

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Mike Murphy, Republican Political Strategist

Taped, June 20, 2017

Table of Contents

[I: On President Trump, 2010 and 2020 0:15 – 33:32](#)

[II: A Career in Politics 33:32 – 1:09:42](#)

I: On President Trump, 2010 and 2020 (0:15 – 33:32)

KRISTOL: Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol, and I'm very glad to have with me today my good friend Mike Murphy, a Republican strategist, ad maker, deep thinker, bon vivant.

MURPHY: Had a career once. Now he is doing this. No, it is good to be here.

KRISTOL: Donald Trump hasn't had you over to the White House to get your advice recently?

MURPHY: I don't know, I don't think I am on that list; having been calling for his head since the minute he got in politics. Figuratively. Don't want to get interviewed by the Secret Service in an hour.

KRISTOL: So where are we? I mean, you have been through this many, many cycles and you have given it a lot of thought. And you saw Trump's rise up close, and you were a critic of his capacity to be president. And I think you are not much reassured. I don't want to put words in your mouth, but what you have seen so far? But where are we, the Republican Party, the conservative movement?

MURPHY: I was epically wrong. My crystal ball has a big crack in it because I thought it highly unlikely he will win the nomination. I thought Cruz would be the real contender on the grievance side of the party. And of course, I was working and hoping for Jeb Bush on the establishment side. So Trump proved us wrong about that.

And then when he won the nomination, I was like there is no way from a demographic point of view or anything else this guy can win. Yet, running 2.9 million votes behind Hillary, he won. Kind of with a bit of a black swan. People want to deny that, but if you look at the map, there was a weird second-in-time with a lot of forces when somebody could literally run 3 million, essentially, votes behind and win. Carrying three states that we, Republicans, haven't won in a presidential since the '80s. So that said, it happened. So, what does it mean about American politics?

KRISTOL: Just on that, I mean, you and I have been through this a million times, but any one thing that people are underestimating as to why it happened? Or overestimating? Stipulating that it is an inside straight with the Electoral College and the different factors.

MURPHY: I would say the motor within that was, well here is what - it is interesting, because I think we both believe this. There's this prebuilt narrative that they spot weld to any campaign. So we got to find the "secret technology." Then you have an "underground phone bank" on the "link to the internet" or whatever the secret was.

I had some Democrat come up to me in LA – "Hey, Peter Thiel paid off... mind control." Insanity. It was [that] Trump's grievance message resonated, in a fairly narrow part of the country, but it resonated so well.

My favorite example is Luzerne County in Pennsylvania, Wilkes-Barre. Reagan won in '84 there by about 8,000 or 9,000 votes. Obama won, in his reelection, by about 4,000 votes in that county of 300,000. Trump won by over 25,000 votes. So where he did well, he went off the scale. Not that many places, but enough to pick the lock of the Electoral College – almost by accident.

The whole theory that there was this mastermind Trump campaign and they had it all figured out, complete baloney. The Trump staff, I was in betting pools where they had Trump losing. There were Trump staffers, it is well known, calling around reporters on Election Day explaining whose fault it was they lost.

So the black swan part of this is real, but it teaches us you can't – "never" doesn't exist in politics. Particularly in this turbulent time where people have lost much faith in politics and they want to punish the system. And Trump was a great hammer to punish the system with for a lot of people. And that was enough.

KRISTOL: Did that surprise you, how much there was?

MURPHY: Yes.

KRISTOL: I would have arguments with people and they would say, "We need to teach them a lesson." Okay, maybe, but this is the presidency. This isn't like sending a congressman who is going to really shout for two years and then you can get rid of them when he finishes shouting.

"No, we really need to shake things up, drain the swamp, blow it up." Really, blow it up? It is kind of dangerous – the U.S., global power, the world economic system. The country is not in such horrible shape.

"No, it can't get worse." I remember that: "It can't get worse." I am like really? But what do you make of that?

MURPHY: People forget Anzio Beach.

Look, it is only a theory at this point because we are in the middle of it; we are not completely sure. But I have a theory. This is part of the pop culture moving into politics – that elections have become so trivialized. There's a kind of game-show mentality. There is a poll every day. In the old days, you know, Dr. Gallup would call, it was like a big deal. Now there is a poll every two seconds. And pop culture and politics have met.

And we're at peace. We have been for a long time, in terms of a global kind of war. We are clearly at war in the Middle East against terrorism and in these regional conflicts. But, compared to World War II, World War I-sized seismic events, even Korea or Vietnam, not quite as big. So the stakes are low.

So all of a sudden, if it's a game: "You know what I am going to do with my vote? I am going to send Trump in there! That will be a show." And so here we are. I think low-stakes elections, people don't take seriously, and you get weirder outcomes.

KRISTOL: I think that is a very important point. It is the opposite of: "Oh there's such anxiety and deep dissatisfaction out there."

There is anxiety and dissatisfaction, obviously. You said grievance. But in a way, it precisely has to be not that deep. It can't be – we are not in the middle of Vietnam or Korea or World War II. We are not in the Great Depression.

MURPHY: But people have forgotten. You know, kids, 20-year-olds I walk into don't remember the old Russians, when they were bad and dangerous. You know, they are like the comedy, drunk Russians and maybe Putin is a bad guys with a few secret agents and he is listening to your cell phone. But none of the Cold War stakes we all grew up with are resonating right now.

But I will say we have a kind of tribal America, two tribes. A politics of "I am right. You are evil. So I should do anything to stop you, anything is permissible, and everything you say is a lie. There's no objective facts anymore. And I can even find sources on the internet saying, the news or even on cable in certain hours, telling me I am right no matter what."

That puts people in bubbles. I mean, I live in Los Angeles, California. People are literally beating their dream catchers into eye-gouging sticks out there. It's like they are turning into Sparta of the Left at war, because they just disbelieve the phenomena that led to Donald Trump as president. So, we are the beginning of this turbulence, not at the end of it.

KRISTOL: I think that is a very important point. And just one last thing on the population, culture side: I think his being a celebrity was the thing that I most underestimated the importance of. That show, 14 years, top-ten or 20, right? Serious numbers and him playing himself as a successful, tough businessman. It is better than even being a famous actor because then you are just playing other people, right?

MURPHY: Yeah, our new politics. If you are on NBC primetime for ten years, you are in a cardboard set designed to look like a boardroom, firing B-tier celebrities who were paid to pretend to work for you to do product placement. And if the biggest thing you do on TV is teach Gary Busey how to work a Sno-cone machine and then fire him, that's a credential. And you take that persona – like people would come up to people who play doctors on television and ask for health advice – you take that persona and you match it up with a totally dysfunctional politics, and anger at Washington, and anger at the establishment, he becomes the perfect hammer, in this make-believe world that now we are living with, to change things.

And people also forget what was he most famous for before *The Apprentice*. He wrote a book called *The Art of the Deal*. People expected that he could cut through whatever they thought the morass in D.C. was and get stuff done. And that is his Kryptonite. Because that was part of the promise that he is, I think, constitutionally – in terms of his own psyche – impossible or unequipped to deliver.

KRISTOL: People like me who say, "Well, now reality hits and he won't do well, probably, and therefore he'll pay a price." Am I being too optimistic, though? Does reality -

MURPHY: Oh, I think it does. But it is like shorting a stock: You are going to be right; the question is how long will it take? You can go broke first.

I would say this, the most unpopular president we have had, in terms of speed to get there, in modern history. He is to the point now, if you are a Democrat and you are seen with him, you get a primary. And

if you're a Republican and you are seen with him, your reelection gets toxic, even in a fairly safe though not bedrock-safe Republican district.

So, that has put him in a place of political positioning where there is not a lot he can do other than regulatory things, as far as policy, and rant and rave. And of course, his personality is completely equipped for ranting and raving. So, I can't tell the future here, but under any usual yardstick, he is in a lot of trouble, politically, because he doesn't have much power to get anything, the political power to move people around. And I don't think there's anything in his behavior that will give him the discipline to dig out of it. I think he'll compound his problem.

So I am short; I don't know how long, but I am betting shorter than longer on his –

KRISTOL: We are speaking in mid-2017, mid-June, 2017. I guess, the big tell will be, presumably, the off-year election of 2018? Though, presidents can do badly in their first off year and come back and win, obviously, as Clinton showed and Obama.

MURPHY: Right, but they correct their course. And I think his - Trump is the atomic clock of being Trump. We see it in the Twitter. And we always have this moment where: "Don't worry, they are going to send David Gergen in to straighten him out." That is the big establishment view. It is like the cannibal king, you know. We keep sending ambassadors; they keep sending us bones and an invitation for another one. I don't think Trump ever changes. The question is, will the party change?

KRISTOL: So let's talk about that.

MURPHY: I had a bunch of political consultants together and a couple of old gray beards like me. All people who have done, literally, 50 or 70 competitive campaigns in 20 to 35-year careers. And we kind of – I won't name names, but some of them are pretty well-known people, all of whom I respect – and we said, "Are we going to hold the House or not?" And we took a little straw poll, and it was four to one we lose the House.

Now we don't know that yet. The future is undetermined. But, that level of concern will permeate. And I think President Trump will go back to his comfort zone, which is being a grievance candidate against both parties. As Republicans try to distance, he will just: "The Washington swamp, they are all terrible. I'm fighting alone. We will never give up our crusade." That's a very comfortable place for him to be. But it freezes all politics, and it freezes the Republican agenda to move forward.

KRISTOL: And what about the Republican Party? Do they feel that they just can't walk away from him because two-thirds – well, now it's 80 percent or less, but let's assume it drifts down – still, two-thirds of the party is with him no matter what?

MURPHY: Yeah. I think we both know that if the president went into the Republican Senate Caucus alone and they turned out the lights, he'd never emerge again and Pence would be president. I'm joking - again, I don't want to get interviewed by the Secret Service. But publically, they are afraid of their own primary voters. And what changes there?

Well, if we lose the House, and we're sitting in January of 2019 with a party in rubble and a frozen agenda, and 28 different people running for president on the Democratic side – people forget that '19 is the primary year, because the primaries in the early part of 2020. And somebody will primary, more than a few, I think, on the Republican side. Plus, these investigations will be boiling over by then. I think '19 could be a 1968-level year of turbulence in American politics. Because the Democrats are going to find out who they are, loony left versus regular. And I think the Trump presidency is going to be crippled. And if we lose the House, which I think is not certain, but within the realm of strong possibility, there will be a total meltdown. And where it goes from there will be the question of our time.

KRISTOL: So where does it go? Let's talk about the different paths. Let's do a sidebar on the Democrats for 45 seconds: what do you think, loony left or semi-centrist?

MURPHY: Well, loony left has all the power. I mean, everything bad comes in twos, generally. And there has been a lot of focus on how Trump has hijacked the Republican Party and I think stymied the conservative movement, because I don't believe he is a conservative. And we are now learning that - not surprising to some of us, and you have been one of them squawking from the beginning. I think others are coming around to this whole Vichy France thing isn't working out.

On the Democratic side, though, Bernie Sanders came close. If there weren't super delegates - I know mathematically she still - but I think he would have had a lot more momentum, and he might have well been the nominee. And that movement hasn't gone away. In fact, Trump has made it stronger.

So I think there is an epic battle coming in the Democratic Party. And my biggest concern is whether the damage done to the Republican Party - and in the American national interest, because while we have turned internal, our competitors are running the table - then, we repeat it with the Democrats. And we go through a Democratic presidency that is ideologically, in their super-populist world, without the character flaws and insecurity, and therefore, politically more effective at actually changing policy. So it could be a real lost decade. I pray not, but the tremors are there.

KRISTOL: I mean, Trump got about 45 percent of the vote in the Republican primary, when it was all-in. More like 30 or 40 when it was competitive.

MURPHY: Well, the back-ended primaries all fall in; there is no competition.

KRISTOL: So still, only 45, and Sanders got 45 percent of the vote in the Democratic Party. That is pretty astounding, isn't it? These two candidates who, by any objective measurement, were pretty far outside the mainstream of their respective parties. And in Trump's case, had serious character problems; and in Sanders case, wouldn't have predicted ahead of time would be very successful insurgent.

MURPHY: I agree, it is remarkable, but it is also a symptom of - I think the primary voters think the promise was broken by both parties. If you are a Democrat, "We are social justice," Goldman Sachs runs that party. What is that all about?

And if you are in the Republican Party, we got a bunch of plutocrats and perfect capitalism and we are doing great. But for the rest of us, real wages aren't going up, and we got a lot of guys clinking whiskey glasses at the Capitol Grill with lobbyists, where is my percentage in that? People feel disenfranchised, so what do they do? They go for the hot pepper of either side.

Bernie Sanders says, a grievance candidate: You want to get a PhD in yoga? You should. But it will cost \$400,000 dollars in college loans and that's unfair. I'll take all of those profits they have in that room on Wall Street with the guy with the top hat and the shovel and the gold bars, and I'll give them to you so you can be, you know, you can learn aromatherapy candle making.

And then over on our side, you're in Detroit swinging a hammer, and the machine tools are getting shipped out and robots are coming in: Well, it is all those Mexicans. They're tunneling in here, and they are cheating. Or those Chinese trade negotiating; Mandarins with their funny tricks. Everything is a racial stereotype with him half the time. We got to admit that about Trump. I mean, we got to -

KRISTOL: How important was that to Trump, do you think?

MURPHY: I think it was huge. I think it was huge. Easy villain. Pissed-off people plus easy villain. Anyway, so Trump's grievance thing is I am going to get rid of them - the Chinese and the Mexicans and all of that - and everything is going to be fine. And Bernie was - there is no racism to Bernie, let's be

clear, but Bernie was doing his class-warfare stuff. And it is dangerous, but when people are disaffected from politics and think they have no stake in the status quo, those guys sell tickets.

KRISTOL: So, the Democrats could nominate a – I don't know who, exactly.

MURPHY: I think it will come down to – I always say, people make the mistake of handicapping the candidates. You try to – look at it like surfing: You handicap the wave. And there is a big progressive wave, and somebody is going to be on the surfboard on top of that. It could be Bernie again; it could be Elizabeth Warren, who is a more media friendly candidate. Could be somebody else that just adopts that message and is young and interesting.

Then there would be kind of the “oh-no, not Bernie” wave, which will be smaller. One of the twelve will climb on that. And there are a few other kind of small personality waves. Corey Booker – people underestimate him. I don't, because he's media capable. And people forget, in the Democratic primary, there's a big African American vote. And if you are seen as a credible candidate, you get a lot of that vote for free. You can get up to 25 percent of it. That is an advantage.

So I mean, I can name five or six people in the Democratic Party that I think are strong, but I definitely think a progressive will have the most votes to go get. Whether or not they can execute and manage the campaign and deal with the super delegates – which will still be there and they won't be progressives, mostly – that is the big question. But it is going to be a hell of an interesting time to be a Democrat in '19.

KRISTOL: And how much do you think the Trump example, which I don't mean his character or anything, I mean the never been in elected office, total outsider, but a celebrity and/or rich guy. How much does that spill over a) to the Democrats, and b) just in politics in general? A lot of proto-Trumps and wish-to-be-Trumps floating around now.

MURPHY: I think two forces are going to pound into each other: On one hand, the copycat force, which is Howard Schultz over at Starbucks or a Kardashian, God forbid. People who are not normally –

KRISTOL: Mark Cuban.

MURPHY: Mark Cuban. You know, Oprah, for an hour, was thinking about it. In the West Coast, you hear of “Oh, Bob Iger's got to run.” And on the East Coast, “Jamie Diamond has to run,” you know, around Wall Street, LA, or Manhattan. But anyway, some non-politics candidate. And people will copy and think “I can do it. Why not?” We are going to have 100 Morry Taylors.

On the other side, though, is the theory that a lot of us believe that people tend to vote for what they think they did not get the last time. You know, we had Bill Clinton that is all of a sudden Plato's Retreat in the Oval, so we get George W. Bush, “honor and dignity” back. And that line will be back, “honor and dignity back in the White House.”

Then people thought oh, he's not that smart and bungling, so we get the genius, Barack Obama, the brilliant law professor. And then he turned out to be perceived as a weakling, so now we got the reality TV guy with the big – “You're all fired.”

Well, what is the anti-Trump? It is somebody that is going to be incredibly competent, zero drama. And I think, at least on our party, reliably conservative, because I think that is going to be a schism that grows – that Trump doesn't believe in any of our stuff. And so that will be the interesting Republican –

KRISTOL: To get back to our side. So, on the Republican side: okay, it's early '19, let's just say they lost the House. Bad off-year, maybe not a disastrous, not 60 seats, but you know 35.

MURPHY: Just losing the majority I think will be the spark.

KRISTOL: Okay, and Trump is sitting at 38 percent approval – whatever he is today – 40, one or two legislative accomplishments, but nothing much.

MURPHY: I say if he loses the House, it will dip down; it could be high 20s. But call it 33.

KRISTOL: What happens? I mean, could he be beaten in an actual Republican primary?

MURPHY: Yes, at that point.

KRISTOL: Do you think that we over-learned the lesson that these primary challengers never win because they happen to have lost – Kennedy lost to Carter, Reagan lost to Ford –

MURPHY: If he wiped us out and nothing got done, he will be primaried from the right as not a real conservative. He will be primaried from kind of the Kasich-wing. Kasich has already moved to New Hampshire. And there will be new generational guys – the Tom Cottons or the Ben Sasses or the Marco Rubios trying again.

But the thing I think people are missing is – and again, you can overstate these historical analogies. My joke is always, “If Napoleon had nuclear subs, we would all be speaking French.” But it’s interesting to look at Goldwater. So we tried something new, that eventually changed the party, but at the time, was seen as an incredible defeat. So they went for the safe-old-shoe: Nixon. So, who is the no-drama, safe-old-shoe in the Republican side where everybody knows, who was right about Obama, right about Putin, and right about Trump?

KRISTOL: Romney.

MURPHY: Romney. So even though he is out and it’s over, I am not so sure. I don’t think he will do anything to run, but for the first time in his political career – and I have told him this – the party may be looking for him in ‘19.

KRISTOL: It’s interesting. I kind of assumed you would finally make the generational transition. It was so insane to have another baby-boomer race between Clinton and Trump, 70-year-old, 68-year-old. After, in 2014, the Republicans elected a lot of attractive, young candidates – a couple of who then ran, Cruz and Rubio. But, maybe that’s wrong. Maybe that’s one of the simple things; maybe that’s wrong. Maybe you do revert back to –

MURPHY: We’re the old-shoe party, and after this ride we are going to have with this guy, which could lead to a Democratic House trying to impeach him in ‘19, the old shoe may be comfortable. That said, there is generational energy always and we got plenty of younger guys. That’s why ‘19 is going to be the most interesting primary year in American history for a long time.

KRISTOL: You don’t think, and I am encouraged by this, and I tend to agree with you, but I think this is a minority view, a contrarian view, but, therefore, probably right.

MURPHY: We are both contrarian, which means we’ve been wrong a lot.

KRISTOL: Yes, but “interestingly wrong,” is what I like to say.

MURPHY: We were right about the ‘92 reelect, way back in ‘91, and everybody laughed at us.

KRISTOL: I want to come back to that, because that is a memorable moment for me, actually. So you don’t think, the conventional view is, of course, there will be a primary *challenge*; but at the end of the day, even if you adjust down a little bit, he has got that core support that will never abandon him, and

even Carter didn't get beat by Kennedy, and even Ford didn't get beat by Reagan. So, unless you are Lyndon Johnson, epic levels of meltdown in '68, Trump beats back that challenge. He is weak, probably, and loses the general. But you don't quite buy that?

MURPHY: I just, I disagree for three reasons. One is Trump is capable of an epic meltdown.

KRISTOL: Yeah, it could be LBJ, right?

MURPHY: Totally - I think could exceed it.

Two, those guys all won because they had the machinery, and the machinery loved them, and the machinery was counting on them. Trump doesn't have the machinery. The machinery looks at Trump like a big poison pill that is wiping everybody out. I asked the Georgia chairman, "48 hours from now, if we lose down there after \$40 million bucks, how we feel about Donald Trump?"

And then finally – and I keep saying this, and I have absolutely no proof and I can't tell you how it is going to happen, but my gut has told me from the beginning he will not stay four years. Because he is a guy in his own bubble of indulgence, and he can't have much fun. He reads every bad poll, yells at the TV. He is not winning. Nobody is winning here. And if he is sitting there with the Democrats trying to impeach him, his family being opened up like a can opener by Mueller and the investigator and finding about whatever, he may just do what he has done in business, which is cut his losses.

KRISTOL: And the Mueller investigation would be an excuse at a certain point.

MURPHY: "This is totally unfair. I have to protect my family, protect my daughter, from the swamp. I am going to fight them from the outside; we are going to elect candidates all over, and I may come back, but for right now, Pence, you handle the details."

KRISTOL: Right. He could take credit. Pence is his guy.

MURPHY: Yes, "I control the presidency, but I am going to strategically retreat to Trump Tower, have some meatloaf, play some golf and protect my brilliant daughter Ivanka and Jared and my beautiful grandchildren, half-Jewish, you know – and good ones. Protect them from the swamp which is using this corrupt witch hunt to come get me." Now everybody says, "Well, that will never happen." You can't say never with Trump. Trump *is* never. So, anyway, we'll see.

KRISTOL: And Pence is not a safe candidate to win the nomination if he is simply inherits from Trump, in 2019, right? There will be two weeks of "Well, let's all unite with Mike because we like Mike," and then we get into a normal, eight-way primary, I assume, right?

MURPHY: I think the machinery, the leaders of Washington-Republican-Incorporated will rally around – "Well, Trump's gone. Whew. We got to get behind Pence." And the social conservatives will be a little more happy because Trump has never – so, that's a factor in the party. But the law of political entrepreneurship will also be in effect, my guess is.

Trump will also wait until it is like an Alec Guinness movie and there is a plaster guide – I don't normally go to those analogies, so I will recant that. But, he'll wait until the bitter end and then the damage on Pence, who will be there to stand by our president to the bitter end, will be pretty bad. I don't think Pence will be in a place where he can win a general election. He will be like a worse version of Ford, much worse.

KRISTOL: Or Humphrey in '68. Which is a better analogy, probably.

MURPHY: Yeah, right. Unless they really go loony-left crazy, then would be this horrible, competitive election between two bad alternatives.

KRISTOL: What if Trump wins re-nomination. Let's say he does a little better than we have assumed. It's sort of weak-ish Carter-ish performance, but enough to beat back a primary challenge and not ludicrous to think he could win the general. Carter was competitive until the last week, obviously. Then you get Trump and you get Elizabeth Warren, on the Democratic side. Is it possible to have, what a lot of people have dreamed of over the years, the up-the-middle, third party or independent candidacy?

MURPHY: Yes.

KRISTOL: The Macron of America? Is that your judgment, just analytically, is it structurally possible?

MURPHY: Yes. I think if Trump runs for reelection, he will lose. In some ways, he lost this time, yet won, due to a weird hiccup in the Electoral College. So is Trump stronger, will he be stronger in a couple of years than he was on Election Day, when he was 2.9 million behind?

KRISTOL: And could they nominate somebody *weaker* than Hillary?

MURPHY: Yeah, but even Bernie is fresh and a change. You know -

KRISTOL: No, I am saying they couldn't. I think, no matter how much we say Elizabeth Warren is to the left and, you know, Hillary Clinton was about as bad a candidate as they could have come up with.

MURPHY: Hillary, it is funny. In Hollywood, where I also work and pay dues to a union – a character building experience for a conservative – they have a phrase called “pre-aware title.” And we talked about this with Trump. You make Iron Man 7, not a movie nobody has heard of, because that brand is easier to sell more tickets to. It is *pre-aware*. That's why they do movies, you know, *Battleship*, the game. There's actually a slinky script running around town for a while. So it is kind of insane.

But under the pre-aware title rule, Trump had *The Art of the Deal*, and *The Apprentice*, and *Can Do*. He fired Gilbert Godfrey; he will straighten out Washington. I know, it is insane.

And then on the other side, Hillary's pre-aware title was like grand-jury investigation and everything they hate about politics. It was the worst thing to be. So yes, I don't think they can do that bad again.

KRISTOL: So third party? Independent?

MURPHY: Two forces, again, you got to figure out. The distribution hates a center party, because we're still set up with the old 1912 system, so to speak, where it is all about two parties. But in the world of the internet, and the world of direct communication for free, essentially, structure is a lot less important than it used to be. *That's* the real lesson of the campaign. I mean, in the campaign industry I have worked in for 35 years, we oversell the power of campaigns, and we go, “Ooh, we got this digital technology.” I even got my pal Axelrod to admit once that if there wasn't an internet, Obama still would have won. All of the technology is always massively overrated because we sell it at a profit. But in the internet world, *message* is what counts. Trump didn't have any structure; he had message. The third party person would have message, and that might be able to finally swamp the system, if the other two are unappealing enough. If it is kind of a white wine and cheese candidacy – I call it the “French Vanilla” candidate – it's 14 percent.

KRISTOL: So it has to be an interesting, unusual –

MURPHY: Yeah, there aren't enough Volvo drivers. But, if they're both horrible, if you have got a horrible loony-left, incompetent-campaign scary, and then you've got Trump again, a more reckless, older, crazier

Trump with all of these scars of failure on him. You know, the new black swan could be third party might do it. The problem is, you do it with the plurality of the vote, so then you are in the House trying to sort that out; that would be an epic politics all its own.

KRISTOL: Do you think this begins – I’ve talked to a lot of people, some of them are, “Do you even get a beginning,” in terms of challenges to Trump. My sense is it begins only after November 18, really. People can do thing quietly, but I mean, in the real world of –

MURPHY: I don’t think the big wheels turn until after there is a tangible, massive, domestic policy defeat for the Republicans, which would be losing the majority in the House.

KRISTOL: And I think enough people now, the reluctant Trump voters, still kind of want him to succeed, hope he turns it around.

MURPHY: Oh sure, totally.

KRISTOL: Wouldn’t take well to someone stepping up and saying he’s – “Trust me, he’s finished, and we need to begin organizing now to save the Republican Party from Trump.”

MURPHY: “No, you traitor.” See, the problem is, our politics is so tribal. Even a lot of Trump voters aren’t enthusiastic about Trump, but they hate his enemies. “*The New York Times* can’t win, Bill.” So, that mentality. Until Trump, until “The Winner” loses, tangible things where you got 40 Republicans who lost their seats and, all of a sudden, Nancy has to get out again.

KRISTOL: It is not our fault, so to speak. It’s a Trump loss.

MURPHY: Exactly.

KRISTOL: And so you wouldn’t advise someone thinking of running against Trump – privately, do whatever you want, in terms of cultivating donors – but you wouldn’t do much publically?

MURPHY: I would tell anybody who wants to run, go out and bust your ass helping Republicans hold the Congress. Because that is the credential that will count.

KRISTOL: And on the issue mix, anything that strikes you as particularly promising or ripe for the sort of alternative to Trump? I mean, is it back to conventional Reagan-Republicanism? Is it forward to something different?

MURPHY: My view is that the weakness of our party is we *were* the machine of reform ideas. And we are now the machine of defending interests that we are aligned with, either through ideological reasons that make some sense, or through kind of corporatist, like in the political science sense, groups that are influential with us.

Out in real America, it is pretty easy to figure out what they are worried about. A job that pays something, that you can have a middle-class life on. How your kids are ever going to go to college so they can get a middle-class life, because college expenses are exploding. Healthcare, people like having health insurance. You know, they hate big-government healthcare, but they like health insurance. And the new one that is coming up; there are two new ones. One is nobody has any retirement savings. And we’ve got a lot of people who are going to live a lot longer than the last generation did, which is a great blessing of our time, but none of them have any money to live on and Social Security – which, for most of them, won’t be enough, plus the healthcare, entitlement costs compounding. And, and I think it could be a bit of a bogeyman, but the fear of technology wiping out a whole class of semi-skilled labor. And what do they do? What do you do if you are 57 and driving a truck, and in 24 months they can put a robot truck on the road? And those are coming. You know, there’s going to be these caravanning deals where you have

one truck with a driver and three with none. They're not going to sculpturist school or sculpting school. They are not going to learn how to code. So what do we do with them?

KRISTOL: Those are tough issues, though.

MURPHY: Yeah, and they are expensive issues. "Well, tax credit," you know. That's not going to answer it.

KRISTOL: Yeah, which means the traditional Republican, "Let's get entitlements under control," which is important to do, actually. Or "cut taxes to get the entrepreneurs working." The tax thing, in particular, seems to have no real resonance now, I've got to say.

MURPHY: You can promote growth with the tax code, but we have these structural problems, where if you are born in the wrong zip code, the odds are you go to a crap school and your path to the middle class has been taken away through no fault of your own. So we have all of those social kind of problems.

KRISTOL: Family and social problems.

MURPHY: They are massive. I mean, our strength, our Constitution is important, but it is our culture that made us great. So you got to deal with that.

You got to figure out how you transition people who are going to be displaced. I mean, automation creates more jobs over time. I am not worried about that in the big, macro sense. In fact, it's our big advantage. We still lead the world in the stuff that counts. I mean, China is the rising power. Their economy is bigger than ours is now, if you look at the actual purchasing power. So we got to manage all of that right.

But it is the, how do we, with our politics, get people through this moment, which is a problem. How do we do entitlements? And how do we *actually* fix healthcare? Which is now breaking both parties. It's the Bermuda Triangle: You fly in, you don't come out. The Dems did it; now we are doing it.

KRISTOL: Were you surprised that the Republicans in Congress decided, "Hey, let's do that first?" I mean, they did have a reason, the budget process and all of this.

MURPHY: I am a heretic on all of this because I did Mitt Romney's campaign for governor, so I was around Romney Care.

KRISTOL: So this was '02 where he ran as a challenger – or had an open seat, I guess?

MURPHY: Open seat. Well, kind of a challenger, in that there was a Republican governor but she didn't run for reelection because Mitt was coming like a freight train.

But I learned, I went to healthcare school then. And the problem with it is, it's all actuarial. If you don't put everybody in the system, insurance doesn't work. And so Mitt, the technocrat, said, "We'll have a mandate." And all of the Republican-freedom world hates the mandate. And everything's bad about the mandate except it is the way to make the damn thing work, mathematically, if you want an insurance-based system. And when we align the Republican Party against that, it was great short-term applause, but now we own it. And we are up against the same actuarial reality. So, what the political solution is going to be is we're going to give you subsidies to afford your healthcare because we won't force young people to pay into it, and the subsidies are going to explode.

And the entitlement problem that's going to choke the budget is going to get bigger, not less, because Congress is going to try to check-write its way out of this. So, we have perverse incentives and we are

going to make it all worse, at least from a budget point of view. And the politics of it is nothing but pain for anybody who touches it.

KRISTOL: So, will 2020 reward the tough-talking, sort of Perot-type? Who, “We got to get serious about these problems. I am going to tell you truths that the two major parties won’t.” Or will it reward just another facile demagogue?

MURPHY: The problem is people will vote for the tough-talking person as long as they don’t *do* anything tough. I mean, people voted for tough-talking Trump to get tough on Mexicans, who live in another country. Trump ran away from entitlements and any of that stuff. Like any populist, he’s never going to be for anything unpopular.

KRISTOL: I’m saying is there a market for non-populist seriousness in our politics today?

MURPHY: Yeah, I think 10 percent. People have a hard enough life than to vote for somebody to go to Washington and they think make their life harder. And we have a whole industry of marketing to tell them, “Don’t vote for that guy; he is going to make your life harder. Vote for me: I am going to give you cotton candy and a magic pill. You’re going to lose 40 pounds and your dog will like you, and it’s free.”

KRISTOL: And the same with foreign policy. Nobody wants to hear that the world is getting very dangerous.

MURPHY: They are like, “Yeah, we got problems here in Farmington.”

KRISTOL: That’s not entirely encouraging.

MURPHY: I hate to be such a pessimist, but you know, being under the hood of American politics for 35 years, I’ve become a greater and greater fan of Singapore. They do pretty well. [Bill laughs]

II: A Career in Politics (33:32 – 1:09:42)

KRISTOL: Have things changed over those 35 years or was it always a certain kind of – well, whatever. You talk.

MURPHY: I know what you’re – American politics has always been rough and tumble, but I think it has changed. You know, I’m doing the old-man point of view, and my great insights – totally missing the Trump result – is why I’m here in your basement now, you know, doing this.

KRISTOL: Au contraire. This is the pinnacle – this makes the network shows, are you kidding? The network shows are a good warm-up for this.

MURPHY: Next we’re going to do short wave [radio]. Yeah, right, exactly. We’ve made it to the top on your internet dial. And the internet is part of what’s changed.

But before I babble on about that, I would say the death of elites being able to shame and control outcomes in politics: When I started out in the early 80s, there were certain rules, like you couldn’t get away with this; you’d be shamed out of it. And government used to work on shame – sometimes bad shame from like the left that controlled the newspapers, or a lot of them. But now we’re in this shameless era –

KRISTOL: And you started out as an insurgent challenger and a troublemaker and all that.

MURPHY: Totally. And I don't think I've changed that much, but before there were kind of rules to campaign, which made them more fun because there was strategy involved. Now it's just mega tonnage, flame throwers at two feet. There was more finesse to it then.

But I would say the biggest thing that's changed, and this sounds like a cliché, is the "interweb," as the kids call it. And what the Internet has really done – I remember when I started out, we're talking like a volunteer kid in the late 70s. You go to like a state rep or state Senate campaign, and the campaign manager had a lockbox with the key, and inside it was three thousand dollars' worth of stamps. And the volunteers would trudge in, and people, you know, you do postcards or flyers, you put the stamp on them, and you take the trays, and you mail it. The stamps were like a thing.

Well, the Internet is free stamps. So now any message you can get anywhere, and we all have these phones, which are a direct appliance. So a lot of the filters are gone, which also means the editors are gone, which means the organization's ability to kind of control the herd is gone to some extent.

And that has opened this wild world where it's democratized fund raising, because I can click and give \$10 to somebody I like. It's given the hotter messages a natural platform to grow, for good or bad. It's given fake facts an easy place to go all over the world for free. It's become this amplifier, without filter, *for everything*. The good and the bad.

And that has served to reduce the power of the forces that used to shame things. I mean, Trump has gotten six or seven stories, in his presidency so far, that if they happened in 1981, that would have been serious talk about the president needing to resign. And that's gone now, that ray gun of, "We don't do this. You can't get away with that," is pretty much gone.

KRISTOL: I suppose, that's a broader cultural change, too, obviously. Not just the media channels, I mean.

MURPHY: Right. Right, but like there's no Scottie Reston that can disapprove and to have the administration tied up for three days thinking about it. So, critique doesn't seem to work anymore. And because stakes are lower, in the voter's minds, than they used to be. You know, crazy entertaining behavior, everything is post-modern and hilarious, you know. OK, until the stakes go through the moon and we have real problems.

KRISTOL: I think the stakes being lower is a real insight, that is contrary – I think I may have said this before, but just thinking about it a little more – I think people say, "Well the stakes are very high. Globalization, technology." And that's true, but those are a little more theoretical. And it isn't the Great Depression; it's not the Dustbowl, right? Let alone, obviously, World War I, World War II. And I do think people do feel more able to indulge themselves.

MURPHY: We don't hear the old political slogans of the Cold War, like, "Vote like your life depended on it." And they were not being ironic.

KRISTOL: People are expressing themselves with their vote more than they're saying, "You know what, I really think we need that person there because he could actually do the job." The expression of sentiment.

MURPHY: You start to wonder about what social things you could do. And I'll tell you one thing that, you know, I was of the generation where we still had to register for the draft. That was a sobering thing. I remember the day I did it, I started reading the newspaper more. And bringing things like that back, some of those institutions. One, they're social levelers. You know, people are forced to meet people different than them, because we now live increasingly in these communities where everybody votes and talks the same and same stuff. But stuff to bring stakes back to the democracy, that this stuff is important. And mistakes can have catastrophic problems.

KRISTOL: And on the media side, itself? I mean, that's not going to change, obviously, the Internet, the collapse of the big –

MURPHY: I think you will see, and I do a lot of work as a consultant in technology. I'm based out of Silicon Valley a lot. I've always been a bit of a nerd for that stuff, anyway. Artificial intelligence is going to be a big deal. And one thing you can do is police a little bit. And there's a lot of work being done in the Facebooks, and places like that, to try to not be completely open-ended amplifier. You know, to bring a little – not unlike a newspaper: full of free speech, but if you're the 'Communist Party Death List' or the "Nazi Party Get-Even List," they don't sell you full page ads. And the Internet does. And, so, you know, not through those kind of companies, but just the nature of the open-ended amplifier.

So, my guess is, as it evolves, there will be some taming, but the whole idea of what's true and what's not is an issue. If we don't have objective truth, we don't have right and wrong. I mean, it is a slippery slope, and it's starting to infect our politics.

KRISTOL: Is there a moment or inflection point where you said, "Whoa, this is really different. This has changed." Trump, obviously.

MURPHY: Well, you know, I'm a shameless elitist. I like the idea of the smartest 5,000 people in the country having some influence, or 50,000. And I like a country where anybody can get there if they have talent and work. I'm not sure that latter still exists.

But I remember the Bork thing bothered me a little, because the judiciary was turned into a cheap congressional campaign.

KRISTOL: Right.

MURPHY: I didn't like when Mitt Romney –

00:42:34 KRISTOL: I think Bork was really important; I totally agree with that. That was a real moment, and it was underrated – and they won, and they won. That's the key. Teddy Kennedy stands up and gives a speech that is just jaw-droppingly dishonest and demagogic. And they won.

MURPHY: And winning gets imitation. So, that was a line that was crossed and in a lesser way. I mean, Watergate was hugely important, to bring down the faith of it.

Clinton, whose crimes were much less than Watergate, but still, the President of the United States got in front of the seal and lied to the country. About his own self-interest. I think that was an erosion.

I think the – I remember when Romney was attacked for having a law degree and an MBA degree simultaneously from Harvard – like, "What a stuck up idiot. Mr. Harvard fancy pants." You know, it's hard to do that. I think the fact that he's really smart is not a bad thing in the President of the United States, and somehow that value got lost. So it's all this stuff about "the rabble" the Founding Fathers were worried about, and it's happening.

KRISTOL: Did it get lost more on the Republican side or the conservative side, do you think?

MURPHY: Pardon?

KRISTOL: Did that conservative populism particularly erode it, or are both sides equally guilty?

MURPHY: Well, it became an arms race. But I'll tell you, we got better at it under Obama. I mean, you know, we let the thugs run loose. Now, I don't know if we control it. It's kind of a fetid jungle where crap grows.

But there was something about Obama that brought out the real alt-right crap. And because it was like one of these things where, "Hey, there are a bunch of cannibals that have joined our army, and they're doing pretty well on the left flank." "Good, give them guns." You know? That kind of mentality. And so now, half the party is eaten by cannibals. And guess what? They're eating us next.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

MURPHY: And so the question is, you know, OK. So that's what happens when we decide that the short-term political victories are all that count.

KRISTOL: There's not even a "we" because no one really controls it.

MURPHY: There is no "we." Yeah.

KRISTOL: Well, maybe, there is a "we." I mean –

MURPHY: "I'm a general and I order you to, 'Oooo!'" You know?

I'll tell you. I mean, I've become a crank in my dotage here, but: One, we ought to have super delegates to put a cap on the stupid. I'd be for that immediately.

Two, I'm not sure – We're the only big, vibrant, Western democracy that has this wide-open primary system to elect leaders. Generally, smoke-filled rooms were, you know, occasionally corrupt, but more or less, smart people try to pick what's in the best interest of the cause and party. Not a bad idea. I'm not sure the wide open, totally democratized party system, at least for presidential elections – maybe it's right for Congress; I can argue probably is – is such a good idea.

KRISTOL: Well, and Trump really showed that the *informal* barriers of the past, which you do sort of have to have been a governor or senator or, you know, something like that –

MURPHY: Right, all de-valued now.

KRISTOL: That's all gone. So now, really, why can't anyone, you know, ride some hobby horse on some issue that's popular for two weeks or something like that?

MURPHY: Right. That's what Mark Cuban's thinking, on the Dems side. "I'm on TV." You know?

Now, maybe there'll be a reformation. And I kind of believe in cycles. But, you know people get horrified when I say this, but what should the establishment do? "I think we need a better jingle." "No, we need more internet." Whatever that is. No, we've got to rig the system back to favor some dampers in the primary system.

KRISTOL: Any chance of that?

MURPHY: Sure there is! One thing we're good at in politics is rigging systems. If we all agree that ought to happen, the establishment still has enough control of the machinery to do it. The problem is it will require courage.

And, you know, I keep making this joke, and I don't really mean to make an analogy to a name that I will not mention, but there is a Vichy whiff in the air here in Washington. I can't wait to get out of this town,

because a lot of people who kind of rationalize it, and then in the privacy of their living room they're horrified. And I get it. People have livings to make and everything. But I think one of the reasons the president's in decline is people are facing the reality of his shortcomings. It's about damn time.

KRISTOL: It will be interesting. I mean, if a senator or governor were rewarded for just saying, without taking him on, not even particularly with any agenda, but just saying the truth. As you say, what they say privately. They're just unwilling to say it publicly. And I don't quite understand why. Because yes, if you're –

MURPHY: Primary voters.

KRISTOL: Yeah. But some of them aren't up for another four or five years, if they're senators. And some of them are so safe in their congressional seats, including safe in the primaries. Not that many people lost primaries. I mean, like three House members have lost in the last two cycles, right? Something like that. A couple of senators – famously, Lugar. But, you know, it's not like most – Most of them win their primaries like 75-25. They hate having to run a primary at all, though. And they *hate* losing 25 percent of the primary vote. But it has *no* effect on the general election.

MURPHY: My systemic cure may be more popular than people think.

But, in congressional races, I'm for open primaries. I mean, I'm not for sealing it up totally, but a big, nationally important thing? All the other parties tend to have strata of party leadership, and they're mostly allied to a cause.

I mean, the other thing that happens is you get a flawed candidate like Hillary Clinton, who has such inertia that they're unstoppable – even when it's not in the interest. And the only person that was strong enough to try turned out to be a loony leftster, you know? If somebody who was more electable and a more competitive Democrat, they wouldn't have had that primary constituency, so, it never happened. But in a more closed system, there might have been a pragmatic alternative like that.

So I don't know. I'm not against "We've always done it this way." I mean, I'm not *for* the argument "We've always done it this way" is the best argument. Yeah, we've done stupid stuff for a long time.

KRISTOL: Right, right. That's good we can have the "Let's Rig the Process Party".

MURPHY: We'll be in an even deeper basement after we put that out there.

KRISTOL: Totally, after this goes on the air. Yeah.

KRISTOL: What else, just over your 35 years? Quality of candidates, quality of public officials, character of public officials?

MURPHY: I mean, I hate to be so pessimistic. I've seen some amazing people, because the really smart ones care something about government. They're conservatives. And they understand the role of the campaign, and then how government works, and how you can integrate the two.

But, you know, they're connected. And they have skills: they're politicians – which is not an insult to me; it's a skill.

One of the issues we have now is that, under our system, in this Wild West, we have – the way the media covers everything, which is trivia, every day is the biggest day in the campaign for more clicks or more ratings. I mean the cover of –

The media has been a dancing partner to the Trump thing. They hate to see that and be charged that, and they do hold them[selves] accountable at some level. But the news business did well by Trump. And they just should admit that and think about it.

But I think, what with all those problems, I've seen some kind of remarkable people. And I worry now that the incentives to go get elected, and the skills to do that and the skills to govern are totally different things. Which is not in our national interest. You know, we used to grow politicians who would go do the campaign, and then they knew, backstage, they had to do things. And now, there's no backstage anymore; they can't get any shelter, because they've got – you know, everything is a massive scandal or some partisan news network is tearing them apart. And that makes it impossible to operate. So I've seen that as a disincentive to a lot of people.

We don't have talent, we don't have many talented eccentrics anymore running for office. Pat Moynihan today? I don't think he'd get elected in the modern media way. "Too weird, he talks funny, all that Latin." John Tower. You know, and these often flawed personalities, though, who did have certain skills. I think they're all gone. So, you know, the world's largest ruling power will be ruled by a bunch of unoffensive weather guys, who are famous for being on TV in their home market.

KRISTOL: And then the reaction to that, in a way, is Trump.

MURPHY: Yes.

KRISTOL: So you have the inoffensive weather guys, or the super careful, cautious Hillary Clintons and – fairly or unfairly perceived – you know, people like Jeb and others perceived that way. And then, Trump gets to be the, "Hey, I'm incorrect. I'll tell it like it is."

MURPHY: He's different; yeah, shake it up. "I'm a pathological liar, but I'm going to do exactly what you want to hear."

KRISTOL: How did he get away with that? On telling it like it is? [Laughter] I mean, the guy doesn't tell *anything* like it is.

MURPHY: Well, that's playing to prejudices, economic or otherwise.

MURPHY: Any good demagogue is very courageously telling people exactly what they want to hear.

Used to drive me crazy about Cruz. He was always talking about how he's speaking truth to power. I go, yeah, from a safe Republican state. Go run in Michigan. Right? Let's see you go win a swing state. But you know, people get what they vote for.

So, I have found, being under the hood – just to wrap this up a little. You know, Americans are pretty cagey. They see through a lot of it. And when we pander to them, especially the language of politics – you know, we're going to "invest" in this because we can't say spend if we're a Democrat. Or you know, the kind of Orwellian triple-speak – they smell that and they hate it. And that is a lesson. We patronize them a lot. And Trump was partially, I think, a scream against that.

So, I think the country is knucklehead proof. But the great question of our time is will we dominate this century the way we did the last one? We have a power that is quickly rising, and we're not doing much to stay ahead because we've fallen into our internal silliness. And can we get our act together or not?

KRISTOL: And I think people underestimate the damage that can be done if you start, things start to fall apart. I mean, this is not an incremental thing where you lose three percent a year. You lose three percent a year until suddenly you lose 20 percent a year, so to speak.

MURPHY: And earning it back is catastrophically expensive in blood and treasure. The goal of our generation, and the next one, should be to avoid that. Because our ability to – If we ever had another world war, it would be very akin to World War I, where the technology is now far in advance of what we think war is. And so it would be catastrophic on a scale of a World War I, which, you know, wiped out entire generations.

KRISTOL: Tell me about your favorite moments in some of these 35 years. I remember you and I were together a couple of times in the Bush White House.

MURPHY: Oh right, I remember when I got thrown out.

KRISTOL: I can't remember, did you *literally* get thrown out?

MURPHY: No. No.

KRISTOL: You were told not to come back, I think.

MURPHY: Well they did a thing, and my memory is a little murky –

KRISTOL: So here's my memory: It's September or so in '91. Bush is beginning to think about reelection, and Chief of Staff John Sununu calls a meeting – was it in the White House itself?

MURPHY: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Yeah, in his office.

MURPHY: Because I thought it was a big deal to get invited to the White House.

KRISTOL: It was like – I was Vice President Quayle's chief of staff, so I came, along with other White House senior staff, and a couple of the campaign guys – Bob Teeter, Bob Musberger. And I think I was sort of told, "Will you bring someone else, some outsider who the vice president trusts" – not an *outsider*, but a Republican, obviously. You know, an additional voice just because the vice presidential race is a little bit different and stuff. So you had gotten to know Vice President Quayle a little, in '90, on the Angler victory in Michigan, which Quayle went out to campaign for him a lot.

MURPHY: And I was like young *l'enfant terrible*, and you were always a contrarian, so you thought I'd be interesting. I had to buy a new suit; it's the White House.

KRISTOL: So we show up at the White House. That's my memory. So then what happened? How do you recall it?

MURPHY: Well, what I remember was a big room – and I had been in the White House a couple of times with Frank Lab, and when he worked with Reagan. But I had not been, even though –

KRISTOL: It may have been the Roosevelt Room; I don't remember where we were meeting.

MURPHY: And I had worked for Bob Dole for a while in '88.

KRISTOL: Right. Did he leave you on the tarmac?

MURPHY: No. Dole was always very great to me. I'm very fond of him.

KRISTOL: Oh, he left someone else on the tarmac.

MURPHY: Oh, he left a couple of people on the tarmac who *deserved* to be left on the tarmac, permanently. But no, no, no. So it was – they were heading for the re-elect.

KRISTOL: Right.

MURPHY: And I remember a roomful of kind of the usual suspects: the consultants who had been around the party for a while, and some of the White House political people, and I think the chief of staff was there, too. But it was like, you know, like 30; it was fairly large.

And there was the normal kind of opening, you know, and there's always like the happy talk reporting in any presidential campaign: "The First Lady was, you know, in Grand Rapids, Michigan and twice as many kindergartners showed up." [applauds] And he goes, "We're winning in the East." You know, but this was pre-campaign.

KRISTOL: This was the fall of '91, and Bush is – right, right. [crosstalk]

MURPHY: And everybody is high-fiving, "He's at 75% approval. In fact, we've never polled this high. Forget Roosevelt, it's the greatest ever." And you know, "Let's go around the room." "Not only is it the greatest ever, it's going to keep being." Everybody has their thing.

And I was like, "Well, all I know is there's a poll number that really counts called the right track/wrong track." Which is do you think the country is going in the right direction or the wrong direction? And more than half thought it was the wrong direction, which is code for, "We're bucking to make some changes here." It's a good predictor of the future. Doesn't mention the candidates. Just, you know, do you think things are right direction or pretty serious off on the wrong track? And the wrong track was like in the high 50s.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

MURPHY: Because of the economy. And you know, Bush was high off the war. And so they got around to me and I said, "Yeah, but you know what? People are unhappy with the economy, more than half. And think of it like two freight trains: That's coming one way, what people think of the economy. And the 70 percent approval of the president's coming the other way. And the president's approval is made out of balsa wood because it can – this is iron. And in that contest, if he can't move the right track numbers, I think he is in real trouble in his re-elect."

And all of a sudden I just remember like the carpet started moving to the door all by itself, and everybody kind of looked for a minute, and then "Next!" "Who let that clown in here? Kristol?!"

KRISTOL: I heard about that the next day. Trust me.

MURPHY: Yeah. And, you know, then they went around the room again, but somehow it skipped over me, and pointed to you, you, you. And you know, I just kind of sat there and thought that maybe that would – And that was the end. But you know, the truth is, it was funny because cut to the president's re-elect campaign. They hire me.

KRISTOL: Well the funniest thing is, a) Vice President Quayle was saying the exact same thing, privately, to the president and to others, because he was always alarmed and very cognizant of the kind of, out there in the country a little more, very cognizant of the dissatisfaction. Hard to win a fourth straight term, two Reagan and one Bush. And they were in total denial, I think.

MURPHY: Well, a lot of high-fiving and framing polling charts and everything.

But I come back to the campaign, and the first assignment they give me – I was like down at the media team, because I had worked on the '88 thing for Ailes a little while. After Dole, Ailes brought me in – Alex Castellanos and I – and I got to work with the great Roger Ailes, who was very sweet to me.

Anyway, so now I'm one of the mid-level. They send me to New Hampshire to make a man on the street spot.

KRISTOL: This is like early January.

MURPHY: Yeah, the primary. And so I show up there and I meet this guy, this local operative, Pat Griffin, who's a hilarious guy. "Hey, how you doing kiddo?! Let's do this!" You know? And so, "There's this shopping mall where they love the president, or at least they used to. I haven't been there lately, but the headquarters is never wrong, right?"

And we go, and we have a handheld camera, and I'm there, "Hey, how you doing? We're working for the president, you want to talk about him? You going to vote for him?" "HELL NO! Screw you, George!" Furious, start throwing rocks at me, taking a swat at the camera. It was unbelievable. So I cut – I tried 20 people and they're all like running away flipping it off. It was awful. So I turned around and say, you know, spin it up and get the microphone. "Bob, you should watch this." Meaning Bob Teeter, who ran the campaign. And I go, "Hey how do you feel about the president?" "Son of a bitch!" It was horrible.

So I make this movie, and I send it back to the campaign for Mr. Teeter, who I was very fond of. Nice guy from Michigan, who was the chief pollster and strategist. You know, "We're getting killed here in New Hampshire; not what you think." Well, I hear nothing back, but my electric card stops working at the top floor of the elevator. So it's repeating itself.

And then, just to finish up the story, we fly into Peace Air Force Base, which we had shut down, by the seacoast. And President Bush has the worst trip ever.

KRISTOL: You were on the trip, right?

MURPHY: I was on that trip.

KRISTOL: Wasn't there something with a cow?

MURPHY: Yeah, that was the famous – So, the day before, I get woken up in the middle of the night the day before the trip, which is hey, you know, because we had different crews and we're going to cover the triumphant trip. And I had one stretch, and we're going to change the motorcade and stop and look at a cow. And I'm like, "What?!"

KRISTOL: "Impromptu." They love those "impromptus."

MURPHY: We had a meeting –

KRISTOL: Get out of the bubble, you know?

MURPHY: So the next morning, the day before the president arrives, we get on with the Secret Service and the advance guys, and we do the route, and we stop in the middle of this road, and there's like a fence and a field. And we get out, and some advance guy, "At this point of view, Steamship [the president's limo] will stop spontaneously at 10:43 a.m., where the president, in barn attire, will depart from Steamship, walk 17 feet, where Holiday the cow, an award winner, will—" And I go, "What the hell is this!?" "Well, we thought it would be a good ag message." "Ag message!?" You know, I threw a fit.

So that gets bottled up; I think I'd killed it. I feel like I've done something for the re-elect that day – middle of the night [they] call again, "Cow's back on," because the guy who owned the cow was buddies with the State House speaker. It's like, you know, New Hampshire, everybody's a kingpin.

So we're sitting there in the limo, 42 cars and a helicopter, and there's a cow and there's a kid. And we screeched to a halt. And everybody piles out, and because a spontaneous stop the media doesn't know what's going on. So they go running to the front, and I've got a camera crew within the media scrum.

So we get there, and the limo is still closed and the door opens and Bush is in a suit. He didn't want to change, to his great credit, into some ridiculous, you know, like 1952 TV show "Howdy Doody" barn outfit that some clown had put in there.

So he goes walking over. And there's a helicopter 200 feet above, and the cow – one minute you're standing there, and 90 seconds later, there are 200 people rushing at you and a helicopter and sun guns on top of the video cameras people used back then, which would shine like a bright little light. So what does the cow do? And Bush is right up there, he's pissed. I can tell he doesn't want to be there, to his great credit. [makes angry cow noise] And the cow starts to gyrate. And the Secret Service guy, the lead guy, is standing there, and he looks down at the poor kid who was like overwhelmed, "Son, control your animal." [reaches under jacket for gun] [laughter]

All right. And I look over, and Bush catches my eye for a minute, like I had thought of this, you know? And it all went to slow motion, [speaks in slow motion] "Control your animal." [reaches for gun under jacket]. And the cow pushes the president. And now the [secret service] guy is stepping up, and the other service guys, and the guy in the silos turning the black hat around like we're going to trigger hamburger in 30 seconds.

And I thought, "They're going to kill the goddamn cow." Because Bush was kind of trapped by the scrum, sensing a presidential faux pas was moving in. And all I could imagine was the title of *USA Today* the next day, Bush splattered in blood with four cow legs vertical behind him.

So the reason he was a great president is he figured out what was about to happen, "Son control that –" [reaches for gun under jacket] You know, the hand is sliding out with the chrome. And Bush gives it, [slapping motion] "A lot of spirit!" Gives it like a knuckle punch or something, in the ear. Some CIA death grip. And the cow "Moo!" You know, steps back. And, "All right, we got to get going. Good to see you." And wham, into the limo. Where, as soon as the armored door shuts with five inches of bullet proof glass [mumbling angrily], and Sam Skinner is in there, getting it straightened out about the stupidest event in the world.

But that was Holiday the cow, and I'll never forget that day on the trail. And we made *USA Today* with a stupid picture of the president and a cow for the New Hampshire message. He was a great man, though, and he was always great to me. And, old school.

KRISTOL: He was a good president.

MURPHY: He *was* a good president!

KRISTOL: It's sort of amazing when you think about historians. He got 54 percent of the vote in '88, dropped to 38 percent in '92, lost with 16 out 54 – what is that, one of every three, almost? Three and half. Two of every seven voters who voted for him deserted him. Was he really that bad a president? He won the Cold War without firing a shot; he signed some good bipartisan legislation. The economy had a little recession, finally, in 1990, came back.

MURPHY: He put the final knife twist into the Soviets.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Somehow, the lesson I took from that campaign [in '92] – was one of the reasons I always thought Trump had a chance to win in 2016 – was that when people want change, they want change. You know? And we kept trying to say, "Hey, you know what? This has been pretty good, these 12 years of Reagan-Bush. Historians are not going to say this was a big failure of the U.S." But people just didn't want to hear it. Perot got 19 million votes.

MURPHY: No, when there's that wave and people hit the red button, they have a very low, low – what would I call it? Low standards for the right button.

KRISTOL: Right, threshold.

MURPHY: But still, 2.9 million votes. This thing was, this was like a calculus deal; it was inside the realm. We don't know the exact value was, but it was close enough to trip the Electoral College.

KRISTOL: What's your favorite campaign that you did?

MURPHY: Oh, I was lucky a lot. Bush's comeback in 1998, Jeb, down in Florida. Because he had lost in '94 and everybody won. So he turned over the staff, except for Sally. And we had a great, fun campaign. Did some stuff in Canada I had a lot of fun with for Mike Harris. The Schwarzenegger recall in 2003 was great fun.

KRISTOL: How much is that a model for–

MURPHY: Mitt Romney's governor race.

KRISTOL: Talk about Schwarzenegger a minute. Because that was a little, that was kind of pre-Trump–

MURPHY: It was pop culture again. You know, it was interesting –

KRISTOL: So, what happened? Gray Davis gets recalled.

MURPHY: Well, they elect Gray Davis, Democratic governor, Democratic state.

KRISTOL: Totally normal, boring Democrat.

MURPHY: Yeah, he kind of surprised in the primary, came up the middle. And, you know, did some stuff that he thought was responsible. It was unpopular – including a car tax, a property tax on cars – and a recall thing starts. Darrell Issa, the burglar alarm congressman, kind of started it. And there's this big, you know – only in California, "real citizens" revolt. Surges, like he did in '78 with Jarvis.

KRISTOL: I guess there were energy problems, right? The energy blackout. Yeah.

MURPHY: Yeah, Dennis Miller had a great joke at that time: "We're paying mini-bar prices for electricity." And, so, the thing starts bubbling up, and I get a call from Dick Riordan, the Republican mayor of L.A., former mayor, who's thinking of running. And so I sneak out there, and we set up the Riordan campaign. We're ready to go, and he calls me and says, "I'm not running." I said, "Great." So I get ready to get on a plane the hell out of the state after two weeks of work, and he says, "No, no. Come see me." And I go and have breakfast with him.

And we get in the car and we drive over to Oak Productions, and I meet Arnold Schwarzenegger. Which is an interesting experience because Arnold does the old secret police trick where he doesn't say much. And you're like, "God, you're the Terminator, and I'm talking. I can't stop talking; huh, this is weird." But he was very nice.

It was pandemonium in the office, and there are a lot of Wilson guys who work for him, a little, who is this new – But my friend Don Sipple was there, who was helping, this old pal of mine. So, long story short, I give him a little free advice. And one of the Wilson guys came in, and said, "Hey, how'd you like to be in charge of radio?" "Hmm, no," and I leave.

And the thing kind of starts to implode, and I go over to the former Soviet Union, where I'm doing a campaign, and I get the call. And I fly across the world, and show up, and kind of grab the recall thing, with very able help from some people there. And, you know, off we went. And it was incredibly fun.

KRISTOL: How did it work? At the same time they voted to recall, they voted for someone?

MURPHY: Yeah, it was a double ballot.

KRISTOL: So Davis got recalled.

MURPHY: Davis is getting recalled, and on the ballot they've got Cruz Bustamante, Tom McClintock, it was a big, open primary kind of deal. Arnold was interesting because he had the power of pop culture. And in focus groups – people forget, Arnold did not start in front; he started behind.

"What are you for? Do you think he's got a vision for government?" "Hell no." "Think he knows anything about government?" "No." "Do you think he can find Sacramento on a map?" "Absolutely not." "Well, why are you for Arnold?" "Because when he gets there he's going to open the trunk of his Hummer, take out a rocket gun, and blow up the capitol." I remember that much during the Trump thing.

To his credit though, Arnold immediately said, "I need people. I need to figure out how to staff the government. I want a really good transition team because I haven't done this before, and I've been hanging around issues" – he'd run an initiative; he knew a lot of policy people, and the most muscular part of our campaign was the policy operation – "get me the best people and get me the best plan." And Arnold took it incredibly seriously, because he knew his strengths, and he knew what he needed to get. And that's *totally* different than Trump.

And so we were ready. We had a perfect transition. And everybody lined up, took over the government; it was very different than what we're seeing here.

KRISTOL: And he had a decent first term. Not as conservative as some people wanted.

MURPHY: But for California standards, I thought was quite good. We had a debt crisis; we had a lot of stuff. Then we got ambitious about turning on the kind of special interest incorporated in Canada – excuse me, in California. And the problem there was that labor will fight to the death for their stuff – they'll mortgage the building, blood drives, whatever it takes. Business will throw you a few grand and tell labor not to be mad at them. So we were massively outgunned and we did some initiatives we shouldn't have, and we got clobbered. And that brought everything in the press narrative to a stop.

And at that point Arnold decided, "I'm going to run for re-election." And he was always the favorite to win re-election; a California governor's very powerful, very few get beaten in re-election. But, "I'm going to have to be the best possible mayor of what *is*, rather than the huge change agent." And he won, and tried to be the best possible mayor of what is, but it wasn't quite the movement, enthusiasm for big changes we had, and had some success with in the first two years. But we had some failures, too.

But it was great. He was very good to me; he's still a friend of mine.

KRISTOL: Didn't you blow up a car or something? What was that about?

MURPHY: Yeah, we blew some stuff up.

KRISTOL: Remember this, where you dropped a car out of a helicopter or something? Not that you would do some vulgar, cheap stunt. [Laughter]. You wanted elevated politics of like the *Federalist Papers* is what you would like to read on your TV ads, I think.

MURPHY: I wanted to conduct the entire campaign in French, the language of world diplomacy. But I was overruled. [Laughter]. What happened was, you want to rule TV news. Because nobody reads, in California, about politics, you know? And TV news is mice on surfboards and everything. So, we were a very visual campaign, by design. And we needed some big finishes, so we did a march, a 10,000-person rally at the capitol. You know, it was a very telegenic campaign, which played to Arnold strength because he knew how to possess a camera.

So, we wanted to have a big finish about the car tax; so I had the idea let's get 3,000 people on a Saturday, in the last 10 days, and we'll get an old junker, "car tax," Arnold will do the plunger, and the thing will blow up. And, you know, we'll own TV news for 24 hours on a big issue for us.

Well the problem – So Arnold, of course, called this guy, [in Arnold voice] "He's the best." So I got, you know, Explosion Jones, half of his face was waffled from one that didn't go well, and he basically asked me, "Well, what kind of car?" "Some old junker." "How high do you want it to go?" "20 feet?" "All right. And how many times do you want it to flip?" "Three?" "All right. Extra, but yeah. Do you want anybody in it?" "No, no, no! We don't need –"

And so, we were all set to blow up the car – I was kind of excited – and, you know, we would be on the pad, it would be great television. And Maria heard about it and said, "We're not blowing up a car." And so, negotiations ensued, and we wound up, we got the old wrecking ball [dropping motion]. And it still worked; we smashed it. But old Fireball Jones called me up and said, "Hey, we already bought the explosives. Do you want to come at midnight and we'll blow it up anyway?" "No, no, no, we can't." So it never happened, Bill.

KRISTOL: OK. I just vaguely remember us discussing that in real-time. "Ah, some of us are working hard, here, in Washington, trying to get the nation's affairs in order. But it's good that you are blowing up cars."

MURPHY: We won. I had a great run. A lot of great governors: John Angler, Tommy Thompson, Christine Whitman.

KRISTOL: That was a great campaign in 1990.

MURPHY: It was, it was fun. Then, I was the genius who blew \$100 million for "President" Jeb Bush.

KRISTOL: And McCain – you didn't mention the bus tour for McCain.

MURPHY: Yeah, that was another –

KRISTOL: You almost beat W.

MURPHY: 2000.

KRISTOL: You and I were not invited to the George W. Bush White House for the first four years, I believe.

MURPHY: You know he was – Yes, I was a fairly frequent visitor as a young punk in the Reagan days, and a couple of times, despite that kerfuffle –

KRISTOL: With President Bush.

MURPHY: And President Bush was always great to me, and when I was working for Jeb he was wonderful. But yeah, I mean, I've always gotten along with Karl, but yeah. Last time I set foot in the Oval was – in the White House, it was in the Oval, but in the White House, period, was 1992 with –

KRISTOL: Jeez.

MURPHY: Yeah, yeah. No, I've never been back. I mean, I probably could have wound up – because I'd become such a crank – under the Obama administration. But I wasn't interested in that. So, yeah, had a great run. And you know, going to try to continue to help the party.

KRISTOL: 2020, it will be huge. It'll be huuuuge.

MURPHY: Oh, I think I'm done with that.

KRISTOL: No Republican, no president has been defeated in the primary since – I guess Johnson was forced out in '68, in effect, so that would be the model.

MURPHY: And that's what will happen with him. I don't think he's slogging his way through "Well, Trump lost in Wisconsin today." He'll fold his cards and not run. Or earlier, I think. That's my guess.

KRISTOL: Somehow I imagine you might end up being a part of this.

MURPHY: You think he's going to run for re-election?

KRISTOL: I think it's quite possible.

MURPHY: You're making *me* sound like the anti-Trump guy. Your Twitter feed reads like Obama's dream journal.

KRISTOL: That's it, that's all the time we have today, Mike. [laughter]

KRISTOL: No, I think there's quite a good chance he won't run, and I think the odds are he wouldn't win if he won the nomination. And what I just can't decide is how likely is the Republican primary challenge to succeed? Is it possible you've got a Macron-type situation with the third party? I do, I'm struck by how much – There's always talk about that. It always usually never goes anywhere. We've been through this a few times, and I went through it a little bit in 2016 trying to recruit someone. But, the one thing I learned in 2016 is I don't believe the ballot-access problem is as bad as people think. The right–

MURPHY: It's bad, but it's not –

KRISTOL: It's manageable, though. If you had a candidate who wanted to do it by early, mid-2019, had a decent team, I think the money would be there – you know, with a good message. I don't think it's out of the question.

The trouble is if he's being primaried at the same time it would be like 2015-2016 again, which is all the energy would be in the primary challenges to Trump or opponents to Trump, which means it would divert attention from that. So you have to sort of pick: are you going to do the Republican, or are you doing the new center?

MURPHY: Right. And I think if Trump's in a position where there are really a lot of people primarying because he's vulnerable, he won't run.

KRISTOL: From your lips to God's ear.

MURPHY: Well, we will see. Thanks for having me.

KRISTOL: Thanks, Mike. Thanks for joining us, joining me on CONVERSATIONS.

And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]