

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Dan Balz, Chief Political Correspondent, *The Washington Post*

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I: News Media and Social Media (0:15 – 29:18)

KRISTOL: Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol, and I'm very pleased to be joined today by Dan Balz, long-time political reporter with *The Washington Post*, one of the best political reporters, in my opinion, in Washington, for all that long time. I guess I shouldn't go on about how long a time it is.

BALZ: Be careful. [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: Yes, yeah. Recent – young political reporter from *The Washington Post*; author of books, which people can look up. And always worth reading your coverage. And spending this term, actually, this fall term of 2017 as a Fellow with the Institute of Politics at Harvard.

BALZ: Thanks for having me. This has been an interesting fall for me. It's the first real break I've had from *The Washington Post* in the almost 40 years that I've been at *The Washington Post*. I've not done a fellowship like this, and it's been extraordinarily enjoyable. The students have been great, and Harvard's got a lot of resources to offer in terms of brain power and interesting people who come through, so and to get a little bit of perspective from being in Washington is helpful.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I need to do that myself. Well, let's get some perspectives. I thought we could talk – I want to pick your brain on the media, pick your brain on politics. You've seen and thought about an awful lot of what's been happening, but let's begin with the media. That's an obvious topic for you, something you've thought a lot – I'm sure you've been asked about it a ton up here at Harvard.

BALZ: Yup.

KRISTOL: I mean, what is the state of the media today? Are – is the alarmism about how everything's fragmented, and there's fake news, and you can't trust anything anymore, is that overdone? Is it – was it never as good as people thought? Or is it a genuine problem? Is it genuinely different from 40 years ago when you began at the *Post*?

BALZ: I do think it's different from – certainly from 40 years ago. I think the question is how much different is it from five years ago...

KRISTOL: Okay. Well –

BALZ: ...or ten years ago.

KRISTOL: Yeah, let's talk about that because I looked at your book – which I recommend to people – on the 2012 campaign, and I just recently looked at it again, and I was struck reading that, how different that – that's five years ago – how different it, a book on 2016 would be.

BALZ: Yes. Yeah.

KRISTOL: On the media side, I mean. It –

BALZ: Well, I mean, I –

KRISTOL: I mean, beside Trump and all that, yup.

BALZ: You know, I think that's – you know, technology drives so much, in part. That's one thing, and I thought that the gap between 2008 and 2012 was significant because Twitter didn't exist in '08.

Social media began to get plumbed earlier than '08, but the Obama people did their own version of Facebook and very effectively used it as an organizing tool and as a communication tool.

By 2012, you had Twitter, and I had a section in the chapter about the first debate, and talked about the degree to which Twitter had replaced the spin room in creating instant conventional wisdom about what had happened in that debate. Conventional wisdom was accurate that Romney won that debate and Obama lost it; but nonetheless, that was decided within 20 or 25 minutes into that debate, and it didn't change.

Then, you get to 2016, and the combination, the fracturing of the media, the – sort of the partisanship of aspects of parts of the media, and Trump's ability to use particularly Twitter, but also to use cable news as effectively as he was able to do was something that no other candidate had done. And so I think that that made a tremendous difference.

I think that the fractured media is not a new problem. We've been dealing with that since the internet came upon us and that began. And there's pluses and minuses of that. But I think what Trump has brought to it is a more systematic effort to delegitimize what I think of as kind of fact-based journalism of the kind that we try to practice at the *Post*, and a lot of other news organizations do. And certainly there was skepticism about, you know, different types of media, but I think it's deeper now, and that, to me, is quite worrisome.

KRISTOL: Why can't it just be a healthy skepticism that, you know, is deserved and now there are many sources of opinion for people to discover, and sources of fact, actually, for people to discover what really happened and so forth?

I sort of had a slightly optimistic view myself, of this, though I'm, you know, a traditionalist in my own – started a print magazine 22 years ago, you know, and so I'm old-fashioned in that way. But I mean, I happen to have – agree with you, that something changed at some point between – from healthy skepticism to just –

BALZ: Right, to disbelief. Right? Or just a – or unwilling to even consider that what we print without – let's say there's not a shred of bias in it – there are just some people who are not going to believe it. And as I

say, we've never had a – you know, a president or a leader of any kind at any particular level who has worked harder to foster that notion. And, you know, the phrase “fake news” is now part of our lexicon.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's interesting.

BALZ: And that, you know, that wasn't the case three years or four years ago. I mean, he's introduced that. He's a brilliant brander, and he's done that, and that, you know, that sticks.

KRISTOL: Well, so let's talk about that. So the fracturing by itself has its own implications, right? I mean, leaving aside Trump, so it's sort of –

BALZ: Well, I think the fracturing has two implications. On the good side, as you said, it has democratized ideas and opinions. You know, when there were three big networks and a handful of papers, that kind of helped us set an agenda. They were, quote, unquote, “gate keepers.” And, you know, the positive side of that was that there was a common conversation that supposedly people had at 5:30 or 6:30 at night watching the networks and a kind of consistency of the view of the world.

But it screened out a lot of things; there's no question about that. And once that began to break apart there were a lot of other voices who could get in. I mean, my friend Ron Brownstein and I have talked about this. There's nobody writing politics today who has the kind of influence that the people who wrote, who were opinion leaders in 1965 or 1973, had. You know, major columnists or major opinion-makers. That just doesn't exist. There are a lot of people who have that voice, and that's good.

Similarly, with kind of, you know, scandal journalism. Maybe the mainstream media kept that out of public view. Some people thought that was good; other people didn't like that. That's all blown apart. The problem now, as you indicate, is that people can find what they want, where they want, and we're all creatures of habit, and we like to be reinforced, and we find things that we agree with.

And so you have a kind of partisanship in the notion of Fox and MSNBC and whatever else is out there. And it makes it more difficult, again, to have a – I'm not saying there should be an accepted view of the world, but a greater commonality in what are the big problems, what's the nature of those problems – not the solutions – and that's harder to get. And people stay in those silos, you know, in ways they didn't have the opportunity to before.

KRISTOL: And how has that affected the actual practice of reporting at a place like the *Post*? I mean, what – do you try to kind of keep the old flame alive? I mean –

BALZ: But, yeah, I think we do. I mean – and I think we're doing a pretty good job of that. People can disagree, and people can say they think that, you know, we're biased in this direction or that direction, but I think that at heart, the people who are in our newsroom think of themselves as reporters. They don't come with a particular ideology. It doesn't mean they don't have opinions and they don't have views, you know, left or right or center, but we all have a notion that our job is to find out things that are happening and tell people about it, and try to try to reveal things that they don't know through good investigative reporting. Or try to provide context and insight into things that that we all know about but we need to have a better understanding of. And we've tried to hew to that.

Now, in the Internet age, and in the age of, you know, of smartphones, which is where most younger people now see and consume news, and in the age of social media, you know, we're part of that world, and we do everything we can to kind of leverage those, you know, those resources to try to get our journalism to as many people as we can. You know, you would not say that *The Washington Post* never has click-bait on its web site.

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: Right? I mean, we do; but in a sense, all newspapers, in one form or another, dealt with serious reporting and entertainment and news and features and those sorts of things.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Yeah. I do think social media somehow is the bigger moment. The Internet actually – I mean, of course, getting things online is different from getting it in your newspaper delivered to your door each morning and so forth. And that changed the practice for all of us of when to post stories, and 24/7. But I don't really feel like that fundamentally changed what news *was*.

I think social media somehow – the instantaneity, and the phone, and the kind of short attention span is almost a bigger change. Maybe I'm wrong about that, but –

BALZ: No, I agree with that, and I think that another aspect of that is, you're getting information not necessarily through news sources. You're getting it through friends.

KRISTOL: Right, right. Yeah, in the old days, fine – if the *Post* – in 2005 there were more web sites you could go to, as opposed to just the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, but they were still *websites* run by someone who you could see who they were mostly and make a judgment that this is a respectable, you know, source of news or not, right?

BALZ: I mean, one of the things about newspapering is that it's a curated product, right?

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: You know, you got to reduce the world to 50 stories or 100 stories or whatever the number of stories is, and then there is a selection process that editors go through to decide what gets the most prominence, and a home page is a version of that.

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: It's different, obviously, but it's a version of that. Social media doesn't have that, and because it's coming to us with the result of algorithms that we have no understanding of – or I certainly don't – what I'm seeing through social media is a fraction of what I might want to see, even if it's coming through friends. I mean, they're – you know, I've got, you know, a fair number of friends on Facebook, and I know I don't see most of what's on there, and so it's a different experience and a much more narrow experience of how you're – of what you're getting.

KRISTOL: And then I suppose people also have – get in the habit, as you said, of self-selecting what they want to look at and being cheerful in their silos, right?

BALZ: [LAUGHS] Well –

KRISTOL: I mean, one advantage of local papers in the old days, if you lived in Washington you had to read the *Post* just because you – even if you didn't like the *Post* national reporters, and, of course, we did – needless to say – but, you know, because you wanted to just know what was going on in Washington, right?

BALZ: Right

KRISTOL: And following the Redskins and so forth. Now – so there was a kind of – now you really can select what you want to, where you want to get your news.

BALZ: The other thing about the old days, as it were, is there's something serendipitous about a newspaper.

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: If you – just the process of turning pages, you're coming across things that you didn't select.

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: And you can learn a lot that way. I mean, it exposes you to things. And I still think that's one real value of the printed product, even as it diminishes in its reach. But now that's not the case at all in the way we're now getting what we get.

And we do, we do stay in – you know, we only have so much time, right? I mean, we can't spend, you know, eight hours a day looking and trying to educate ourselves, and so you get used to your habits, your – our – to go to this or to that, or five things or ten things, maybe, if you're lucky. But those tend to be the things that you are most comfortable with.

KRISTOL: Does that – is there any reason to think that reverses or even stops going in that direction? I mean, is there any –

BALZ: I can't imagine that it will because, you know, technology keeps moving us in that direction. Technology's not going to pull us back. You know, we have – we created what we call the "rainbow edition," not – it was only because it was the project name. It had nothing – there was no political overtone to it, but it was the rainbow edition; and the rainbow project, and it was an effort to create on a tablet the experience of a newspaper.

So instead of the traditional website, when you open this there are just two stories, and then you keep scrolling across, and there's two more, and then you can click on one of them, and you look at it, and it's a version of *The Washington Post*, but it's not everything in *The Washington Post*. There's almost no local news in it because it's geared for a national audience, not a local audience. There are things we can try to do to replicate kind of the value of the old printed edition, but in general, technology pushes us away from that.

KRISTOL: And economics, as well?

BALZ: And economics. Oh, no question about that. I mean, the – I mean, and it's one of the reasons, I think, that local journalism is so challenged today compared to, you know, what you would think of as kind of the national news organizations. I mean, we – for most of the time I was at the *Post*, as Don Graham always used to put it, we are a local paper.

We happen to be in the nation's capital, so we have national, a lot of national news and political news, but our economic model was built around the local audience and to have as big a percentage of that audience subscribing to *The Washington Post* as possible.

Today, the economic model has to be built, in the Internet age, on reaching as many people *outside* of the Washington area. We still care about the local market, but the growth area is national and international. And so the degree to which we are, you know, packaging news with those readers in mind and with the hope that over time they will get used to paying something for our journalism and not that it's going to always be there for free, but that's a different – a totally different model than we've had in the past.

KRISTOL: And I guess the paradox is that you would think that the Internet and social media, which provides, you know, infinitely more possible material to read, different sources and so forth, I mean, it seems to me to have the effect of making people less – read about fewer subjects – I'm not sure if they read less in total.

So, I mean, when I came to Washington I worked at the Education Department, and I think the *Post* had a reporter, I remember, assigned to maybe two or three of the minor domestic departments at once. So she covered maybe Education and Labor and, you know, HUD or something like that.

BALZ: Right.

KRISTOL: But that – she covered it for two or three years. Part of her job was to get to know people. I remember going out to lunch off the record. I was Chief of Staff to Bill Bennett, so I wasn't – I wouldn't be the person that who would normally deal with her. That would be the communications or press director or press secretary; but she wanted to get a feel for what was our agenda, what might she look for coming up; if there would there be things worth covering that are beneath the surface.

She obviously also went to lunch with people who were critical of Bill Bennett and stuff, but that was – but, I mean, it was a real beat, you know? And she took it seriously, and I think that was true of a lot of people. I have the impression – and so, then, if you were a reader of the *Post*, your main interest was not, believe me, in the Reagan years, you know, what was happening at the Education Department...

BALZ: [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: ...compared to the State Department and to the White House or, you know, the huge stories of the day. But you could get – you could read something, and it would be informed, and you could get interested in it, it strikes me.

I don't even – now I think, both on the reporting side and on the consumer side, there's much less likelihood that unless you are looking for education stories that you will ever read one. Am I right about that? I mean...

BALZ: I think that if –

KRISTOL: ...that's just my – and everyone's reading the same – the irony is it's all very diverse and there are a million sources of information, but everyone's reading the same five stories every day.

BALZ: I think the key word in what you just said is "if you look for it you can find it." I mean, we still have a robust team of people who cover education.

KRISTOL: And there are special journals that cover everything, of course.

BALZ: Absolutely. I mean, all – and so all of that is there, but – and I think you're right, and I think that the reason for this is that, A) cable news drives us to a narrow conversation. It –

KRISTOL: Top three stories.

BALZ: Right.

KRISTOL: Top five stories.

BALZ: And it's just over and over and over...

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: ...and comment. And, you know, a part of journalism today – and I would say not the best part of journalism – is the kind of journalism in which somebody says something and we ask you to respond to it.

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: Right? And that's a kind of classic cable model of you know –

KRISTOL: You're a Republican senator, you discuss Roy Moore because either you'll criticize him or you won't criticize him, and then it's, either, an easy story to report, you know?

BALZ: Yeah, and, you know, sometimes that's fine but it gets – you know there's more of that than we need. The other is, I was thinking in terms of kids' soccer, you know, the notion of the ball goes here and everybody goes there.

KRISTOL: Right, totally.

BALZ: And I think that there's more of that in political journalism, you know, sort of at that one level of political reporting, whatever the news of the moment is, and that can change instantly. Everybody wants to be a part of it.

I mean, one of my moments at the *Post* that I think of as a bad example of how this happens, it was after Congresswoman Gabby Giffords was shot, and Sarah Palin was in the middle of this controversy, that people had wrongly accused her of fostering a climate that allowed that. And then she responded with a video, and it was a very controversial video, and Sarah Palin drew an audience. I mean, it – everybody in the Republican Party, Democratic Party, media, whatever, "Sarah Palin said something," you know. So I looked on our website at some point in the afternoon, and we had links to 16 or so stories related to that Palin thing.

And several of us went to the editors and said, "What are we doing? You know, I mean this is – I mean, okay, it's a controversy. And we need to cover it. But we don't have to turn over our home page."

And I think that happened – that's an extreme example, obviously, but it is not atypical of kind of how when something happens, everybody wants to be on it.

And the other thing I think that's happened is – and, you know, we're all guilty of this – but it used to be that when reporters were asked to do television they were asked to do television about something they had written about or reported.

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: And now they're asked to do television to talk about whatever's happening at that moment, whether they've really covered it or not, whether they're an expert on it or not. And I think it devalues the currency of what good reporting really is about – which is you do develop an understanding and, presumably, some insights. And you can share those with a larger audience on TV. But we've moved away from that. Again, because of the nature of media in general right now.

KRISTOL: The herding effect or the kids' soccer effect is really startling when you step back and think about it. You'd think that, well, gee there'd be a market opportunity to be the person not covering what everyone else is because not everyone wants to read the 30-second story on whatever the hot issue of the day is. But I don't know?

I guess the economics of it there kick in, and – and it's – you know, everything is immediate, so it's not about – It'd be like writing a book that would be out of favor at a time, but it would be on a bookshelf, it would be in bookstores for three years, so you can sort of, gradually people could develop an interest, and, "Oh, that's kind of important what's happening in this part of the world that I haven't thought of because it's not in the headlines."

But the news media seems not to work that way so much.

BALZ: But don't you think part of this is what you were talking about before, which is the nature of our attention span?

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BALZ: And, you know, nothing lasts. I mean, it's just –

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BALZ: You know, it's like it – there's a conveyor belt of information moving by, and, you know, there are stories that are worth more than others. But they disappear rapidly, and so certain kinds of scandals don't stick in the way they did. You know, a big scandal obviously does, but others – it might have taken a bigger toll or lasted for days – can be gone in 24 hours or less. And so we're all, we're all impatient, and the media reflects that.

The other is that, you know, there is an echo chamber effect. Twitter creates it, and cable creates it. And it's hard to pull out of that without feeling that you're falling behind, and knowing what's going on, and maybe there's something that is going on that you really do need to pay attention to.

KRISTOL: And what about – I want to come back to Donald Trump, who we had a pleasant 20 minutes without mentioning. But, the way in which he's sort of taken advantage of, or used in the current situation, which I do think is very interesting. But just on the sort of situation pre-Trump or not counting Trump, I guess. I mean, just Twitter has a very, yeah, effect, because journalists tend to be on Twitter and read each other and tend to think, "Oh, well, this is the big story."

BALZ: [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: Or, "This is the way to frame the story" somehow.

What about Facebook, though? That is – I know from the magazine business that it is such a monster in terms of driving traffic. And as you say, it's a somewhat black-box algorithm there, but – That's been in the news, of course. And then the fake news is – don't you think a lot of that is Facebook?

BALZ: Oh, I do think that. I frankly –

KRISTOL: Not to blame Facebook. I'm just saying...

BALZ: No, I'm not blaming him, but it –

KRISTOL: ...it's transmitted through Facebook, but – yeah.

BALZ: But yes, Facebook. And Facebook – well, there's a lot of – I mean, the bots on Twitter have clearly had an effect. But they use, or the, you know, the penetration of Facebook with genuinely fake news is something that I'm not sure Facebook had an understanding of it.

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: You know, in a sense, so much of that operates invisibly, and how do you monitor it? How do you – I mean, the biggest staff in the world can barely, you know, could barely do that.

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: So, to me, Facebook is more opaque than Twitter. I mean, I know there's aspects of Twitter that I don't understand, but at least I have a feeling that I know kind of where Twitter fits into it. Facebook, not so much, because it – One, because just its sheer size and how, you know, its ability or the ability of people who know how to use Facebook to move information in invisible ways that, you know –

That if you're trying to cover a campaign in an old-fashion way, you'd try to, "Well, what's – what are we not seeing?" Well, you want to look at direct mail because that's going into mailboxes and it's not on TV and it's not on radio, so what are – what is a campaign doing on direct mail? I mean, this is like direct mail times 100. In its invisibility because it can be so narrowly targeted.

And then the kind of advertising role that Facebook provides, it is odd that nobody thought at the moment that ads paid for with rubles might be suspect but, that's a different issue. [LAUGHS]

But that – you know, whether it's the Mueller investigation or the Senate Intelligence Committee, or Facebook itself – coming to terms with that is, you know, it's not only vital, it's essential in a very fast way. I mean, it's not something we can afford to spend five years trying to understand that.

KRISTOL: I mean, yeah, direct mail is probably the closest analogy from sort of 25, 30 years ago. Little beneath the radar, a little hard to tell who's paying for it sometimes.

BALZ: Yup.

KRISTOL: If it were dropped late, a little hard to counteract it if it lands in your mailbox the Monday before the Tuesday election. That was a classic technique of where it was – you'd be – there'd be a blowback if you lied or slandered someone two weeks out, right? I mean it would become a story in itself, and the other campaign could use it.

But if it – but that was sort of the limit of what you could do or get away with, I guess, right? That was sort of, you know, the dirty tricks of 1985, you know?

BALZ: There were more ways to check that...

KRISTOL: Yes, but now, I mean –

BALZ: ...it seems to me than with Facebook.

KRISTOL: And it really can be just fake.

I mean, that's the other thing that struck me. I won't say where, but I was with people who were well-educated, civic leaders, even, you know, serious people. It was an occasion. It wasn't a political occasion, but just talking to them, and there were a mix of political views, so it wasn't a right-wing or left-wing thing. The degree to which they got their news from, like, cut and paste e-mails from their cousins who had seen something, God knows where, which in turn had been seen God knows where, and, you know, they just said –well, it seems like – and it looks like a kind of, you know, in a font that looks like a newspaper, you know?

BALZ: [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: With some vague name, you know? You know, "*The Boston News Service*," you know, something made up. And then it's just made up. I mean, just made up. It's really kind of astonishing.

BALZ: I'll give you an innocent example of this. We were with a group of people, most of whom we didn't know, you know, six or eight months ago. And this couple who were, you know, really very smart, well-educated people, and they said, "Isn't it great that Robert Redford and Meryl Streep have finally gotten

together all these years?" And I said, "What are you talking about?" And they said, "Well, they got married." I said, "Really? I guess I missed that."

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BALZ: And so I went online, and it was one of these fake stories somewhere on some website, and it had gotten passed along and passed along, and, you know people who followed them say, "Oh, isn't that nice?" And yet that's – as I say, that's a totally benign case of this. I mean, what the Russians were doing was, you know, was truly nefarious.

KRISTOL: I mean, talk about the Russians for a minute, and then we'll get to Trump himself, which is, I mean, we don't know what Mueller knows. We don't know a lot of things, but you do know that – you've covered many campaigns, and you know the news business, the media side of things. Do you think it really – you think it was a big deal. I mean, just in terms of – not only a big deal in terms of it's unethical or it's a foreign power intervening in our election, but a big deal in the sense that there was a lot going on and it really had an effect.

BALZ: I think it had an effect. I can't say that it changed the outcome of the election...

KRISTOL: No. Well, that's a different – that's –

BALZ: ...or if – that's a different issue.

KRISTOL: That's a sort of – the way that's framed is a – no, a political ping-pong ball. I mean, it –

BALZ: Yeah, and I – in a sense, I think that's far less important than...

KRISTOL: Right. We can't – yeah.

BALZ: ...than the ability of a foreign government to come in and, A) provide a distorting effect. But also, in a sense, to undermine democracy.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BALZ: I mean, to create, you know, division, doubt, dissension about the whole process. That has a corrosive effect, and that, I think, is a serious problem. Senator Warner, Mark Warner, was up here at Harvard a few weeks ago, and I said to him, "Are we, as a government, a country, prepared for 2018 and 2020?" And he said, "No, we're not."

KRISTOL: Wow.

BALZ: I mean, that we're just not – we haven't done enough to assure ourselves that this can't happen again.

II. Trump and the Media (29:18 – 42:39)

KRISTOL: That's worrisome. Let's talk about Donald Trump for a minute because I think your point – which I hadn't quite thought of quite the way you said it – is very important: that, I mean, he has a real agenda to use this – the new-media situation – in a way that others have sort of adapted to it.

BALZ: Right.

KRISTOL: So President Obama, the Obama campaign would be a good example of that in a sense of they were – adapted faster than the Republicans. They got a lot of benefit out of targeting voters, whatever. Republicans probably caught up in a few years. The Trump thing's a little different, though.

BALZ: The Trump thing is different because he's the practitioner. I – this was not something in which, you know, his four strategists said, "You know, this Twitter thing, you could make good use of that."

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: He had an instinctive sense of it. And somebody made this observation to me during the campaign, which was that his experience in the New York City world of tabloids prepared him like no other candidate for the Twitter age. That and in part that you're either, you know, you're either feeding that beast, or the beast is going to, you know, consume you, and if you are constantly feeding it, you are creating something that's probably helpful to you and perhaps harmful to somebody else, but particularly helpful to you.

So I think that's one way in which he was better equipped than any of the other candidates, Republican or Democrats, for this period. The other is his work on *The Apprentice*. He was totally comfortable in kind of reality TV world, and, you know, nobody else on that stage in those debates could say that. And so his ability to use cable news to create a conversation and use Twitter to find and feed his audience was different than everybody else was doing.

KRISTOL: And he had a sense that you wouldn't be penalized much if you said things that were, minimally, exaggerated and, maximally, just false.

BALZ: Just false, right.

KRISTOL: But, I mean, that was, for me, just a – "Well, that's wrong. You can't say that." I mean, "Of course you'll pay a price for saying something that's totally wrong." No, and it's amazing.

BALZ: Now here's – but here's the question. Did he know that, or did he learn that quickly?

KRISTOL: Yeah. No, I agree. I don't –

BALZ: And I don't know...

KRISTOL: No, I don't know.

BALZ: ...because, you know, start with the John McCain attack in July of 2015 when he said, "He's not a hero." "You got captured." You know, everybody, including people around Trump, thought that could, you know, sink his candidacy, or at a minimum damage it. And it didn't. And then, you know, there was episode after episode, and so he learned. Somebody who – close to the Trump operation said that one thing Trump did both in his use of Twitter, his call-ins to, you know, TV shows – whether it was cable news or the Sunday morning shows – and his use of the big rallies, was to test.

KRISTOL: Yes. I agree with that.

BALZ: It was like he used it as if – somebody said he used those big rallies like a gigantic focus group, and he would test, and then he would watch and see how much ripple effect they had, how long that, you know, comment, outrageous as it might be continued to ripple through the conversation, and he would, you know, he would adjust, and he would focus on those things that had resonance, even if they were controversial. The other thing that he's quite skillful at is creating a diversion from another diversion.

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: You know, in this sense of sowing chaos constantly to just keep the political system roiled, and, in a sense, to prevent all of us from really focusing on one particular thing at a moment; he'll create something else that we have to think about.

KRISTOL: Well, that part, I think, is huge, the flattening of all the lies and all the scandals so that you don't focus on some that are really important. But then there's a bunch that are trivial, and they are trivial. Who cares what the inauguration – the crowd size of the inauguration was.

BALZ: Right. Yeah.

KRISTOL: But if you got enough – but, you know, it was wrong, so you sort of have to call them on it. And then they'll call you. Then he attacks back. And then you have free –

BALZ: Well, in a sense, it's comical at first, right?

KRISTOL: Yeah, right.

BALZ: I mean, it's, like, well, who cares? And then –

KRISTOL: And then you feel sort of stupid about, you know, obsessing about it. And then Trump supporters say, "Oh, come on. Get off it. So what if the crowd size at the inauguration wasn't – he just needs his vanity. But is it important?"

Meanwhile, he's distracting from the fact that on that – the place he made that claim was in a – just to take that one example, which only occurs to me now – was in a speech at the CIA, the first day of his presidency, where he showed no understanding of what's appropriate to say, I would say, as president speaking in a nonpartisan setting to career intelligence officers; as opposed to, you know, at a rally somewhere –

BALZ: With a backdrop a wall of, you know...

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BALZ: ...CIA –

KRISTOL: But that kind of got obscured. It just became, "Well, what a funny – let's look at a photo of the mall, and maybe it really is bigger because there are some people you don't see," you know? It was all that kind of stuff. I mean, right?

BALZ: Right.

KRISTOL: It was – I guess that's – who knows if that, how intentional that is on his part. But he has a real feel for that.

BALZ: I – you know, I don't think it's all intentional. I think that part of it is, you know, it's all about him. Right? And he wants to be the center of attention. And he doesn't feel he gets the credit or respect that he feels he deserves. And, you know, nobody thought he was going to be president – in his mind – and he's president, and so there should be more respect.

KRISTOL: And he understands a little from Page 6 that, you know, all news is – all coverage is good coverage, or there is no such thing as bad publicity. Not quite true, of course. And one shouldn't exaggerate how successful he's been: He got 46% of the vote; he's now at 38% and all that. But still, he had a feel in this – maybe this says something about our culture though, that the kind of celebrity culture

rewards celebrity for celebrity sake. And, you know, he understood that being at the center of everything just made him a –

BALZ: Celebrity isn't – alone won't get you elected president of the United States. But having it certainly is an asset. Obviously, you have to do a lot of other things, but being a celebrity today – and just the sort of nature of our society – it's, you know, the politics reflects the society in that case. You know, there's this – there's more attention given to celebrities. There's more interest in celebrities. The media, you know, does it.

The presidency is a singular office built around one person, unlike the Congress, so the focus tends to be on that individual; and if that individual brings to it something in addition to just being president – that, you know, that they were rich and famous before that – it does have an effect.

KRISTOL: I mean, I wonder. I was thinking – someone reminded the other day of the birther controversy, which people – every now and then someone mentions that. "Gee, Trump was involved in that in 2011, 2012, and that was pretty ridiculous." And then it kind of faded, and, well, Obama produced his birth certificate, I guess, and Trump semi-never really acknowledged, until 2016, that he was wrong, but subsided, let's say.

When you step back and think about that, that's pretty astonishing. I wonder if he learned the lesson from that, that he got a ton of followers, I bet, at the time, on – just literally followers on Twitter. I mean, you know – and a lot of publicity, and established himself in a way as if he were in the "Obama was born in Kenya and as a Muslim camp." He's kind of the guy who dared to raise it as opposed to, you know, Marco Rubio and Jeb Bush and everyone, and it probably did him a lot of – it gave him a certain base, let's say, going into the election three years later. And he – and it was totally irresponsible, false, demagogic, etcetera – and it – Did he really pay a price for it? I mean, I wonder, you know?

Now maybe if he had been attacked systematically on it in 2015? I don't know. Well, it'd look kind of weird though, right, if Jeb Bush did –

BALZ: So – but –

KRISTOL: If Jeb Bush had put up five million dollars of ads saying, "You can't elect as president someone who attacked the current president, whatever you think of him, and you don't like him if you're a Republican that much, you know, with – just manifestly false, you know, charge that clearly was a kind of code, you know, coded racially charged, you know, thing.

BALZ: Yeah, and barely coded.

KRISTOL: Barely coded, yeah.

BALZ: Yeah, in that case, barely coded.

KRISTOL: Yeah, yeah.

BALZ: I mean, he's done some other things that are, what you would say, are more coded.

But here's part of the question: What is it about the nature of the modern Republican Party that his opponents were not willing to kind of take that attack and really press it? And, you know, and kind of have it out. I mean, maybe they still would have lost, but you would have to assume that Trump came out of that experience believing that there is a – that he understood a portion of the country that could help to make him president. Obviously, you know, I don't know what the percentage is. It may not be very big at all, but nonetheless –

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: And that paying attention to them or saying things to that particular group that resonate is an important part of the overall message. And he seems to go back to it. I mean, after Charlottesville, the comments he made about the – you know, the neo-Nazis. Again, why would he do that?

KRISTOL: So, I mean, I would say that if you followed Pat Buchanan and getting 35% of the vote in New Hampshire and – when was that? – in '92 and then winning in '96; if you followed Ron Paul, other things in America, you would say, yeah, there's a chunk of the Republican Party that's open to – I will characterize as, you know, nativist or somewhat xenophobic appeals and that kind of "truth-telling" against political correctness, which slides over to not truth-telling and a different kind, you know, and demagogic appeal at the expense of various groups.

So that's – that, I think, people could see. What's – Trump saw that, but he somehow also saw, or just got lucky, that unlike in the case of Buchanan or Ron Paul, it wouldn't cap his support.

BALZ: Yeah.

KRISTOL: I mean, for me, that's why I thought Trump wouldn't win the nomination. I thought, well, we've seen this before, and it could work pretty well for a while, and we'd be – We forget how everyone freaked out, including me, in the first Bush White House...

BALZ: [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: ...but even – but, I mean, even in '96 when I wasn't in the White House, just as a kind of matter of social culture, "What's going on? How can Pat Buchanan get so many votes?" And then Ron Paul, that's even more, I'd say – a real conspiracy theorist with kinds of, you know, disagreeable guys around him, gets 20%, 25%. But, you know, one always had the sense, and it always worked out, that that was the high-water mark, and people would look at it more, and no one really thought the guy could be president. And you end up with your Romney or McCain or, you know, Bush or something.

And then – and Trump somehow either had the luck or the sense that you could start with that base and then not be disqualified, not have that cap over your support.

BALZ: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And then by more conventional appeals to people's economic grievances and other issues, you know, get up to the, you know –

BALZ: Well, he did – I mean, he didn't limit himself to that. I mean, it – I mean, you could take your, you know, your comparisons back to Wallace, George Wallace. And, I mean, it – a similar, similar kind of appeal in a similar kind of camp.

But I think that one of the things that was different by 2016 is there was also this much broader disgust with kind of Washington and its politics; and, you know, in some ways it's a non-ideological view that the political system in Washington is stacked against ordinary people. And Trump got that better than everybody else.

Maybe Bernie Sanders on the left you would say the same thing of, but Trump married the, kinda the birther piece of it – which, I think, does have a clear cap, obviously – with a much broader message of outsider-ism, blow the place up, drain the swamp, whatever analogy you want to use. And did it with a clarity of language, if you will, that many modern politicians don't know how to use. I mean, if you look at, you know, Secretary Clinton's language, it's much more stilted and poll-driven, and you could say, well,

that's – maybe that's her, or maybe it's the, kind of the big apparatus around him. Donald Trump won the nomination surrounded by, what, six people?

KRISTOL: Yeah, yeah.

BALZ: I mean, it's astonishing when you think about it, and so it was – so, therefore, it's a leaner operation. It's driven more from him, you know, good, bad, or indifferent. And for him it worked out, and so, you know – the phrase "Make America Great Again," it's like every one of those words has resonance.

KRISTOL: Yup.

BALZ: Which eclipsed anything anybody else had in terms of the crystallization of a message. And so is it because Trump's a brander, or is it because he stumbled onto this? You know, I mean, I think you have to give him some credit for having either enormous good luck or a strategic kind of gut instinct about where enough of the country was to make it possible for him to win the election. Not that he would, but that it was even going to be possible.

III. Looking Ahead to 2018 and 2020 (42:39 – 1:16:29)

KRISTOL: I want to come back to your analysis of the country, but talk a little about elections like we've – unless there's anything you want say about media? I think we've done the media –

BALZ: No. We're –

KRISTOL: No, but you've covered elections since I think you were – directed the election coverage in 1980 in the *Post*, and that was an exciting election, actually. I mean, is the Trump model the future of – I mean, how much have – has Trump – is Trump a one-off at an odd moment, odd time? You know, Trump and Sanders each got 45% of the vote; huge discontent out there. Or, is Trump more likely to be the model for successful candidates and campaigns in the future? How much are we –

BALZ: I – Bill, I don't know the answer to that. I think that – I think I would say that Trump has created a Trump moment, but I don't know that it becomes a Trump era. You know, Reagan created more of an era.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BALZ: And I don't know that –

KRISTOL: But that's because he was a successful president. I told all my Trump – pro-Trump friends – acquaintances...

BALZ: [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: ...somewhat pro, even reluctant pro-Trump. That was where most of my acquaintances were, the, you know, "Well, this Trump revolution could be like the Reagan revolution." The Reagan revolution wasn't winning in 1980. The Reagan revolution was governing for eight years and then achieving some pretty important things.

BALZ: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And then Bush for four years after.

BALZ: I mean, you know, I remember –

KRISTOL: So with Trump, I guess a lot depends on what happens, right?

BALZ: Yeah. I mean, I don't –

KRISTOL: But on the election side though, one could imagine that you could take those lessons, even from a failed Trump presidency, and use them either on the left or the right, or center –

BALZ: But they have to be genuine to the candidate, and I think that's part of what we see in the modern era. I mean, what worked for Barack Obama was not transferable.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BALZ: It worked for him because of who he was, and the story he wanted to tell fit his being. What has worked for Donald Trump isn't going to work for most other candidates. They're going to be less genuine with their anger or with their, you know, un-PC language, or they're going to be afraid to go as far as he is, and so I don't know. But I think you're right, that the success of – you know, the degree to which Reagan is an era in American politics – and an era that lasted beyond Reagan, obviously – requires something more than winning an election.

And, so far, what we've seen in President Trump is somebody who is thinking almost entirely about the elections, and operates as if he is still in an election. And that's a lot different than putting together a governing agenda. He has no particular ideology, as we all have written; so, you know, whatever is in the tax bill he's likely to be happy with if it reaches his desk.

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: Whatever was in the bill to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act he would have been happy with. And so it's not as though he brings a governing philosophy or a set of convictions, other than the current system's messed up.

KRISTOL: Yeah. What about that discontent? I mean, I would say if you told a historian that 45% of the vote's going to go to Trump, who's running against, in effect, his own party in large measure, and just saying things that once would have been thought to be disqualifying; and did things in his life that once would have thought, frankly, to be disqualifying, virtually. And 45% of the vote on the Democratic side will go to Bernie Sanders, the socialist who wouldn't even join the Democratic Party until the year before –

BALZ: Right, and still hasn't.

KRISTOL: I guess still hasn't, yeah.

BALZ: [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: People would have said, Well, that's – I understand that. I mean, there must be a depression going on in the country and be like Huey Long, or, you know, well, there must be a Vietnam War-type situation with incredible unhappiness about policies being pursued in Washington, or riots in the streets.

But it was 2016. I mean, that's what – for me, that's one of the most bewildering – not entirely bewildering. We can all come up with fancy explanations of what was happening beneath the surface of all that, but it is still a little startling. The Trump rhetoric was – does not seem to be, to accord with the *actual* situation of America in 2016.

BALZ: No, and I think that the – but the – it's a combination of things that ultimately made it possible for him to win.

One was discontent. You know, we're in a series of transformations in this country, and some people are comfortable with that, and some people aren't. And there's a lot of people who aren't, who think that in one form or another that the America and American exceptionalism and the values that they think have made America the greatest country in the world are being eroded.

And this question of what is it to be an American, and what's the national identity, and how much is that being, you know, changed in negative ways in the estimation of some people; obviously, a lot of people are very comfortable with it. But that has created a huge division in the country, and so politics reflects that. It's not that politics created that. Politics is a reflection of that. So, he tapped into that. Some of that is economic anxiety. Some of that is cultural. Some of it is because of the swirl of technology. So there's that piece of it.

Then, you know, the second piece is he ran what I have written about as kind of the classic independent candidate: wealthy, could fund his own campaign; celebrity, so he had big name ID; ideology that ranged across. But he knew, instinctively or luckily, that you couldn't win a presidency that way. You could have a voice and have some influence. So he ran as a Republican, hijacked the Republican Party. And therefore had in it – you know, in a period in which voting is very tribal. He was able to attract support from people who did not want him to be the nominee, but who nonetheless, in the end, said, "Well, for – whether it's because, you know, we'll have a Supreme Court that I would be happier with"–

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: "...or we're likely to get a tax bill or a health bill that I like." And that created enough extra support that he was able to, you know, amalgamate it up and put it into an Electoral College majority.

KRISTOL: Yeah, no – and barely. Someone shouldn't – one could over interpret these things and over interpret –

BALZ: Well, it's not the massive Electoral College victory that he often talks about.

KRISTOL: Right. I mean, the one question I suppose – if he doesn't – if he's not a terribly successful president, he probably won't, you know – he won't be – there won't be a Trump revolution like a Reagan revolution. Or even like President Obama, changing probably some aspects of public policy in ways that will be hard to reverse or likely to last.

For me, of course, the other question is what he does, though, to the Republican Party. I mean, he could be a not very successful president and still fundamentally transform the Republican Party, and, I would say, conservatism, don't you think? I mean, just by virtue of being president for four years.

BALZ: I do, but – and I'll talk about that in a minute, but I think there's one other area where the Trump presidency could have a longer effect, and that is where America fits in the world. I mean, the degree to which, in a variety of ways, he has pulled America back from a leadership role – you can debate the individual pieces, but there's no question about that. And I have been struck in the last four or five months in being in audiences with people from a – numbers of different countries, the degree of concern there is about that.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's interesting.

BALZ: And what he's doing. And so I think that's – you know, that could be a lasting legacy that would take a while to kind of undo.

KRISTOL: Quite a while. Well, that's a very good point, I mean, because I think – I mean, I tend to say – and I think – I don't know if you might agree that domestically – in terms of – the institutions are pretty

strong. He's not going to – the American legal system's going to be in pretty good shape, I would think, after four years of Trump, even if it's inappropriate for a president to try to tell the Justice Department who to indict or to, you know. But he – there is a strong interest–

You know, the country has all these institutions in place, and norms and procedures that are pretty strong. He's not going to get Jim Mattis to fire 2,000 people from the military because they were admitted under certain rules and they're transgender, and now because Donald Trump woke up one morning and decided to tweet something that they have to be fired. So, in that respect – and the separation of powers and federalism, civil society, and the private sector – it just seems unlikely that he's going to transform America so much.

It's harder to, in a way, to transform America.

BALZ: Yeah.

KRISTOL: It's frustrating to some people.

BALZ: And on the domestic side, on...

KRISTOL: And there's Congress.

BALZ: ...lots of other legislation, it's pretty conventionally conservative, you know?

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: Paul Ryan or – you know, or –

KRISTOL: I mean, it could change a political culture in some important ways. That's a slightly different story.

BALZ: He could.

KRISTOL: But I very much agree: on the international side it's not quite the same, because these – it's not like there's a huge number of – you know, there are a limited number of institutions holding things together, and American leadership is so crucial to them, and that depends more on the president. I mean, some nice senator can give a good – you know, can go travel abroad and try to reassure people in Japan or Germany, but it's not quite the same as the President of the United States.

BALZ: Yeah, and one big test, obviously, will be North Korea. And we don't know whether this approach that he's taken, which is quite controversial, will bear fruit, or quite the opposite, and that's a, you know, that's a chapter yet to be written.

KRISTOL: Yeah, the foreign policy side, I think, is – yeah, it could be the biggest real-world affect.

BALZ: Yeah, yeah, but anyway, back to the Republican...

KRISTOL: But back to the –

BALZ: ...Republican Party. You know this better than I do, but in the recent past, the Republican Party – and probably longer – but in the recent past the Republican Party has had conflict between “the establishment,” whatever that is, but the establishment and some kind of grassroots insurgency. And the, you know, the best pre-Trump version of that was the Tea Party, and the Tea Party folks were, you know, they were unhappy with a lot of things.

It was a small government, you know, adhere to the Constitution, and put their leaders on notice that they wanted to go in a particular direction. Or they wanted things stopped, may be a better way to put it. That, you know, that is a debate that the Republican Party was having.

There was also a debate about what's the right way to win the presidency back. Is it the Ted Cruz model of, you know, get an authentic conservative, other than Mitt Romney or John McCain, who can make the case for, you know, in a sense, hard-right conservatism, or is it the Rubio model of expand the party, reach out, have a different agenda? That all got –

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: That was building in 2016, or 2015, and then Trump came and kinda, you know, smashed it, and Trump has brought into the party a coalition of people who don't quite fit either of those other two.

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: And I think that, to me, is the source of the greatest instability in the Republican Party. And one thing we know about presidents who, you know, who are strong in what they try to do is that they redefined parties, and so Donald Trump has the capacity to redefine the party more like himself.

He's clearly, at this point, the most popular politician in the Republican Party among Republicans. I mean, if you look at him versus Senator McConnell, or him versus Speaker Ryan, it's not – they're not identical at all.

I mean, he is more popular, and if you win the presidency, I think people think you have the right to define the party, and I don't know where that – I don't know how that unfolds. The Republicans could have a very tough year in 2018. I'm not saying they will, but they could. That might not reflect on how Republicans see Donald Trump. In other words, it will – would a bad year in 2018 turn Republicans away from kind of Trump-ism? I'm not sure that that would happen.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's very interesting. Well, this – elaborate on that a bit because that's – A lot of the Never-Trump characters I hang out with, that's kind of one of their hopes as well. So far we've been disappointed in the Republicans in Congress. They haven't really stood up to Trump. Even if they beat the Bannionite challengers, which they probably will in many cases, in these primaries, they're going Trumpy to do so.

BALZ: Right.

KRISTOL: Or Ed Gillespie barely beat a Bannionite challenger, and then in the general felt he had to appeal to those people, and I think he ended up hurting himself, arguably, in the general election, but it still feels like that's the direction a lot of the establishment Republicans will go for the next few months.

But sort of the magic hope, the – you know, the Aladdin's lamp there for the, "Well, once they see it in 2018, that it doesn't work, they'll sort of, there'll be a flight from Trump." I said – I tend to agree with you. I'm not so certain that's how the dynamic works.

BALZ: I'm not convinced that that will happen. I mean, I – there's been ample opportunity so far, and very few people have taken advantage of those opportunities. I mean, the Corkers and the Flakes and people like that, I mean –

KRISTOL: But they're quitting. [LAUGHS]

BALZ: – but they're quitting. That's right. These are – there's nobody who's got a political future that they care about who's stepped out in a way. Now maybe a – you know, a shellacking in 2018 would begin to

do that, but, you know, then the question is, well, what do they do about 2020? Do – does somebody run against Trump? And if so, does that person get support from the – kind of the non-Trump? I won't say the Never-Trumpers.

KRISTOL: Yeah. They'll be – right.

BALZ: Just the Trump skeptics who are quite uncomfortable with him. Does somebody who challenges him in the primary get that support? I'm waiting to see whether that actually takes place. And, if you're a Republican politician and you're looking at 2020 and Trump is going to run again, if he's says, "I'm going to run again," you're all tied to that, and in a sense you need him to do well for the party to, you know, not shrink.

So I don't – I think it's a very tough call to know how strong the resistance to Donald Trump inside the Republican Party ever will be until, you know, until the electorate at large has a different judgment.

KRISTOL: I mean, events obviously matter, so you – the argument that my anti-Trump friends would use to cheer themselves up is, "Well, that's true so far. He's got – " I think you said you did a poll, a friend of yours did a poll that showed, what, 78% of Republicans approve of Trump, or is –

BALZ: Well, say that the party should become the Trump party.

KRISTOL: Yeah, which is stronger even, I mean, in a way. That's a stronger –

BALZ: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

KRISTOL: So that's a pretty startling finding. But the economy's been fine for the nine, ten months he's been in office; the stock market's up. They may get this tax bill through. There are no obvious foreign-policy disasters. We could question some things, but there's – you know, NATO hasn't crumbled. We're not at war somewhere, so – you know, so – and even so, he's only at 38, 40% of the polls.

If there are real setbacks, one could imagine, one could argue, at least, that the reluctant Trump voters and supporters, who I think are a bigger chunk. Don't you think the media's too obsessed with the fervent Trump supporters on the one hand, and then the half the country that hates Trump? But the in-between people are what put him over the top.

BALZ: Peter Hart, who's a Democratic pollster and does *The Wall Street Journal*-NBC poll with Bill McInturff, says that that's the group to pay attention to.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BALZ: It's not – the base is probably going to stay strong, and the, you know, the anti-Trump constituency is not going to move toward him, I don't think. But it's that group – it's that sort of 38-to-46%.

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: I mean, the group that fills that is the group to watch, and –

KRISTOL: And what would jostle them, then is the question? And I just see psychologically, in a way, that, all the reasons – and I'm not belittling these reasons, some of them may be legitimate – that they're not quite willing to abandon Trump now, will still be reasons, won't they? Six or 18 months from now there'll be another Supreme Court appointment. There'll be economic issues where they want to be still better off with a Republican than a – certainly than an Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders-inflected Democratic Party, which might be the party people are looking at a year or two from now. They'll still be, you know, H.R. McMaster and Jim Mattis are there, so it's not – you know – your fears are, you know,

that he's not – The Twitter stuff's irresponsible, and it's distasteful, people will say in this group, but, you know, "it's not really the policy of the government. NAFTA's not been blown up." I mean, I'm just making this up, but, you know, one could imagine people – Exactly what people are saying to me now when they sort of tell me, you know, "Get off the Never-Trump thing a little. It's not quite as bad as you feared."

And in some ways it isn't, incidentally, so it's not necessarily – this isn't a ridiculous argument. They could keep making that argument, I suppose, six or 18 to 24 months from now. That dynamic could still be in play.

BALZ: Yeah. That well could be the case.

KRISTOL: And then Trump would get re-nominated, and then they would have a similar to 2016 election with a lot of reluctant people saying, "Well, he's better than Elizabeth Warren." [LAUGHS]

BALZ: I think there's – well, I mean, I think there's a couple of things related to that. One is he will have some kind of record in 2020.

KRISTOL: Yes. Well, that changes things.

BALZ: And either it's going to be a record that's sterling or not. Or he – I mean – but there will be a debate about whether he's – what he's really accomplished.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BALZ: I mean, he – you know, and the year after – you know, a couple of weeks ago they put out a list of his record – and stock market record high, jobless rate at a 17-year low, Justice Gorsuch on the Supreme Court, you know, border crossings at an all-time low, things – and they can point to those things, but in other ways that record is going to be challenged.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BALZ: So that's one thing, and the other is he's not going to be running against Hillary Clinton in 2020. And I don't think anybody can put a percentage on it, but there's clearly some people who voted for him as the lesser of two evils. I mean, that they just couldn't abide by voting for Secretary Clinton.

And, you know, if the Democrats nominate somebody who doesn't come with the kind of the baggage that she came with – she came with a lot of attributes, obviously, a lot of experience, but she came with baggage. If the next Democratic nominee doesn't have that, it makes it harder for Trump to make the election as much or more about her as about him.

KRISTOL: No, and he could well lose. If I had to bet by now, I bet he would, and, of course, that's worth nothing, since I've been wrong...

BALZ: [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: ...in the past. But I did sense – I would say my – you know, I was totally wrong about the primaries. And the general I always thought he could win because when you have a change in election, the candidate of change always has a chance, even if he's himself, you know, on the edge of being disqualified...

BALZ: [LAUGHS] Yeah.

KRISTOL: ...you know, several times. But what if he – even if he loses in 2020, from my point [of view], you know, as a conservative and Republican, I mean, I'm curious as an observer – in your case, as an

observer, that it would be a changed party. I mean, I don't think – I think people – some of my friends are kidding themselves that we just sort of, "He loses." It's November – whatever election day is in 2020. I'll say January 21st, 2021...

BALZ: Right.

KRISTOL: And suddenly it's, "Hey, it's the Marco Rubio, Ben Sasse, Nikki Haley, John Kasich, Rick Scott, Charlie Baker Republican Party." And we just have our normal debates between the more conservative and the more moderate, and the more Tea Party-ish and the more establishment, and it's kind of back to that, that that doesn't feel to me right. You can't go through four years of this and have – and just snap –

BALZ: No, I don't think it –

KRISTOL: And a re-nomination, and a campaign in which everyone will have supported Trump, probably, again, right? And sort of just say, "Well, that was kind of a weird parenthesis, and – " you know?
[LAUGHS]

BALZ: Right, "We – well, we didn't mean any of that."

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: Yeah. I – it – I don't think you can, you know, reverse the tape and say, "Okay, we're now back to, you know, June 15th, 2015, the day before he announced for president, and this is the Republican Party."

As I say, I mean, the Republican Party has got – has had turmoil anyway, and Trump's going to have an impact on the future of the party no matter whether he's there as president in 2021 or whether he's not. Because, if he's not, there's going to be a piece of the party that's going to blame others in the party for his failure to get re-elected.

That they didn't do enough, or they weren't sufficiently strong in their support of him, or they did things to undermine him. That, you know, that's going to be a potentially fractious debate, and as you say, there are going to be people who, you know, who are seeking to be the leaders of the future who will have supported him. So then, well, what do they disavow, or what do they not disavow? How do they put distance of themselves from Trump or not?

I mean, that – you know, things happen over a four-year period that you can't unwind.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I mean, it's very fluid, and I think certainly unprecedented almost, to try to figure out what's going to happen. I do think denying him the nomination in 2020 would be a huge thing, of course, but the odds are against that, as we know from the last several decades.

BALZ: Well, it – you know, it –

KRISTOL: It's not impossible. I mean –

BALZ: No, and there – you know, there –

KRISTOL: Lyndon Johnson didn't get re-nominated, and Carter and Ford were close to being denied re-nomination...

BALZ: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

KRISTOL: ...so it's not like it never happens, but –

BALZ: I mean, it's hard to know with Carter. Had the Iranian hostage situation not occurred whether Kennedy would have been able to beat him in those primaries, I don't know. But, no, I mean, it – you know, trying to predict where we are going to be in, you know, in this time in two years as we're heading into the presidential – I mean, one – and one big factor, obviously, is just the Mueller investigation.

KRISTOL: Yeah. The big binary – big fork in the road.

BALZ: Yeah.

KRISTOL: People sort of forget about it, but yeah, in a way, you put it out of your mind, but you know it's going to happen, but –

BALZ: Something's going to happen.

KRISTOL: Something's going to happen.

BALZ: Something's going to happen.

KRISTOL: Either he's going to, quote, "clear him" – and one interesting question is what if it's bad but not bad enough that Mueller reports to Congress? I was thinking, you know, what if it's sort of Manafort and Flynn, and it's some very foolish and irresponsible and reckless behavior by people around Trump. Maybe some sense that Trump would have known about it and should have stopped it, but at the end of the day not really, you know, fundamental kind of, you know, collusion by the candidate with a foreign power, and therefore no referral, let's just say, to Congress by Mueller.

BALZ: Or let's say there is some level of it.

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: And I'm not saying there was...

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: ...but let's say there's actually some level of collusion.

KRISTOL: Right, but –

BALZ: Will – would that be enough to suddenly dramatically change the structure of public opinion on Trump and on the politics? I don't know that.

KRISTOL: And is there a snap-back where he – where the headline becomes "he's cleared"; even by Mueller, this witch hunt doesn't work. You know, I mean, I don't – I think you could see a scenario where it strengthens Trump's support among those who are open to supporting him. It's not going to change anyone who's against him, but –

BALZ: Right. Yeah.

KRISTOL: And, of course, the opposite, if there really is something that goes to Congress then we're in an impeachment situation, and that's a whole different ballpark.

BALZ: You've probably had this experience, but, you know, just when you go around the country and talk to just regular people, if they are even moderately pro-Trump, they are so deeply skeptical of the whole Russia piece.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BALZ: And particularly the idea that there was real collusion. They're even skeptical of why so much is being made of the Russian interference. I mean, I remember talking to some – a couple of older guys in my home state of Illinois back in the early summer, and I said to them, "What do you think about this?"

And they were like, "What are you, nuts? I mean, you think we don't do that?" I mean, that was their reaction.

KRISTOL: Yeah, yeah.

BALZ: I mean, that we've messed in elections, and so the Russians mess in ours. And, you know, obviously this one is different than that, but for a lot of people they haven't, you know, they're not prepared to believe that, unless there is more that comes out that we haven't seen.

KRISTOL: No, in that respect, Trump's own messaging has been fairly successful in a way. I mean, you know, the stuff that people like me are so appalled by, moral equivalence of us and Russia; Mueller, a respected former FBI director's on a witch hunt. It seeps in. People don't quite agree with that, maybe, but, you know, it's a little quite – you know?

BALZ: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Enough doubts or so that I think that's what he's very good at doing.

BALZ: I mean, I think the one thing that you would have to say about Mueller is he seems impervious to most of that.

KRISTOL: Yeah, he's not going to be affected.

BALZ: And he's just, you know, he's building legal cases, and we'll see how many he ends up building and who, you know, who gets indicted and what kind of, you know trials are held, and –

KRISTOL: What about the Democrats, while we're just speculating here?

BALZ: [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: And you cover them on not just speculation.

BALZ: They're in perfect shape, Bill. [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: Yeah, they're in great shape.

Well, so in the big sort of – do they go – is it – are there any Bill Clinton Democrats left? Is it a Bernie Sanders party?

BALZ: There are a few Bill Clinton Democrats left, and I think that their voice has not been heard much. And I don't know how strongly those voices will penetrate, because people like Bernie Sanders have a big platform – and, you know, you have to give him credit for maximizing what looked like a, you know, a kind of a, you know, mom and pop operation when he started...

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: ...and turned it into a movement. There is – I was just talking to some people recently, who were talking about the hostility that still exists between ardent Sanders supporters and ardent Clinton supporters. That that resentment is still real and will have to get worked out. I think that's a smaller percentage of the Democratic Party population writ large.

But there is – I think there is a debate that hasn't quite begun to break out on what should Democrats really believe. And how do they – what is the coalition that they really want to try to make their own, and is it a coalition that is compatible with, you know, kind of the diverse population diversity in all ways, whether it's, you know, whether it's race and ethnicity, or gender, or the way we think about gender? That part of the party – and then put together that with the white working class that they claim they want to try to win back.

KRISTOL: Right.

BALZ: I'm not sure how – I don't think that's going to be easy at all. But what's the message that brings that kind of a party together?

And, you know, I think that the degree to which we've heard answers to that are unsatisfying, that they don't go far enough, or that they're overly simplistic. That you can – well, you can do it with a Democrat – with an economic message. I think it takes more than that. There has to be a cultural component that plays across that, and maybe it – that they're incompatible.

So I think that they have both a question of how do you put together all of the little pieces of things that Democrats believe in and turn it into, you know, a Make America Great Again kind of message, the one that is, you know, fuller, simpler, and reaches across?

The other aspect is the generational fight. We were talking about this earlier, this notion of a party all of whose, you know, recognizable leaders are – you know, I can say this, are old.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BALZ: Right? You know, Bernie Sanders, Joe Biden, you know, Hillary Clinton, Elizabeth Warren...

KRISTOL: Nancy Pelosi.

BALZ: ...Nancy Pelosi...

KRISTOL: Chuck Schumer.

BALZ: ...Chuck Schumer.

KRISTOL: No, it's striking how – yeah.

BALZ: And it – so there's a younger generation, probably some quite talented people, but getting heard is difficult. Getting money will be difficult. Having a base of operation upon which to build a campaign will be difficult. How do they break through? But I think that that's – this generational fight is also one aspect of what the Democrats are going to have to contend with.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's interesting. I mean, I guess the conventional view is the out-party often nominates someone who's the opposite of the in-party president whom they don't – they want qualities that – the opposite of those they dislike in the president. I'm not sure which way that cuts in terms of –

BALZ: Yeah. [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: ...Trump, but I do think it cuts for youth. I sort of have the vague notion that somehow the dynamics of the Democratic primary – I mean, who knows. So much will depend on what happens in 2018 and who emerges and who doesn't and – but would benefit someone we don't know that well and the country doesn't know well at all...

BALZ: Yeah. I think that –

KRISTOL: ...who is a 47-year-old senator...

BALZ: I think that may well be right.

KRISTOL: ...or a 51-year-old governor and not, you know, one of the people who has run before.

BALZ: One of the problems the Democrats have is they don't have much of a bench among the governors. And, I mean, there are a number of capable senators who fit that profile that you're talking about, but not many governors. I mean, the two biggest state governors they have, one is Jerry Brown, who's also old. [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BALZ: Older than Bernie Sanders, and Andrew Cuomo from New York, and, you know, I don't know whether, you know, Andrew Cuomo would translate nationally effectively if he decided to become a candidate for president.

KRISTOL: Final point: I'll just take advantage of your having been here at Harvard with – I think, mixing with a lot of students over the – not that Harvard students are representative of anything and etcetera. They're – but I'm just curious. Anything strike you that's sort of surprising in terms of young people and their reaction to Trump, their reaction to politics, the young conservatives, the young liberals? I mean –

BALZ: You know, the young people that I've come in contact with, the undergraduates are basically through the Institute of Politics, and so that – there's a self-selection process that goes on. So I can't speak for the Harvard undergraduate population writ large, but I've been struck by a number of things. Obviously very bright, I mean, but that – you kind of assume that kids at Harvard are going to be pretty bright.

KRISTOL: They're good at faking it, I would say.

BALZ: [LAUGHS] Yeah.

KRISTOL: As a former Harvard student, yeah. [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: Alarmed by Trump. I mean, I think that there's no question that whether they're, you know, Democrats or Republicans, conservatives or liberals, Donald Trump concerns them. And they're not sure what to make of that, and they're not sure what the future is going to hold for their generation.

KRISTOL: Do you see any sub-contrary stream of – that's not the right word; whatever it is though – of people who are sort of thinking, "I don't know. Maybe there is a Trumpy future that I'm attracted to."

BALZ: Well, I think there's – there is, and I've heard recently of some stirrings that have gone on within the, kind of the Republican community of students, in which there is a kind of a Trumpian – you know, a view that Trump is good for us, and that we ought to, you know, that we ought to embrace that in a way that we haven't, the – as students.

And I don't know, you know, the degree to which that is going to take root. The other thing I would say is that they are – they're a marvelous cross-section of the new America. I mean, the diversity that they have, the, you know, the racial and ethnic diversity, the international-ness of them, and therefore the kind of experiences that they've already have are pretty extraordinary.

And I think it suggests that they can go in a variety of different directions: not simply in kind of the traditional ways we think of public service, of, you know, working in federal government or state government; but working for other institutions that are looking for ways –it sounds corny but true – to make the world a better place, and to make politics, you know, a bit more civil than it is today.

I have not had conversations with the students – and some of them, a number of them are freshmen, and are in their formative years – who come in with that sense of “I want to get into this hard-bitten world of, you know, calling the opponent terrible names and all of that.” I mean, they're looking for something other than that. And that, you know, within my mind, would be more fulfilling and a better use of the talents that they have.

KRISTOL: Be nice if they have that chance. Well, they will have a chance to make that happen, perhaps.

Dan Balz, thanks for taking the time to join me today.

BALZ: Thank you, Bill.

KRISTOL: And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]