

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

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I: The Trump Presidency (0:15 – 22:44)

KRISTOL: Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol. Very pleased to be joined again by my friend Jonah Goldberg, a senior editor at *National Review*, fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, author of books that have been written and –

GOLDBERG: (LAUGHS)

KRISTOL: That have been written or that are about to come out.

GOLDBERG: That's right.

KRISTOL: Wait, what's your next one called?

GOLDBERG: The next one, the working title – we still may change it – is *The Suicide Of The West*, because we're looking for something upbeat.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's –

GOLDBERG: Forward-looking, you know? I wanted to go with "*Cheer Up For The Worst Is Yet To Come*." But we decided to go with something a little more serious, so –

KRISTOL: Okay, well, this conversation, I'm sure, will be suitably upbeat, as well.

GOLDBERG: Yes, yeah.

KRISTOL: So I think we last did a conversation almost exactly a year ago. We're now speaking in, what, mid-to-late October. We did one right after the election, speculated about what might happen. I think some of us – where things might go. I'm not sure how those speculations stand up – better than our pre-election predictions, probably.

GOLDBERG: Probably, yeah.

KRISTOL: (LAUGHS) So, where do you think – a year into the Trump presidency. I mean, where does the country stand? Where does – we'll talk about conservatism as well, the Republican Party – but let's just start with what strikes you one way or the other about the country's fate and well-being.

GOLDBERG: Yeah. I think – how to put this? One of my favorite lines from Orwell is where he says, "A man can be a failure and take to drink, and become all the more of a failure because he drinks." Right?

KRISTOL: (LAUGHS)

GOLDBERG: So there's this catalytic thing. A lot of the problems that America has are not the product of Donald Trump. Donald Trump is the product of those problems. But he's made a lot of those problems, I think, worse: in terms of polarization, distrust of institutions, distrust of, certainly of the media, right? Which used to be our bread and butter, but, like, at some point, you know, every poison is determined by the dosage. So some things can go too far. And so I think civil society generally is in a really rotten place.

I've just spent the last two years on this book working on it, which we'll talk about when my book comes out, but I think that one of the sort of long-term trends – you know, it's funny. It's – I think President Trump has illuminated trends that we sort of recognized or talked about but didn't really worry about too much...

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: ...and – to mix metaphors – metastasized them in a way. And one of them is, you know, for years we've talked about and complained about, as conservatives, the politicization of daily life, right? Of Hollywood, of entertainment, of education, and all the rest.

What we're now seeing – what happens is, is that you actually get – it's a feedback loop. And if you politicize our life – If politics becomes a lifestyle, our lifestyles also become political. In my understanding of the social sciences, this is the first time in American history where partisan identification is more predictive of behavior than race and often religion or gender, which is just bizarre, right?

So politics has now become – political identification has become a form of identity politics. And I think that things like Facebook and Twitter and social media accelerate and exacerbate these trends, because as civil society atrophies, people still have this desire to belong to a community. And they start looking to national politics. They start looking to social media groups, which are really pale imitations of real community. Virtual communities aren't real communities.

And in the virtual community world of Facebook and whatnot, it's all so incredibly tribal and polarized, and people become abstractions. And so in a very serious way, I think the country has got real problems because we view politics now as essentially a form of entertainment, and the whole notion of deliberative democracy is really on the outs. It's just all about victory.

For years I've been – You know, my favorite *New Yorker* cartoon has – which I might have even brought up in the last time I did this because I talk about it all the time – but my favorite *New Yorker* cartoon has two dogs in suits drinking martinis at a New York bar. And one dog says to the other dog, "You know, it's not good enough that dogs succeed. Cats must also fail."

KRISTOL: (LAUGHS)

GOLDBERG: And that's, I think, where we are politically, is that everything is zero sum. We take sort of ecstatic schadenfreude when the news fits our narrative rather than somebody else's narrative.

One of the most repugnant things – hopefully when this airs there won't have been a recent mass shooting, but – because it'll seem like I'm talking about it, but there hasn't – the most recent one we had was a few weeks ago, in Las Vegas. But there's this really grotesque, almost vampiric pause where everybody's waiting to find out whether it was Muslim or a crazy Christian, right?

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: And then one side gets to say, "Haha! Your side's the problem," and the other side gets to say, "Haha! Your side's the problem." And it's grotesque, and it's ghoulish, but that's where our politics are right now.

KRISTOL: Yeah. The Gold Star parents controversy that is just happening this week is, well, stomach-churning, really, I find it. So, you're good on this – these kind of deep, semi-deep cultural analysis.

GOLDBERG: (LAUGHS)

KRISTOL: Well, deep in your case. Semi-deep in my case, but –

GOLDBERG: I like the claw back. (LAUGHS)

KRISTOL: Yeah, I said it and I thought, "Well – "

GOLDBERG: (LAUGHS)

KRISTOL: But look, I mean, these two – I very much agree with what you just said, and so how do these two things happen at once? You have hyper-partisanship, tribalism to a really unhealthy degree, and I think maybe unprecedented degree in America, on the one hand. And on the other, entertainment culture. Politics as reality TV. You'd think those two would sort of cut against each other, no?

But I mean, one is kind of politics is childish; politics is all about personality. Trump is not an ideological figure.

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: We didn't elect Ted Cruz or nominate Ted Cruz or elect Ted Cruz, or whatever, Bernie Sanders. And yet, on the other hand, it does seem like, in a weird way there, they go together more than I would have thought, I guess. I mean – you know what I mean?

GOLDBERG: Yeah. I mean, I think one of the ironies is that –

KRISTOL: I mean, it's like, we have bread and circuses – So my image of decline. There are two kinds of decline: Bread and circuses decline, everyone's just distracted and...

GOLDBERG: Right. Decadent.

KRISTOL: ...decadent, trivialities. *Or* insane partisanship leading to civil war. We seem to have, like, combined both of them. How did that work?

GOLDBERG: Yeah, although, you know, it's funny. I mean, you're a better student of history than I am, but it may be that they *always* went together.

KRISTOL: Well, that's a good point. That's the question.

GOLDBERG: It just doesn't seem like it from the vantage point of the present. But I think one of the ironies of the situation that we're in –

Look, I think that Steve Bannon and his whole argument, both in terms of American history and its political project, are way overblown and really fairly spurious. I think that there are only two constituencies in America that are deeply invested in the myth of Bannon's genius; and it's the Bannonistas themselves – primarily the Breitbart crowd – and the mainstream media, who are just sort of desperate to inflate his importance. They're trying to sort of turn him into what you were in the 1990s with the fight on HillaryCare, right?

KRISTOL: Right, right.

GOLDBERG: They need a narrative villain person to do the "Republicans in disarray" talk and all the rest. And I think that –

But the thing is, his argument, such as it is, becomes more plausible the longer Washington gets nothing done, right? The more dysfunctional Washington, the less productive it is, the easier it is to watch it all as a spectator sport, right? Then it really is just about the personalities.

And I think that, you know, what Trump did was he broke the blood-brain barrier between reality television and professional wrestling culture and political culture. And it was actually a blogger – who's actually very pro-Trump now, much to my astonishment – but a brilliant guy, Ace of Spades, he was the guy who sort of clicked on a light for me, oh, a couple of years ago, what he called the "MacGuffin-ization of American politics."

GOLDBERG: And I've written about it a bunch since, and I think it really is pretty insightful. In film, a MacGuffin is just whatever the hero wants, right? In –

KRISTOL: It's like a plot device, right?

GOLDBERG: It's a plot device. Right.

KRISTOL: It gets things going, I guess, right?

GOLDBERG: Yeah, so in *Pulp* –

KRISTOL: It's the missing –

GOLDBERG: In *Pulp Fiction*, it's the briefcase, right? And the Maltese falcon is the classic MacGuffin, right?

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: It's just something from which the hero's motives derive, right? *I must get the plans for this nuclear code. I must find the missing baby.* Whatever it is.

And Ace pointed out that the coverage of Barack Obama, for eight years, from the elite media was completely MacGuffin-ized. Once President Obama set his sights on a desired goal, all of the news coverage was, "Will he get it? Will the Republicans stop him?" It didn't matter –

So, Obama could spend, what, a year, two years going around saying, "It is flatly unconstitutional for me to do DAPA and DACA," and all this kind of stuff. And the moment he switches gears and does it, almost no one in the mainstream press says, "Well, wait a second, you said this was unconstitutional." No one –

the *New York Times* editorial page doesn't scream bloody murder: "The president is violating his oath of office." It was all about the hero; the protagonist in the story of politics is succeeding.

And I think it explains a lot of the frustration of conservatives about how Obama was treated as president. You know, "there were no scandals" and all this kind of stuff.

But it also explains, now that the shoe is on the other foot, enormous amount of the psychological thinking that goes into defending Donald Trump. It's that *he's our hero*. We have to rationalize our – you know, for the people with a conscience, it is we have to rationalize our choice of electing this guy, of supporting this guy, and so we need to give him wins, regardless of ideological content.

And for the people who are all-in, you know, the true Kool-Aid drinkers, it is simply a cult of personality. And whatever he declares a victory we must echo is a victory as well. And the entire discussion of politics now is almost, like, you know, it's movie synopsis work.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: It's not about actual public policy issues. It's about, you know, *will our hero succeed?* And for the left, *will our villain fail?* And I've – at some point it just gets tedious.

KRISTOL: I mean, I guess one argument that's – well, okay, so now I'm depressed about the culture, the civic culture. I mean, one argument I've made occasionally is the institutions, you could argue, have done pretty well. I mean, we're not...

GOLDBERG: I agree with that.

KRISTOL: ...a third-world country. Do you agree with that, or –

GOLDBERG: Yeah, no, I agree with that. I agree with that.

KRISTOL: That he can't – you know, one bad president – one bad dictator in Argentina, one bad president, who assumes dictatorial authorities in Argentina – just to use one country – in a third-world country can really destroy, almost, the...

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: ...the political system. That doesn't seem to be the case here.

GOLDBERG: No, I think that's right, but let's not forget that our institutions of civil society – I mean, the constitutional framework, right? And the military – the ethos, the patriotic ethos of the generals around Trump have helped enormously, I think, right?

KRISTOL: Yes, I agree with that.

It's funny that we're so dependent on the military ...

GOLDBERG: You know, when you're talking about a –

KRISTOL: ...to keep *civil* – you know, the government sound, right?

GOLDBERG: Yeah, and we should be clear: I mean, I don't think Donald Trump is Hitler, right? I mean, Hitler could have repealed Obamacare. (LAUGHS) You know?

And there's something else going on there, right? I think the desire to invest in Donald Trump ideological coherence or authority – I mean, he's the talent, as they say in Hollywood. He's just the guy who wants to make sure his trailer is bigger than everybody else's trailer, and he gets two scoops of ice cream on his plate, and doesn't really care about the policy stuff.

He does demonstrate how fragile our system is in so far as, imagine if he really understood – imagine if he had Pat Buchanan's brain and Trump's ability to rally the troops.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: It'd be a very different country, and –

But just getting outside of the sort of, the inside the beltway part, I mean, our institutions are in really bad shape. The family is in bad shape. Faith and trust in institutions across the board is way down.

You look at, you know, the religious right, which I've spent – and you've spent most of your career defending, right, from crazy liberal attacks. Their ability to instantaneously rationalize Donald Trump's personal behavior. I mean, I – look, I understand, "He's a flawed figure" and all that kinda stuff. But the number of people who see him as God's instrument and think it's unfair or unworthy to condemn his personal behavior, from the Christian right, is astonishing to me.

And it shows you both how beleaguered and desperate and frightened a lot of people on the right are that they really do think that we were one election away from America ending.

But it also just shows you how much the entire country is invested in politics from Washington, which is a sign of the erosion of civil society. People – for most of American history, people look much closer to home for their politics, for their meaning, for their sense of belonging. And instead, as civil society lowers, the entire national culture turns on the reality show of Washington politics and roots for the bad guy – roots for their tribe, and it is – I think we're in a bad place in that way.

KRISTOL: You used the term rationalizing a couple of times, and we've discussed this over the months of the Trump presidency, the degree to which people, they start off saying, "I don't like him much. I wish he wouldn't tweet. I know his character's bad, but we're getting Justice Gorsuch, and we're getting some other things, religious-freedom legislation or something, and so we should – we've got to go with him."

And it doesn't seem like many people can hold that position. It's not at all a ridiculous position. It's not quite where I am. But, I mean, it was the most, in my view, sensible vote – reluctant vote for Trump position, reluctant support Trump position: Don't go crazy about his flaws. But acknowledge them.

But it's – what is it about psychology? It's just, it does seem that it's hard for people to hold that. They want to believe somehow. It's hard to be a reluctant supporter, somehow – either in today's America, or maybe just in life in general, frankly. I mean, you know? It –

GOLDBERG: Yeah, no, I think that's right. And, you know, it's funny. It's different horses for different courses in terms of the arguments that you get. And I've – it's interesting. Social media makes everything worse, right?

KRISTOL: (LAUGHS) Hey, we're active in social media. Yes.

GOLDBERG: And I'm very active on it, but I – a lot. But half of it is pictures of my dogs.

And cable, definitely, makes everything worse to a certain extent. But when you actually go out and talk to rank and file conservatives, it's shocking how rare you find the true Kool-Aid drinkers.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I agree with that. Yeah.

GOLDBERG: I mean, you find them. You do find people who are, like, very mad at me. I'm – don't get me wrong, and *certainly* mad at you, and –

KRISTOL: What do you mean, "and certainly mad at you," as if they're more reasonable to be mad at me than at you. They should be equally mad at the two of us, I believe.

GOLDBERG: I didn't say reasonable. It's more understandable that they're mad at you. You –

KRISTOL: I understand.

GOLDBERG: You've just, you know –

KRISTOL: I just lack that charm, that kind of grace that you have to disarm your enemies.

GOLDBERG: I suppose that's it. I would just – look, there are a lot of different frequencies of NeverTrumperism.

KRISTOL: I'm one frequency over from you, right?

GOLDBERG: Yeah, I think that's right. I'm –

KRISTOL: I'm one or two frequencies short of, you know, Pete Wehner and Bret Stephens, and so –

GOLDBERG: That's right. And you sound like Mike Pence saluting Donald Trump's broad-shouldered leadership next to Jen Rubin.

KRISTOL: (LAUGHS) Right.

GOLDBERG: So, I mean, there are gradations here.

KRISTOL: Yeah, the varieties of NeverTrumpism, that'll be a very – that'll be a book or article that will have a readership of 12. But we'll all be very interested in it. (LAUGHS)

GOLDBERG: And it'll be a very high-level readership.

KRISTOL: (LAUGHS)

GOLDBERG: And I can't remember where I was going with this.

KRISTOL: Where were we going with it? The rationalization thing, yeah.

GOLDBERG: All right, so the rationalization thing.

KRISTOL: People are not actually Kool-Aid drinkers, most—

GOLDBERG: Well, most aren't. They want him to succeed, but you – one of the reasons why I think social media and cable are worse than reality is that they don't want nuance. And the people who are most invested in defending their position are the most likely to be talk-radio hosts, cable-news hosts, and sort of social media pundit-types – which none of those places lend themselves to a nuanced position.

And, you know, one of the lessons I learned very early as a columnist, and I don't know – you know, look, Ann Coulter makes a lot more money than I do. Lots of these people make a lot more – Sean Hannity flies private but likes to refer to the “Jonah Goldberg class,” as if I'm the elitist. But –

KRISTOL: (LAUGHS) Hah! Does he really do that?

GOLDBERG: Oh, yeah, yeah. He – I don't know, about a year ago –

KRISTOL: (INAUDIBLE) also know you were amused by the idea of you were having...

GOLDBERG: A class—

KRISTOL: ...your own class of jets and, you know, high life. The Goldberg Mansion, or –

GOLDBERG: Every three to four months Sean goes nuts talking about how – trying to, like, demonize *National Review* cruises as the height of luxury.

KRISTOL: (LAUGHS) Yeah.

GOLDBERG: And *National Review* cruises are lovely. I'm sure the *Weekly Standard* cruises are lovely, but, you know, Sean is worth, I don't know, 25, 50 million dollars, so I just – it's tartuffery, as far as I'm concerned. And if Sean's watching he can go look up what that word means.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: Anyway, the reality is, is that it's been – again, we got distracted here. The reality is, is that the people who are most invested in making this a black and white thing are the ones with the megaphones.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: And I think that's a real problem because it – there is sort of very little social space to say, “Donald Trump has actually been pretty good, and this is – “

So we started this thing by wanting to talk about our predictions and where we were a year ago. From a conservative perspective, I have to say – taking his character out of it, right? Just as a, as the chief executive, as the head of the party, all of that – forgetting the branding, the damage he's done to the Republican brand among millennials and all the rest – it's actually gone much better than I feared.

KRISTOL: Hm.

GOLDBERG: First of all, his judicial appointments have been great, right? I mean, I don't know that there's a candidate that we would have supported more than Donald Trump, which was pretty much all of them, right? With me, the possible exception of George Pataki, but – who I think is like a case of bad clams: He just keeps coming back, but –

So the judicial appointments have been great. The marketing of his repealing of a lot of the Obama stuff has been ugly, but on policy grounds, it's pretty good.

What I feared and what a lot of people feared – I mean, we probably talked about it at the time – is that Trump was going to come out of the gate and be the New York liberal that he had been.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: Cut a massive – [That he] would co-opt Democrats in a massive way. And instead, he listened to Steve Bannon and sort of – as I, you know, somewhat unfairly like to say – and he gave that inaugural, which sounded better in the original German. And – or maybe not German. You know, Italian? You know...

KRISTOL: Yeah, it was more Italian, yeah.

GOLDBERG: It [did] sound, like, you know that at the end of it, you know, he was going to shout, “And Trieste will belong to Italy forever.”

But – and he immediately alienated Democrats even more, right? And if he had not – I actually thought he wasn’t going to do that. And if he had done something like a giant infrastructure thing – he doesn’t care about budgeting, the budget or any of that kind of stuff – he would have brought along about half, two-thirds of the Republican Party. He would have broken the spine of the Tea Party crowd forever. Either they would have lost their political clout, or they would have gone along with it, and either one would have been fatal. And he conceivably could have gotten a significant chunk of Democrats to go along.

And even if it failed, he would have opened his presidency with a legislative agenda that would be very popular with rank and file Democrats, very popular with the – his base, who got him elected, and would have marginalized all sorts of voices, like us, even more than we have been, and – but he didn’t do that. Instead, he went for this “blood of patriots” nonsense, and I think it was a colossal mistake, but I’m glad he made it.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: And the dysfunction in Congress, Donald Trump certainly deserves his share of blame, but it’s not all his fault, right? I mean, the GOP is a mess, and it’s really divided into these different constituencies.

But, you know, what is the old Soviet joke about how things couldn’t get any – The pessimist says, “Things couldn’t get any worse,” and the optimist says, “Oh, of course they can get worse.”

KRISTOL: (LAUGHS) Yeah, right, right.

GOLDBERG: It could have been worse, you know?

KRISTOL: Yeah. No, I think that’s – I mean, I think that’s an important point to – I mean, he wasn’t Buchanan in the sense that he, or even Bannon, in the sense that he really was willing to, in a determined and systematic way, carry out a campaign to transform American conservatism, or America in a real nationalist, populist, et cetera, direction.

He wasn’t Nixon, if you want to think maybe that’s the right analogy, on the let’s co-opt the Democrats.

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: And, you know, in a Disraeli-like way, have a clever way of splitting the Democrat’s party.

GOLDBERG: And he was surrounded by Nixonites. Right? I mean, I –

KRISTOL: And he really – in a way, I kind of thought that’s what he might do.

Instead he just sort of went very partisan. I mean, it is a weird thing, the combination of extreme partisanship without any real content to it.

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: It's not as if he believes in whatever Republican – limiting government, worrying about the deficit –

GOLDBERG: It's all lizard-brain stuff, right? It's all – I mean, to the extent he's a partisan. He's a partisan because –

KRISTOL: He ran against Hillary.

GOLDBERG: He ran against Hillary, and because Democrats are attacking him more mean-spiritedly than Republicans are, right?

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: But it – he doesn't care about the party. He lets that slip all the time.

II. Donald Trump and Conservatives (22:44 – 1:05:45)

KRISTOL: But so, you think conservatism, in that respect, has slightly escaped some damage that Trump could have done? I mean, let's talk about conservatism.

GOLDBERG: Yeah. I mean –

KRISTOL: Where does conservatism stand a year in, you know? 2015, I think most of us were pretty optimistic. Excellent class of young senators, congressmen, governors. We had Tom Cotton and Ben Sasse and Nikki Haley and Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio, when they all, you know, had their own angles and limitations, but that's not bad, really, and...

GOLDBERG: No, it was great for –

KRISTOL: ...created diversity, and not in a stupid, liberal way but in a genuine way, in terms of backgrounds.

And people are winning in the Midwest, winning in the South – and then suddenly, you know, where are we two years later? I mean, how worried are you? How much is the whole conservative – Are we at the end of an era? Is it a hiccup? What do you make of it?

GOLDBERG: So it's interesting. I'm –

KRISTOL: This is something you've thought about a ton?

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: I mean, written about so much.

GOLDBERG: I'm thinking about – I'm working on a piece for *National Review* about some of this, and I haven't even written a word of it yet, and by the time this comes out maybe I'll have put it out, but I've been rereading the early debates about, you know, conservatism generally, like – people don't understand: Conservatism is, in many respects, the most recent ideology in American political history.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: Right? It's the youngest one. Classical liberalism – or the strain that we call classical liberalism of libertarianism goes back, way back, you know? Past Herbert Spencer into sort of, you know, anarchist theory. You find Roman antecedents of it. If you want, you could say Cynicism was a kind of libertarianism, you can.

Progressivism, been around for a long time. Socialism, been around for a long time, much longer than Marx. But in the 1940s and 1950s, a bunch of people were part of this conversation about – essentially created conservatism, right? And Russell Kirk create – writes *The Conservative Mind*, which was vilified by lots of establishment liberal people, saying this is a hodgepodge of an intellectual history.

You can't find an actual conservative tradition in America. Your dad was part of this conversation. You know, *National Review* basically forges this weird synthesis around fusionism, which philosophically is really flawed but as an organizing principle is fantastic.

But what's sort of fascinating is in – during and right after the McCarthy moment was this huge debate on the right, such as it was, about populism. And they actually called it nationalism for the large part. And the McCarthyites, according to Will Herberg and Willi Schlamm and these guys, were the nationalists...

KRISTOL: Hm. They used that term?

GOLDBERG: They use that term, which I – you know, I must have read the George Nash book three times cover to cover, and I never remembered this discussion in it. But now it feels so unbelievably relevant to the moment.

KRISTOL: And they call them nationalists in pejorative way?

GOLDBERG: Largely in a pejorative way. And they also didn't like "the Liberals," which like Herberg and Schlamm would always capitalize and put in quotation marks because they didn't – back then, it was still a fairly new thing to call progressives "Liberals," right? It's FDR who starts that in the '30s, and as late as 1952, McCarthy himself was calling himself a liberal.

KRISTOL: Is that with a small L.

GOLDBERG: With a small L, and also – but McCarthy –

KRISTOL: Buckley attacks liberals, the capital L, I think in the founding document of *National Review*.

GOLDBERG: That's right. And – but people also forget that McCarthy actually comes out of more of the progressive Republican wing of the Wisconsin party, which was essentially – you know, it wasn't Bolshevik, but it was pretty left-wing.

But anyway – and so this – Will Herberg writes this piece for *The New Leader* in 1954 called, I think, "Government by Rabble Rousing," and he makes this argument, which I think is unbelievably resonant for today, where he says, "The founding fathers were as afraid of despotism as they were of direct democracy, because they were close students of history, and they understood that direct democracy leads to despotism."

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: Right? And he says, "The demagogues of ancient Greece and ancient Rome manipulated the crowd," and he even says, you know, that – he's says, you know, "Caesar and Pericles, they use the arena and the forum to rabble rouse and to exert their will on the elites, and the founding fathers were terrified of that."

And they wanted deliberative democracy, which was largely closed off. It was democratic in that these were the legitimate representatives of the people, but then once behind closed doors, they could slowly and methodically think things through.

And so Herberg says, this – there have always been rabble rousers in the past, but there was no means of really doing it well, technologically, until radio comes along. And it's FDR who is the first rabble rouser. And he says, "Look, FDR was a public-spirited man. He was a good man." He's more pro FDR than I am, but his fireside chats were used to launch these incredible public-pressure campaigns against Congress, "write letters, make phone calls, send telegrams, force Congress to exert my will," right? And then McCarthy comes along and he –

KRISTOL: Then there's other rabble rousing on the radio, presumably, from the right.

GOLDBERG: Right, yeah.

KRISTOL: Or from people who were on the left to become like Father Coughlin.

GOLDBERG: Father Coughlin is one of these; he's a classic sort of demagogue, although he was a huge FDR supporter. He – and when he broke with FDR – this is one of my great intellectual, you know, grievances, is the consistent calling of Father Coughlin a right-winger. When he broke with FDR, he broke with FDR from the *left*. He said that FDR is – the New Deal didn't go nearly far enough.

But then McCarthy comes along, and he's the same sort of rabble rouser. He has no serious ideas about how to do anything. He just has the right enemies; he rouses passions.

And so – and then Herberg says, you know, "TV is making these things worse, and the Kefauver hearings were basically TV shows."

And it's amazing how resonant given, like, what we were talking about earlier, about watching politics as TV, he saw this more than a half-century ago. And seeing how mass-entertainment technology is turning – is siphoning off deliberative aspects of politics and making it into a kind of rabble rousing and entertainment. And so, anyway, it's a bit of a digression, but my point is, is that –

KRISTOL: Is there a pushback against him? Are there people who say, "Oh, that's just your elevated sensibilities, and things are fine," and –

GOLDBERG: Well, you know, I mean –

KRISTOL: And of course, Buckley himself is a semi-defender of McCarthy. I mean, I'm –

GOLDBERG: But Buckley and Bozell were defenders of McCarthy, and – so anyway, that could speak –

That's a good question because it gets me back to the point I was – you were asking about. The conservative movement back then, in its embryonic form, was trying to create an alternative to the East Coast establishment, right? And the liberal establishment, which were sort of the same thing. And so people like Kirk, Whittaker Chambers, Schlamm, Herberg, they were sympathetic with the broader arguments of McCarthy, right?

But they didn't like his rabble-rousing aesthetic and personality. And so Burnham, Kirk, all of these guys, they refused to say they were pro- or anti-McCarthy, because they thought both his enemies and his supporters were wrong. Buckley and Bozell try to thread the needle. And I think that this raises sort – and as your dad, you know, had that famous line where he said, "Well, if the American people know one thing about Joseph McCarthy, he's an anti-communist; about his critics, they can't be too sure."

KRISTOL: Right, “about liberals they know no such thing,” or something. Yeah, right.

GOLDBERG: Right, and so, this tension of agreeing with the populists, sort of emotionally, but intellectually thinking that they’re just a little too worked up and a little too simple about how they make their arguments has been baked into conservatism from the very beginning.

And it comes up again in 1960s with the Wallace stuff. You know, I was just reading the other day Barry Goldwater’s, you know, take on Wallace, and it sounds like he’s talking about Donald Trump.

KRISTOL: Is that right? And how – so this is, what, this is ‘68?

GOLDBERG: Yeah, ‘68. Yeah

KRISTOL: And how – and so what is his take?

GOLDBERG: Well, he – eventually he gets – I was disappointed

KRISTOL: This sounds like a very interesting article. You should write it.

GOLDBERG: Yeah. (LAUGHS)

KRISTOL: Maybe it’s a book. You can write another book, you know?

GOLDBERG: No more books. (LAUGHS)

He ends up making it a point about not throwing away your vote on a third party. But the beginning is all about how, you know, Wallace certainly has identified many of the problems, that he – you know, look – what he calls the “intellectual morons of academia,” who are, you know – who think we’re all stupid and think this country’s bad and run down. And he might as well have been talking about people taking the knee at football games. It was that kind of stuff.

And so Wallace is on the right side of these things – but he’s crude, and he’s – you know, vaguely implies that he’s bigoted. ‘68 was a weird time for *National Review*, and for Goldwater. But you’re reading it, you’re like, it sounds like he’s talking about Trump, right? And he’s like – yeah, emotionally he’s on the right side of a bunch of stuff, but he’s an irresponsible demagogue. And this tension runs through [Newt Gingrich’s] “The Contract with America.” It runs through the Tea Party stuff. And it has been baked into the cake for a very long time.

The problem is – and this gets back to the Herberg and the mass media stuff – is that the institutions of the right, places like *National Review* and *The Weekly Standard* and the various think tanks, they no longer have the technological ability to be the kind of gatekeepers they were 50 years ago, and the internet lets a thousand flowers bloom. It rewards the most extreme statements rather than the most reasonable statements and the most persuasive statements, and so this – while this fight between the sort of Kirkian, way-too-elitist by my lights, conservative-intellectual stuff and the mass populism thing has always been going on, the technological changes have all gone in favor of the populists.

It just makes it easier to elect, you know, people who – and gerrymandering and that stuff helps it too, but there are certain structural changes in the economy, in technology, and in communication are much more on the populist side – and not just on the right; on the left, too. And that’s why I think we’re gonna be seeing a lot more of this before we get it out of our system, if we do.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I guess. I don’t know if this is really a caveat, but one of the ways to maybe think about this, it seems to me it’s – the Tea Party, take the most recent example – and we were both pretty pro-Tea Party.

GOLDBERG: I was pro-Tea Party. It was the only populist movement I ever supported.

KRISTOL: And I won't say I regret it because it seems to me directionally the Tea Party's sentiments were pretty correct and pretty healthy, really. Debt is a huge problem. That we want – limited government. Leave that –

GOLDBERG: Back to basics, Constitution.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Right. Education, well, maybe they were a little crazy to be so obsessed with the Common Core, but the instinct that, you know, can we just have local control of the schools and back to basics education. So a lot of that.

Palin, who was a precursor of that in '08, was a McCain Republican. I mean, she was stylistically populist, but her actual views on things were not.

And there Trump, I think, is different. Trump is both more populist and more demagogic than the previous sort of populist and sort of demagogic things. But also just is not in any way in favor of limited government or American leadership in the world or stuff that was pretty –

The Tea Party had elements already of a little bit, of some nativism, I'd say, and the immigration issue, probably a little protectionism. But that wasn't the big part, I don't recall, of the Tea Party message. Little bit of Fortress America, maybe, you know, "Let's win the wars we fight." But mostly, support for American leadership in the world.

GOLDBERG: It was very patriotic.

KRISTOL: So Trump has sort of taken it to another level or in a slightly different direction, it seems to me, in that respect. I mean, it – maybe it was always – there was always a potential there, I guess, one would have to say. But maybe it's what you're saying. It gets unmoored from any kind of –

Palin had the sense that she should defer to John McCain on big policy issues because John McCain had been, was the Republican nominee. That was a little odd situation. She's the VP nominee. But also McCain had been a senator for 25 years. He knew what he was talking about, and, you know, our point was to get rid of liberal idiocy, not to sort of really question the fundamental Bush-McCain views of the world.

I think what Trump does is take it to another level of real questioning of even the conservative elite views.

GOLDBERG: Yeah, so I have a slightly different take on this, and I get into this in this forthcoming book, but I'll do a little bit of it here. My publisher is going to get furious with me.

KRISTOL: No, no. This is good pre-publicity, you know?

GOLDBERG: Yeah. (LAUGHS) So I think – look, I agree with you about the Tea Party. I was a pro-Tea Party guy. I spoke at Tea Party rallies, and I did Tea Party events in part because the history of populism is generally the history of expanding government, wanting more from government. It's grievance politics. It's identity politics. And the Tea Party seemed to be breaking with that. You know, they – it was all about the Constitution. It was all about back to basics. People were reading Hayek in Tea Party reading groups; it was great, right? It almost seemed like it was going to fulfill the great, ancient libertarian prophecy of – you know, of libertarians taking over the government and leaving everybody alone, right?

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: And – but here’s the problem. The way they were treated – and yeah, there were some yahoos and weirdoes. Any mass energetic movement is going to invite a few crackpots, but on the whole, it was an incredibly healthy thing. It was the kind of response you would hope for when the country has gone off the rails, right? Let’s get back to basics. Let’s get back to the American idea. And they were *still* called racists and fascists. They were still demonized and lied about, and it was sort of fascinating. We talk about rationalizations and psychology. It was so overlooked that the favorite leaders of the Tea Party faction were often African-Americans.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: And it was – I always thought that was in part because these are, these were basically decent people, and they were trying to demonstrate that this is not a racial argument. The Constitution is not a white document, right? And so they supported Herman Cain, and then they supported Ben Carson because they wanted to say, “Look, we don’t like Obama because of his ideas, not because he’s black. And we don’t like being called racist.” That was the essence of Andrew Breitbart’s entire world view, was he was outraged at being called a racist.

And so then what happened? But then the Tea Parties are dismissed. They’re ridiculed, and they also attract a whole bunch of cynical jackasses who become, you know, corrupt, money-bilking, you know, grifters. And I think it caused something of a psychic break. And if you go and you look at the arguments that people like Michael Anton made, right? And I had several arguments with him in print about this.

KRISTOL: This is the *Flight 93* author.

GOLDBERG: Yeah, this is the *Flight 93* guy who’s now on the National Security Council. He basically argued – and lots of other people have argued – that the old America is already gone, and we are now in an era of tribal identity politics, and therefore as he – I think he told Andrew Sullivan for the *New York Magazine*, “If we’re going to have a Caesar anyway, wouldn’t you rather have *our* Caesar?”

KRISTOL: And do you think the Obama re-election in 2012 was a key moment there where people just thought, “Oh my God, we’ve...” you know. ‘08 you can understand. First African-American president, financial crisis, whatever; McCain flawed. But ‘12 was like, “How could that happen?”

GOLDBERG: Yeah, no, I think it is an unfolding process, right?

And so you had – you have an enormous number of people who – of the sort of early adopters of Trump who basically think, “Well, we’re going to get called racist anyway. Let’s just do what our tribe wants,” right? And it’s this erosion of –

KRISTOL: And a demagogue who’s not scared to play the race card doesn’t put you off as George Wallace did put off Barry Goldwater, and, you know –

GOLDBERG: And the funny thing – or not; it’s not funny. But if you look at some of the social science data on this... Like, I am, last I checked, a white person, right? But I’ve never, like, taken any great meaning from being white. I suspect it’s probably the same for you.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: It’s the same for almost – I mean, like, literally almost all of the white people I’ve ever known.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: But it turns out that the more you call people – first of all, the more you demonize whites as, you know, white privilege; white supremacy; the permanence of race; the whole Ta-Nehisi Coates argument, the more – the natural reaction from white people who cannot change their skin, unless you're Elizabeth Dolezal [Rachel Dolezal], is to say, "Well, wait a second. You know, my parents weren't evil people. I'm not an evil person. There's some white people who did some okay things in the history of this country. I'm proud of my country."

And you start embracing a racial identity that you didn't have before, and the data is pretty clear on this is: that the more you consider yourself – that part of your self-identity was as a white person, the more likely you were to vote for Trump.

And the people who are feeding a lot of these problems are the left, by telling everybody you have to think of yourself in terms of your skin color. And that is another one of these sort of Orwellian, you can be a failure, take to drink, become more of a failure because you drink thing.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's good. I mean, I guess a way of saying it would be the populist reaction to the Left of 2013 is going to be worse, more toxic, in a way, than the populist reaction to capital-L "Liberalism" of 1952, because capital-L Liberalism of 1952, though we don't like it, and we would have been with Buckley attacking it and so forth - or showing, at least understanding its weaknesses and limitations and all was – I mean, you read *God and Man at Yale*, which I guess was Buckley's first book, right?

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And, you know, he's – what he's complaining about, it's, like, really – I mean, compared to today—

GOLDBERG: No, exactly. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

KRISTOL: He's complaining about a Yale that we would give anything to have back.

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Old-fashioned, liberal, slightly obtuse, maybe, you know. But professors who basically believe in kind of liberal pieties like free speech, you know?

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: ...(LAUGHS) and, you know, progress in an old-fashioned sense, scholarship, you know?

GOLDBERG: Were pro-Keynes, you know? (LAUGHS)

KRISTOL: Yeah, exactly, right? I mean, yeah, if only. So I guess that's an interesting point. It's not to excuse anyone's behavior and...

GOLDBERG: Yeah, it's an analytical point

KRISTOL: Yeah, but in the real world, the universities, we have the political correctness we have, leads to Trump. Or at least the mutation, I would say, the mutation of the Tea Party into Trump is an underreported phenomenon that I find – it's very distressing.

GOLDBERG: Yeah. I agree.

KRISTOL: I mean, because it does then make you then wonder, well, how much of that was in the Tea Party from the first? Maybe there's stuff I didn't want to see. I didn't want to see some nativism. I didn't want to see some prejudice, and there's probably some truth to that, of course.

GOLDBERG: Yeah, no, I think that's right, but, you know, when we did this a year ago we were talking about how one of the main justifications for Trump was at least he's not politically correct. And I've always thought that was a garbage argument because he's politically correct when it's useful for him, and he's politically incorrect when it's useful for him. He's a nearest-weapon-to-hand kind of guy.

But political correctness is – it's a complicated subject, but for millions upon millions of Americans, it feels like they're just slowly draining all the meaning from the traditional civilization that we grew up in – or they grew up in, and replacing it with this thing where they have to defer to pointy headed people they don't like who tell them that they're evil because of the color of their skin. And you could see how that would build the kind of resentment and populist backlash that would make someone like Donald Trump possible.

KRISTOL: And I guess there is a vicious cycle then, because Trump appears and the universities go even more crazy.

GOLDBERG: That's right.

KRISTOL: And some of the –

GOLDBERG: He reinforces the worst part –

KRISTOL: And some of their complaints are right, and we agree with them.

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Trump shouldn't threaten the First Amendment and so forth. He shouldn't demagogue, you know, all these things.

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: But then they – it just justifies – it seems like it justifies the left in going crazier, and that is, I suppose, a – that's a pessimistic scenario for the country. You know –

GOLDBERG: Yeah, it's a center does not hold a problem, right?

KRISTOL: Right, right.

GOLDBERG: You know, it's sort of like – and this is what Bannon's whole vision is, right? And I – as he calls himself a Leninist. I think that's grandiose, but he does believe in the worse, the better, and he says it. You know, he says, "We need a war. This is a war." And it reminds me of, like – remember during the Obama administration, every now and some idiot wanted to burn the Quran? Right?

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: And I'm against burning the Quran on simple, prudential good-manners reasons.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: It was just – I'm against burning books, right? And...

KRISTOL: Yeah, right.

GOLDBERG: ...I'm certainly against burning holy books.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: But you've got this sort of dynamic, this catalytic dynamic where people were, like, "We don't – we can't let 'the Muslims' have a heckler's veto about what we do, and so we have to support this guy for burning the Quran." And then you had other people saying, "No, we have to ban it entirely." And what happens is you let people – normal people, rational people of the left and the right who want to take the middle-ground position, which is that the guy shouldn't burn the Quran, but yes, ultimately, he has a right to do it.

You just, you have no audience, right? Because it's either ban it completely, or applaud as he burns the Quran. And I think that sort of dynamic is running straight through our culture about a million things. People who want to say, "Yeah, Trump is right about this, but he's – Or his advisers who are steering Trump administration is right about this, but he's a demagogue, and he's ill-suited to the office." You get condemned from "The Resistance" as being too politically expedient. And you get condemned from the right, such as it is, as being insufficiently supportive of our commander in chief, right?

And you find this in the culture war games, like the stupid, kneeling football thing, right? On the substance, I'm entirely with Donald Trump, to the extent that as long as you're not actually compelling anybody, this guy shouldn't be taking the knee during the Pledge of Allegiance. It's rude; it's dumb. It's a bad business decision, but yeah, they have a right to do it.

KRISTOL: And it's not worth having a heart attack about.

GOLDBERG: It's not worth having a heart attack about it. And it's not worth politicizing this sport, which is supposed to be one of the safe havens from politics.

And that sort of gets us back to the beginning about the problem of politicizing lifestyle, is that there are fewer and fewer safe harbors from politics. And that's happening to religion; it's happening to entertainment; it's happening to the Boy Scouts. It's happening to all the little platoons of civil society, and the problem is, is that when you politicize these little things, you essentially destroy them. And you create the centrifugal forces for mass rabble-rousing because people look to Washington then to give them that sense of belonging that they should be getting much closer to home.

KRISTOL: So are we the party of, "The center must be strengthened, so the center can hold again"? Or are we the party of conservatism, which was never center – you know, which was sort of slightly contemptuous, honestly, of this, you know, "the center must – you know, we all have to be – get along with each other" kind of centrism. I feel somewhat torn myself in this respect.

GOLDBERG: Oh, I do too. I mean, but in my last book, *The Tyranny of Clichés*, you know, which I admit is a terrible title, but a big chunk of that was all about mocking "No Labels" and centrism, and all that kind of stuff. And I still stand by all those arguments. But it's almost like the center that we're talking about is a different center.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: It's not –

KRISTOL: A deeper center, maybe. A...

GOLDBERG: Yeah. It's –

KRISTOL: ...liberal democracy, you know?

GOLDBERG: It's more, like – I mean, the vital center that Schlesinger talked about was more of a foreign policy concept than a domestic thing. It gets misunderstood a lot, but it's sort of that idea, that there is – there should be this realm of civic life where deliberative democracy is possible, right? Where arguments are possible, and that's a conservative position, right?

The – you know, defending the American founding and the architectural – the constitutional architecture of our country is, in a way, defending the center because it's saying there needs to be this place in American politics where the better arguments can win, and right now so little of our politics is about better arguments. It's all about, you know, as Donald Trump would put it, fighting and winning, which are completely amoral concepts.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's good. I'm going to steal this, and that's – so that's, in a way, defending the center, properly understood, today is a conservative task and is what conservatism was always about, to some degree, against progressivism.

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: Which had a certain contempt for this kind of, you know, old-fashioned institutions of constitutional democracy, of liberation.

GOLDBERG: Woodrow Wilson hated...

KRISTOL: ...and civil society.

GOLDBERG: ...the Constitution and all that stuff, right?

KRISTOL: Right, limited government.

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: What's the vital center, incidentally? I got to go look at that now. That was more foreign policy?

GOLDBERG: Well, if I remember right – I don't want to get in trouble on this. So I'm open to correction, but I could swear that what Schlesinger really meant by the vital center was that the world at the time was, as he saw it, sort of divided between communism and fascism, and that – and remember, there were – right after World War II, there were very few liberal democracies around, right?

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: And so he saw a liberal democracy...

KRISTOL: As the vital center.

GOLDBERG: ...as this vital center.

KRISTOL: And probably domestically, it's sort of liberal anti-communism as the vital center between –

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: I'm making this up, but I always suspect, between fellow travelers, on the one hand, Henry Wallace on the one hand and Joe McCarthy on the other.

GOLDBERG: Right, so there was a domestic analog with his founding of the ADA and all that stuff...

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: ...and trying to kick out the Wallace Progressives and –

KRISTOL: So we need to go back to that. That's interesting. I mean, you cited – actually, I've got to go back and look at these things myself. I mean, they – it sounds like you actually think – going back and reading stuff from the '40s, '50s, '60s shows that to be quite helpful. I mean –

GOLDBERG: Oh, I think it's great. I mean, I love –

KRISTOL: Which is reassuring to me because I think people – it would be bad if we discovered that there was nothing to be learned from these thinkers we look up to and who were a generation or two before us, or even before our parents. And I'm sort of reassured that you found them worth going back to look at.

Well, but so one of the questions I want to ask is, are we just in a new era? Technology, globalization, social media. Traditional conservatism seems dead; traditional liberalism died a while ago. And, you know, those were all wonderful. They're interesting, the way we read about debates in the 17th century Great Britain. They're very intelligent people, but there's nothing to be learned at a very abstract level...

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: ...about politics and society, but really, I mean, you don't read some 17th century debate and think, you know, well, that's really, you know – resonates, but it sounds like you do think that, in that respect, the American conservative tradition, the authors who were key to it in the early years, some of the authors who were part, maybe, of the liberal tradition as well, there really are things to be learned?

GOLDBERG: Yeah. So, I mean, again, this – again, I've been like Howard Hughes with Kleenex boxes on my feet for the last couple of years working on this book, and so I've got strong views about some of this stuff.

It seems to me one of the central insights of conservatism is the idea that human nature has no history, right? That as – a line I actually learned from your dad, I can never find where Hannah Arendt actually said this, but your dad quoted Hannah Arendt saying this all the time, which is that "Every generation, Western civilization is invaded by barbarians. We call them children." Right?

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: And the central conservative insight is that civilization is something that you have to start over with every human being, right? And so that – I think that's a really important thing to understand in terms of looking back at old debates. I honestly think – and this is a major theme of the book I wrote – but I honestly think there really are no new arguments since what I call the Lockean Revolution, right?

I mean, this was the one big, new thing in a really, really long time. The last similarly big new thing was the birth of Christianity. And so, if what is true is that human nature has no history and that human nature cannot be – one of the other conservative insights is that you can't get rid of human nature, right? The whole opposition to the French side of the Enlightenment is rejection of the Rousseauian idea of the perfectibility of mankind, right?

You cannot get back to the noble savage because the noble savage never existed. And...

KRISTOL: And no Utopianism, no –

GOLDBERG: Right. No new Soviet Man.

KRISTOL: And we like the founder hardheaded.

GOLDBERG: Right, because the –

KRISTOL: Hardheaded Lockean liberalism.

GOLDBERG: Again, as your dad – I mean, for viewers who don't know, Bill's dad was a huge influence on me. But in his *American Revolution as a Successful Revolution* he talks about how the reason why the American Revolution was successful was because it took human nature into account rather than trying to write it out of the political project that they were doing.

And so this is one of the reasons why – I think I might have talked about this last time we were here – why I think science fiction is such useful literature. Because the whole reason why science fiction – or fantasy, right? *Game of Thrones*, whatever – works is that you can change all of the material circumstances, all the technological circumstances around people, and the one constant that makes it accessible is that people can relate to other human beings and human nature because human nature does not change.

Now, we may technologically one day start changing human nature, but I don't think so. And so, when you go back and you look at these debates, like this Will Herberg thing with radio, right? What you're really seeing is the same patterns of human nature expressing itself, given the context of the times. And this whole fight about, like, nationalism that we have today, that's a very old fight in American history. I mean, you know the founding stuff better than I do, but, you know, in the 19th century there was – and in the early 20th century – there were these things called The Bellamy Clubs or The Nationalist Clubs, which came out in response to a science fiction book called *Looking Backward* that was written in the year 2000 and –

KRISTOL: Written in the 1900s about the year 2000. Right.

GOLDBERG: It was a utopian –

KRISTOL: Dystopia. Utopia or dystopia?

GOLDBERG: It was more utopia. It was sort of a technological utopianism. And the – one of the great things in the book is it's all about – you know, all these 19th century forms of – from H.G. Wells and Bellamy and all these people, they all are just sure that in the future we're going to be collectivist, right? Because that's what good things are, is collectivist.

And so one of the great metaphors in the book is there's this narrator describing how things have changed over the last century, and he says, "You know, it used to be that when it rained people carried their own umbrellas, and think about how inefficient that is. Now today, whenever it rains giant canopies come out from on top of buildings and cover all of us so that we're all in it together." You know, and it's that kind of vision of stuff.

But these nationalist clubs were huge in the United States and a huge part of American politics, and this whole, you know, the Birchers, McCarthy, the Wallace thing, all of these things were replete with these contradictions between nationalism and patriotism.

The stuff that Seymour Martin Lipset wrote was all about whether or not, you know, Americanism was a creedal ideological position. Or whether or not it was not, and that we were more like Europe. And he obviously took, you know, our side on this.

KRISTOL: American exceptionalism. A term that I think – I don't know if he coined, but he wrote about as a social scientist.

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: Now it's become a political slogan. But that was really explaining why America didn't go down the path of Europe – certainly to fascism, implicitly, but, I mean, certainly to socialism, but also to fascism, as I vaguely recall, right?

GOLDBERG: Right. No, absolutely. Absolutely.

KRISTOL: I mean, that was sort of the argument, that we were different for various reasons, middle – I mean, various sociological reasons.

GOLDBERG: And he wasn't necessarily saying it was all good.

KRISTOL: No, it was just explaining...

GOLDBERG: It was an analytical thing.

KRISTOL: ...why don't we have a Labor Party? Why don't we have a Social Democratic Party? Why didn't we have a National Socialist Workers Party, right? I mean –

GOLDBERG: I think that discipline starts, actually, with Werner Sombart, the guy who asked why is there no socialism in America?

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: And his answer was we didn't have a feudal past, right?

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: And so – but Marty picked up on that, and I was a big fan of Marty Lipset. I read a lot of his stuff in my early days in Washington, and I saw him every now and then because he was around the American Enterprise Institute a bit. And I've stolen from him – I always give him credit, but in speeches I bring this up all the time, and now I'm ruining it because now all of America will see it – but he used to explain American exceptionalism, and he had this great sort of take on it where he would say, you know, "Conservatives like to talk about" – back then West Germany, East Germany were still a thing, or at least fresh in people's minds, or North Korea and South Korea – as "these natural experiments between capitalism and socialism and all that."

And he says, "That's all fine, but a much more interesting one and understudied one is actually in North America." Because at the time of the founding, if – you were British, right, and you were in favor of the revolution and the principles of the revolution, you either moved to the 13 colonies or you stayed there. If you were a loyalist or a royalist, you were – large numbers of you either left the 13 colonies and moved up to Canada, or you stayed there."

Same genetic population, same cultural population. Same institutions in every way. It's the greatest – one of the greatest natural experiments in political science ever. And then he says, "You know, so fast forward 200 years in the 1970s, Canada and the United States, at the same time, told their people they

were switching to the metric system.” And the Canadians, because they have a rich political tradition of being lickspittles to the throne, were, like, okay, you know? And so now up there it’s all kilometers and centimeters, and other witchcraft. And in America they’re, like, are you freaking kidding me? We’re not gonna do that, you know?

KRISTOL: Yeah, right.

GOLDBERG: And he says, “This is an example of American exceptionalism. It’s neither good nor bad.” You can make a really strong argument that it’s stupid for America not to switch to the metric system, but it’s just what we do –

[Take] our violence. We’re a much more violent culture than other countries. That was always considered part of his explanation of American exceptionalism. He didn’t like the violence, but now it’s become this thing, this stupid football where Obama talks about it in a dumb way, and then Trump talks about it in a dumb – you know, Trump doesn’t like American exceptionalism.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that is interesting, right?

GOLDBERG: Because he has this, “all nations are just simply self-interested, you know, entities” that ideology is secondary, principles are secondary to raw, national self-interest.

KRISTOL: We have our killers, and Putin has his killers.

GOLDBERG: Exactly.

KRISTOL: Yeah, no, no. I think that’s a very important point. That – but that is what’s so distressing if you like to – if you’re willing to tolerate or even respect it, a kind of conservative populism that was exceptionalist, that was patriotic, to see it go in Trump’s direction is – I guess it teaches lessons about the character of populism, how easily it gets hijacked, how –

GOLDBERG: How seductive it is.

KRISTOL: Yeah, politics itself, how one can’t count on things. I – one side bar in science-fiction. I can’t remember if we discussed this a year ago either, but if we did, so what?

GOLDBERG: So be it.

KRISTOL: So be it. So I’ve never had a – I don’t know why – a taste for science-fiction particularly, but I don’t know, maybe I should have because so many people I respect seem to have learned a fair amount from it, and also seem to think is it intrinsically sort of conservative or anti-utopian or anti-progressive, and –

GOLDBERG: Well, I think it is. I mean, there have – there is certainly plenty of utopian science-fiction. And again, I haven’t read much science-fiction in the last 20 years just because I’m a slow reader, and I have so much, like, work-related reading.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: But I was a teenage science-fiction geek and loved *Dune* and all that stuff. And I think there – while H.G. Wells sort of pioneered the utopian, and very fascist, science-fiction tradition –

You know, H.G. Wells was actually the inspiration for the title of my first book, *Liberal Fascism*. It’s his phrase, and big chunks of his –

KRISTOL: Used favorably, by him.

GOLDBERG: Yeah. He was invited by the Young Liberals in England to go speak to a convention in 1932 to chart the way forward, and he says, “I finally figured out after 30 years how to describe my political point of view” – and this is ‘32, so Hitler hadn’t done that much bad stuff yet – and he says, “I’ve decided to call it liberal fascism,” or he also says, “enlightened Nazism.” And people forget, H.G. Wells was a really important science-fiction author, but he was hugely influential in the American social gospel movement, on American progressivism.

When he visited FDR it was like a papal visit. I mean, he was...

KRISTOL: Wow.

GOLDBERG: ...one of the most important public intellectuals in the English language.

But anyway. I think, yeah, for the simple reason that literature doesn’t work unless it reflects the human condition, right? Unless it mirrors in some way the trials and travails and drama of our lived experience, and it requires struggle, right? For literature to work; there has to be a reason why the arc moves – the narrative arc moves forward. And you can’t write compelling – I don’t think you can write compelling fiction about a perfect world where everything’s great, right?

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: And so you – by having to acknowledge that people have diverse interests and that human nature is a real thing and it creates factions and problems, it is inherently small-C conservative in that way.

KRISTOL: Where are you on the question – this is another thing I’ve been thinking about, so it’s kind of a sidebar, but relevant. Is it possible to recapture the word *liberal*, or desirable? I mean, that is so much of what we’re in favor of, is a certain understanding. I wouldn’t say liberalism. I think once it becomes an “ism” it becomes problematic, but now the progressives have decided they’re not liberals – we are for liberal education; we are for liberal democracy, basically.

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: We are for a liberal world order, you could even say, you know. If we’re for a kind of American empire, which I myself would be okay with, it’s a liberal empire. It’s based on self-government and so forth. It’s not, you know, exploitative, but is the word liberal just lost? I mean, was it ever there really? I mean, when Hayek has that essay *Why I’m Not A Conservative*, he wishes he could just be a classic – call himself a liberal or a classical liberal. But then he sort of says, well, that’s probably not doable unless you say Buckley and others use liberal with a capital L to –

GOLDBERG: Right. Well, I mean, so this is something that, I wish it were possible, and it may be possible.

It’s worth pointing out because I love that essay by Hayek: he’s not talking about American conservatives, explicitly. He’s talking about De Maistre and all these blood and soil guys in Europe. And he says – and it’s – because libertarians drive me crazy where they quote the title of that essay, but they never read the actual essay. He’s saying that America is the one place in the world where you can call yourself a conservative and still be a champion of liberty because you’re conserving a liberal revolution in the essence of the American founding.

Let me put it this way: I would be really happy if we could do it. You're probably a better guy to figure out a strategy for how to do it. I think the – in one way, the only way it would happen is if you got a really smart, thoughtful, conservative president who insisted on calling himself a liberal.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: And even then it would – because that's how FDR did it, right? And FDR took the word liberal, which, you know, comes out of these enlightenment-based democratic revolutions in Spain and then spreads northward. He took the word liberal to give himself a new brand name because they'd done so much damage to the word progressive.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

GOLDBERG: Yeah. So, look, remember, the 1920 election was this absolute drubbing of the Democrats, right?

KRISTOL: Wilson, right.

KRISTOL: Because – and so you get – you have to wait for the Republicans to come in to release all the political prisoners, including Eugene V. Debs, stop the rationing, stop the propaganda industry, get – you know, stop relying on these goons called the American Protective League, stop the war, socialism, and go to what the Republicans called "A Return to Normalcy," right?

And that was, like, we're – we have to get back to being normal Americans. And the war, in particular, so damaged the label progressive that throughout the '20s, left progressive intellectuals were kind of searching around, and then FDR comes along and basically partisanizes the word liberal, because liberal used to mean, like, liberal in liberal arts or what liberal means in Europe to this day, which means sort of open society, right?

Still in political science we talk about illiberal regimes.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: We are both liberals in any grand sense of it, right?

KRISTOL: Yeah, absolutely.

GOLDBERG: And the funny thing is, is that it took until, what, the 1990s for them to so destroy the word liberal...

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: ...that they – and because people's memories are short – they picked up the word progressive, which had gotten even worse in the 40s, because, remember, the communists took the word progressive.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: Right? And Wallace becomes the head of the Progressive Party, and they were just useful idiots for the Soviet Union. So, obviously history shows that these words can migrate around, but how you would actually do it and whether it's worth the energy that would be required, I don't know.

III. The Future of Conservatism (1:05:45 – 1:27:56)

KRISTOL: Well, it would be worth – it might be worth the energy if “conservative” were irretrievable, so let’s circle back to that.

How much trouble is conservatism in? I mean, do you think that – Can one say we are carrying forward what the work of Buckley and many, many, many others. Have hit a couple of bumps in the road here, but basically that remains the path? That’s the fundamental strain that we are moving forward?

Or is it sort of a moment where people say, that was a wonderful, impressive thing, a wonderful thing, but we’re sort of at such a new moment, we – It doesn’t have much to tell us, or there’s not much to appeal to because Trump has so damaged it?

GOLDBERG: I don’t know. I mean, I truly – I honestly, I don’t know. I sometimes feel like, you know, there’s that old joke about the guy who jumps off the top of a building, and he passes a window on the 10th floor, and the guy says from inside the building, “How’s it going?” And the guy falling to his death says, “So far, so good.”

KRISTOL: Yeah (LAUGHS).

GOLDBERG:(LAUGHS) You know? I just don’t know where this is going. I think that it really kind of depends – I mean, let’s put it this way. Trump could do us an enormous favor or could do us an incredible disservice – and when I say “us” I mean conservatives of the sort of standard school – if he started vilifying conservatism. It would help enormously sort of save the word conservatism for what it’s supposed to mean. But if – the more he embraces it, the more it’s associated with him – there’s this weird capriciousness – I mean, like, I always hated with –

KRISTOL: He had no association with it. That’s the thing. He lives in New York City. He’s 71 years old. So he’s a – he’s not a pure Bill contemporary, a contemporary of Bill Buckley, but he is there as a major figure in New York for, what, 20, 30 years of Bill’s adult life.

GOLDBERG: Yeah, at least, yeah.

KRISTOL: And God knows everyone else is slightly younger. He’s nowhere, right?

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: There are other businessmen who are not – they’re businessmen; they’re not intellectuals. They’re not activists, but they support *National Review*.

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: They go to dinner with Bill Buckley. They get to know someone like my father. I mean, one knows of many, many people like that, different levels of activity and interest. What’s most amazing about Trump is zero interest.

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Didn’t even – like, and it wasn’t even his world. It wasn’t a world he even liked or cared about. If anything, it was the other world he was part of more, right? He goes to the Clinton’s wedding. He doesn’t go to, I don’t know, you know, whatever the equivalent would be on the right. Not the – Clintons come to his daughter’s wedding.

GOLDBERG: Yeah, yeah.

KRISTOL: But the – he doesn't think to invite, I don't know, the leading, you know, Republicans or conservatives of the time would be, right? It's really amazing that he –

GOLDBERG: He's a creature of celebrity.

KRISTOL: Yes.

GOLDBERG: And this is a problem that we have, that journalists have, the people who are in the words business, the ideas business, the, you know – at a very high concept level, the pattern recognition business, right? That's what intellectuals do, is they find long-term trends, and they, you know, connect dots, and they talk about the grander significance of individual events and all of that.

People on the left, people on the right, defenders, critics, everyone is trying to fit Donald Trump into some larger meta-thesis about his agenda or American politics and all these kinds of things. And I certainly believe we can do that. But you have to take into account that he is essentially a leaf on the wind, right? He is a Chinatown tic-tac-toe chicken who is not motivated by any grand ideological agenda, with the exception of stuff like trade, right? "Take the oil."

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: There are a handful of things that he's believed for a very long time. But for the most part it's pure lizard-brain, status, glandular stuff. And he listens to the last person who talked to him. He's seduced by compliments. When he made the deal with Chuck and Nancy he did it on the fly. There was no forethought. you know? And that is – that does great violence to people cognitively in our line of work because we're all about trying to figure out what the real plan is. And there is no plan with him.

There's all sorts of scheming with the people around him, for good and for ill, either to manage him towards good things or to exploit him in the Bannon sense for this ridiculous nationalism stuff. But there's – but he is a page six guy from the *New York Post* and a boldfaced names guy, and he doesn't think strategically about this stuff. He brags about how he just goes with his gut in the moment.

And, you know, there's this thing in economics and social science called – I think it's called *winners bias*, and basically – There's a great cartoon about it where it has a guy who is saying, "People told me I should just give up. People told me I was a fool. People told me that I was wasting my time, but I didn't listen to any of them, and I just kept buying lottery tickets, and look at me now." Right? Some people are just outliers, and they think it's proof that they're geniuses, when in reality they're just lucky. And you find this with stock pickers and all of the rest. We elevate the people who just may be at the right tail, far-right tail of the distribution of lucky people when it comes to guessing correctly.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: Trump is far out there on the right tail, and I'm not saying he's not – doesn't perhaps have some talents and stuff, but so much of what has made him successful just simply doesn't translate well to politics and doesn't translate well to the way people like you and me think about the world.

KRISTOL: And, I mean, we said earlier, in a way it makes him less dangerous that he's not Bannon, let's say.

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: He doesn't have the, you know, determination and sort of will to achieve something that leads him to plow through various restraints. He just hits something, bounces off and turns his attention to something else. I suppose the flip side of it is there's something maybe more dangerous about him, just the kind of feckless, chaotic, recklessness celebrity culture, reality TV. I mean, there is an organization.

It's sort of like, do you want to have a CEO who's wrongheaded and determined and competent? Or do you want to have a CEO who's just feckless and sort of foolish? And either can do damage to an organization.

GOLDBERG: Right. I used to think he was Lonesome Rhodes, right? Who's the main character from *Face In The Crowd*, Elia Kazan's fantastic movie about populism in the media, who was this brilliant demagogue who exploited people's fears and all the rest and rose to great power. And I'm much more on the side of him being Chauncey Gardner now.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: He's just – he's a Rorschach test for people. And the whole point of Rorschach tests is there's actually no real meaning on the page. You're trying to reveal what people want to project onto it. And in that sense he is sort of in the Weber sense a classically charismatic politician, in that people impose meaning on him that he is not, in fact, bringing to the table.

KRISTOL: But I suppose the denigration of democratic processes and norms of standards of civility...

GOLDBERG: That's all bad.

KRISTOL: ...is bad in a way more so than by a more, you know, systematic – I mean, the chaos could do – I always think of it – The foreign policy and analog is, you know, you – there are two ways of getting into a horrible world war that does an unbelievable amount of damage. World War II, which is closer to us, we tend to think of much more Mussolini, Hitler. Stalin, et cetera. Or World War I, which is – no one remembered –

GOLDBERG: Just a stupid war. Yeah.

KRISTOL: Yeah, chaos. I mean, foolishness, recklessness, you know, things spiraling out of control.

I sort of think Trump is more the first [World War]. But World War I did a heck of a lot of damage as well, and saying –

GOLDBERG: And made World war II possible.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Right, and that's the other question: How much does Trump make possible post-Trumpian, things that are worse? I mean, that – what do – what –

GOLDBERG: Yeah, I think – and I've been writing and saying this for two years now. I think that one of the things that I think Democrats – and we should be clear: The left and the Democrats are in a hot mess, too.

KRISTOL: Well, Sanders –

GOLDBERG: Right?

KRISTOL: Let's talk about Sanders for a minute. For me, it always comes back to 45% of Democrats voted for Sanders, 45% percent of Republicans voted for Trump.

That's not a sign of a country where 45% percent of the people who vote in the primaries, a lot of people, 30 million in this case, voting either for Sanders or Trump. Really, in 2016? It's one thing if it happens in the middle of the Depression, you know?

GOLDBERG: Yeah, no, no, I agree. And maybe it's because my last name's Goldberg, but when nationalism and socialism are coming together as the consensus position, National Socialism, I'm sort of out of here.

But – well, so two points. One just very quickly. I think by breaking the blood-brain barrier between entertainment and politics, long-term...

KRISTOL: It opens up—

GOLDBERG: ...this might be much worse for the Democrats. Because I still think in the summer of 2016, George Clooney or Tom Hanks or Oprah could have strolled in and said, "I'm running," and Hillary would have gone down to 5% or something, because people didn't like her, right?

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: Really charismatic people, celebrities, have – This gets back to the whole point the founders were afraid of, is they have real power in a democracy. And the more democracy you have, the more power they have, and the more power – and the more we see politics as entertainment the more power that they have. So I think long-term the Democratic Party could just simply become a cargo cult to some Hollywood figures.

In terms of the Bernie Sanders stuff, I think his popularity is a symptom of the exact same thing, for the most part, of Trump's popularity: civil society is in really rough shape. People are looking for meaning. They're looking for something to belong to, and they're looking to find it in politics. And so if you have one sort of aesthetic bent, you think Trump is a bore, and you're more inclined to go with Sanders. And if you're of another bent, you think Sanders is a loon, and you're more inclined to go with Trump.

But maybe it's because I worked on that book, *Liberal Fascism*, and I know the literature on how many brown shirts became red shirts and how many red shirts became brown shirts and that it was basically these atomized young men in Weimar Germany, which was a hot mess and chaotic. They were searching for meaning and something to belong to. One year it was the communists, and the next year it was the fascists, and I'm not saying that Trump's people are like brown shirts, and I'm not saying that Bernie Sanders people are like the Communists, but it's the same dynamic of this sort of searching for meaning in politics that I think motivates both sides.

And until we fix the structural stuff and Washington actually starts getting stuff done – I mean, I think Lindsey Graham is right about this, is that as long as Washington doesn't, particularly the GOP doesn't, actually deliver the goods then why not nominate or elect people like Roy Moore? Because at least he's entertaining.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: Right? You have to prove to people that the adults are trying to get – are getting stuff done, and if they don't get stuff done, then it is just a TV show and let's have – let's just throw bombs and be silly.

KRISTOL: And to your point, Trump always had the sense – we all sort of ridiculed him, and I don't think the data suggests there's a huge number of people who followed this lead, but that the Sanders supporters could be his supporters.

GOLDBERG: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

KRISTOL: And I don't – see, I think in the real world it's just the sociological difference is now too great between being a 26-year-old who is multicultural and a 62-year-old, you know, white former steelworker

who's Trumpy. But if you just took the – take a few – if you looked at them each speaking in interviews and took a few proper nouns out...

GOLDBERG: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

KRISTOL: ...they're quite similar, don't you think? Kinda the –

GOLDBERG: No, I think that's exactly right, and this is one of the points I've been making for years: is if you look at any speech by Castro or Chavez and you take the word socialist and replace it with nationalist, you don't change the meaning of the sentence, right? Nationalizing things is socializing things, and it appeals to the same part of the brain, and I think that you could imagine –

I mean, and this gets back to what if Trump had a different brain, right? You could see Trump's message if he knew how to talk, right? He's so much a product of bridge and tunnel populism from New York that he doesn't know how to talk to sort of broader diverse groups than, you know, than he does. But if he knew how to talk to sort of traditional, sort of more traditional liberals in a way that appealed to them, you could see him having gotten a lot of the Bernie Sanders people.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: Right? You know Huey Long was really good at that stuff. Huey Long was a brilliant politician. FDR was good at that stuff, and he was much more of a demagogue than people remember. But he was less of a demagogue than his enemies, and he used that to maintain the support of elites. I could totally see a sort of a blue-collar, homespun, every-man type. I mean, that's – we keep flirting with these people. Schwarzenegger.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: Jesse Ventura. Eventually we're going to stumble on the celebrity who finds the right mix. You know, and Reagan, to a certain extent, was that guy, who knew how to talk to normal people.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: He knew how to tell stories. He co-opted populism. He won over a lot of Democrats. He was unthreatening, but he was also fairly radical in his approach. and I think that – but thank God Reagan's heart was, and mind were in the right place.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: But you could see someone with Reagan's skills going a very different way and succeeding in the – given the landscape that we have.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I mean, he's was an actor and so forth. I do think that – still there's a pretty fundamental difference between – I mean, there was a real commitment to democratic norms and...

GOLDBERG: Oh, absolutely, absolutely.

KRISTOL: ...civility and so forth.

GOLDBERG: I'm not denigrating –

KRISTOL: No, I know. I'm not – nor, and I'm not saying you are, but I – just thinking about sort of the extent to which these things – everything prepares a little bit for the next thing, but there is some line that

gets crossed when you go from, you know, a certain use of theater and drama and style for the sake of, you know...

GOLDBERG: ...a higher purpose.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Which is consistent with the basic outlines of...

GOLDBERG: I agree with that.

KRISTOL: ...free markets, freedom, you know, for freedom abroad. And then just kind of going – a liberal democracy and going a different direction.

The Caesar thing – I was thinking about this as you were talking. I guess you said Mike Anton said, you know, we should get our – or someone said – “we should get our Caesar.” But, of course, I don’t know about the history of pre-Caesar, late Roman Republic, but my impression is you don’t get your – it’s not like “your Caesar” or the “other Caesar”. Caesar is Caesar.

GOLDBERG: That’s right.

KRISTOL: And both sides lose.

GOLDBERG: That’s right.

KRISTOL: I mean, the plebeians are fighting the patricians, I guess, right?

GOLDBERG: Right, right.

KRISTOL: But it’s not like Caesar wins for either of them. They – both parties go down, in a sense, and you have Caesar, as – which, incidentally, that was also a theme, if I’m not mistaken, as I vaguely remember from my youth, of a certain type of conservative political theorist and political thinker in the ‘50s and ‘60s: the threat of democracy descending into what they call “Caesarism.”

GOLDBERG: Mm-hmm.

KRISTOL: I think Voegelin talks about this, maybe.

GOLDBERG: Yeah, yeah.

KRISTOL: And that might be worth also looking at, since we – this is sort of Caesarism with a, you know, peculiarly 21st century American celebrity-culture type, you know?

GOLDBERG: That’s right. I mean, and so that – and from –

KRISTOL: But –

GOLDBERG: There’s – Caesar had an agenda, right?

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: I mean, like, and he’s – Herberg talks about how Caesar was a public-spirited person. He had an idea, a vision. Trump lacks the vision, you know?

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: And that's one of the ironies, I think, that people, you know – I'm sure you know people who went into the Trump administration or interviewed for jobs with the Trump administration. I have a bunch of friends who were in there in one way or the other, or almost went in. And some of the more seasoned guys, one of the reasons why they didn't go is because – First of all, they didn't need it for the resume, right? So the only reason they would go in is to get important things done. And the problem is – Kate O'Beirne used to say about Reagan, "The great thing about Reagan is you always knew where the old man stood on an issue." So it actually liberated you to really go the extra yard to – on a policy thing if you knew he had your back.

Other than the trade stuff, and immigration –

KRISTOL: And even on those, look what he's done.

GOLDBERG: Yeah, yeah. I mean – you know, so I had a friend who wanted to go and work for the Justice Department. He was like, "The stuff I want to do, it will take a year of groundwork to get just close to doing it, and I'm not going to spend a year of my life, give up all my clients, and then one morning someone says something on *Fox and Friends* and all of a sudden Trump says, "Oh, we're not gonna do that," right?

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: And Caesar knew how to send a signal to his troops.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: Reagan knew how. The lack of a coherent ideological agenda has been really tough on Trump's biggest supporters.

KRISTOL: I mean, I guess there are two areas where it seems – I've encouraged people to go in, and I think this fits. One is where Trump doesn't care at all, and he's just ceded authority to parts, usually of the conservative movement, which we would more or less agree with: The Federalist Society gets to pick the judges...

GOLDBERG: Yeah. That's great stuff.

KRISTOL: ...and if you can go to the Justice Department and help those guys get confirmed, that's fine with me. And then national security, and – well, and then secondly, I'd say areas that are just not political, and if you can go to the FDA and improve drug approval and make medicine work better for America, then no reason not to do it, even if Trump is president.

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: And then there's the sort of national security, keeping the trains on the rails and not letting the four years, if that's what it's going to be, of Trump destroy the country and destroy the liberal world, or the world order, that's important even if it's personally difficult for General Kelly and...

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: H.R. McMaster and stuff. So I'm also very – so I'm on the whole an encourager of people going in. I think maybe you have been too.

GOLDBERG: Mm-hmm.

KRISTOL: If they think they can do good, but not to go in just to –

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: It's a – and certainly not to go into the communication side of the White House to defend everything Trump says. That's not going to be good for your character, I wouldn't think.

GOLDBERG: I would stay out of there, if at all possible.

KRISTOL: Yeah. So final, maybe, question, just – I mean, who the heck knows, but looking ahead, I mean, how does this work? (LAUGHS) We're on the tenth floor going down, but, I mean do you have a gut instinct, 2018, 2020? We had this conversation in – I mean, where do you think we are? *We* the country, I'm thinking more, but also Republican Party, conservative party.

GOLDBERG: Yeah. So I'm – you know, if this doesn't air within the next five minutes –

KRISTOL: With all the caveats that we know now and – yeah, yeah, yeah.

GOLDBERG: Yeah, everything could change, right. But I'm skeptical about any great legislation getting accomplished – for all the usual reasons – and if that's the case, that is a greater boon to the Bannon primary-everybody movement than any arguments that they make.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: And so GOP dysfunction is – will breed more dysfunction and –

KRISTOL: And breed a real civil war, right? I mean –

GOLDBERG: It will breed a civil –

KRISTOL: Don't you think people are underestimating just what it's going to be like to have primaries in 10 states for Senate seats and 20 congressional districts, that are *real* primaries, not just, like one insurgent here or one challenger there, but I mean well-funded campaigns.

GOLDBERG: It'll be an abattoir. Yeah, no, I mean, it'll be a hot mess, and –

KRISTOL: Yeah, with Trump, basically, on one side and the Senate majority leader and the speaker of the House on the other. We've not really seen that.

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: I mean, in our lifetime.

GOLDBERG: And I think that will be terrible. It will turn off a lot of people, and even the "better" candidates in those races, right? Because, you know, not every – I mean, I understand why Mitch McConnell wants to focus on people like Sharron Angle and Todd Akin, right? But we also got Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz...

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: And Rand Paul, so, I mean...

KRISTOL: Mike Lee, yeah.

GOLDBERG: You've got – Mike Lee, so you can – It's a mixed bag of who the challengers might be. But even if all of the better ones win, they will all still be damaged for the general election because there is no good position to take vis-a-vis Trump.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: If you take the Jeff Flake position, you're screwed. If you take the, you know – I don't know, the...

KRISTOL: Pathetic, obsequious position.

GOLDBERG: Right, the under –

KRISTOL: We don't have to put a name. We don't have to put a name.

GOLDBERG: Yeah. "Under Comrade Trump, the wheat harvest will be greater than we've ever seen," right? That's bad for you, right? Particularly in a general election, but also with a not insignificant number of Republicans.

And so, it just seems to me that it has a potential to be a bloodbath. I don't think that Republicans will lose the Senate just because of the numbers, right?

I would trust your judgment on this more than mine, but people don't appreciate the other factor here. I mean, again, it's this Orwell take the drink thing. If the Democrats take back either branch, right, particularly they take back the House, they then have subpoena power. And then this – whether they impeach him or not – I think they would – and whether it would be right to impeach him or not is a different issue, right? We can talk about that when the time comes.

But, well-run White Houses when there are subpoenas flying around, and testimony being compelled, and independent prosecutors, are chaotic. *This* White House, where everyone is going to start looking to cut a different deal, and you're going to have – talk about politics as a TV show, you know. You give the Democrats subpoena power, you got people taking oaths and pleading the fifth, the idea that we can get anything constructive and conservative done before 2020 strikes me as really unlikely.

And so I think the stakes are very, very high in all this, and I just don't know what the best-case scenario is. You know? It's just – it's – you know, I mean, they're all – the good news is there will always be something for us to write about. (LAUGHS)

KRISTOL: And talk about here on CONVERSATIONS.

GOLDBERG: And talk about here, yeah.

KRISTOL: Well, let's hope we avoid various nightmare scenarios and stumble through. There is a lot of ruin in a great nation and all that. And I guess this could be a hiccup, not an inflection point downward, right? I mean –

GOLDBERG: Yeah, and even Rome wasn't burnt in a day. (LAUGHS)

KRISTOL: Yeah. That's a really wonderful note to end on.

GOLDBERG: (LAUGHS)

KRISTOL: Jonah Goldberg, thanks very much for...

GOLDBERG: It's great to be here.

KRISTOL: ...taking this time, and thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]