

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

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I: Challenges to American Primacy (0:15 – 26:24)

KRISTOL: Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol, and I'm pleased to be joined today by my friend Tom Donnelly, a Senior Fellow – Resident Fellow – what are you? Senior Resident Fellow; a very important fellow.

DONNELLY: Yeah.

KRISTOL: At the American Enterprise Institute.

DONNELLY: Hail, fellow.

KRISTOL: Hail, fellow, well met, at the American Enterprise Institute, been involved in national security and foreign policymaking and commentary, and research, for decades. And one of my favorite foreign-policy analysts. Because Tom, you both know the details – you can tell us why the Army should procure this and not that – but you also have the big picture, and that's what I want to begin with today and get the benefit of your thinking.

You wrote a terrific piece for *The Weekly Standard* about what, three, four – more than that, I guess – six months ago: "Reversing Decline, the Example of Elizabethan England," which we can get to later, and you can cheer us up and say that we can do what Queen Elizabeth did.

DONNELLY: Let's hope so.

KRISTOL: But let's begin with where we are. Let's step back. I mean, okay, we're talking June 2017 [July sic]. I mean, one has the vague sense that the world's not in great shape, and our status, that it isn't – But I mean, is that wrong? Is that right? How bad is it? What should we worry about? What will things look like 10 or 20 years from now?

DONNELLY: It's always a big risk to try to put the current moment in some vast, historical sweep, but it really does feel as if the post-Cold War moment, the period of American preeminence or hegemony is certainly under threat. And this has been kind of a steady but slow unraveling that goes back quite some

time now, but really does sort of seem to have crossed over to a new threshold of danger and instability in the world, you know, measured by all of the things that Americans care about: security, liberty, and prosperity. All those things seem to be at greater risk than at any time in a generation.

And as one, you know, casts the runes and tries to predict what might happen, it's really hard to come up with a highly likely good outcome. It really does seem like the bad guys are gaining on it, and we're falling behind. I mean, I think that is a legitimate fear – very much, you know, expressed in the Trump candidacy and presidency, and even in the Make America Great slogan. I mean, that seems to me to be an expression of worry more than an assertion of, you know, confidence or muscularity.

KRISTOL: So why isn't this just the normal, you know, it's always rough, you have the Balkans, 9/11 – There always seems like oh, it's, you know, we have to beat back little challenges. But at the end of the day, have things really changed that much? And why should one think that we might be at or approaching a tipping point, and so forth?

DONNELLY: Well, it could be cyclical. If I was going to have to bet the mortgage, I would say, you know, it is like, you know – again, if I had to sort of handicap it – I'd say it's *more* likely to be cyclical.

But the thing that strikes me the most is *our* loss of confidence. The world, you know, our adversaries, our potential adversaries, aren't 10 feet tall by any stretch of the imagination, but again, we really seem to have lost our ability to – both as a matter of national will, but also as a matter of being able to think through what our important interests are and what needs to be done to secure them.

Again, it, I think, reflects an internal doubt and uncertainty much more than the external-threat situation. Not that that's not serious, but there isn't anything out there that, by itself or even in combination, is beyond our capacity or our power to respond to.

KRISTOL: Your premise, I guess, is that we're sort of in charge of the world, and that we need to keep all these threats under control. And I mean, why isn't the answer, well, to the degree that what you say is accurate, that's just being grown up; it's obvious that we can't run the world, and there'll be these rising powers like China and troublemakers like Russia, and you know, we deal with them case by case kind of, you know?

DONNELLY: I've never quite understood that. I mean, you know, there's certainly nothing inevitable about American primacy or, you know, our unchallenged power position. On the other hand, historically speaking, it's incredibly strong. I mean, it's global in scope. All the past great powers, you know – at least of the modern era – are allies who are thoroughly bought into having us as the pacesetter, the leader.

So there's, you know, there's no reason – again, it's not inevitable, but it is certainly more than possible and to the degree that history is contingent, it's something that we could do. It's not beyond –

KRISTOL: What's the "it" there? Sort of hegemony?

DONNELLY: To continue the – I mean –

KRISTOL: What's the "it," and why is it worth doing?

DONNELLY: It is American primacy in the world.

KRISTOL: Why isn't that just like a 25-year post-Cold War thing but it's inevitably going to go away, and we'll have to live in a more balanced world?

DONNELLY: I'm just not down with inevitability.

KRISTOL: Well not inevitability. Why shouldn't we choose to live in a more balanced world, or not make the sacrifices required for your crazed view of us running everything, et cetera, et cetera?

DONNELLY: Yes. Yes. Competition breeds violence and war. It is sort of historically normal for rising great powers, like China for example, to want to live in a world of its own making. That would be the sort of typical approach to things.

On the other hand, that theory would've predicted that a reconstructed Germany or a rehabilitated Japan would again pursue its traditional security interest, trying to itself secure their own interests. But in fact, what they've done is sort of delegated that element of sovereignty, that essential element of sovereignty, to us. They've been convinced it's a better deal for them.

So, it is neither inevitable that we will continue to be the rule-setting power, but neither is it inevitable that others, you know, will be successful in any challenge. And again, when you look at the sort of material balance of power, we got a lot going for us.

So, which, again, leads me back to wonder *why* after being so assertive for 75 years and so repeatedly insistent on doing it our way, to sort of put it in shorthand terms, why we now are all of a sudden so doubting of our own power and our own principles?

KRISTOL: I guess the answer people would say is, well, Iraq and Afghanistan are tough. And we're not going to stop China from rising; we don't even want to, really, in some ways. And Russia, maybe they have to have a sphere of influence near them, and then we need to adjust.

I guess the question for me is less could we do it – well, I want to get back to that – but *why* should we do it? I mean, I think that's, in a way, the question. Both does it –

DONNELLY: Because it makes for a different quality of international life, quite obviously.

KRISTOL: But that is, in a way, the challenge, don't you think, that President Obama and President Trump, in different ways, opposed, right? Is it worth doing for America? "Nation building begins at home," I think that was Obama. And Trump has versions of that, I mean.

DONNELLY: But it does not end at home. I mean, the idea that we can separate ourselves from the rest of the community, international community. I mean, this is as old a classical, political-philosophical question as there is: *where do the walls of the city end?* Where do the, you know – what separates the barbarians from the civilized people?

And there's no reason to acknowledge an adversarial set of powers or influence. Again, especially for us. I mean, we do have an ideological view, a set of political principles, which, most of the time, we think are universally applicable to all humanity. So, I think it's a particularly curious irony that we have lost faith in those fundamental principles.

There's nothing about the world that's different. In fact, it seems to be a, you know, something that's stemmed from incredible success rather than any particular failure. I mean, the troubles of Iraq or Afghanistan are – and, you know, you should never diminish the losses of lives or the treasure expended or anything like that – but these are, you know, relatively secondary or tertiary issues of strategy.

And, I mean, they fit in a larger pattern, but it's curious that the failure to immediately turn Iraq into a functioning republic after decades of tyrannical rule and a very, you know, a history before that that was not particularly hospitable to, you know, representative government, that just a couple of years of that – and again, that, at the moment where we actually were having success, in 2009 into 2010, to walk away from that, I think certainly tells you more about us than it does about Iraq.

KRISTOL: Do you think that was sort of the key pivot moment somehow, in '09, '10, '11 when we got out of Iraq and then, I guess, failed to intervene in Syria? Was that a –

DONNELLY: I do. I do. I think, you know, this was also a function of not taking stock post-9/11. There was never really a larger argument advanced, a strategic argument, about how we – the Middle East is the most unstable, most violent. It's the –

KRISTOL: Yeah. Well, let's go into that. That's important, I think. So there's – Russia and China we'll come back to.

DONNELLY: Yeah.

KRISTOL: So, we're sort of – “Europe Whole and Free,” we're doing that in the nineties.

DONNELLY: Right.

KRISTOL: China we're –

DONNELLY: East Asia's getting peaceful. It's the engine of twenty-first century prosperity.

KRISTOL: Right.

DONNELLY: There's at least a hope that China will become a responsible stakeholder.

KRISTOL: India's becoming much better.

DONNELLY: Right. Exactly, exactly. So, things are going great. But it's clear that the dysfunction of the Middle East, the sort of post-World War II failure of the post-colonial governments, you know, Arab nationalism that, you know –

KRISTOL: Islamic –

DONNELLY: If a –

KRISTOL: And then the rise of Islam.

DONNELLY: Yes, radical Islam – both in its Shia formulation and the Iranian manifestation – but also Al-Qaeda and its ilk. You know, a man from Mars would have said, “The biggest problem on planet earth is the Middle East. That is the biggest geopolitical problem that you earthlings face.”

And it would have given us a sense of perspective if we'd been able to, again, when that 9/11 moment happened, to have articulated some sort of larger objective – understood that it wasn't going to be a rapid, decisive operation, and that the mission wasn't going to be accomplished overnight, and it was really going to be a long-term process of bringing people in the region into the international community in a way that the rest of us could live with.

I mean, that would have put us in good stead, I think, if we'd been able to have that level of analysis and sort of been able to distance [ourselves] from, obviously the very powerful emotion of a desire for revenge after the attacks and, you know, having tried to deal with Saddam for the better part of a generation prior to that. We have looked at the Middle East in pieces.

KRISTOL: Right.

DONNELLY: You know, it's very much like the traditional 10 people groping different parts of the elephant, and not being able to describe what the creature looks like. So, we've engaged with blinders on, repeatedly, and without being able to put the pieces together in a more lasting way.

KRISTOL: And what does that look like, putting the pieces together? I mean, are we talking about troops there and regime change and all that stuff that's got – it's daunting, I think, to a lot of Americans, that prospect.

DONNELLY: Well, again, let's just substitute Europe for the Middle East. I mean, again, it's sort of hard to know where exactly in the scope of history we are in the region, but to me, it reminds you of the Thirty Years War of the seventeenth century.

So, you have now a faith-fueled, regional conflict where various powers – not great powers. I mean, the problem with the war is that it continues because, among other things, nobody else is powerful enough to win. So it's a very back and forth, very devastating set of circumstances. But again, if you'd looked at Europe in 1630, you would have said these people are, you know, un-coachable, un-civilizable, riven by tribal and ethnic and confessional differences that can never be healed. And, you know, 350 years later, and a lot of destruction later, Europe looks more pacifistic even today than one ever could have imagined.

But again, the fact that it's a hard problem doesn't mean that you can walk away from it or that there won't be consequences of ignoring it or that other outside powers won't try to intervene and meddle and make the situation much worse than it would be otherwise. I mean, my goodness, to think that the Russians are sort of back as a big influence in the Middle East after 30 years of being shut out on every front is a pretty stunning development.

KRISTOL: But it does seem the argument for a very assertive American-hegemonic policy, "empire for liberty," I think you've called it.

DONNELLY: Yes. I borrowed that from Jefferson, so I didn't –

KRISTOL: Jefferson says "empire of liberty" or "empire for liberty"?

DONNELLY: It's in correspondence between Madison and Jefferson. They use both terms, sort of interchangeably. And if you really want to be pedantic, I think it's worth wondering about what the nuances between the two might be.

I like "empire for liberty" because it sort of implies the traditional employment of power but for the purposes of human freedom.

KRISTOL: Right. Right.

DONNELLY: Whereas, "empire of liberty" sort of suggests that it's going to be a consensual agreement among free and autonomous individuals.

KRISTOL: And "empire for liberty" characterizes, I guess, our policy with respect to the American continent –

DONNELLY: Absolutely.

KRISTOL: – for the first many, many decades.

DONNELLY: And, certainly, our foreign policy for the last 75 years. I mean, we've acted ruthlessly – not always consistently with our principles, but as statesmen have acted across history. But always for the

purpose and with a good deal of success in inculcating or, you know, advancing these political principles, which tend to be both more stabilizing but also more liberating and also tend to make people richer.

KRISTOL: And less likely to cause trouble for us, I think.

DONNELLY: You know, it's better by every imaginable measure.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I do, though, take the original argument for a liberal empire, or "empire for liberty" – I was toying with "liberal empire" as a slogan; that's a little further out there because – But *empire*, you know, maybe you just need to bring that term back, you know?

DONNELLY: And look, countries like Germany and Japan have become fully participatory members in the liberal empire. It is a transnational phenomenon.

KRISTOL: Yeah. And it allows for self-government. And it is liberal.

DONNELLY: Yes, absolutely.

KRISTOL: I mean that would be a key point to make. Unlike previous empires.

DONNELLY: Correct.

KRISTOL: The British were the most liberal, I guess, of the earlier ones.

DONNELLY: Right.

KRISTOL: But not so liberal as we are, in the sense of believing truly in self-government. But, I mean, they sort of believed – they believed in getting people ready for self-government over decades or centuries. But it ended up working. I mean, India is a different place than it would have been if it hadn't been British, right?

DONNELLY: I mean one of the favorite, you know, drinking games of historians is to compare British colonies to Spanish colonies or French colonies. It's always better to be British.

KRISTOL: I suppose a critic would say, well, that's, you know, that's frightening but this is sort of like – it would be nicer if we could do all these things, but nuclear weapons have been around for a while; we've done surprisingly well in constraining the spread of them, but at some point, they're going to spread. I mean, that's just, you know, the way weapons work. And this is sort of like wishing that – I mean, and let's be sort of more grownup about realizing the limits of what we can do to stop that and –

DONNELLY: Well, we have worked very hard to constrain proliferation. I mean, that is, I think, reasonably viewed as a real success of American policy.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Taken for granted, though. No one ever wakes up – I mean, you have to go to the Mars point of view to see how amazing it is that we constrained it as much as we did, A, in my opinion.

DONNELLY: Right.

KRISTOL: And, B, how damaging it is that we started to let it fray? Even though we maybe didn't have much choice with Pakistan, and then North Korea, and maybe now Iran, depending on how you understand the Iran deal, right?

I mean, is it true to say that we're at some kind of possible tipping point? The straw that breaks the camel's back situation where you know, you sort of – A certain amount of fraying, yeah, you can live

with, but then at some point the fraying becomes, you know, more than – the whole thing starts to unravel, to continue the metaphor. You know?

DONNELLY: The pace of proliferation is clearly accelerating, and not in a linear way. And also, the nuclear problem has been a, you know, very simple – there have been few nuclear nations up until this point. And just the complexity – I mean, a lot of the sparks to conflict could just not involve us at all.

And India and Pakistan, you know, could turn out to be the stable exemplar of this.

KRISTOL: Right.

DONNELLY: You know, when the Iranians have a weapon, and the Saudis have a weapon, that's, again, not knowable. But, to me, counting on the rationality of the leadership actors in states like that, it doesn't strike me as being the best bet we could possibly make.

KRISTOL: And I guess to oversimplify the Trump answer to that is: No one's going to attack us because we're mean and big and stuff, and look, frankly, even if they get to use terrible weapons against each other, we can't stop it all. We can't rule the world.

And the Obama answer is international institutions, the U.N., international law. We need to strengthen all these international constraints, somehow. The international community has to stop this from happening, not us.

So, answer each of those: Give me your two-minute answer to your intelligent, Trumpy critic and your intelligent, Obama-ish critic.

DONNELLY: Well, the Obama-ish proposal is sort of law without order. There's no real enforcement mechanism. And that's irrational and bound to fail.

KRISTOL: It's like a U.N. Security Council debate on Sudan for 10 years while a million people die or something.

DONNELLY: Exactly. And the Trump version is sort of like: Order in part of the world and increasing disorder and violence in the rest of the world. Which would be nice if somehow we could guarantee that it would never affect us. But that's historically unsupportable.

And it's certainly not been – Americans have always understood their – even when we were weak and even before we were a nation – we understood things in global terms. We understood that what happened elsewhere in the world was going to affect us. It was going to affect our domestic liberty. It was going to obviously affect our security, and of course, it was also going to constrain our prosperity, as well.

No serious American political thinker has ever – I mean, and all the John Quincy Adams or Washington Farewell interpretations are just all wrong and a misunderstanding of how those people really thought about –

KRISTOL: But we did stay out of World War I for two-and-a-half years, which is, in a way, when you think about it, pretty amazing. And we stayed out of World War II for – depending on when you want to begin it - two years, for two years, until we were directly attacked. So, isn't it the opposite that we try very hard to stay out of these things?

DONNELLY: We do. We are reluctant. I mean, right. We are reluctant, especially to venture out of North America. But again, in both those cases, ultimately, we did.

KRISTOL: Yeah. It would have been better, maybe, to do it earlier. I mean that's the –

DONNELLY: Exactly. Exactly so.

KRISTOL: You have to stop it from happening in the first place. It seems to me, one problem is that World War I and World War II were taken as successes – and, thank God, they were, ultimately.

DONNELLY: Yeah.

KRISTOL: But of course, in a way, they were horrible failures. Now, I'm not sure we could have stopped them because we weren't who we are today, then, but –

DONNELLY: No. But having –

KRISTOL: You don't want a world that leads to – I guess maybe that's the simplest way: you don't want a world that leads to World I or II again, whether it's the sort of accidental – not accidental, the way World War I happened, with the unstable alliances with smaller countries dragging the bigger countries in, maybe to oversimplify.

DONNELLY: Or just, you know –

KRISTOL: Or just chaos.

DONNELLY: Germany's aspiration to be the hegemonic power.

KRISTOL: Right.

DONNELLY: I mean, that has been the first principle of American statecraft, is that hegemonic – a hegemonic power in any part of Eurasia that's important is anathema to us.

KRISTOL: And then World War II is the more easily understandable, I suppose. You know, horrible totalitarian dictator with wild ambitions.

DONNELLY: And both those are well contrasted with the absence of major war since then – certainly due to things like nuclear weapons. But principally due to the assertion of American power.

KRISTOL: Yeah. That's something people just don't – I don't know that they quite – you say it and you take it almost for granted because of your study of history. But do Americans understand that? I mean I'm struck – Well that happened so many times to me during the campaign in 2016, you know? We can't run the world and it's, the price is so great, and you know, we can't afford to do it and things are terrible.

And you say, *compared to what?* I mean, let's look at the world in the first half of the twentieth century. Why wouldn't that be what we would go back to? I guess that would be the question, right?

DONNELLY: That's been – I mean people – I mean, this is almost baked into the human condition; the competition for power is – That's what history is, is the story of the competition for power. And why should we ever expect it to be otherwise?

And again, it's not like we are not involved in the exercise of power and subject to all the constraints and the compromises that one has to make. I mean, we justify it because we do it for the sake of liberty, and we actually sort of take that seriously. We make decisions that other great powers would not have taken because of that.

II. Why America Must Lead (26:24 – 54:12)

KRISTOL: I just keep coming back – isn't it too hard, too much? I mean are we really going to prevent Russia from throwing its weight around in the Baltics? Are we really going to prevent, I don't know, China from becoming dominant in its region? Are we *really* going to fix the Middle East? I mean, how does it happen?

DONNELLY: I think this is really much simpler than people believe. Again, the fundamentals of our position remain strong. So, if you just, you know, imagine a map of Eurasia, if you will. So the deterrence line, if you will, for Russia, is now sort of like the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea – all those parts of Europe that came into NATO with NATO expansion but did not get, didn't become part of the military alliance in a sense that there were troops stationed there.

So actually deterring Russia from actually invading, or even politically sort of undermining, you know, nascent democracies would be pretty cheap and pretty simple to do. If we had left even fewer than half of the troops that we stationed in Europe for 75 years during the Cold War, the balance of power in Europe would be unassailable.

So, that's imminently doable. And the cost of securing the European peace has still remained fundamentally low.

And the same is true in East Asia. Again, our alliances are strong; our allies are prosperous. You know, the Japanese are going to rearm, and maybe they'll spend more than one percent of their GDP on military power, but they'll be a really powerful force.

So, our ability to sort of deter China from upsetting the balance of power in the Middle East is actually pretty easy. We have to have a bigger Navy so we are present. I mean part of the problem is, say in the South China Sea, we're just not there to, you know, police the perimeter, so to speak.

So that's actually – and again, deterrence is always a lower-cost military proposition than actually fighting.

And again, in the Middle East we just have to accept if we were *patient* about things and could do a little prioritization of things, our prospects for success – and the cost would go down exponentially, too.

Again, I'm really struck by where we were in 2009 versus where we are now. It would be more costly to get back to that kind of a position – and again, the situation in the region has changed. So that's the hardest one of the – by far.

And also, South Asia is rising in importance as a theater, which is a really long way for our military to project its power. But again, the Indians are obviously interested in a strategic partnership of some quality. So, our ability to reinforce a decent order there is well within our capacity.

If we're currently spending about three cents on the dollar for military power, if we added say a penny and a half to that, and kept it at that level and constantly were investing it, I see no reason why we couldn't both, keep the lid on things – deter the Russians, deter the Chinese – and over the course of time, sort of beat back any Iranian bid for hegemony, control Sunni jihadi groups and things like that.

These things are not going to cost us that much, not beyond the realm of what's possible. They do require some patience, a good deal of diplomacy to stitch these coalitions together.

KRISTOL: You've argued in the past for increases – if I can put it this way – in both our expenditures and hard power but also soft power, right? So you're also implying, you know, an active State Department, intelligence agencies.

DONNELLY: Sure. Yeah.

KRISTOL: So, another cent on the dollar, maybe, for that, right? You know, language training –

DONNELLY: Well, but even the principle job of the State Department is to actually do diplomacy.

KRISTOL: Right.

DONNELLY: I mean, you know – but people have been wanting the State Department to drift into becoming a development agency, which both diverts its attention, is really not its core competency, and they're not particularly good at, either. They have to contract out to do it.

KRISTOL: Right.

DONNELLY: So, you know, the size of the State Department is a blip on, certainly the size of the government. But again, focusing it principally on traditional diplomacy and statecraft is a cheap proposition.

KRISTOL: I mean, I guess what strikes me as you talk about it, though, listening to you, is it does require – and this is a point you made earlier – I mean, more than anything else a change of mindset, which would then lead to changes in expenditures and policies in the more concrete areas.

DONNELLY: Right.

KRISTOL: But the mindset has to be not, let's hope there's not a problem; let's not do anything until the problem really emerges; let's just, you know, really be good – if you're Obama, just try to be good partners in the international community. If you're Trump, let's just mind our own business and be sort of occasionally belligerent of people.

DONNELLY: Yeah. Snarl if people get too close.

KRISTOL: Or if we have trade deficits.

DONNELLY: Right.

KRISTOL: And the mindset, the opposite mindset is kind of, let's go out there and, you know, proactively, as they say, stabilize, develop, help friends, help people who would be better within these countries, presumably?

I mean, it's a very different – I guess what I'm struck by is how much we've slid away, in both parties, from anything like that mindset. Even the more hawkish members of Congress, let's say – they're more hawkish in the sense that they want to – and you and I would probably agree with most of the time – to respond more aggressively to various problems or threats. But I wouldn't say they get up in the morning thinking, *how do we shape the environment?*

DONNELLY: No. It is difficult to sort of explain why we're so trepidatious about it. You know, even again –

KRISTOL: Well, maybe you and I need to explicitly make the case – I'm coming back to the term *empire*. You sort of need people to think in a different way, and somehow the way we talk about it all –

DONNELLY: Correct.

KRISTOL: – “international community,” or “American self-interest,” in a very realistic way and all, it really gets you – Even if you back into something approximating good policies, which you could on either of those grounds, because you’re tough minded and you end up doing what you have to do, you know, because you’re not going to let things totally fall apart. It’s a very different – you then back out of them – and this is the problem post-9/11: You back into a good, you know, sensible, tough-minded policy in terms of we got to finally deal with Saddam.

DONNELLY: Right.

KRISTOL: Or we’ve got to not let Afghanistan be a – but then you get, immediately as soon as we can get out, we’re going to get out. What you’re really saying is, you’ve got to get over that kind of “as soon as we can get out, we can get out,” either from the Obama side or the Trump side?

DONNELLY: Correct. And the other thing that’s striking about it is how anomalous this is in the American experience. It certainly wasn’t the case –

KRISTOL: Well, is it really? We always backed in. We won World War II, and then, with Truman, we’re drawing down forces as quickly as we can, and then Stalin –

DONNELLY: It certainly wasn’t the case in North America –

KRISTOL: – and North Korea. Stalin and North Korea come to our – not to our rescue, but I mean, force us to sort of wildly react – not wildly, but I mean correctly react in ’49, ’50, ’51. But it was, you know, if you look at the debate in ’47, I’m sure it looks – it’s sort of there’s no –

DONNELLY: Sure. But, I mean, we’re in sort of an extended period of navel contemplation. It’s been 25 [years] – and again, you can’t explain it for want of wealth or power.

KRISTOL: Yes, I agree with that.

DONNELLY: Okay. So you’re really thrown back on, you know, what has changed to better our fundamental – or has there something that’s really –

KRISTOL: Well, or the opposite. I mean, has this always been somewhat a part of our fundamental outlook, which needs to change because, look, we managed to stay out of Europe in the thirties. We managed to stay out of Europe in the 1914, ’15. We managed to stay out of a lot of – and *this* continent was always different, I think.

Or maybe another way of saying what you’re trying to say or propose is, we need to think of the world a little bit more of the way we thought of America, the American continent, in the 19th century. I mean, it’s not that different a task. We just can’t have, you know, major powers on this continent; we need to ultimately settle and civilize it. Some harsh things happen. Some bad things happened in the course of that, but, you know, you had to – you couldn’t really – that was part of what made –

DONNELLY: Sure. But it’s also, I mean, it would be good to sort of revisit what the actual attitudes were of the Founders and, you know, others who did not, even when they wanted to exclude European powers from the Americas, didn’t imagine that that was going to be the end of the story. I mean, they always understood that the balance – again, the balance of – our project here was inseparable from the global balance of power, really even since Englishmen settled in North America. So, and that once the continental project was complete, that that wouldn’t make *us* the dominant power on the planet. I mean, Benjamin Franklin was a rabid British imperialist trying to shake people in London by the lapel saying, *you silly people*, you don’t recognize that, you know, if you stick with us for –

KRISTOL: Yeah, we can –

DONNELLY: Yeah, you'll be the unquestioned great power.

KRISTOL: So America succeeding Britain as the liberal-imperial power was not something that just happened by accident? It was sort of, in a way an appropriate succession.

DONNELLY: I've been reading Bob Kagan's *Dangerous Nation*. I mean, he sort of describes this as kind of an unwitting – I think that's the word he uses – is [almost as] we stumbled into this.

I think that's quite wrong. I think actually, from the earliest, certainly the possibilities – I mean there's like what, *we dare not say this too loudly*, but my goodness, the colonial charters – Virginia was supposed to expand, you know, extend to the Pacific. They claimed everything that they could get their hands on.

And the American project itself was a continuation of British imperial expansionism that had preceded it. And they believed that westward expansion was the key to becoming a truly global power.

KRISTOL: Yeah. So maybe it's better to think almost of Anglo-American foreign policy or the Anglo-American liberal-imperial project, or however one wants to say it. I mean –

DONNELLY: I do think that would be a really useful thing for us to do. And my own sort of wacky view about it is that the American Revolution was basically a dispute over the course and direction and ground rules of the Empire. And the complaints that one reads in the Declaration of Independence are essentially the colonials saying, "Hey, King George, you're changing the ground rules. We've just won this fabulous victory. Our prospects for westward expansion across North America are now wide open. What are you doing not only turning Quebec back over to the Francophones and cutting deals with the Iroquois, but also, instead of leaving your army here to secure expansion, making it an army of occupation against us? You know, that's not what we signed up for, and so we will continue, if you're not going to keep this compact, we'll go on alone by ourselves."

KRISTOL: And it is amazing, I've always thought – I'm agreeing with you here – that the fact that we intervened in the Shores of Tripoli, you know; we had Marines in Africa in 1804 or whatever. I mean, there weren't that many of them, and it was a little bit of a bizarre bunch of circumstances with the Barbary pirates and the Europeans didn't step up.

DONNELLY: Sure.

KRISTOL: Stand there busy fighting their Napoleonic wars. But that's pretty amazing. A tiny, what, four million Americans? They're a small country, thousands of miles away, no modern communications to say the least, no modern transportation, you know, and we're like, yeah, well, we have to go take care of that. I mean, and that's Jefferson, incidentally. It was not Hamilton as president. You know what I mean?

DONNELLY: Again, we all have had a keen appreciation of our own weaknesses, even in those times, but the framework for analysis, and certainly the aspiration, and the belief that the American experiment could not prosper absent global great-power attributes was pretty deeply inculcated. And you know, many of these decisions were, you know, how do we survive to the point where we can naturally –

And this is the real message of Washington's Farewell. You know, we have to avoid getting caught between France and Britain now, and we can't let them divide us here at home. But the punchline –

KRISTOL: So that we can be greater later.

DONNELLY: The punchline is, when we are powerful enough, we can determine – I forget the exact line – according to our sense of our own power and our sense of justice.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Yeah, it's amazing how bad – I mean how backwards, though, I think the conventional, both academic history, but I'd say popular, almost, history at this point is and the popular understanding–

DONNELLY: Yes, especially conservatives.

KRISTOL: “We were an isolationist country,” you know, “we'd just back into these things.”

DONNELLY: Right.

KRISTOL: *The* country that expanded the most – I'm just thinking out loud here – in the world in the 19th century is this allegedly isolationist –

DONNELLY: Correct.

KRISTOL: – you know, country that is inward looking, right?

DONNELLY: Why can't the Confederates have their own sphere of influence? [laughter]

KRISTOL: Right. Right. And to say nothing of the West. And we didn't have to go, you know, trundle out there and, you know, and do all that, right?

DONNELLY: I find it particularly disheartening that the conservatives who really want to embrace the originalist, you know, sort of embrace the Founders seem really tone deaf to this.

KRISTOL: Right. A Constitution that maybe, I'm sure uniquely at the time – and I think maybe uniquely, almost uniquely since then – envisions expansion, requires that every state be let in as an equal state.

DONNELLY: Correct.

KRISTOL: So it envisions non, let's call it, European-type expansion, where we simply subordinate others to us, but I don't know. Were there other – were there other polities that sort of explicitly said, you know, of course we're going to be getting a lot bigger, and we need to have a rule in our constitution of how we incorporate parts of places that are not now part of the U.S.?

DONNELLY: I really think of it as their attempt to correct what they saw as a defect in the British unwritten constitution.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's a good way to put it.

DONNELLY: And then you have things like the Northwest Ordinance that, you know, really regulate – it is a plan for expansion. The Constitution and these early pieces of legislation are all premised on creating mechanisms for continued expansion and for, again, becoming a great power in the international sense.

And yeah, I think it would be useful to, you know – some of our current political debates end up being framed as debates about the Founders – to revisit that. Really, to reclaim the future, you have to reclaim the past a little bit in this case.

KRISTOL: Regime change, I mean that got kind of a bad name – unfairly, in my opinion – but with Iraq, I suppose. But that also was always part – not obviously invading every country to make them immediately liberal democrats – but the notion that over the long run, we would be a force for regime change in the world. Am I wrong to think that was also there from the beginning?

DONNELLY: No. You are quite correct. And that's sort of how we measure success. It's not that we always use military power with the objective of regime change. Again, we have to – we are constrained

by practicalities and the need to practice statecraft and, you know, have a strategy and stuff like that. But that's how we know when the war is over, sort of, to speak.

KRISTOL: Right. It's what we do when the war is over in the Japan, Germany case.

DONNELLY: Yeah, exactly.

KRISTOL: And even in the nineties.

DONNELLY: Again, and when the peace is durable. Okay? We need to live in a world with like, you know, broadly speaking, similar governments, because we believe that out of inequities, political inequities, that's the wellspring of conflict.

That's what we thought about European monarchs in the nineteenth century. We didn't go over and, you know, try to remove the czar – and, in fact, we cut deals with the czar from time to time – but we had no illusions that a world dominated by, you know, the czar, the Habsburg Emperor and, you know, the Prussian Kaiser was going to be a congenial or safe place for Americans or their interests.

KRISTOL: Or stable among themselves.

DONNELLY: Exactly.

KRISTOL: I think that's the other strong argument. If you got a bunch of dictators, you're just asking for more trouble. Not that it's 100 percent that dictators always go to war [and] democracies never do; that would be an exaggeration. But all things equal, you know, right? I mean –

DONNELLY: Well, the democratic piece there is one of the few really serious pieces of political science, you know, of the last couple generations. I mean, there are always outliers and exceptions, but again, when you have, especially, liberal democracies, they find ways to resolve their disputes well short of conflict or combat.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

DONNELLY: That's not a trivial observation.

KRISTOL: And do you think that's plausible – maybe we'll end with this – in the 21st century? I mean when people say, well, what's your vision? I mean, okay, spend all this money and get us involved in these difficult and messy parts of the world.

I mean, or in Asia with China. I once said, you know, I don't know, "Why wouldn't we hope that by 2050" – to make up a time – "you know, China is a liberal democracy?" That's not a crazy thing to hope for. I mean, it would be much better for the Chinese, and better for us, and better for their neighbors. And people just look at you like you're nuts when you say that, A. Or B, that you want to have a land war with China or something.

But I mean, I don't know, would that be a crazy thing for Americans to sort of say? You know, Russia looked like it might make it, it slid back. It'd be a lot better world if – I mean just take those two big countries, Russia and China, if you could – it's not like the Chinese aren't intelligent enough, well-educated enough –

DONNELLY: Correct.

KRISTOL: – prosperous enough.

DONNELLY: No, their problems are political.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

DONNELLY: Who knows? I mean –

KRISTOL: But all I'm saying, though, is you would be in favor of supporting democratic efforts?

DONNELLY: Again, that's how – that's how we would know when it would be really safe to be less vigilant and less forward leaning. So that's how we would measure success.

But look, the history of human beings oppressing one another is pretty long and pretty deeply entrenched. Surely we should prepare to continue to try to survive and thrive and prosper and be free and preserve our liberties and the liberties of other countries whose fate is tied to ours in the face of autocratic or tyrannical challengers, people who are too wedded to sect or nation, in a blood and soil sense, or tribal affiliations.

You know, I think it behooves us to be realistic about what kind of world we want to live in, but continue to be devoted to what kind of world we would prefer to live in, and we aspire to live in and that we're working to live in.

KRISTOL: That's very well-said.

I mean, a final point I guess I would add is – I wonder if you agree with this – I'm struck how many conservatives libertarians, you know, with whom I personally agree on some domestic policy issues, that they have really adopted this argument that's been made that, you know, war is the health of the state and if you talk about empire with one hand, you're going to have just huge central government and corrosion of civil liberties at home and, you know, the whole notion of constitutional limited government goes out the door.

There's obviously some truth that, you know, World War I, we curbed civil liberties in a way that we hadn't before. On the other hand, I mean in our case, but certainly in the case of the British Empire, when the Empire was at its most far-flung was when the touch of government at home was the lightest, in the nineteenth century. I mean, I love these conservatives and libertarians who yearn for a nineteenth-century state, but the greatest nineteenth century, you know, "night-watchmen" liberal state was Britain, presumably, and they had this –

So I'm very unconvinced that liberal empire doesn't go pretty well, actually, with a kind of liberal constitutionalism.

DONNELLY: It certainly demands deeper thought than it's gotten at this point.

I mean, you know, back in the early Cold War there were all kinds of fears of the national security state and so on and so forth. But again, you look back over the history of 75 years and, sure, there have been government excesses, but government power has been used to secure freedoms for black people, for women, for gay people, now for transgender people. I mean the scope of individual, you know – it almost bleeds over into license and decadence to a certain degree.

KRISTOL: Right.

DONNELLY: But, individual Americans have never been as free as they are now, and that's because we felt safe.

KRISTOL: Yeah. And also, because we – I think there’s a connection between promoting liberty at home and defending it at home.

DONNELLY: Sure.

KRISTOL: And being serious about it at home and abroad. I mean, the European welfare states, which do not engage in a liberal-imperial project in any war to say the least, I’d say are more nanny state-ish at home, too.

So it’s the opposite of what people think – that if you just get out of this foreign policy stuff, we can really have a nice, liberal regime at home. I mean they have decent liberal regimes, but –

DONNELLY: Well, they didn’t exactly make it up themselves, so to speak.

KRISTOL: Right. Right.

DONNELLY: It is a product of living in an American-dominated world for –

KRISTOL: That’s another way of putting it.

DONNELLY: — or certainly correlated with that.

KRISTOL: And I don’t think it’s an accident that the Civil Rights Movement happened at the height of the Cold War, when we were standing for liberty and saying we were. And people said, “Well, wait a second: you can’t stand for liberty if you’re doing this at home.” That’s a very powerful argument.

DONNELLY: Yes.

KRISTOL: And, in fact, the worst retrenchments against civil rights were when America was probably retrenching from abroad, as well, in a way. Jim Crow –

DONNELLY: Right. I mean, again, a very –

KRISTOL: It’s kind of like, if we’re just going to be inward-looking, let’s just, you know, let’s indulge our prejudices at home, just as we don’t care much about liberty abroad.

DONNELLY: Again, and the correlation between tolerant societies and safe, or people who feel themselves to be secure and confident in their own political project is pretty striking.

And actually, one of the things that I would really be concerned about going forward is that the sense of fear that we have, and uncertainty about our purpose in the world, will translate into greater constraints on civil liberty here at home.

I mean, I think it’s more like – that is one of the things we did not talk about, but I would really be concerned about going forward, is that, you know, fear of greater danger in the world – you know, again, the sort of travel ban is maybe a leading-edge indicator of that attitude.

KRISTOL: Right. Right. So if you really – yeah. If you really want to have a nasty politics at home, let’s –

DONNELLY: Let’s be afraid about what’s outside in the dark.

KRISTOL: Let’s not *attend* to what’s happening outside our borders. And then be *afraid* about what’s happening outside our borders.

DONNELLY: Right.

KRISTOL: And then –

DONNELLY: You're worried about, you know, infiltration and subversion at home.

KRISTOL: That's another thing to think about.

DONNELLY: Another happy –

KRISTOL: No, no. Well, it's – I mean it's part of the case for an empire for liberty. So, I'm looking forward to your book on this and to – we need to have another conversation about Elizabethan England as a model of reversing decline, and also with a certain "empire for liberty" agenda, you might say, right?

DONNELLY: They kind of dreamed it up to a certain degree.

KRISTOL: Yeah. So, the Anglo-American tradition. So that's maybe a – but this has been, I think, very enlightening for me, and I hope for our listeners and watchers, viewers. And really does make one step back and think that the whole debate right now is so constrained and sort of missing the point almost, you know? Really forest and trees problem here. People are not stepping back and saying what really can and should America do to secure a safer and freer world.

DONNELLY: I'm pleased that I had the opportunity to bloviate.

KRISTOL: No, no.

DONNELLY: And I do think that this is an important conversation that we should be having.

KRISTOL: Yeah, so we'll continue it. Tom Donnelly, thank you so much for joining me today.

And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]