

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Eric Edelman, Hertog Scholar at the Center for Strategic Studies; Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (2005-2009); U.S. Ambassador to Turkey (2003-2005)

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I: Erdoğan's Turkey (0:15 – 13:57)

KRISTOL: Hi. I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined today by my good friend Eric Edelman, former Foreign Service Officer, culminating in service as ambassador to Finland in – what, the late nineties, I guess?

EDELMAN: Yes.

KRISTOL: And then to Turkey in very fraught years, 2003 to 2005. Then you served in the White House, [as] Under Secretary for Policy in the Defense Department. Wide experience; I really do think one of our most thoughtful commentators and analysts of foreign and defense policy. So it's great to have you here.

And a PhD in history from Yale I should mention. Despite that, you've done well and –

EDELMAN: Misspent youth.

KRISTOL: Misspent youth, the wrong place and the wrong discipline but otherwise it's a good – it's a good PhD, right? But you've overcome that, so that's good. Well, I want to talk about Turkey, Russia, the world and the world we confront now, a little bit also about your experiences in some of these places. You served in the Soviet Union, I think?

EDELMAN: Yes.

KRISTOL: In the Foreign Service, as an American Foreign Service Officer there. So that's something people should – will be interesting to talk about. But let's begin with Turkey. You had a piece in *The Weekly Standard* this spring saying this really could be an inflection point for Turkey. A lot of people said, "Well, that's kind of interesting, if you care about Turkey." But why should –

EDELMAN: Why should we care?

KRISTOL: All of us, why should all of us care? What do you mean by that? What's happening there? And what does it signify?

EDELMAN: Well, Bill, first of all, thank you for having me. It's great to be with you for this conversation.

So I may just try and frame the issue about Turkey in the following sense. One of the major political events of the 20th century was the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which had been the sick man of Europe throughout the 19th century. And when it collapsed, Kemal Pasha Ataturk – the Ottoman general who emerged out of the wreckage of the Empire as president of the modern-day nation state of Turkey – attempted to do something very radical in the Muslim world, which was to create a secular, democratic state.

He was, when he became president, the person who put not only an end to the sultanate but the end to the caliphate, because the Ottoman sultans were also the califs in the Muslim world. And if you read for instance –

KRISTOL: Was this immediately after – in the aftermath of World War I?

EDELMAN: This was in the – yes, this was in the early 1920s. If you read some of the writings of Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda, they will frequently date things from the end of the caliphate. And so, the importance of what Ataturk was trying to do, I think, you know, obviously was not just about the twentieth century but what we face now in the twenty-first century with violent Muslim extremism.

And his – he Latinized the alphabet. He imposed new dress laws and tried to make a modern, western democratic state out of a country that had a Muslim majority.

KRISTOL: You know, maybe we shouldn't dwell on this because we need to get to the present, but I've always wanted to read more and I haven't actually about Ataturk, but it does seem like one of these things you read about in Rousseau or in the, you know, Plutarch or something about a founding, right?

EDELMAN: Right.

KRISTOL: It really was kind of a re-founding of the country and changing the language, changing the religion, or getting rid of or privatizing very radically the former religion and banning it in public really, almost, right? I mean –

EDELMAN: He drove it, more or less, from the public space and put it under state control so that, while it was possible to worship, the sermons were basically vetted and controlled by the state. And we sometimes talk past one another when we and Turks talk about religious freedom, because our understanding of secularism and there's is slightly different.

Our founders were dissenting Protestants who came to the United States wanting to prevent government from tainting religion and, therefore, advocating separation of church and state. In Ataturk's case, it was the reverse: He was afraid of religion tainting government and, therefore, advocated the separation of mosque and state.

And that experiment, which he began in the twenties and thirties – he died relatively young, in his fifties in 1938. And it wasn't until 1950 that you actually got the first multi-party election with a change of government in Turkey. But that experience that he created, which led to Turkey becoming a member of the North Atlantic Treaty – a treaty ally of the United States, fought side by side with us in the Korean War before they even became a member of NATO, and an aspirant to membership in the European Union from the time that it was still the European Community in the 1950s and early '60s – that experiment is coming to a close and being undone by the current President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

KRISTOL: So that's a big deal.

EDELMAN: It's a big deal.

KRISTOL: And how far along is his attempt to close that off? How successful was he being? And how worried should we be about that?

EDELMAN: He's been very successful, in the sense that –

KRISTOL: He took over in – he was elected?

EDELMAN: His party was elected in 2002. He became prime minister in 2003.

He'd been under a political ban. He'd been banned from politics by essentially the military and the government before 2003. He came back and became prime minister in 2003; he became president in 2014. In fact, he became the first popularly elected president in Turkey's history, because previously the president had been elected by the parliament. And he is essentially, now – he and his party have been in power uninterrupted for 15 years, essentially the same amount of time that Ataturk had.

And he is now very self-consciously undoing what Ataturk did and re-founding a new Turkish state or a new Turkish republic that is based on very different precepts.

And that should be worrisome for Americans because Turkey has been a NATO ally. It sits cheek by jowl athwart an incredibly important region and some of the most important waterways in the world: obviously the Straits in – the Black Sea Straits, a very important waterway; but it's a neighbor of Iraq, Iran, and Syria. So it sits in a very, very pivotal piece of real estate in the world. And it is now being sucked in to the maw of the Syrian Civil War in very dangerous ways, which could not only be destabilizing for Turkey, more broadly, but potentially for all of Europe – because Turkey is the first stop for refugees flowing out of Iraq and Syria and onward to Europe.

KRISTOL: So there are geopolitical questions, but let me go back to just the Islam question for a minute. I mean, I suppose we could live, people might say, with a, I don't know, moderately Islamist Turkey. We might not be – we might prefer Ataturk's solution, but, you know, if they mind their own business so to speak? But I guess, as a NATO ally and because of the geostrategic importance, and also because of Erdoğan's own views – I mean, this is more problematic than that, isn't it?

EDELMAN: And it's on Europe's doorstep. And it's a neighbor of Ukraine and Russia. I mean it's just – it's hard to stress how pivotal it is geopolitically. A few years ago, Paul Kennedy, the historian at Yale, and some colleagues wrote a book about pivotal states in world affairs, and Turkey was one of those pivotal states. And so it still has, you know, a very important role to play, notwithstanding all these problems.

But I guess my fear about the religious element here is that it's not really that Erdoğan is going to impose sharia law immediately. That would be very difficult, because Turkey's a deeply divided society and he does not represent really more than 50 percent of the population. He represents about half of it. The other half doesn't care for him at all.

But I think the real problem is what happens over time to Turkish society. And you know, if you think about Pakistan as a potential role model here, where Zia-ul-Haq introduced, you know, the process of Islamization in Pakistan, which has, you know, turned the country into a basket case in a very dangerous place. And I worry that that's where Turkey is headed.

KRISTOL: Should one be more worried? That's a very good analogy, I mean, about a kind of descent into semi-chaos, semi-anarchy, breeding ground for terror, *à la* Pakistan.

I guess, Turkey doesn't have nukes, but it wouldn't be out of the question. Or should one worry more about – well, is that the main worry, or is it that they also can become an actual obstacle to our foreign policy? And how much does their being a member of NATO raise particular problems?

EDELMAN: Well, so, you know, both issues, I think, are important: both what happens in Turkey for its own sake, but also then what happens to it as a member of the NATO alliance.

And truth be told, it's an extremely bad member of NATO right now. I mean, just in the last few weeks, you know, what's happened has, you know, been jaw dropping for long-time observers of Turkey, like me. The Turkish press agency publicly revealed the location of U.S. Special Forces troops in Syria. President Erdoğan announced that Turkey will be buying S-400 air-defense missiles rather than, you know, Western –

KRISTOL: S-400 are Russian?

EDELMAN: S-400 are Russian air- and missile-defense missiles, and they are not compatible with NATO systems.

They have shelled the city of Afrin, which is where some of the YPG Kurdish fighters who are forming the backbone of the force that U.S. forces are supporting in the liberation of Raqqa, and trying to put an end to the so-called caliphate of the Islamic state.

So I mean, these are not the kinds of things that you normally expect, you know, from a NATO ally. And, you know, if there were a mechanism for expelling an ally from NATO – which we don't have – you know, you could imagine people beginning to talk about this.

And I've not even gotten to the question of Erdoğan, you know, letting loose his thugs *in Washington* against peaceful protestors, U.S. citizens protesting against some of the creeping authoritarianism in Turkey and his jailing of journalists and political opposition, et cetera.

KRISTOL: And how much does the rise of Erdoğan, then – it's a Turkey problem? It's a Middle East problem? Is it part of something bigger that you see going on in the world and worrisome, more worrisome than even the regional NATO worries?

EDELMAN: It is part of something bigger that's going on. That wasn't always clear to me, but over the last few years, I think we've seen a rise of populist authoritarians around the world and in various places.

We've seen it in Asia with President Duterte in the Philippines, for instance. We've seen it in Central and Eastern Europe with people like Viktor Orbán in Hungary. And Erdoğan is very much a part of that sort of populist authoritarianism. And of course, I think Donald Trump bears some resemblance to this global phenomenon as well – and, to some degree, his strategist Steve Bannon sees it clearly as part of a global phenomenon. And all of that I find, you know, very, very, very troubling.

This goes back really to something that Bob Kagan wrote about, really starting about ten years ago, which was, he wrote an essay and then a book called *The Return of History*, which was basically an argument that what my friend and fellow Cornellian Frank Fukuyama wrote about with *The End of History*: that, you know, the liberal, democratic model had become the only legitimate model for political development in the world. This has now given way to self-styled authoritarians in China, in Russia, in all these other places now – with support from Russia, by the way – challenging the sort of, the U.S. role in the world, but also the order that the U.S. created after 1945: a kind of norms, rules-based international order with international institutions that are meant to support open societies, free trade, and the alliance

structure that the United States created after 1945 that's helped keep the great-power peace since the end of World War II.

II. The Threat of Authoritarianism (13:57 – 31:43)

KRISTOL: And I guess, I'm just thinking about it now, these authoritarians – I mean if you grew up when we grew up, one sort of wants to see – wants to see but one maybe expects to see, you know, a kind of world effort – communism with, you know, satellites and similar ideology. I suppose with these authoritarians, what's similar about them is the defense of authoritarianism and the critique of liberal democracy. But then they can each have their own nationally inflected forms of authoritarianism, I guess?

EDELMAN: Yes.

KRISTOL: I'm thinking Putin and Erdoğan and, you know, Putin's anti-Islamists and so forth, sort of. I mean, you know, claims to even appropriate a little bit of, what, Russian Orthodox kind of, you know, history and all that sort of thing: defending the West against Islam.

EDELMAN: Right.

KRISTOL: But I suppose they can get along well, and together they can be as much as a threat as some unified movement, in a way. Right?

EDELMAN: Well, yes. I mean, all of them have sort of, you know, national, you know, particularities. And all of them came to power in a very specific set of national circumstances. But they share an antipathy to the U.S. suggestion that democratic norms are global values that *all people* share; that they need to abide by those rules. And they – while they might not have completely overlapping geopolitical goals, and sometimes they will even be at odds with one another – as Turkey and Russia have been on and off – they still share a kind of general predisposition that what creates problems for the United States is good for them.

KRISTOL: And I do see that they have a common interest. I'm always struck by that. Even though they often have very concrete differences and conflicts and they even fight a little bit, as I guess Russia and Turkey have, you know, done through proxies and so forth.

EDELMAN: Yes.

KRISTOL: But there is a way in which they kind of do have a common interest in reshaping the world away from an American-led, liberal world order.

EDELMAN: Yes, and I have for a long time thought, dating back to my time as ambassador, that Erdoğan consciously saw Putin as a role model for his own increasingly authoritarian behavior at home in Turkey, and appropriated some of the tactics and techniques that Putin had used in solidifying his own power in Russia after he succeeded Boris Yeltsin as president in the fall of 1999.

Notably, for instance, attacking the media and taking control of the media. This was notably one of the most important things that Putin did after he came into power: cutting down the big media magnets and oligarchs like Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky and others; taking control of the media; putting it in the hands of his cronies. That is precisely what Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has done in Turkey over the last ten years.

KRISTOL: I think I've underestimated, for a long time, the importance of Putin. I mean, I now understand it *I think*. But, you know, I sort of bought the argument that it's – Russia's kind of a failed state. I mean

they're keeping afloat on petrodollars, but they have horrible, you know, statistics in terms of life expectancy, you know, and he's – Putin's bad for the Russians. I mean, it's unfortunate that he's there.

But I think I underestimated the extent to which he has become the center, in a way, of something that's much more powerful than you would think for, you know, what – and I guess they still are a huge nuclear power. I don't know.

Talk about Putin. You studied it; you served in the Soviet Union, and then you served in Central and Eastern Europe and Finland, which are –

EDELMAN: And the Czech Republic, so–

KRISTOL: Yeah.

EDELMAN: Yes. No, I completely agree, I think. It was easy when Putin first ascended to office to not pay particular attention to some of the more alarming things that he said and wrote at the time. So for instance, when he became president, he issued, shortly thereafter as he was campaigning to be elected president for the first time in the spring of 2000, he wrote a manifesto in which he talked about the importance of not the dictatorship of the proletariat but what he called the “dictatorship of law.”

Well, at first glance, you know, in the context of, you know, a breakdown of Russian society that had been evident in the 1990s, the two wars with Chechnya, et cetera, it was possible to see that in a more benign light. Over time, as he has eliminated systematically, you know, all elements of political opposition and solidified his hold and, you know, empowered his cronies, former colleagues from the security services from whence he came, it's taken on a much more sinister, you know, character.

And it would be one thing to say, Okay, well, you know – to appropriate a phrase from the 1920s and '30s internal debates in the communist movement and the Soviet Union – if we were only dealing with authoritarianism in one country, you know, this might be, you know, something we could live with.

Although, as you point out, this is a country – it's the only country that has a sufficiently large nuclear arsenal that we have to worry about it as an existential threat. But it really has now metastasized into something much broader that represents a much bigger geopolitical challenge for the United States.

And I've thought for some time that President Obama owes Mitt Romney an apology for [having derided](#) Governor Romney's comments in 2012 that Russia was emerging as the biggest geopolitical challenge to the United States by sarcastically saying “the 1980s are calling and asking for their foreign policy back.” I mean, I think Romney was much more, you know, accurate in his diagnosis of this than President Obama turned out to be.

KRISTOL: I want to come back to what America has or hasn't done about this and could or should do, but what about China? I think it's more fashionable, I'd say, still in Washington to talk about China as the challenge of the next two, three, four decades, and I'm sure there's some truth to that. But how does it relate to Russia and to what we've been talking about?

EDELMAN: Well, China *is* a challenge, I think – and in the old saw in Washington that the, you know, merely urgent, you know, chases out the important. In the long run, China is potentially the biggest challenge that we face, in part because of the flow of wealth and productivity from West to East and the rise of Asia as a huge economic force.

And we need to – and it's because of the very large, 20-year double-digit defense budget increases that we have seen going on in China and the military buildup that China has engaged in. China is a very serious problem for Asian security and for us because we have maintained the peace in Asia for the last, you know, 30 years, and since the Vietnam War ended, through our policy of forward defense and our

alliance system, our bilateral treaty alliances with the Republic of Korea, with Japan, with the treaty obligations we have. Not treaty obligations, the legal obligations we have to defend Taiwan, but also the friendships we've developed with countries like Indonesia, Vietnam, India.

And that is somewhat at risk now because the Chinese military buildup is making it increasingly difficult – and then some things we've done to ourselves, in terms of budget cuts and declining number of Navy hulls and stuff like that. We've made it harder for ourselves to operate as we have traditionally operated in the Western Pacific and in East Asia, and that presents a very big challenge.

Now, the way it's connected to Russia is that China, like Russia, is essentially a revisionist power, and it doesn't agree with a lot of the international institutions that we have put in place; the role that we play in the international economy. Because they're so interdependent with us in terms of their exports to the United States, there are some limits in what they can do about that on a commercial level – although they seek every, you know, advantage that they possibly can with intellectual property and all the other things that they do.

But the bigger problem is that what we see with the rise of China and now with the revisionist Russia is, after a very long period after the end of the Cold War, in which nobody really thought great-power competition was a serious problem, we now, as former Secretary Carter, Defense Secretary Carter said, are witnessing a world in which we have renewed great-power competition *in addition to* the other existing problems that we've already been facing, which were not inconsiderable, with regard to Muslim extremism, terrorism in the form of Al Qaeda and ISIS, but also the emergence of new nuclear powers or potential nuclear powers like North Korea and Iran.

So we have, you know, a very, very complex and difficult emerging international environment, probably more difficult and complex than any that the Republic has faced in its history, I think.

KRISTOL: Wow.

EDELMAN: And we are doing that against a backdrop of having cut a trillion dollars out of the defense budget over the last decade.

KRISTOL: And probably not done as much as we should have in diplomacy, intelligence, and other areas, as well.

EDELMAN: I agree.

KRISTOL: So, I think – you and I have argued for years against, let's say – I'll caricature this point of view – but let's say a kind of, "Everything's fine; the U.N. can deal with things, you know; don't be alarmed; that's not the 21st century." So let's just leave that wishful thinking aside.

It seems to me the sort of sophisticated take on what you've just been saying – but I think one that you don't quite agree with – would be, "We're back to history, and we've got Russia; we've got China; we've got ISIS; we've got Venezuela; we have issues, but we've got to be prudent and adjust and, you know, we've got to prioritize. And so we'll take on some of these, in some ways, and others we'll have to yield and maybe have regional hegemonies, Iran, North Korea. [We] can't do everything."

I mean, there's obviously some proof to that; you *can't* do everything. But I mean don't you think that – I would say that's kind of the average sophisticated, somewhat hard-headed view right now. But I think it's one that you don't quite accept?

EDELMAN: I don't quite agree with it, because I think the postulates that have guided us since the end of World War II – I mean, if we go back to the experience of the 21st – of the 20th century, before we got into

the 21st century. In the 20th century we twice had to go to war, essentially to prevent a single power from dominating Europe.

In World War II it was a group of powers dominating Europe and Asia. And the predominant view, before the end of World War II, was the United States had, what one of my teachers at Yale, C. Van Woodward, called “free security,” because we were behind two oceans and, therefore, we really didn’t have to pay too much attention to what was going on in other parts of the world. It really didn’t matter that much to us.

After the experience of World War I and World War II, the vast majority of the national-security elite in the country – there were dissents, by the way, on left and right, as we have now – but, agreed on a consensus position that the future of Europe and Asia, of Eurasia writ large, mattered to us, that we couldn’t allow it to be dominated by a hostile force, and that the best way to do that was through, not by waiting until we had to fight on our own shores, but to have forward defense, to be able to project power forward through a system of alliances, a multilateral alliance in Europe, which was NATO.

And then in Asia it developed slightly differently, with bilateral treaties of alliance that also had Article 5 guarantees that an attack on one was an attack on both: with Japan, with the Republic of Korea after the Korean War, with the Republic of China, Taiwan after 1954, until normalization of relations in the late seventies when, instead of a treaty relationship, now our relations are governed by the Taiwan Relations Act that paved the way for establishment of full diplomatic relations with People’s China.

In the Middle East, we largely believed at the end of World War II that that was going to be a British responsibility – they would be the senior partner; we would be the junior partner – but over a period of time, culminating in the late sixties when Britain formally renounced its defense obligations east of Suez as a result of one of their defense white papers, we’ve taken on the responsibility for that as well.

We did it by beginning to base the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, and you see the culmination of this in the Carter Doctrine of 1980. After the Iranian Revolution and the invasion of Afghanistan, President Carter said we couldn’t allow an outside power to dominate the Persian Gulf region because it would be inimical to our interest.

Well, the way we’ve actually acted through administrations of both parties since then has been that we couldn’t allow an *internal* power to dominate it either. And so we’ve, you know, gone to war twice to deal with Iraq, and we are now dealing with the potential of Iran dominating that region. The problem I have with people who think we can, you know, limit our liabilities and –

KRISTOL: Pick and choose.

EDELMAN: – pick and choose by what we do –

KRISTOL: Pivot: “let’s forget about the Middle East for a while and go on to Asia – it’s, you know.”

EDELMAN: – is that life has a way of imposing these things on you, and you can’t – if you say, “We are not going to be responsible for security in the Middle East,” you are tempting people to take advantage of that.

The famous example, of course, of Secretary Acheson’s failure to list Korea as part of the U.S. defense perimeter in his National Press Club speech in January of 1950. Six months later, the North invades the South. So, you know, like it or not, we’ve inherited a global order and we are the lynchpin of it.

The Brits, when they had this role in the nineteenth century, had the luxury of having people separated by a common language, as Churchill said, waiting in the wings to pick up the responsibilities – or at least some of the responsibilities, initially, and then ultimately, after 1945, the bulk of the responsibilities for maintaining this global order. There is nobody to pick this up from us now.

And so, the choice we have is not between limited liability and, you know, choosing our – “selective engagement” or whatever you want to call it, or “offshore balancing.”

The choice we have is between maintaining some semblance of order. It’s not perfect; it’s always messy. You can’t do everything; you can’t right every wrong, and you can’t undo every evil. But either maintaining some semblance of order or allowing a more disordered world.

I think we’ve actually seen some of that in the Obama administration. I think there was a conscious effort to retrench, to not extend ourselves in the Middle East, in particular. And it’s led to a very disordered world.

And if, you know, the argument – I was on the Romney campaign, and we were told to please shut up about foreign policy, because any day that we weren’t talking about, you know, the economy was a day that we weren’t playing to Governor Romney’s, you know, strategic advantage. And oh, by the way, have you idiots looked at the polling? You know, actually, Obama’s foreign policy is pretty popular. That was true.

However, if you look at the polling now, the consequences of President Obama’s policy are not very popular, because Americans are – rightfully, in my view – very unnerved by the disorder they see emerging in the Middle East, in Northeast Asia because of North Korea’s nuclear developments, potentially with Iran with its nuclear policy, the disorder that’s creating a massive migration movement that’s threatening to overwhelm the institutions of Europe and giving rise, along the way, to some of these populist authoritarian movements. I don’t think people are very comfortable with that, and they’re right not to be comfortable with it.

III. A Breakdown of World Order? (31:43 – 1:00:11)

KRISTOL: And I suppose one would have to paint a picture, really, of what the world could look like five or ten years down the road. I mean, one maybe overuses the ‘30s analogy, and I never really studied it, but I’m going to guess that in ’32 or ’34 or ’36, you know, one would say, Well, it’s very bad what’s happening in Germany. In Japan, China, I mean sure, that’s very worrisome. And Mussolini, not so great. And the Spanish Civil War, that’s, you know –

But people didn’t somehow – they didn’t put it together into sort of a picture of what real breakdown of world order could look like. And I’m not saying we’re going to have a Hitler or a Japan or a Pearl Harbor. But I mean it’s probably a somewhat different kind of breakdown now – more, I don’t know, more chaos and less attack, you know? But more 1914, perhaps. But again, people don’t – don’t you think people would have to –

EDELMAN: Failure of imagination.

KRISTOL: Yes. I mean that’s a –

EDELMAN: Or it’s the combination – it’s a paradoxical combination of a failure of imagination and also overactive imagination. So, one of the – I mean, there was a failure of imagination to, for instance, be able to imagine that, you know, something like the Holocaust could take place.

But it was an overactive imagination in the sense that, in the wake of World War I, and the enormous damage that World War I had done to European societies, there was this incredible fear of the instruments of future warfare – in particular, bombers. And the notion that the next war would, you know, be so terrible that right-thinking governments had to do everything possible to prevent it from occurring.

And so well, “of course Heir Hitler has a few reasonable, you know, complaints about the global order. It’s not completely fair. The Versailles settlement did some unfair things.” And so there was this, you know, weird combination of a failure to imagine how bad it would be, with a paralyzing fear of a future war. And that, I think, led to one of the biggest catastrophes in world history.

KRISTOL: I mean, they did have the excuse of having had World War I just, you know, two decades before. I’ve always thought, you know – I hate to be too judgmental about people in the ‘30s who were, you know; it was such an unbelievable devastation, both in terms of deaths but also sort of the collapse of an order that had lasted a century.

We don’t really have that excuse, in a way, right? I mean, we won the Cold War without firing much of a shot in the last 15 years or, at least, 20 years – 15 years, I guess. Is that right? Yeah, since Vietnam. And then, I don’t know, somehow we just take for granted that things can’t really get *that* bad. I mean, North Korea will have a few nuclear weapons. And Iran, who knows? But it is a – in that respect I think it’s hard for people to see, in the 21st century, what a world of nuclear proliferation and authoritarianism rising and terrorism tolerated could look like.

EDELMAN: Yeah. One of the most worrisome things to me is this sort of unwillingness to face up to the nuclear perils that a breakdown of the proliferation order really would entail.

KRISTOL: So talk about that, I’m interested in –

EDELMAN: And – and –

KRISTOL: We haven’t actually mentioned North Korea or Iran here.

EDELMAN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: At all, almost.

EDELMAN: Well, let’s take North Korea, for example. So the theory of the case for the last 20 years, since – 25 years, since people became aware of the fact that North Korea was pursuing its own nuclear weapons programs. And we made various efforts in two administrations to essentially bribe them out of it – three administrations – to bribe them out – four actually, going back to Bush 41.

The theory of the case was, well, North Korea is developing a sort of minimal-deterrent nuclear capability to defend them against the potential overwhelming U.S. conventional advantages that we have and an effort that we might make to enforce regime change on them.

Well, if – in my view, what we’re actually watching now is a country developing a very large nuclear capability. I mean, if you believe, for instance, what David Albright has written at “[38 North](#)” for my colleagues at the U.S. Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins, you’re talking about, by the middle of the next decade, a Korean arsenal that would be over 100 nuclear warheads, which would put them, you know, not quite as big as the U.K. but, you know, getting up there.

They’re developing essentially all the appurtenances of a nuclear triad. They’re developing a submarine-launched ballistic missile. They’ve now been testing an intercontinental ballistic missile that can reach the United States. That’s been the source of a lot of the tension this summer and the missile tests that have taken place. Those missiles are mobile, which means they’re very hard for us to find, because mobile missiles have been a problem since the First Gulf War; we’ve known about, that’s difficult. They can obviously develop, you know, they could deliver these things by air if they wanted to.

So they have essentially all the elements of a nuclear triad. Why are they doing that, and what is the purpose? This is well beyond I think, you know, a minimal deterrent meant to hold us off from imposing

regime change on us. And what does that do to the security of Northeast Asia and Asian security more broadly? I don't think we've really thought our way through that very carefully.

I think there's been a tremendous tendency to kind of look the other way about what would happen if Iran were to get a nuclear weapon. To my way of thinking, it would be essentially the end of the nonproliferation regime that we have established.

And nonproliferation, as my colleague at Johns Hopkins SAIS, Frank Gavin, pointed out about a year or two ago in a very good article, has been a central part of our grand strategy since the end of World War II.

Now, a lot of people criticize us for that and say, "Well, the United States believes in nuclear apartheid. They think they should have nuclear weapons and nobody else should have nuclear weapons." I'm for that, actually. You know, I think we've shown, you know, that we are quite responsible about nuclear weapons. I'm not so sure about everybody else.

KRISTOL: Right. Also we haven't tested the – it's one thing to have some erosion at the margin of that regime, but we haven't tested the proposition of what happens when you go from 8 to 10 to suddenly 12, and one of them is North Korea and they can sell nukes to Iran. Don't you think? I mean there's a kind of a –

EDELMAN: Absolutely.

KRISTOL: It's not incremental, you know. There's a moment when the whole thing just spirals out of control.

EDELMAN: Absolutely, and I think we're approaching that tipping point. And one of the things that worries me about that – several things worry me.

One is the incredible destructive power of these weapons. We sort of all know that, you know, sort of abstractly. But we're now dealing with a generation of leaders like Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un, you know, and people who, you know, have never seen an atmospheric nuclear test. Because we last had an atmospheric nuclear test, you know, sometime in the '60s. I mean, the Chinese may have done one or two. But, you know, we haven't done one, you know, since the '60s, nor has the Soviet Union/Russia done one since those days.

And so just, I don't think people real – I mean they use – they're very loose about the use of these weapons. And we now know that the Soviet civilian leadership, from researches that have been done since the end of the Cold War, was actually very, very, very careful and very worried about these things and the use of these things. We have anecdotal evidence of Brezhnev during exercises where he was brought the Soviet equivalent of the nuclear football turning white and demanding to know if he pushed this button, would it actually really not set off, you know, a nuclear conflagration. We know they were actually very, very worried about this.

We're now dealing with people, both in Russia and elsewhere, who I don't know have that same prudential sense of caution about the use of these weapons.

And there's another factor here: which is, you know, President Kennedy in 1963 – again, after the Missile Crisis had, you know, imposed on him, you know, the discipline of thinking really hard about what a nuclear exchange would look like and how many people would be killed and what kind of devastation it would cause – was asked at a press conference, you know, "What's the thing that worries you the most? What keeps you up at night?"

And he says, "What worries me the most is that" – you know, in 1970, you know – "at the end of this decade we will have 10 or 20 or 30 or 40 nuclear powers."

Well, you know, sort of we're 50 years on from – 54 years on from that point. But, and we only have nine nuclear powers. And so there's I think a tendency of, well, it's not so bad, you know.

But we only have nine nuclear powers, first of all because we and a lot of other countries put a tremendous amount of effort – starting with the Nonproliferation Treaty, which was signed in '68, ratified in '70, and all of the institutions that went along with it that were meant to clamp down on dual-use technologies. It's only because of a very big exertion by the international community and the United States that we only have nine nuclear powers.

And we still have not come to terms with one important factor. In the late '50s, a number of very smart people, including one of my predecessors as Under Secretary of Defense, Fred Ikle, wrote a memorandum called "The Nth Country Problem," which was about, we had one of those – he wasn't a co-author but one of the people who was at RAND, Albert Wohlstetter, called "a delicate balance of terror" between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

But what would happen when you had kind of multipolar nuclear competition? It was sort of a bipolar balance East-West, U.S.-Soviet, even Soviet-Chinese, Sino-Soviet or Indo-Pakistani sort of dyads of countries that have nuclear weapons. It was possible to sort of, you know, understand how you might be able to maintain, you know, a stable – what people call "strategic stability," which essentially is a deterrent relationship in which nobody could be confident that they could launch a first strike without a devastating retaliation being visited upon them.

When you start having three, four, five competitors, if they're all in the Middle East and the flight times are, you know, 5 to 8 minutes, not the very luxurious 30 minutes of warning time that we had in the Cold War, with regard to a missile attack from the Soviet Union, how does that play out, you know?

My view is, most likely it plays out with someone actually using these thing at some point. And the consequences of that are just, you know, incredibly catastrophic.

KRISTOL: And the final depressing point on this very worrisome – I think people do tend to have a very static view of these countries and the regime.

So Pakistan – everyone would prefer, I believe, in the West, probably, that Pakistan not have nuclear weapons. No one's really – the Pakistan-India thing is sort of stable, except it almost wasn't in – when was that? 2001, 2002 – when, you know –

EDELMAN: 2008, when we had Mumbai and –

KRISTOL: Yeah. I mean you just – But Pakistan, for all of its problems, has a somewhat responsible government, which – some control over it. But how long is that? Are we confident there'll never be a coup in the next ten years or insurrection or a jihadist takeover part of Pakistan? I mean, what happens if that happens with a nuclear country?

Then of course, Iran, you know. It's one thing maybe to deal with Rouhani; it's another thing to deal with others, and even that's worrisome.

And North Korea can just sell its nukes. They're obviously desperate for cash. So, I think people do underestimate the kind of dynamic character of this problem, too.

EDELMAN: People understand it, but our attention is so fleeting to everything because the world has gotten so complicated, and we live in a 24/7 news cycle. And now with Twitter it's like almost, you know, every second you have to check your phone to see who said what about who.

President Clinton at one point after the Cargill episode in 1999, which was another one of these near-miss crises between India and Pakistan, said, "Pakistan is the most dangerous place on earth." In part because of the nuclear weapons and the jihadism and the instability of the place.

It's gotten *worse*, actually, since then. It's gotten worse because, you know, Al Qaeda has shown an enormous appetite and violent jihadists have shown an appetite for mass-casualty attacks, and obviously, you know, the sort of gold-standard of a mass casualty attack would be something that involved nuclear: either a dirty bomb, which would be very messy to deal with, or something that actually produced a yield and a detonation, which would be even worse.

But also because Pakistan has been producing plutonium like nobody's business, and they have an extremely large and growing arsenal. And they've begun to, you know, miniaturize and lower-yield weapons. They're prepared –

There's a kind of generative grammar – I don't often quote Noam Chomsky – but there seems to be a generative grammar for how countries deal with nuclear weapons. All of them seem to end up moving towards some kind of triad. Except for our allies, the French and the British, who have moved, you know, towards only one system, but that's got to do with the fact that they have our nuclear umbrella to shelter under.

But the Pakistanis are developing as an offset, as it were, to India's conventional superiority – which is a condition, it's always going to be that way; they know that. Much as we did in the 1950s when we were trying to offset Soviet conventional superiority with a reliance on President Eisenhower's "New Look": massive retaliation. The notion that if our adversaries really step over the line, we're going to, you know, threaten to use massive nuclear strikes against them.

And then eventually that was kind of an incredible threat to make. So, we eventually moved to putting tactical nuclear weapons into Europe to slow, you know, a Soviet advance into Europe and also to create a potential fire break so that the Soviets would understand we were serious and the next step was going to be a, you know, a big, strategic nuclear exchange.

This is what Pakistan is now trying to do with India. And, you know, if you talk to Indian general officers and talk to Pakistanis, it's just an accident waiting to happen. Because, you know, Indian officers say, "We know what it would take," you know. "We know where their redlines are. We know how far we can push without tripping over their redlines."

Yet, Indian doctrine now is to deal with the low-level war Pakistan has been waging against India behind a nuclear shield. So there was Cargill. You mentioned the 2001, 2002 parliament crisis. We had Mumbai in 2008. So, you know, eventually we're going to have another one of these episodes.

The Indian strategy would likely be to grab-off some piece of Pakistan and hold it, you know, until the Pakistanis cease and desist what they're doing. And, you know, Pakistan's riposte to that is to say, "Well, we've been invaded, so we're going to use these battlefield nuclear weapons *on our own territory*. So, we won't actually have committed a nuclear attack on India."

And, you know, how that plays out is very worrisome and troubling. And could also lead to others thinking that nuclear use is okay. I mean, we like to kid ourselves that we operate in a world of a nuclear taboo, which I think is the wrong way to think about it. It's really more that we have a tradition of non-use of nuclear weapons, but that tradition is much more fragile, I think, than people realize. And it takes just one, you know.

KRISTOL: It's more fragile, probably, in other countries than in the U.S.

And finally, on this front you had a terrific piece for us on President Trump's summit with President Putin a few months ago, I guess it is now – a couple months ago – and, speaking of the '62 Cuban Missile Crisis, comparing it to Kennedy's, I guess, first meeting with Khrushchev. Talk a little bit about that, because Putin remains so important.

EDELMAN: So it's a very, very interesting analogy, I think. President Kennedy, when he was elected, was very anxious to meet with his Soviet counterpart. I mean, you'll recall that Vice President Nixon, one of his political claims to fame was having debated Nikita Khrushchev in the so-called "Kitchen Debate" in Moscow.

Kennedy was very anxious to meet with Khrushchev because, although he was a Cold War liberal, who, you know, said that "We should never negotiate out of fear," but he also said, "We should never fear to negotiate." So he was hoping that in the wake of the collapsed relationship between the U.S. and the Soviet Union that existed at the end of the Eisenhower Administration, because the Paris Summit that had been held had broken down because of the shoot-down of Gary Powers – a U-2 pilot – over Russia, that he could resuscitate the relationship through personal diplomacy with Khrushchev.

All of his advisors were very cautious about this and said that you really needed to prepare for this. And he went into his – he was also in ill health in the weeks before the summit, was on crutches. Although that was kept from the American public. But when he went in – he was told, in particular, by his advisors, "Don't get into a debate about ideology, you know, with Khrushchev because he's, you know, a trained dialectician. You know, he knows how to debate about Marxism and Leninism. Don't get into this." And it's sort of like the moth to the flame if you read the transcripts, which are publicly available now, of the meeting.

KRISTOL: They kept transcripts? I guess they –

EDELMAN: Yeah. They had, you know, note takers –

KRISTOL: Note takers.

EDELMAN: – and very – I'll come back to that. Very careful note taking and transcription by the interpreters and the note takers. I mean, Kennedy and Khrushchev had a, you know – he just goes immediately to the ideological.

KRISTOL: So they're in Vienna in what?

EDELMAN: They're in Vienna in June of 1961.

KRISTOL: Summer of '61.

EDELMAN: And they –

KRISTOL: He's been president five, six months, whatever? Yeah.

EDELMAN: And so Kennedy does a couple of things, which I think are striking. And one is he gets into the ideological debate. And he gets manhandled, as his advisors were afraid, by Khrushchev, who's really much more at home dealing in this kind of dialectical debate than Kennedy is.

But also Kennedy tries to tempt Khrushchev into sort of a collaboration on some points. One is the Chinese nuclear program. "Don't we both have a common interest," you know, "against that. Maybe we

should do something to keep them from getting nuclear weapons.” Khrushchev isn’t buying it. And the irony here is that, eight years later, it’s the, you know, it’s the Soviets who are coming to the Nixon Administration saying, “well, maybe we should have like a joint, you know, strike on China’s nuclear facilities.”

But the other thing he does is, one of the big issues at the time of the transition from Eisenhower to Kennedy was Laos. And Kennedy goes out of his way to say, I think my predecessor’s Laos policy was stupid, and I’m not going to follow that, you know. And there is a negotiation that goes on about Laos as a result of it.

But Khrushchev’s takeaway from all of this is: Kennedy is young, he’s inexperienced, and he can be pushed around. And almost immediately after the summit, a series of ultimatums are issued about Berlin, which has been a festering crisis from 1958 on – access to Berlin and the status of Berlin and East Germany. And in August of ’61, the Wall goes up. And in that time period as well, the decisions are made that lead to the deployment of nuclear weapons to Cuba – which isn’t discovered until about a year later – which leads to the missile crisis, arguably the most dangerous moment in the Cold War.

And my sense is that the Trump-Putin meeting in Hamburg has eerie, you know, sort of resonances of the 1961 meeting with Kennedy and Khrushchev. I mean, you know, not a lot of preparation. A lot of advisors were not sure this was a good idea. The National Security Advisor and his extremely able senior director for Russia, Fiona Hill – my former colleague in the Bush 43 administration – were nowhere to be seen during this meeting. It’s just the note taker and Secretary Tillerson, which goes to the point of I’m not sure exactly how good a transcript we have and how good a record we have of the meeting, much less –

KRISTOL: It’s the interpreter and Tillerson, right?

EDELMAN: It’s an interpreter and Tillerson.

KRISTOL: So it isn’t really a note taker. I mean in most – you’ve been in a million of these meetings?

EDELMAN: Yeah. I mean usually –

KRISTOL: I guess Tillerson would be the note taker?

EDELMAN: Tillerson was the note taker, but it’s very hard if you’re the Secretary of State to actually *also* be the note taker.

KRISTOL: Yeah, you’re not used to –like a foreign service officer is –

EDELMAN: Right, exactly. And usually it’s a combination of the interpreter, who’s also taking pretty good notes in order to interpret –

KRISTOL: Right.

EDELMAN: – and the note taker to come up with the transcript. But not only do we not have, you know, probably a very good transcript of *that* meeting, but there was the subsequent meeting that was revealed later at the dinner that went on between the President and Putin, of which we have almost no record because it was the Russian interpreter.

KRISTOL: Right.

EDELMAN: So we have no record at all of what was said there. And, you know, the Russians have, you know, been threatening and now are expelling, you know, “U.S. diplomats,” or the number of U.S.

employees at the embassy. It's not completely clear will it be U.S. diplomats or actually local Russian employees who are going to be affected by this.

But, you know, there's been this sort of retaliation and threats made by Lavrov, the foreign minister, and Putin about the U.S. presence in Russia. And my sense is that, just as Khrushchev took the measure of Kennedy and decided that he could pursue more aggressive policies, I think Putin has taken the measure of Trump and concluded that he's basically dealing with a similar kind of phenomenon to what he dealt with in terms of *policy* with Obama, if not rhetoric. I mean the rhetoric, obviously, you know, very, very different. But that, essentially, he's not going to be challenged in Syria. On the contrary, the Secretary of State came out and said – despite several years of evidence to the contrary notwithstanding – that we have the same interests as Russia in Syria, which I think we manifestly do not.

So I think, you know, Putin must have found the meeting, you know, rather encouraging, in terms of what his agenda is and what he can do. I mean that's the other thing: Putin came into the meeting with an agenda; Trump did not. But that meant that Putin drove the meeting.

KRISTOL: And I haven't looked at this, but I bet if one went back historically to 1961 and looked at newspapers and so forth at the time – you know, they had the meeting, maybe people thought for a few days afterwards it wasn't so great for Kennedy, and then everyone went on to discuss a million other issues, obviously.

And then the Berlin Wall went up a couple months later. I'm not sure how many people connected it to the summit, even then. And then, of course, Cuba's a year later. And it's a good reminder that these things, you know, we sort of lose sight of it. I mean no one's talking right now about – particularly about the Hamburg Summit. But who knows what has been put in train –

EDELMAN: Right.

KRISTOL: – as a result of that. I mean, this is where it does help to have people who are focused full-time on this.

EDELMAN: It's actually one of the interesting sort of vignettes out of the Kennedy/Khrushchev meeting – which is, in some ways, still inexplicable to me – is, as soon as the meeting was over, Kennedy went in – and this is a mark of how different, you know, a time we lived in. It was pre-Twitter, no internet and all the rest of that. He went back to the U.S. Embassy and he went into a meeting with James Reston, a columnist for the *New York Times*, and he just sort of slouched down in his chair and said, "That was the worst thing that ever happened to me in my life. I just," you know, "Khrushchev just beat the hell out of me for two days."

KRISTOL: Which Reston didn't print, of course.

EDELMAN: No, but it did – I mean it did –

KRISTOL: Or did he?

EDELMAN: It showed up in the sense that this had been – I mean, he didn't quote the president, but he did report it, and it became, you know, sort of widely known –

KRISTOL: I didn't know that, actually.

EDELMAN: – that this had been not a good meeting for Kennedy.

KRISTOL: I see. And did Kennedy take lessons from this?

EDELMAN: Well, he never had another summit with Khrushchev.

KRISTOL: But you said earlier that he did seem to – I mean, after the –

EDELMAN: No, I think –

KRISTOL: After the Cuban Missile Crisis at least, he reflected upon this.

EDELMAN: Yeah. I think he did reflect, particularly after the Missile Crisis. I mean, I think that was a sobering moment for both Khrushchev and for Kennedy.

In fact, Khrushchev, you know, we know from what he told his son and what he wrote in his memoirs that during the Missile Crisis he came to have a slightly different appreciation of Kennedy and of Kennedy's restraint and how Kennedy handled himself, which he had not, you know, felt at the time of the summit.

KRISTOL: So Kennedy did learn something.

EDELMAN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: I mean, which it's not clear that our current president has done.

EDELMAN: Yes. Yes. [laughs]

IV. On his Foreign Service Career (1:00:11– 1:30:42)

KRISTOL: You served in many interesting places in your career in government – as a Senior Foreign Service Officer in Moscow near the end of the Soviet Union, as Ambassador to Turkey at a very interesting time. Talk a little bit about that. Most people obviously don't – haven't been in the foreign service, haven't been ambassadors. But talk particularly about Russia. So you were in Moscow from '87 to '89?

EDELMAN: '87 to '89.

KRISTOL: What was your job, actually?

EDELMAN: I was in the political section of the embassy, and I was the – The political section was divided into an internal group that focused on the ins and outs of the Soviet Politburo and Central Committee, who was up, who was down, classic Kremlinology, really. And then an external group that was involved in worrying about Soviet foreign policy, both with regard to Europe but also in the Third World. And I was the head of the external section that was focused on Soviet foreign policy.

Before I went to Moscow, I'd had the job of – on the Soviet desk of the –

KRISTOL: At the State Department.

EDELMAN: – at the State Department – of the Officer in Charge of, as I used to say, Soviet Policy in the Third World, which I did some public speaking in those days. This was in the Reagan Administration. And I was speaking down in Athens, Georgia at a Rotary Club. And someone introduced me as, you know, here's Mr. Edelman. He is the person in the State Department who is responsible for Soviet Policy in the Third World. And someone in the back of the room said, "I've been waiting to find that son of a bitch for a long time."

KRISTOL: Right. Yeah. That's good. So what was it like? I mean, did you guys see what was happening? I mean, how visible was it that the fundamental change was coming and –

EDELMAN: I remember the moment –

KRISTOL: It's an interesting question for a historian or political scientist. How these, you know – in real time, can one see this?

EDELMAN: It's a great question, and I remember very distinctly the moment when it first occurred to me that the Soviet Union might not be a permanent condition.

KRISTOL: Which we all thought it would be.

EDELMAN: Yeah, we all grew up in the long twilight struggle –

KRISTOL: Right.

EDELMAN: – that President Kennedy described in his inaugural address that, you know, the Cold War was going to go on forever. The Soviet Union was going to, you know, live forever.

And the moment when it first really occurred to me that that might not be the case was when the then-CIA station chief in Moscow, Jack Downing, who later was the Deputy Director of Intelligence, the head of the Clandestine Service of the CIA, in a country team meeting in the bubble, you know, in the secure conference room that we maintained inside the embassy, in an internal discussion we were having said, "You know, the problem is that the Communist Party is having trouble recruiting people from the Komsomol, the Communist Party Youth Organization. And they're not really able to replenish themselves." They're not able, essentially, to develop the cadre that they need of people to continue to have the party run this massive state, you know, that extends across, you know, 12 time zones or 11 time zones, whatever it was.

And I remember it was literally the first time it occurred to me that the Soviet Union might not be a permanent fixture in life. And it was Jack's comment that, you know, touched that off.

KRISTOL: Was it more evident that the Communist Party might lose control or that the empire might fracture, that the Soviet Union would become –

EDELMAN: Both things were going on at the same time, and they had a tendency to reinforce one another. So Gorbachev, to his credit, had concluded that it was a mistake to try and hold the external empire in Central Europe together. And he had concluded that, in general, the costs, you know, of empire were too great and that they needed to liquidate their – particularly their extended positions in the Third World – Afghanistan, Angola, other places where Soviet activism in the '70s, in the wake of U.S. preoccupation with Vietnam and retrenchment under the, you know, Johnson and Nixon administrations – were these positions which they'd assumed in a period of kind of triumphalism when they were thinking that the Soviet Union was the wave of the future, were actually bleeding them and bleeding their economy.

And so he made that decision, and that was partly related to his struggle inside the Soviet Union and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union with people who were against his reforms and also against abandoning, you know, these positions.

So he was content to abandon the empire. What differentiated him from Boris Yeltsin was he wasn't prepared to abandon the party in the Soviet Union itself and institute any kind of real democracy, although [he'd] be willing to introduce some democratic elements inside the party, but not really beyond it. And that's what, I think, kind of gave that period its particular dynamic.

KRISTOL: And then the Soviet Union itself breaking up I remember was such a surprise, to me at least. That is, one could sort of see coming maybe that they would lose their grip – the party would – and one could see coming that they might lose their grip on foreign countries like Poland or countries that had tried to rebel, Hungary. But the actual sort of Ukraine becoming its own country, that was really astounding, as I recall.

EDELMAN: Yes.

KRISTOL: Maybe I just didn't know enough and didn't realize how little –

EDELMAN: The nationalities issue had always been sort of an Achilles heel of the Soviet Union.

KRISTOL: Right.

EDELMAN: And, you know, it really was the Baltic states that really began this.

KRISTOL: Right.

EDELMAN: But then there was, you know, you had in the Caucasus, Armenia and Azerbaijan also seeking greater latitude. And then once Ukraine – I mean, Ukraine was really the lynchpin.

By that time I had actually left Moscow, and I was in the Pentagon for my first tour of the Pentagon as an Assistant Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for East Central Europe and for – it started out actually as Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and then it became Soviet Union and Central Europe, you know. And then it became Russia, Ukraine, you know, Central Europe. And by that time I had run out of business cards.

But when we saw Ukraine beginning to go, that was really the moment when it was clear that the Soviet Union might really break up. And there was a bit of a debate inside the Bush 41 administration, which Secretary Baker describes in his memoirs, between those of us who really thought that support for Yeltsin and support for independence for Ukraine was a positive thing that could break up the Soviet Union peacefully, and those who were afraid that it wouldn't be peaceful and that it was too dangerous and that we should just try and hold the Soviet Union together, goes on.

It was an interesting sort of debate right at the tail end of both the Bush administration and the Soviet Union, because the sort of collapse and the end of the Bush administration are almost coterminous.

KRISTOL: You have the "Chicken Kiev" speech, where –

EDELMAN: "Chicken Kiev" speech.

KRISTOL: – where Baker cautioned against –

EDELMAN: Against –

KRISTOL: In August '91, maybe?

EDELMAN: Yeah, just before – I think it was July.

KRISTOL: July.

EDELMAN: It was literally about a month before the coup and the whole place starts to unravel.

KRISTOL: Right. Do you think, all in – I'm just curious. I mean, I was a part of that administration, too, in a very minor role, but it was a pretty good performance.

EDELMAN: Mine was more minor.

KRISTOL: I don't know about that. You were actually responsible for dealing with some part of the world.

But it was a pretty good performance by the U.S. government, right, managing that? I mean, it's all taken for granted now that it was all going to fall apart peacefully, that Germany would reunify in NATO, that these other countries, again, whatever the problem subsequently, that the Balts and Ukraine and others would become free and then move towards, more or less, democratic rule and become part of, in some cases, the E.U., in other cases part of NATO.

EDELMAN: It's interesting how, you know, what you think at the time and how you think about things retrospectively can sometimes shift a little bit. You know, at the time I was sort of very impatient with the Bush administration, in the sense that I thought we could push further and accomplish even more.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

EDELMAN: And I remember thinking to myself that, you know, having voted for President Bush, you know, in the '88 Election, I was hoping for a kind of a third term of Reagan and being somewhat disappointed that we got a first term with President Bush.

But certainly in retrospect, and particularly when one thinks about kind of various other administrations that have followed, I think President Bush deserves enormous credit for how he handled that. And I think, overall, the whole team functioned pretty well and accomplished an enormous amount despite my impatience and, you know.

KRISTOL: And benefitted usually from Reagan's –

EDELMAN: I was young and –

KRISTOL: – buildup, also though – both the defense buildup and the –

EDELMAN: I was a young, immature –

KRISTOL: I was a – [inaudible, crosstalk]

EDELMAN: I was in my forties. I was young and immature.

KRISTOL: And people forget how much he benefitted though, from Reagan. I mean, both the defense buildup –

EDELMAN: Yes.

KRISTOL: But also the kind of moral challenge. It's not like they just went away. Bush was less interested, a little less vocal about that than Reagan, but in a way, the – what had been unleashed, if that's the right word, or unloosed already was out there. You know what I mean?

EDELMAN: I think there was a little bit of a disposition at the beginning of the Bush administration to believe that President Reagan had become too entranced in his personal relationship with –

KRISTOL: Gorbachev.

EDELMAN: – with Gorbachev, and that, you know, the old man was kind of losing it at the end. And that, you know, we needed to be more tough minded and that Gorbachev was not –

It took a few months for the administration to realize that Gorbachev was in a headlong retreat, in part because he was trying to focus on the domestic fight at home and, therefore, was willing to give up, as we were just discussing, the external empire to focus on the fight at home and the struggle for reform at home. And that, therefore, there was even more to be accomplished.

And I mean, ironically, having criticized President Reagan for having been too enamored of Gorbachev, you know, President Bush's relationship with Gorbachev becomes famously close, to the point that there was, I think, in the White House a lack of appreciation of what Yeltsin represented and, therefore, a misreading of some of what was going on in Russia.

KRISTOL: Let's fast-forward a decade briefly. What's it like to become – you'd been ambassador once before so it wasn't I guess a shock to become *ambassador*, but Turkey in a very fraught moment, what was it? The summer of '03?

EDELMAN: The summer of '03, yeah.

KRISTOL: The war had already – the Iraq War had already –

EDELMAN: The Iraq War had begun and the major combat phase had ended already, in the spring of 2003. We'd had two major blips in U.S.-Turkish relations before I got there.

One was that the Turkish Parliament – the Turkish Grand National Assembly [TGNA] – had held a vote on March 1st about whether or not to let the Fourth Infantry Division, commanded by General Ray Odierno, who later became chief of staff in the Army and also the commanding general of our forces in Iraq and also before that the Core commander – whether to let that division pass through Turkey into Iraq or not.

And the vote had – actually there was a plurality in the TGNA to pass the [unintelligible], the resolution. But there were so many abstentions that they lacked a quorum in there. So there was a point of order made and the parliamentarian ruled that the vote had not passed.

And this was an enormous disappointment to the U.S. It arguably led to the war lasting maybe a week or so more than it needed to, or the major combat phase longer than it needed to. Arguably it may have contributed to the decomposition of some Iraqi units rather than the U.S. Army being able to destroy them, which may have contributed, arguably, to feeding the Sunni Arab insurgency of later years in Iraq.

So that was already a very sore point in the relationship.

And then a couple of weeks before I got there, there were some Turkish Special Forces folks – I mean Turkey had had a presence inside Iraq going back to the First Iraq War. Some Turkish Special Forces guys were planning apparently to kill some, I think it was either Kurdish or Turkman leader near Kirkuk. And they were taken down by guys in the 173rd Airborne, and they were hooded and flex cuffed and taken to Baghdad and this led to a huge outrage in Turkey.

So one former U.S. ambassador to Turkey as I, literally as I was on my way out, said, "Congratulations, you're arriving, you know, at the absolute nadir of the U.S.-Turkish relationship, and the good news for you is that there's only one way this can go is up." He was wrong.

KRISTOL: And how evident was it – we talked about Erdoğan earlier. I mean, how evident was it to you and to the rest of the U.S. government? Did you have to alert the rest of the U.S. government to what was sort of beginning to happen there, or –?

EDELMAN: Well, you know, it took some period of time. So the party had only come to power in November of 2002. So when I arrived, they'd been in government less than a year. And Erdoğan had only become prime minister in March of 2003, after the vote. And he only won his bi-election putting him in the parliament and making him eligible to become prime minister, I think it was March 7th or 8th or something. So he'd only been prime minister for four or five months when I showed up.

And the AKP party, as it emerged from the Turkish Islamist movement of the '70s, '80s, and '90s, was in some ways a very seductive force for Westerners, and certainly for Americans in the wake of 9/11.

So here was a party that said, "We are a moderate Muslim party that believes in democracy. We want to be an Islamic party the way the Christian Democrats are a Christian party in Germany and in Europe." And, you know, for people who were furiously searching the world for moderate Muslims in the wake of 9/11, these were sort of moderate Muslims from central casting.

And the party, in its early days, was actually an interesting amalgam of an Islamist base, which had – There was a rival Islamist party, the original – it went through a variety of incarnations, the National Salvation Party, then the Welfare Party, and then the Felicity Party; it had a variety of different names – but of Necmettin Erbakan, who briefly became prime minister in the '90s before being ousted by the military. He was not overthrown in a coup, but he was basically forced out by pressure of the military. So they had that element.

But they also had a lot of non-Islamist but, you know, piously oriented Muslims who were coming from the party of the former prime minister and president Turgut Özal, who had returned Turkey to democracy after the 1980 military coup.

And they also had different people, different reformers who saw them as a vehicle for reform. And it was a kind of coalition. I wouldn't say a rainbow coalition, because that's something that a current Turkish political figure who's in jail tried to put together in the last couple of elections. But it was definitely a broad coalition that initially came to power.

Over time it became obvious to me that Erdoğan was incredibly beholden, both politically but also psychologically, to his Islamist base, and he was very oriented towards that. And over time, all these other elements – he began to shed the reformers and the other former party people. None of them really are left in what exists now in today's AKP, the Justice and Development Party that he heads. It's now a party that's been totally remade in his personal image. And it's very like Putin's Russia. It's a very *personalist* regime, where the only decision maker anymore who matters is Erdoğan. Nobody else really matters. And that's very hard to run a country, you know, that way.

So this did become apparent to us. I'm in the odd situation of having a lot of my telegrams that were, you know, actually drafted by the embassy – all telegrams go out from an embassy with the ambassador's name at the bottom. So although I didn't personally write a lot of those telegrams, I had to approve almost all of them.

And they all have my name at the bottom. When Private First Class Chelsea Manning revealed, in 2010, through WikiLeaks, this huge trove of classified documents, the largest tranche of documents came from Baghdad, of course, where he was stationed at the time.

The second largest came from Ankara, because we copied Baghdad on everything. And so a lot of this became public. And including concerns that we expressed to Washington about Erdoğan's growing – now, I can't read these things, by the way. I can't download them on my computer because they're still classified. And since I still hold clearances, I'm not allowed to, you know, have access to any of this, even though I obviously saw all these things at one time.

But several people have come up to me and talked about how, including Turks, about how good they think the reporting was – and not just during my time there. There were a lot of telegrams from other ambassadors who succeeded me, Jim Jeffrey, notably, and others. But the reporting was consistently, you know, quite good about where this was headed and the dangerous direction it was going in.

I think, though, that consistently in the Bush and in the Obama administrations, and now in the Trump administration, there has been a disposition to believe that Turkey is so important, its location, as we discussed earlier, is so crucial and we need them for so many things, that it's okay to turn a blind eye to what's going on inside Turkey, the growing authoritarianism, the growing, you know, religiosity and intolerance that has been encouraged by the AKP regime.

And my view is that is a huge mistake because to understand Turkish foreign policy, which is what our main concern is, you have to understand that it's all related to Erdoğan's domestic agenda and his desire to secure supreme political power inside the Turkish polity. And you won't understand what they're doing until you understand that.

Moreover, my concern is he's driving the country towards a civil war, because it is deeply divided. And his quest for personal political power at some point is, you know, going to spill over into a broader social conflict. You've seen signs of this – the Gezi Park protests a few years ago.

What's going on in Southeastern Turkey, which is an ongoing violent Kurdish insurgency that has been repressed brutally by the Turkish armed forces and gendarme in Southeastern Kurdish majority cities like Cizre and Gaziantep and others. If you look at the reports that have been done by the U.N. Human Rights monitors, if you look at pictures of some of those central cities, it looks like Aleppo.

And the danger here, I think, is that Turkey gets swept up into this broader conflict. I mean, you already have a tremendous amount of weaponry and explosives because the Turks allowed themselves to be a thoroughfare into Syria with jihadists.

In fact, they turned a blind eye to some, not ISIS per se, but they allowed some ISIS people to move back and forth, but they actually encouraged the actual Al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria during the conflict. To be fair to them, in part it was because they didn't see the U.S. doing anything. This goes to my earlier point that when we create a vacuum, the forces that fill it are frequently not wholesome.

And so the danger I think is Turkey, which is deeply divided between pious and secular, but also between Turks and Kurds – that's the big cleavage – but between Sunni and Alawis as well, because there's a 20 percent population that's Alawis, not Sunni Muslim. And the Alawis have been subject to pogroms and repression in Turkey.

If Turkey goes up in a civil war, it's going to actually make Syria look, you know, tame by comparison. And it's on, you know, Europe's doorstep. And I don't think we're that far away from it, unfortunately. So it's, I think, an ongoing problem. And it was very hard to convince people as ambassador that, you know, this might be the trajectory we were on because people don't want to believe it.

KRISTOL: A few years out, but it's – 10 years is not that long a time. Yeah.

Let's close by getting back to America. Just you've served – obviously, you served through 2009, in Democratic and Republican administrations. Say a word about each party and its sort of view of foreign policy as you think now.

EDELMAN: So, what worries me most is that there really has been a breakdown, I think, of the consensus on U.S. grand strategy. I mean, as we discussed earlier – the end of World War II, there was this broad consensus. There was dissent on the left and on the right. The dissent surfaced first on the left

in the Democratic Party in the form of Henry Wallace and his independent “progressive/communist” candidacy in 1948 against Harry Truman.

And it surfaced on the right in the form of Robert Taft and isolationist wing of the Republican Party, which was defeated in 1952 by Dwight Eisenhower at the Republican Convention, and which had really kind of gone dormant for a very long time, until it was essentially resuscitated by Donald Trump.

And, you know, Trump, as I might have said in my earlier career as a Sovietologist, it’s not by accident, comrade, that, you know, Trump resuscitated this. By the way, it was my colleague Tom Wright at Brookings, who first wrote about this back in 2016, that if you look at Trump’s speeches, it’s very, you know, similar to the kind of Taftian view of the world: Allies are bad. They take advantage of you. They drag you into fights that aren’t yours, you know. It’s very similar.

And of course, one of the people in the Republican Party who represented that wing of the party was Joseph McCarthy, whose counsel in the Army-McCarthy hearings was Roy Cohn, who was consigliere to Donald Trump in the 1980s until he died of AIDS. This was a formative experience for President Trump.

So I worry that that’s sort of a problem that we have in the Republican Party, that there’s been a resurgence of this isolationist wing. Trump is not the only, you know, evidence of that. I think, you know, Senator Rand Paul is yet another example.

KRISTOL: Buchanan beforehand, in a certain way, of course.

EDELMAN: So and the Wallace-ite, you know, sort of left-wing version of this you can see in Bernie Sanders and, to some degree, in President Obama actually: this allergy to the use of American power and to standing up to the Soviets/Russia, et cetera. I think it was very disabling for President Obama in the last years.

And we now know that they’d known for a couple of years that the Russians were wielding these information weapons, that they were behind some of the populist eruptions in Europe, and that this was now being aimed at the United States. And yet there was no real effective counter to that, which I think a lot of my friends and colleagues on the Democratic side now deeply regret.

KRISTOL: Don’t you think the red line was really a disaster? I mean the Syrian red line.

EDELMAN: Yes.

KRISTOL: I was struck when I was in Japan in November of 2013 I guess, that’s what *they* were talking about and “can we trust the U.S.?” And I think China looked at that and decided they’re not going to stop us from our “salami tactics” with those islands and so forth.

EDELMAN: Absolutely. It was a disaster in, you know, well beyond – it represented a huge disaster in Syria – but well beyond it with Russia, with Japan, Korea, other U.S. allies worrying about whether, when the U.S. drew a line, whether it was actually willing to, you know, follow through on it.

It was a terrible problem. You’ve had this process where, on the Republican side now, we have a congeries of factions, only some of which are committed to the traditional, you know, approach to national security. You’ve got, you know, sort of a libertarian-isolationist group that’s not, you know, small by any means. Even those who are supporting the traditional view, I think, talking to some of the newer younger members, one gets the sense they have the sense that their colleagues don’t have a sense of urgency about some of the concerns we’ve been discussing: about defense spending, about maintaining our ability to operate *everywhere* in the world because we never know when we go to bed what we’re going to wake up to in the morning. And so there’s that problem.

On the Democratic side, the sort of Blue-Dog Democrats, the Scoop Jackson Democrats. I mean I think of someone like Joe Lieberman, who was maybe the last element of that wing of the party that's, you know, really, the John Kennedy, Scoop Jackson, you know, strong, anti-communist Cold War liberalism. That's almost completely disappeared from the party.

And so, there is not the sort of center-left, center-right ballast that essentially held us throughout the Cold War. So my view is both parties have a lot of work ahead of them trying to sort out how: A) how each of them thinks about the world.

And how those who think that the United States still has to play a leadership role, engaged throughout the world, militarily strong, prepared, you know, to use military force when necessary *even* if that means unilaterally, hopefully in order to, you know, galvanize a multilateral effort. But in my experience, that's frequently not likely to happen unless people think you're *ready* to do it on your own.

Until you get that center-left, center-right kind of mass, I think we're going to continue to have these kind of herky-jerky policies that leave everyone unsatisfied and have a much more unsettled world as a result.

KRISTOL: Well, maybe this conversation will help inspire a few people to get to work –

EDELMAN: I hope so.

KRISTOL: – rebuilding that consensus for American world leadership.

And, Eric, thank you for everything you've done, actually, as a public servant, and thank you for taking the time for this conversation.

And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]