. Have you ever interviewed him here? He'd be fascinating.

KRISTOL: I need to do that. But I always cite Kahn Academy as kind of the example of what we're talking about here, which is amazing.

SASSE: He's a guy doing private equity, and he's not thinking of himself as a teacher but he's got a niece in Cleveland or somewhere and she wasn't able to learn her algebra because she was in an institution where there wasn't a lot of good teaching, and he calls his sister and he's like, "What do you mean we have a niece that" – he speaks sort of stereotypically and he jokes about it – "we're Indian Americans, we're supposed to be great at algebra. What do you mean our niece isn't do great at algebra? Send me the book." So, he starts doing little six, and nine, and 12-minute lectures every day, and instead of sending her this big, heavy file by email, he just records himself with a little web cam on his white board and uploads it to YouTube, and all of the sudden, two and three hundred thousand people are watching each lecture.

Then he does another discipline and another discipline, moving up math and then moves over into physics, and all of the sudden, he's got millions of people watching his lectures and he's become arguably the biggest, the most important math teacher, not math researcher, but math teacher in human history. That digitization is a pretty great opportunity.

KRISTOL: I don't know, I haven't followed this as close as I should have. Do schools let you take your competency test now if you're at the end of second grade and prove you can just skip third grade because you just learned all of this stuff by watching videos in the evening by Mr. Kahn? That should be the way it goes.

SASSE: It's very rare, right? Very few. We could debate about all the socialization aspects and whatever. All the other things that happen, having a cohort in a community of care for a second or third grader. But for a ninth grader? A 11th grader? I mean, if you get the stuff, let's accelerate you, because everybody has this differentiated learning pace, and if you awaken that appetite and you provide people with a library tools, both print tools, but also digital tools, everybody's going to go faster and be hungrier.

We had an interesting experience at Midland when I got there. Accounting was our third or fourth largest major, and we were trying to look at the economic problems of having a lot more demand for accounting if we could figure out how to meet the supply and align it. But we had a bunch of tenured professors in departments that didn't really have students anymore, and we were in financial crisis. So we're playing all these tenured profs that don't really have students to teach, and we don't have enough supply-side for our accounting.

And so we looked at some studies about all-online accounting, all-in person accounting, or hybridized accounting, where you would have some digital classes and some in person stuff with extra tutorial support. And Midland taught accounting at about a 40/1 ratio. University of Nebraska, Lincoln – one of our big competitors, the flagship institution in the state – taught their accounting classes at, I think, 300/1.

And we bragged about how much better we were than the university because they're 300/1 and we're 40/1. Well it turns out when you look at the data, 40/1 is so far beyond a seminar that it's really no better than 300/1, because there are five nerds who talk all the time. And whether it's five of 40 or five of 300, they become the feedback loop for the professor, and the professor thinks that he or she knows where the class is, but they don't. And a lot of the other 35 kids are stranded on some bottleneck, and it turns out, if you go to high-frequency, low-stakes quizzing and the professor gets feedback loops about what students are caught where, you can help free them and then they're all free to accelerate again.

So, we found that, sort of like you'd expect, all-in-person was the most expensive, hybrid was the second most, and all-online was the cheapest. But what surprised us was efficacy was best at the hybrid. Second best in person, and worst at all-online. But hybrid was better than in person for average student learning.

KRISTOL: There you have the internet provides such a huge opportunity, I think at every level as you say, maybe even more high school than elementary school and maybe even more in college, where it is somewhat insane to be sitting in a lecture hall –

SASSE: Of 300 people. You can do it in your room in boxer shorts.

KRISTOL: Right. I mean, if people want to go to the lectures, the key is, of course, being to also have the ability to interact with either the professor or teaching assistants.

SASSE: Absolutely. I believe deeply in the embodied, residential, liberal arts education experience; but it turns out, what you need is not the lecture time to be in person, but the questioning time to be in person. We tend to focus on the lecture in person, then you leave and you can't get any attention from the professor. It'd be better to do your lecture before you get to class and then argue.

KRISTOL: Then one has a conversation like this – and this is a particularly good version of a conversation I've had several times – and this is partly what animates the Conversations, the idea that people should learn something. The great thing about the internet is they can learn a lot from a conversation with you or Harvey Mansfield, or anyone else, if they choose to, when they choose to, and it's outside of the normal constraints of the college and universities.

SASSE: And the marginal cost is zero.

KRISTOL: For them. Not that much for us either, right? Or for you? The marginal price is low. Zero. Abiding by the ethics laws.

SASSE: I think you offered me a free book earlier. We'll have to scrub that from the video. [Laughing]

## **II: (39:39 – 1:00:45) On the Need for Self-Reliance**

KRISTOL: Declare that to your counsel. I guess, so this gets to the question, then – I guess one definition, perhaps, of the decadence of society would be knowing there are big problems, knowing there are big opportunities, and not somehow having the will or the intelligence, or the ability, collectively, to change those institutions to respond to the problem.

It's not like people, if you look at areas – I'm no expert on this, you're a historian and I'm not – but, my sense is, if you look at times of what we consider now, in retrospect, decadence and decline, it's not like

people weren't aware of the problems. They weren't like oblivious. Sometimes they are maybe, but they mostly aren't oblivious to the fact that they are huge [problems] and they're not dealing well with the challenges out there. But somehow, they just never get it together to reform their own institutions to deal with those challenges.

SASSE: I think that's right. I think that we have a hollowing out of mediating institutions: so, there's a declining sense of local community, and our national community is increasingly political. And most of the stuff we're talking about here isn't really amenable to political solutions; this is about nurturing souls. This is about how do you raise kids well. It's not just the parents' responsibility. I believe deeply in that first of all institutions, the family, but where are these conversations really happening right now?

When I – I mentioned our oldest kid, she's now 15. When she was 14, last year, you know, we work them hard. I think I'm the only commuting family in the U.S. Senate. I bring a kid with me almost every week. And so, they've got stuff they have to do. We do hybridized schooling. They co-op a little bit into the local public high school and they do some college classes and some distance learning, but mostly, we just work 'em. My wife's a former high school guidance counselor and inner-city system principal, and she runs a curriculum for them, but we also give them a lot of work. Still, we were afraid that our kids are too insulated and protected from scar tissue, and so we sent our 14-year-old to a cattle ranch. Nebraska is the largest cattle state in the Union.

We sent her off to a cattle ranch a year ago, and March in Nebraska is still really cold, and that's when the momma cows are starting to deliver. And she gets shipped to this ranch and 600 cows are going to be born over about a six-week period and our daughter was there for about half of the births. And it's hard. You got to go out and check cattle at midnight, and 3 a.m., and 6 a.m., and she learned that when the 25-year-old ranch hand donned a rubber glove up to her shoulder and tossed my daughter a pair, that meant she was going to do a kind of work she'd never done before.

And she was startled by it, and scared, and also thought it was great. Like she knew that there was a kind of suffering that she was going through there that was going to make her a better human being. And as I traveled Nebraska for the next few months – I had converted my daughters text to me. Every day she'd text dad every three or four hours whatever she was learning or experiencing, I just converted them into tweets. They were hilarious. "#FromTheRanch" You get this ick factor of a 14-year-old girl who might lose a watch trying to deliver a baby cow. As I tweet out her texts, a lot of reporters starting following this and it became a kind of viral event. I didn't think anything of it. My daughter was living on a cattle ranch not because her dad's a senator but because we're concerned about her character development and her work ethic.

And as I traveled Nebraska for the next two months, almost the only thing anybody wanted to talk about was that. I'd show up – and we had a big presidential election, and I was in trouble with some voters in Nebraska for the position I had taken in that – and yet crowds would form after I'd speak at the Rotary Club on whatever the policy issue de jour was, and they'd say, "Hey, your daughter at this ranch, can you give me that guy's phone number? Because my kid is playing too many video games and I need to make him suffer. He needs to go there; he needs grow up."

That crisis of concern about the transmission of a work ethic, I think it's burbling just below the surface for lots and lots of people, and they don't know where to have that conversation. And as we hollow out a lot of the mediating institutions – again, this transformation from sort of village, Tocqueville village, urban ethnic neighborhood, to kind of increasingly placeless suburbia, there are fewer institutions that people feel a connection to.

And so, there's national media screaming about politics as if these jokers that I work with are in any way competent to help us figure out how to raise our kids by a piece of legislation. There are legislative implications to this stuff, but the really big issues are about republican, small-r republican culture of virtue. You can't have America continue if we aren't raising people who believe that mostly they and their

local community, and their friends and their neighbors and their family are going to build the future. That's where meaning is found.

KRISTOL: I totally agree with that. But I would say, I'm slightly more pro-political than you, perhaps – maybe because I'm a political scientist and study political philosophy and you're maybe a little more of a historian and you see the culture as downstream of politics. But I guess, my Tocquevillian answer would be, "Yeah, but politics does influence, of course, the culture."

And there are these practical things that could be done, maybe more in this case at the local and state level than in Congress, to make it easier for parents to do what you did. A lot of them are breaking-up monopolies and freeing-up things to at least – I don't know if you can, government would not be good at certainly making people do it; we don't want coercion, in that respect, or even perhaps encouraging people to do it or lecturing people to do it. But they can remove some of the impediments to doing it. That's where I think the deregulatory, more a libertarian, almost, agenda – even though you're not ultimately, I wouldn't say, libertarian in a sense, here – is important, don't you think?

I think one reason no one thinks to do what you did is because it requires liberating your kids from the public school system, which means all kinds of changes, but there are a lot of things that could be done to make – you could play on sports team without going to class six hours a day, that's something that I think is happening in a lot of places.

SASSE: Right. The "Tebow Law."

KRISTOL: There are just practical things I should think that could make it easier. The kind of taking a competency test then you don't have to take the 10th grade math class or something like that.

SASSE: Absolutely. But I'm serving in a federal office, right, and the vast majority of these are really – we need more state and local innovation, and that requires a national understanding of *why* we have federalism. Why we have 50 laboratories of democracy.

KRISTOL: So, tell me about that? Do people respond to that or do they hear the word *federalism* and think "Ugh." It's been so many times – for conservatives, especially, and Republicans – so many decades of touting federalism and no real delivering on it, I would say.

SASSE: Think about the way people scream about the Department of Education fights. At the end of the day, federal funding of education is 13-ish percent. I guess you were Chief of Staff of the department, right?

KRISTOL: I'm behind on the numbers.

SASSE: So, low-40s are state dollars in most districts. Low-40s percent. Low-40s percent is local, usually property tax in most places, and the feds are funding 12, 13, 14 percent. But when you talk to principals and you talk to lead teachers and when you talk to school boards, they say a majority of the regulatory constraints they face are ultimately federal constraints.

I think it'd be amazing for some governor to say, sort of stand up and try to convene some other governors and look at Washington and say, "We actually want to say no to your 12 or 13 percent for the next 5 years and we're going to try this experiment." And we'd like you all to enter into this dialogue with us that admits that if we can hit some sort of different standard – ideally, locally and state-defined standards, not Washington-mandated standards – they'd want to have a different conversation where federalism tried to be bottom-up instead of push-side, top-down.

So much of what is going to happen in the future of K-12 education is going to be things just like the Tim Tebow law you flagged, right? Which in most states now have a situation where – in Florida, I don't know

the exact history on this, but this is the rough arc of it. Florida didn't allow homeschooling families, regardless of how much property tax they were paying, to do anything à la carte with the schools. You had to be all-in or all-out of the public schools. And if you're a parent and you're saying, "Why do I have to choose to have my kid in your factory model school from 8 to 5, five days a week, when I'm paying taxes to have my kid go to band camp? Why do you get to decide it's an all or nothing monopoly?" There was no movement on the part of the state school board, or whoever in Florida, or parents being able to get there – and then all of the sudden, you have this kid Tim Tebow, who looks like he may be the best quarterback that anybody in the SEC has seen in a generation. And football coaches start saying to their school board, "You know what would be really interesting? We should allow that homeschooling kid" – I guess I should have said, the prior fact was that Tebow is homeschooled – "Why can't he co-opt into our school? Maybe take a math class, but why can't he play on our football team?" And most states now have a Tebow Law.

I think, to your point about the Kahn Academy, more and more parents that are active are realizing that the supplementary stuff that they want for their kid's algebra tutoring might come from the internet, and they might be 75 percent, or 95 percent, or 45 percent public school students. And we need a lot more innovation around institutional form.

KRISTOL: I think one of the big problems here is often it is framed a little bit as, you know, "if only the federal government would get out of the way," but the truth is the collusion between – collusion is too strong – but commonality of viewpoint and interest between the federal bureaucracies and the state bureaucracies, and incidentally, the local bureaucracies. I live in Fairfax County – it's not like the Fairfax County Board of Education is that different from the Virginia –

SASSE: Is that innovative.

KRISTOL: Yeah. And, in a way, is even *more* respondent to teacher unions and other administrators and other, and just the general desire never to take a risk because they might get blamed if some kid somewhere is homeschooled and doesn't learn math at the right level. The collusion of bureaucracies, that kind of is a perversion of federalism, but it's worse, actually, than just the federal government overreaching – where, fine, you can kick it out, stop it from overreaching. That really is, I think, a big governance problem in the country, and I think it's true in a lot of areas.

SASSE: I think so, too. I agree, but I think what we really need as the first step on this is not just one bit of regulatory reform or even 10 bits of regulatory reform: We need a whole bunch of parents to come together and say, "Wait a minute, what do I really want my 14-year-old to have by the time she's 16? Or my 13-year-old to have by the time he's 17?" I think we want our kids to be curious. We want them to have a habit of reading. We want them to have a reading list of stuff they want to read. We want them to have the eyes that come from new travel.

And by that I don't mean grand, European-tour rich people travel, I mean have been somewhere else to look back. I think about when I was a little kid, and my dad and all of his coaching buddies would talk about how they went to Canada fishing every summer when they were in high school and then early in college. And, living in a truly primitive place, they saw their hometown for the first time. They saw social relationships that they'd never seen before until they were in place that had no built environment. You want to have those productive experiences.

You want to have limited consumption. You need some intergenerational experiences. If you have a lot of things happening in your life when you're 12, and 14, and 16, and 18 that aren't just grade movement through school, that's a lot more interesting life. Then, school also becomes more interesting, because you can see that tool for its purposes.

KRISTOL: This is always the case for reading. The opposite of the current trend. You read a lot of stories about people like you, or people who are different from you but still also live in America in 2017 but

they're a different race, maybe, or ethnicity or something. In a way, you learn much, much more by reading about feudal knights or, you know, ancient heroes or something. That gives you the perspective.

SASSE: That overused line that "a fish can't tell you what water's like because he's never been anywhere but in the water." Right? It's absolutely what reading and travel, which are very similar things, get you. The ability to see differentiation and distinctions that you couldn't see until you went to another place. We never realize how rich we are until our kids are in a place where there is actual poverty. 7.2 billion people in the world, about a billion of them live in abject poverty. Amazing decline in the share of the population that's poor now compared to 40, 50 years ago, because of trade and technology and rule of law. But, still, there's a lot of poor people in the world, and we don't understand how historically strange it is for almost everybody we know to not have any doubt about where their meals are coming from tomorrow until you go and experience that difference. Literature can get you that, too.

KRISTOL: We have to let you go in a few minutes, but I want to pick up on the last thing you said because it's relevant to the current moment, I think, politically, which is precisely the progress of the last 50 years – trade, technology, an American-led liberal world order that has mostly preserved peace and allowed people, hundreds of millions of people in India and China to come out of poverty. Hopefully in a more democratic way in India, less so in China, but maybe, ultimately. I am struck, of the current moment, how little appreciation there is of that achievement, too.

We have the progressive left that never wants to be satisfied with anything that's done. And we now have a right with a current president that's also hostile, in a way, to the efforts of the last 30, 40, 50 years. I think that's a problem, too, don't you think?

SASSE: Absolutely.

KRISTOL: You're a critic of the status quo. And the bulk of this conversation has been very critical of hollowed-out institutions and habits that we've lost and so forth; but the flip side is that, in some ways, people can be very critical of the status quo and lose sight, you know throw the baby out with the bath water, so to speak.

SASSE: Absolutely. I think one of the distinctions that's so relevant here that we don't unpack enough is what American exceptionalism means. American exceptionalism, I think of first as a historical understanding, not as a foreign policy argument from the neocons.

KRISTOL: Totally, yeah. It was a social science term.

SASSE: By neocon I don't mean the one that's often used in foreign policy, but even the neoconservatives, the people who came out of a leftist movement and realized that this world view didn't work. I mean, that at the American founding, we flipped on its head the idea of where rights come from. Government is necessary because the world is broken and there's somebody that wants to take your stuff, and maybe take your life, and take your freedoms. So, government is necessary, but because government is necessary doesn't mean that government is the first thing and government is the source of your rights. Our Founders said we think everybody has dignity, we think they have rights by nature, and government is our shared project to secure those rights.

Well, once America believes that, that gives us a constitutional system where we enumerate the powers of the government; we don't let the government define our rights. The First Amendment and the entire Bill of Rights are really just a didactic device to explain what it means that government is negative. Right? That the powers of the government have to be limited. And the island isn't the rights of the people, the island is the power of the government in the limitless sea of the rights of the people.

Well, once you believe that, you believe in universal human dignity for all 7 billion people on the globe. That doesn't mean American has the responsibility to solve every problem in the world, but it does mean



we make big truth claims about anthropology, about fundamental human dignity. And then it isn't surprising, when you have an international order that has more nations that believe in the dignity of people, that believe in their potential, that believe in their economic entrepreneurship and what they can produce, when you have trade, when you have more rule of law, you tend to get a lot more prosperity and you get a lot more peace.

We live at a strange time in the post-Cold War moment, right? Peace of Westphalia in 1648 all the way to 1989 and the fall of the wall in Berlin, we thought about the world chiefly in terms of nation-state actors. We're now 27, 28 years into a period where there are a whole bunch of places where ungoverned spaces allow these little death cults to rise that can have global reach. The distinction between the Taliban and Al Qaeda is that that Taliban was the government of Afghanistan, but they didn't attack us. Al Qaeda attacked us, but you couldn't have Al Qaeda without having the Taliban.

You have places like that in Libya now. You have most of Syria. You have big parts of Afghanistan and Iraq still. You have tribal regions in Pakistan. Well, seeing the fact that there could be non-state actors that rise up when they're vacuums of failed states should make us want to remember the best parts of the post-Cold War era, not say, well, let's try to retreat within ourselves. That's a recipe for disaster.

KRISTOL: The American exceptionalism, it was really a social science term in the early 20th century to explain why America, unlike European nations, I think primarily didn't have communism or socialism. I think that was the term, that was the actual problem sociologists in Germany and elsewhere were addressing in the 19-teens, 1920s. It also applies, in a way, to fascism.

For me, one most worrisome about 2016, and this is sort of mirroring on a political level what you've been describing more on a cultural, sociological, existential level, is you have an election in 2016, a presidential election, that looks not like an American exceptionalism election but sort of like an Argentinian election.

With all due respect to the Argentines. You know, a socialist, Bernie Sanders, who thinks that the solution to everything, a somewhat authoritarian populist, let's call that, the other major party candidate. And then, you know, a kind of inside-baseball family, you know, politics is the family business-type who's gotten wealthy off political connections. That is literally a third-world election.

That is not – and in a way, it just struck me as, watching it and leaving aside my personal likes and dislikes of different candidates and whether they'd be good presidents or not – just a bad sign for the country in a way. That it was so susceptible to the demagoguery of the left, the demagoguery of the right; that in the center, there was nothing more interesting than someone who was so clearly a kind of you know – I don't want to be personal about it. I don't know. I don't know if you had this sense. You weren't happy about 2016 either, but I think it wasn't just, people just think, well, you didn't like this candidate or that candidate – it was a worrisome moment for me for the country.

I do think, in that respect, American exceptionalism, it isn't just a foreign policy term or a boast, people really misunderstand that. It's an important thing. You said it very well. About what America is and therefore what kinds of politics we need to have to support precisely the things that you've been discussing that go beyond politics, I think.

SASSE: To tie that back to your point about safe spaces on the campuses. It means that you have to have a full-throated defense of the First Amendment that says the dignity of people necessarily needs free speech, free religion, free assembly, the right of redress of grievances, a free press, because those things are all *freedom to* things. Right? We want *freedom from* oppression, that's what government is supposed to help secure, so that you can be *free to* read great things, and associate with the people you want to, and create beauty and read and innovate and build the next tech app. Right?

The 2016 election was discouraging on a whole bunch of dimensions but one of the most basic was where was the thing that makes people want to stand up and sing country music even if you're from a place that doesn't like country music, right? There should be a desire to embrace the fact that the meaning of America sounds a lot more like the lyrics of patriotism on July 4th than it sounds like either the technocratic federal register or the Argentinian sort of cronyist kind of election of the past.

Reagan's line that "we're always only one generation away from the extinction of liberty in a republic," is because we believe that our kids and our grandkids, they're going to have to rule. We'll we – They're going to get to, in an Eisenhowerian-sense. I don't know if that's an adjective. President Eisenhower used to say that every American should understand themselves as having a part-time vocation as a politician. We shouldn't have full-time politicians, and we shouldn't have anybody who thinks they can check out of public life. We're responsible to maintain the public square and pass it on to the next generation, so they can go and find true love, and pursue the good, the true, and the beautiful, and recognize that America has given them gifts and inheritance that's really glorious.

We ought to be able to celebrate those things together. Then, underneath that umbrella, then let's argue about partisan differences about the level of interference in the economy that the government should have, and how much positive and negative externalities should we technically allow here and think that government needs to try to remediate and fix.

But, fundamentally, we should have a big, broad, shared understanding that transcends these two political parties. And right now, neither of these two political parties seems like it has vision for the future – not surprising that they're amenable to hostile takeover.

KRISTOL: That's a good note on which to end. You'll come back in a couple of months and we'll discuss the future of the two political parties and a bunch of other things. I can honestly say that, I worked for Pat Moynihan, I admire Pat Moynihan so much, but I think this is a conversation, on your part, that Pat Moynihan would have been proud of. It's really very thought provoking, and I really appreciate your taking the time, and also just the thought you've put into these issues, which is uncharacteristic of a United States Senator.

SASSE: I wish I had his hair. It seems like the right hair for a guy to be pontificating in the Senate.

KRISTOL: You could work on that.

SASSE: I'll stop cutting it.

KRISTOL: Thank you very much, Ben, thanks for joining me. And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]