

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Mike Murphy, Republican Political Strategist

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I: Trump and the Midterms (0:15 – 25:56)

KRISTOL: Hi, welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol. Very pleased to be joined today, once again, by my friend Mike Murphy.

MURPHY: Hello.

KRISTOL: Republican strategist, consultant, Hollywood writer, producer.

MURPHY: Infuriated gadfly.

KRISTOL: Man of all parts, right.

MURPHY: It's good to be here.

KRISTOL: It's good to have you. We have been discussing geo-strategy and politics, artificial intelligence this morning. But now we're actually going to talk about something – you know something about, at least, and I pretend to, which is politics.

MURPHY: Right, sure.

KRISTOL: You've done a ton of campaigns; you've been a shrewd analyst. I remember, when I first came to Washington one of the things I was most impressed by about you is I had all of these hopes and dreams and you told me: "Reality." You've always been reality based.

MURPHY: I'm a dark cloud that floats over one idea to the next. But yeah, no – look, politics is the art of what's real.

KRISTOL: So, let's just talk. We both have our views on Trump. People can go to find them in many, many places, but let's talk more about what is likely to happen in 2018, politically, and then we will move to 2019, 2020.

MURPHY: Sure.

KRISTOL: So here we are: it's early February, 2018. Republicans obviously control both houses of Congress. That is thought to be at risk. What to look for over the next – what is it? – eight, nine months until Election Day? What do you expect?

MURPHY: Well, you know, the future is always unmade, and my crystal ball is badly cracked because I'm one of the geniuses that said that "Trump is going to lose by a couple of million votes; he can't win." Well, he lost by a couple of million popular votes, but in the Electoral College, very narrowly, he was able to win.

KRISTOL: Right.

MURPHY: And by narrowly, I mean the margin in those states like Michigan and Wisconsin, a little less than Pennsylvania. So what do we think? Well, I'm a big fan – there are two theories of how to analyze this stuff. One is you look at the polls every two minutes. "Oh, the generic ballot has narrowed to 5.2." But, polls are a noise meter –

KRISTOL: "Trump gave a good State of the Union" –

MURPHY: Yeah, no, right. "The hair appears to be a little better now, new hairdresser. Our focus group – Dr. Frank Luntz says the hair is connecting to Connecticut." So you can get caught into the micro-noise, knowing that polls are essentially noise meters of what happened two weeks ago, too.

And they are not unimportant, but I always start with the theory of kind of "revert-to-mean" a little. And if you look at historical norms, which, again, can be over-rated. I always tell the joke, "If Napoleon had nuclear subs, we'd all be speaking French." So, the history thing can be oversold.

But, first off-year midterm elections of a new president are historically tough on that president.

KRISTOL: Especially when his party controls Congress.

MURPHY: Right, exactly. So, historically, that's a 23 or 24 seat average. I don't believe in getting into the specific numbers. It is generally a bad thing.

Second, how popular is the president? Normally, they lose seats when they are kind of average popular. If they are unpopular, it tends to have a magnifying effect. And we do know, from averaging all the polls together, that Donald Trump is the most unpopular first-year president in the history of polling, easily. There's nobody – he is first, second, and third place. So that is a bad thing.

KRISTOL: And that has been pretty steady and kind of unlikely to surge in the next seven, eight months, right?

MURPHY: You know, there could be a foreign intervening event. Martians land with the same hair and say, you know, "Only he understands us, and we are going to save the planet." But, assuming normalcy, the forces are pretty bad.

And then, I think the key question is always – and this was a question a lot of people asked at the beginning of the administration was – "Well, will he and his machine, his people, have the skills to leverage the ability to be president to become more popular?" And I think we can now declare that experiment in one year over. And it has told us that the more he governs, often the more trouble he gets into. He does not improve; he gets more unpopular, at least with the two-thirds of the country that is very suspicious of him.

Among the third of the country that likes him a lot, it just stays there. But it's hard to win national elections with a third of the country.

So, that means, I think, the headwinds against him, the normal headwinds, the revert-to-mean headwinds, the inputs that we have trusted through history, are pretty bad.

Now, we've got, what, nine or ten months left? There could be other events. You know, there could be new medications or something, and maybe he'll improve. But, if I had to bet, I would bet we are on a path – and, privately, this is a view shared by most of the smartest number counters I know in politics, and I would even say, some of the leadership in the Republican Party in Congress – it's better than – right now, I think the handicappers agree the chance of losing the House is better than keeping [it].

Now there has been a little hope-cloud lately because the generic question on polling about “which party are you for?” has narrowed a little bit. But what narrows can move, and the tax cut had some positive and negative press. It has gotten a little better. The polls we're looking at now that are better [are] two weeks old. Now we're in the stock-market volatility again. So we'll see.

But I think it is more stacked against him than for him. You see the retirements, too. That's the other point I would make. When in doubt, when people start choosing in their own career decisions, which guide a lot of Washington – too much in my view – to leave. When you see a lot of people building rafts who have inside knowledge who know their districts pretty well and are retiring, that is sign, too, of trouble.

The last thing is energy, and this is probably the most underrated thing. Off-year elections, 88, 90 million people vote. On-year election, close to 140 million. And both rise with population, but there's a big delta.

And the voters who vote in a presidential year, but not in the off-year, tend to be younger and more Democratic. So Republicans have done well in the off-year because our grumpy, old retired Army colonels all vote. And the Democrats do well in the presidential year because they get their millennials and poorer voters show up, etc., etc. So the Democrats have spent fortunes trying to get those presidential-year voters to show up in the off year, and it has almost always failed, despite the mythology of Eric Schmidt and all the magic.

This year, if you look at the special elections, which are fairly good canary-in-the-cage test, you had that massive turnout. So, we got a pile of dead canaries from the first couple of elections. So it is likely that some of these presidential-year Democrats will get engaged and show up, which is a thumb on the scale against us that could be part of the formula to cause us to lose the House.

KRISTOL: So, more likely than not, the Republicans lose the House.

MURPHY: If I had to bet today, I would take money. I would probably try to get slight odds, but I would bet money we lose the House.

KRISTOL: And still the playing field in the Senate? So many Democratic seats up and so few Republicans that you think Republicans, more likely than not, hold the Senate?

MURPHY: It is not impossible to lose the Senate, but I would be surprised. The problem is the opportunity cost. Because, McConnell's hedge, I think, was “run up this year.” We win a couple of seats, ideally, to be ready for 2020 where the map reverses [and] is kind of bad for us. Because, if you get kind of the apocalyptic view of this, which I am not sure is right but I think is not incredible, which is, this is a big cycle of mediocrity. So Trump will implode, and then a progressive person like Elizabeth Warren – God forbid – is elected as the anti-Trump, and we have a ten-year lost decade here. The Senate could be the hedge against crazy socialist ideas, if McConnell can run the numbers up enough this year to survive 2020 in the majority.

Now this year maybe a time in this environment where we don't win some of those places that we could gain seats with, and then we're looking at the meat grinder in 2020. So I don't think we lose the Senate, but my guess is we don't get to our full potential. But we'll see.

KRISTOL: And biggest extraneous events, obviously there are always the foreign crises. People forget the Cuban Missile Crisis had an effect on the '62 off-year election. And, right, Trump could handle something like that well or the opposite, obviously.

MURPHY: Right, it could go either way.

KRISTOL: Mueller, the Mueller Report, I think that is underestimated in Washington, in my sense. I mean, this thing is going to happen.

MURPHY: Yes.

KRISTOL: We don't know what it will be, but something will happen in the summer that will be pretty – I don't know if it's decisive or dispositive – but pretty significant in terms of our knowledge about both the campaign and the possible obstruction of justice.

MURPHY: Yeah, I don't know anything inside. I hear all of the rumors. I would just say this: one, I have a lot of faith in Mueller. I think he is Elliott Ness, and he's widely competent.

And I remember from my experience when I was a consultant for Christine Todd Whitman, we had this kerfuffle where Ed Rollins had been out late at a party the night before and then did a press breakfast early the next morning and started talking about African-American ministers and turnout money, and the next thing you know I got FBI guys in my office. And I had the amusing, but not at the time, experience of being hauled in front of a grand jury. And Evan, the prosecutor, waved my phone records in front of me and, "Did you call the governor at 8:01 the next day to commit a conspiracy?" And we were all cleared; there was no there, there. But I got a little taste of the investigatory power of the government. And it is the ultimate brute force operation.

So, I know that Donald Trump is going to go under an electron microscope. And everything I know about Donald Trump, and I know a fair bit about him going back to my Jersey days when he was operating in Atlantic City – that's where I first kind of encountered him – he is one of the *least* likely people to survive an electron microscope into his life, I believe, and his business life of anybody. So, my instincts are strongly that they are going to find some stuff.

Now, I am not sure what they will, what it will be. The Russian connections, you know, financial support to his enterprises – I mean, who knows? But there is a reason that his legal team is acting – I mean, there is an old, Southern political saying: "The guilty dog barks the loudest." And there's a lot of barking going on. But, we'll see. And I think it will be a big part of the inputs.

KRISTOL: So that is – I guess, how does it play out? So let's just say, enough is there that a fair number of Democrats, not just a fringe, say, "We've got to consider impeachment. We have to have hearings."

MURPHY: Right.

KRISTOL: And the Republicans probably say in August, July, or September or whenever this happens of 2018, "No, no, no; not enough there," or "Certainly not. We're not going to do it now." So then, don't you have, in effect, an off-year election that is kind of a quasi-impeachment referendum?

MURPHY: Yeah, I think, totally.

KRISTOL: Now, which party is that good for, or bad for, is an interesting question.

MURPHY: Well, this is interesting because the Democratic strategist class, most of them, are all like, “Don’t talk about impeachment, whatever you do; you are going to activate the Trump thing, scare away the middle.”

KRISTOL: It’s 1998, where Clinton bucked the headwinds, you know, because of impeachment.

MURPHY: Now, meanwhile, if the ace card the Democrats have to win is that massive intensity that’s organic, that they haven’t created – Trump created it, but it is rising up – you can’t control that. So, if a memo comes down from party leadership to the 600,000 people in downtown LA marching against, you know, the women’s march, which was, really the subtext was anti-Trump, saying, “Hey, you can’t be for impeachment,” that’s – they’re just going to throw it away, tear it up.

So the Democrats really want to be tamping down their own forces when they can’t control them. In fact, what they ought to do is amplify that intensity because that is their hole card and turnout to maybe win the majority.

So, I think it is an illusion to think they have a choice. I think there is no way the midterms won’t be a referendum on Trump. And Trump will make it – he’ll be jumping around in a bunny suit, who knows? But I guarantee that Trump will not cede the spotlight to anybody. So, I think it will be about a referendum. I think they’ll be clever when they finally agree they have to do it. It will be “Fire Trump, Fix Healthcare” or something. But it will be about Trump; it will be about firing, investigating, *impeaching* him. And I don’t think it will hurt ‘em that much because it is what their wave wants. Though, I think they are very reluctant to do it.

I was on one of the morning shows and they had me next to Congressman Deutsch, Democrat who has run their campaign committee, and Senator Merkley of Oregon. I asked them both, “Are you going to run on impeachment?” “No! Humana, humana, never that!” And Merkley afterward, who is a nice guy, was kind of like – I could just see his head counting all of the phone calls he’s going to get from the activists in Oregon – “What the hell do you mean you’re against impeachment,” you know? So, this will be their conundrum.

Our problem is we’re going to run on a tax cut, which has some upside. We’ll see, it has to be litigated. The real question is will the economy heat up enough to cause wage growth. That is the thing people feel. That’s why, you know, we’ve got full employment now, which on paper looks great, but you take a poll, what’s number one? Jobs and the economy, because they’re not making any money, in real spending power. And I don’t know what else we’re going to have to talk about, maybe a big infrastructure plan. That’s a lot of what the White House has to do in the next ten months, is come up with some stuff we can run on beyond the obvious, “Pelosi is terrible.”

KRISTOL: I think the other question – and we’ll move on from 2018 – is if you’re a swing voter, and you’re sort of anti-Trump but you sort of like your moderate-Republican congressman or congresswoman, in northern Virginia, where I live, or in Philadelphia suburbs, or in parts of California they are still, for all that it’s a Democratic state, they are quite a lot of Republican members of Congress from California, do you–

MURPHY: There are quite a lot of Republican donors, too, who are now paying higher income taxes. That’s going to be a thing.

KRISTOL: But do you think, you know, my congressman has done a good job, I am going to re-elect him. That person has been there before Trump; that person isn’t particularly Trump-y. If I don’t like Trump, it’s not a problem; I like some of the policies. Or do you think, oh, we need a Democratic House to check Trump, which is, does the national message or instinct overwhelm the sort of local affection for your, you know, repeatedly re-elected member of Congress?

MURPHY: Right.

KRISTOL: I guess the history suggests the national wave –

MURPHY: Is always better.

KRISTOL: Trumps –

MURPHY: Yeah, the calculating voter of, let's see, I am going to strategically keep my guy on the post-office committee while – it is basically, “Do we like the guy we got or is it time to send a message?” So, historically, they've sent a message.

And the tragedy for kind of pragmatic conservatives like me and you is that some of the people we admire most in the House are from some of the harder districts to win, and they are going to be the first casualties here. The first ten to go will be seven or eight people that we think ought to be there, but they are in the toughest districts. So, you can have a little bit of a delta where, eh, I don't like Trump, but it might be worth four or five points. But if you have a ten-foot wall of water coming, then I don't think it's as surgical as that.

Now, maybe in the new era, where we have the internet and so much more information and people study up, it could happen. It makes logical sense, but history shows people don't normally vote that way. They decide, am I going to send the president a flower or am I going to kick him in the ass?

KRISTOL: So let's assume this outcome happens. I mean, how much does it change things? And one could argue that either way. I mean, if you want the revert-to-the-mean argument: Clinton lost everything in '94; Obama lost the House in 2010. A lot of hubbub, a lot of readjustment on the part of, certainly, the Clinton White House, maybe less on the part of the Obama White House. Some changes in policy.

MURPHY: Right.

KRISTOL: But, ultimately, they both got re-elected, and, you know, it didn't interfere, in a sense, with their progress – and the party didn't fundamentally redefine itself because of losing a mid-term election.

MURPHY: It was kind of business as usual. “Okay, change it up.” Well, who knows? But is Trump as flexible as a Clinton or an Obama to adjust his course, or is he the atomic clock of what he is and will double down? His instinct so far has been to double down.

Trump is, in my view, never left the Republican primary. You know, it's all about the base. And the disease of the Republican Party is we treat base voters like swing voters, when, in fact, is you want to put the base under some pain to attract other people to get to a majority number. But, Trump is *my people*: “It's my people versus the rest of them. Give me a rally in Alabama; I'm going to talk to my people.” So, my guess is he'll just double down on that and he won't make those adjustments.

The second thing is, if the Democrats win the majority in the House, from a Republican point of view, I think two things will happen. One is, we will meet the Democratic Caucus, which is, they've got their cranks too. The Democratic House Caucus is not the cutting edge of the best in the Democratic Party. So that'll be interesting how the country kind of reacts to that.

Second, they are going to go hell-bent to impeach and harass Trump, and they'll have the power of the majority in the House to do it. They will be able to grab and drive the budget process. And the Freedom Caucus will be – they'll look like the parliament of Gandhi compared to the budget fights we are going to have.

So, I think it will be very, very turbulent. And, again, when the president sees opposition, he doesn't do the Clintonian thing of let the steam out and kind of meet them halfway and diffuse it to take their energy away. He goes right at them.

So, look, and this is all crazy speculation. But if I had to guess – and, again, I've got a crystal ball with a huge shattered thing having predicted Trump would lose. But I will say – footnote: 2.9 million votes, we have never had an Electoral College difference of a big loss like that.

But if I had to guess, I would say the president will react badly to losing the House, and he will immediately blame the House Republicans for losing. "If they had only listened to me. They didn't build the wall fast enough. They are too tied in the swamp. I tried to save them, those idiots. In fact, I don't need any of these people." And he'll get back to the campaign where he kind of runs against everybody and isolate himself even more. And it will be "the D.C. swamp Republicans who screwed up, and now I got these Democrats."

And I wouldn't be surprised if Trump starts talking about running as a third party candidate because I think the party will react badly to losing the House. Because the whole Republican apparat – I don't mean the establishment with striped watchbands. I mean the conservative establishment, the Ted Cruz establishment, the regular business establishment – everybody, it will shrink. Congressmen are going to look at empty seats where their friends used to be. They are going to move into small minority offices and they have no power. Some of them will be happy with that. They will just put out press releases with conspiracy theories and stuff, but others won't. And the machine around it won't. And the party apparat in the states that has kind of gone along with Trump – "Well, he's a winner." Well, not anymore. Now there's a cost.

The an analogy I use is the Tony Soprano analogy: If your mob boss suddenly – You're no longer getting paid, and all of your friends are going to jail, you decide time for a new mob boss, and all of a sudden Tony vanishes. So I think – that could be the Leninist that Trump has turned me into – that could be the big event that starts to switch things. And Trump will feel that, and he'll react to it, and he'll react by attacking.

So I think Trump isolated, talking about his "make America great, third party, I am going to sweep them all out" presidential thing could be the news out of the election from Trump. That could be his reaction as opposed to the Clinton and Obama strategic reaction.

KRISTOL: And you could have, I think, don't you think, the House Republicans will be a more conservative caucus?

MURPHY: Yeah.

KRISTOL: More Trump-y kind of caucus. They could double down on their conspiracy theories. The left wing of the Democratic conference will drive impeachment, and it really could be quite a scene in Washington. It'll make this year look – I don't know what the implications of that are exactly.

MURPHY: Well, civil war, I think. Because some Republicans will say, "Oh, my God, we're in a death spiral." You know, "this is terrible." Others will say, "I'm with you, Donald; let's blow it all up."

KRISTOL: Yeah, we just didn't go far enough.

MURPHY: Right, exactly.

KRISTOL: We accommodated Paul Ryan, we –

MURPHY: Arrest them all.

KRISTOL: We were betrayed by Murkowski and Collins.

MURPHY: Right, exactly: “We need a military parade every week,” you know, “Why only one?” And then the Senate guys who are looking at 2020 with a lot of guys, you know, candidates up, are really going to freak out.

KRISTOL: Yeah, so let’s talk about that. The Senate Republicans are in a different place than the House Republicans. I’m struck by that when you talk to them privately. They’re like, “Oh man, we are making this work so far. We are getting our judges, and we are getting some regulatory relief, and we are appointing some good people, some of our buddies are getting jobs as assistant secretary for this and that, but –“

MURPHY: Yeah. No, no, they are all doing the Franz von Papen thing, which is, “We can manage him,” wily German chancellor – “Yeah, he’s a beer-hall politician, and he’s a little crazy, but we have shiny objectives we distract him with, don’t worry.”

But, you know, you go to the meeting and there used to be four of those guys, and what happened, there’s an empty chair. “Oh, it didn’t turn out well for him.” You know, so the monster is breaking out of the case a little bit. Right, they all act like Baghdad parking attendants, you know: their hands are shaking with the key.

But they know, particularly if this year is bad generically and they don’t get some of the wins that we ought to be able to get, that 2020 could be really, really bad. And also in the Senate, there’s some ex-governors there. There are people who actually kind of want to get some stuff done. They’re actually, because they are all supremos, talk to some of the other side. They know each other. It’s what the Senate is supposed to be, a little more grown up thing. Well, the House is a hockey fight.

KRISTOL: Right.

MURPHY: So, I think how they act is going to be interesting, particularly if the Dems aren’t making big impeachment moves. They are thinking, all right, we can be the Trump defenders and swirl down the 2020 drain. Or, if the Mueller report is persuasive enough to a couple of them to take action – I mean, there are a million scenarios. But the pressure on them will increase because their own political careers are going to look dimmer and dimmer into ’20.

So, I don’t know. I think, as you said, it will be very combustible. ’19 is going to be the biggest year in politics in a long time, because ’19 is the primary season for who we pick in each party, which is all in the first quarter of ’20.

KRISTOL: So let’s get to that side of ’19, which is the ’20 election side of it as opposed to the Congress side. I mean, I have this instinct, too, that things could happen. Maybe in the Senate – for all of the bipartisanship is dead, couldn’t Susan Collins and Joe Manchin and people get together and decide that they want to work together and be an alternative to this terrible Trump versus House Democrats fight.

MURPHY: Yeah. Well, you could have a unity caucus. I mean, this would be – this is right out of an Alan Drury novel.

KRISTOL: Those are excellent novels, which I want to recommend to all of our viewers.

MURPHY: These were all ancient.

KRISTOL: They were great, though. I loved them when I was a kid.

MURPHY: You should really pitch Geritol as a sponsor because this whole thing is like – there is a TV network called DuMont and it had all of these –

KRISTOL: The Ed Sullivan Show, yeah, right.

MURPHY: Exactly. You've modernized things. It's now in color here.

The idea could be that, all right, the House has gone impeachment crazy. Do four or five of the Gang of Eight break away and declare they are going to be independents for a year and try to have a new Senate leader to navigate that in some unity caucus?

KRISTOL: Split the chairmanships.

MURPHY: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It would be great drama. Now the institutional world will blow up. But, you've got some 70-year-old patriots there who may not run for reelection in 2020. So, I don't know. The bottom line is it will be a combustible, and laying atop of it will be the presidential primary in both parties will begin.

KRISTOL: So one last point on the Congressional side: What if they hold that? What if Republicans, Cuban Missile Crisis situation, handle it well in October – I think that's true, in '62, they came back and won 10, 15 seats they weren't going to win, I think people now think – and they hold the House. So there you are. Trump says, "You know what? I beat all of these enemies, everyone is going after me and here we are, we lost a few seats but we held the House, we held the Senate." What's the dynamic then? Just more of the same at that point?

MURPHY: Yeah, I think so. You know, there's always inertia just to break into the same – we've got trench warfare because that's what the incentives are. You know, one side is watching one cable TV channel tells them they are right, especially in prime time. The other has got its own channel around the clock telling them they are right. And it's the kind of fun sport of just slogging away.

KRISTOL: Don't you think the Democrats go a little crazy, though, with having had this fantastic chance to win one of the two bodies?

MURPHY: Sure.

KRISTOL: I mean, Bush held – won back the Senate and held the House in 2002, post 9/11. And I don't think it's an accident that Howard Dean took off in 2003. The Democrats, who everyone assumed were going to be a very establishment, Clinton/Gore alternative to Bush, suddenly Howard Dean is the frontrunner and really was the frontrunner for quite a while. The Dems really could go further left if they fail in '18, it seems to me.

MURPHY: Right. Well one, there is a symmetry to it. There's going to be the force of Trump-ism. There will be an anti-Trump-ism, which is some of the same grievance politics on the left, in a different way. You won't have the big racist stuff that Trump does. And then there would be disappointment if the dream doesn't come true. And then it will be – you saw a flash of it over Schumer when it was perceived they "lost the shutdown" thing. And that will be sweep them all in. So some of the new-face Democratic candidates, like Dean was, I think generically have some support – let alone if there is a perceived Washington super-failure of some kind because, expectations.

Their problem with polls are, the way the news business works is they are economically incentivized – particularly on television, but on the internet and everywhere else – they treat every day as the biggest day ever.

KRISTOL: Right.

MURPHY: Every day is the biggest day of the campaign; every day is the biggest day of the presidency. So today, “A new poll: Democrats might lose,” you know, in February. And then the phones light up. So we’re in this feedback loop where nobody waits for the real thing. And the truth is, it would just be speculation until then, because the only mark-to-market thing in politics is Election Day; everything else is hot air. So the truth is, we kind of have to wait.

KRISTOL: Okay, but I think we do –

MURPHY: Says the hot-air merchant, right here, but yeah.

KRISTOL: Well, I was going to say. I believe that is called “a conversation” and not hot air.

MURPHY: True. We’re in a rarified thing here in this secret location.

KRISTOL: Exactly. But the day after Election Day ’18, it will be a new moment. I mean, everybody now is navigating this congressional thing. I personally feel it that way. I sort of like this person to win, but maybe it would be better if the Democrats won the House. But on the third hand, I’d like the Republicans to hold the Senate because they would confirm some good judges. It’s like – it’s confusing.

MURPHY: There will be a massive new reality.

KRISTOL: Suddenly, you are looking down the pike at 2020 and it’s a different world.

MURPHY: It’ll pick up the whole thing and turn it upside down, and there would be a lot of breathless screaming of “what happened?” When it’s actually kind of, you can see it coming. And it will have a traumatic effect on the Republican Party and the president, and how they react to that will be the story, on our side, of ’19. And how the Democrats will react to it will be the story of what the future of their party will be.

II. Looking Ahead to 2020 (25:56 – 57:11)

KRISTOL: So now let’s just speak of the Democrats, because that is so under covered. How – the conventional wisdom, I would say, among our friends in Washington is they’re going left. All of the energy is on the left. It’s a little bit of a reassuring thing for Republicans and conservatives to tell themselves because it makes the Democrats seem less electable, perhaps, with a less electable nominee in 2020. Do you buy that? Is that what happens necessarily?

MURPHY: Well, I think the progressives have the ideological muscle now, and you see it.

But, I think more than anything else, I think people make a mistake in presidential politics where they look at candidates, when, really, look at what the voters are looking for. I call it the wave. So there will be a big progressive wave. Now, who rides that wave with their surfboard? Is it Bernie again? A lot of downside there. Is it a new Bernie? Is it Elizabeth Warren? But that is out there, that force, and that will find somebody ideologically.

But I think the bigger thing is they are going to want a fighter. They think Trump is a street fighter. Trump has done this kind of Rasputin mind trick to them, which is, “All the polls, [Nate] Silver, said I was going to lose, and I won. So poison doesn’t work on me. I can’t be killed.” You see that now: “Oh, they are going to win the midterms.” I mean, Trump has a great Jedi mind trick on the media and the left that he is this super invincible guy, which I think is all bluff. But mark to market, wait for the voting; we’ll find out.

So some scrappy, even House person comes out of the impeachment hearings. I think the power for a non-Washington face – I think Eric Garcetti, the mayor of LA, is underrated because he is a telegenic

new face from the West, nothing to do with Washington; he's generational. I think he will have a moment. Now, whether or not he can ride that moment to the nominations is a big question. The second look at what he has done in LA, not that impressive. But he is the fresh new wave, which I think would be very powerful.

But whoever they are, they are going to want a brawler. And then you got Biden who is sitting in polls now at about 20 percent because everybody knows him. That is a pretty weak number for somebody everybody knows, but he could be the fighter. I think "progressive" is only one factor. I think "fighter" is even bigger.

KRISTOL: Which is contrary, I would say, to another version of a kind of revert-to-mean sort of argument. Which is, you always select the person who is the opposite of the incumbent you don't like, and so Democrats will go to a calm, reassuring, steady hand on the wheel to reassure the public after this turmoil of Trump. It doesn't sound like you're –

MURPHY: I think that is more the Republican thing, to kind of get over the lost weekend here. This has been very exciting for Republicans, maybe a little less excitement – which is why I have always thought Romney, on paper, could have another bite at the apple.

KRISTOL: I'll want to come back to that and not just leave that floating out there. But let's stay on the Democrats for another two minutes.

MURPHY: I told Mitt I'd shut up about that. Not that he has any plan to do anything other than be a good senator for Utah.

KRISTOL: Of course not. So we have to end this in at about 20 minutes because a top-secret call with him.

MURPHY: No, no.

KRISTOL: What's the Utah area code there?

MURPHY: Fake news, Bill. Fake news. But the Democrats, I think, will want somebody who is a fighter.

KRISTOL: And don't you think generational, maybe? I think younger. Do they really want Biden?

MURPHY: So I don't think they want the super competent, because they think that's what they always offer and lose.

KRISTOL: Right.

MURPHY: We always have the polite, nice. They want face-ripper McGee, who is also acceptable to the progressive wing. And the primaries will create that candidacy. And we don't really know yet. It will be wide open, I think.

KRISTOL: It could be someone young, and someone – I think one point you make – I myself agree with so I will repeat it. But I mean, people look at the current name I.D.: "Well it has to be one of these, either someone super well-known or famous, or super wealthy so he could self-fund." I don't buy that at all. It could be someone we barely – I mean, Howard Dean really could be, Howard Dean who wins it seems to be, it could be, or Jimmy Carter. I mean, it does happen sometimes, right?

MURPHY: I think it could both be true. It's an advantage to be what we call in Hollywood a "pre-aware title," which is something pre-famous. That is what Trump was. Even if all he did was teach Gary Busey how to work a sno-cone machine on TV every night, it made him the can-do guy.

So that is a big advantage now. Oprah, you know – that is worth something. But the process itself is historically designed to elevate somebody to super power. And the impeachment moment in '19 for a crusading Bobby Kennedy-type prosecuting Democrat. Or a candidate out on the road doing it, who is compelling and new, that is rocket fuel for somebody. So there are different flavors of rocket fuel. I do think you're going to need rocket fuel. You are going to need a moment to be: *that's the person*.

KRISTOL: And I suppose if impeachment fails, either in the House or no conviction in the Senate, you could also imagine a Howard Dean-type rebellion *against* this leadership of either the House or the Senate. Dean rebelled, obviously, against the Iraq War vote cast by Kerry, Clinton, and everyone else.

MURPHY: The more they punt or fail, the more an outside-Washington Democrat I think will – and that's why I have my eye on Garcetti out in California – will be attractive.

KRISTOL: Interesting.

Okay, on the Republican side. So there's Trump, he's – let's assume they lose the House but hold the Senate. He's sitting where he is in the polls, 40 percent generally, 38 percent, but 65, 70, 75 approval among Republicans. Is there a significant chance of him being denied the re-nomination?

MURPHY: You know, again, I think it is more likely he'll be driven from office and not run than any other scenario. Or he'll get tired of it. "I want my old meatloaf recipe at Trump Tower."

And remember, he can save face by this third-party thing. He can say, "I am foregoing the Republican process, don't need it. We're going to build the MAGA party, and buy your new red hat because it now has a special flag on the side." 1995, made in China. And then he'll announce his streaming network he is going to carry his campaign on and he can get back in the fun stuff.

Then he can say "Unbelievable. The swamp fixed it with both parties to rig the ballot so I can't get ballot access because they knew I was going to win, and they were afraid of what we were going to do together. So I am not going to run because they denied it and we all knew I would win, everybody knows I would win. And so instead, I am going to pick the winner with my endorsement." You know, the media will fall for this and cover him every minute, and he'll be back to being the biggest voice in the campaign but no responsibility.

So I actually think that could be an exit strategy for him. But, assuming I am totally wrong and he runs again, I think a Kasich or somebody may try to take him out in the primaries. My guess is he'll slog to a victory – not Kasich but Trump – even in the damaged state he could be afterward. Maybe others, but I think probably not. And then he'll be the nominee, and my guess is a Democrat will probably prevail.

If you re-ran in 2020, if you re-run the election we had just on demography alone, he'd lose. Let alone if he will be in worse shape, which I think he will. And the party will be divided. There could be an independent protest candidate at that point, you know; there are a million permutations.

KRISTOL: I want to get to the independent possibility in a minute. But, on the Republican side, I mean, it seems to me there's a Kasich scenario, Romney – someone will run. I think that is probably true. Because even if only 15 or 20 percent of the party is against him, that's not nothing.

MURPHY: It will be a reverse Ashcroft.

KRISTOL: Yeah, *at least* it will be Ashcroft/Nixon or McCloskey; it could be McCarthy against Johnson, depending on how the world looks. McCarthy looked like a protest candidate who became a real candidate because the world moved in a certain way in 1967 and early '68.

MURPHY: And it's always more fragile than Washington thinks. Washington always assesses people "But, you know, it's always got to be a senator." The little guy from the state can never – when in fact, this whole thing is built on graham crackers, and if you catch the public imagination in a time of tension, stuff can happen. So it's a very shifting-sand kind of environment.

But, I don't know if Kasich as much as – you know, I'd vote for him in a primary against Trump, but I'm not sure he's that thing.

KRISTOL: And that's re-litigating 2016 in a way which – I mean, if you could design, which you can't, kind of the candidate who could most likely take Trump on in the primary, I think it would be someone who *wouldn't* have been NeverTrump like us. It would be someone who voted for him, tried to work with him maybe, a member of Congress or a governor, was cordial, reached out a little bit. Conceivably, someone who even worked in his administration at some remove. But just says, "Hey, look, I mean, he did some good things. I respect him; I'm not one of these guys like Murphy and Kristol who spend all of their time"–

MURPHY: You're shattering my secret plan. I was going to file in the New Hampshire primary under the slogan "Eliminate the Middle Man," and run for president. Now you've talked me out of it.

KRISTOL: You can still do that. But that could be a diversion from the real candidate. But no, the real candidate, wouldn't it be – I don't know who this is, but someone who is sort of more in sorrow than in anger says – and I do think there's a certain number – I've run into people like this in the last couple of months – you say, "Are you pretty happy with Trump?" "Yes, Bill, you're too harsh," blah, blah. "We've got to give him a chance." "Are you fine with another four years? Let's say these first four work out adequately, you know. You want another four? "He'll be 75." "Ehh, geez"–

MURPHY: No, there's fatigue.

KRISTOL: So you could get – this is like the Nikki Haley scenario – I'll put a name on it. Not that I've, I want to make clear – as you admit – I've not discussed this with Nikki Haley. You know, she resigns in '19 having done a great job as UN Ambassador, and sort of Trump makes a couple of errors and there's a "draft Haley" thing. And she's worked loyally for Donald Trump; she is not some lunatic who was anti-Trump. But we don't really – "Can't we get a little change of course here?" You know what I mean? That would be an interesting scenario. It's a little tricky to pull off, because you're sort of –

MURPHY: It is the inside-out kind of thing.

KRISTOL: Right, it's the – Coups are always – the successful coups in military dictatorships are usually led by someone who was part of the regime, not by the – not usually, but sometimes – opponents of the regime.

MURPHY: No, no, no. Acceptable to make the pitch.

I do think post-meltdown, if we lose the House, there will be a Trump taint.

KRISTOL: So that cuts the other way; that's fair enough, yeah. Well, that's good – okay, that's better for your candidacy, then.

MURPHY: So I think – Well, yeah, I am planning to –

KRISTOL: I'll be campaign chair. Man, it will be huge in New Hampshire; it will be unbelievable.

MURPHY: We'll make a funny documentary and then I will wind up in jail somewhere watching the military parade being – you know, in a steel cage being driven down at the end behind a particularly flatulent horse. The president personally ordered this.

KRISTOL: Trump looking at you, you know.

MURPHY: The problem with the parade is we're going to have to come up with a Trump salute. I think it's a hair swirl thing – like a "hail Caesar," you know.

KRISTOL: There won't be a parade, right? Would you bet right now? This is the news of the week.

MURPHY: The President of the United States orders a parade, how do you stop? I think it will be – hopefully it will be in the Pentagon parking lot and go around twice.

KRISTOL: And it will be November 11th; they'll make it kind of 100 years after the end of World War I, so it's not really a pathetic Juan Peron, Trump parade.

MURPHY: But the other way, in the anti-Trump thing, could be "grown-up" versus "drama." And it's like let's get back to competence again, particularly if we have some foreign policy near misses. Because right now it's all opportunity cost. TPP was an incredibly big geo-political defeat, I believe.

KRISTOL: The Asia trade deal, yeah – terrible.

MURPHY: Because it was a political deal to isolate China. And Trump and Hillary ran against it as a Chinese trade deal. The biggest lie in American politics.

But let's say we have an artillery duel in South Korea – forget the nukes – and Trump lobs a cruise missile into their sub base where they're trying to build a missile sub. And some Nor-Ko [North Korean] general throws a couple of shells at Seoul, and then we have one bad day. So it's not a nuclear disaster, but there are 500 dead South Koreans and there's red alert everywhere. You think the stock market – The whole [computer] chip, you know, our modern economy, the production footprint in South Korea is tremendous. The disruption would be huge. Just the fear of it, that would take a couple of thousand points off the Dow. It could cascade.

KRISTOL: People have not really thought about what would a 6,000 point drop in the Dow look like.

MURPHY: I know really shrewd investors who carry heavy currency hedges on South Korea just for this thing, because nobody has figured out that the microchip-production footprint there, particularly for memory, is enormous. And that's the whole world supply chain.

So anyway, we have a couple of near misses where it's like "Ooh, thank God he was at Mar Lago and the generals were able to make the plane not take off for two days and handle this." That could hurt.

Or, we have a win. You know, one of the best things you can say about the Trump administration, and as a critic, I say this all the time: he's done a far better job crushing ISIS than Obama ever did.

KRISTOL: Yes.

MURPHY: Much more success, objective success. Now, I think it was more an output of the Trump administration as a thing. He turned the military loose to do what they do. But still, you got to give him that. So maybe other things will happen and he'll credit for it. So you can't rule out –

KRISTOL: Or North Korea. We could have a lucky, you know – we have a lucky or successful thing, the place collapses, we do have some pinpoint strikes that work –

MURPHY: We avoid a war in China when it does collapse. I mean, a couple of moves they have to make there, but yes.

The bottom line, though, is he's a phenomenally unpopular president under political stress. That generally doesn't work out well for second terms. But, in between now and then, a million unknowns.

KRISTOL: But you think on the Republican side, it's as likely the steady old-hand becomes the alternative to Trump as opposed to generational change, young Nikki Haley, young Ben Sasse?

MURPHY: Those forces are all there, so – And there's no lack of ambition. I think, like a pack of wolves, if they smell enough weakness, a bunch of them will jump in. So I don't really see the lone Kasich challenger theory. Because if he [Trump] is strong enough to scare everybody out, he'll be strong enough to beat a John Kasich. But if he's weak enough – either driven out of office, or the third-party meltdown thing, or he's limping through – then a bunch of wolves are going to run. I think you're going to have an old, grownup wolf, which the economic forces will like.

KRISTOL: Mitt Romney, let's just say.

MURPHY: Well, I've said the Romney scenario just because: [He was] right about Putin, right about Obama, right about Trump. And he's no drama; a nice boring presidency of competence. But I don't think Marco Rubio has lost his map to New Hampshire. Tom Cotton. Pence. I mean, there are a bunch of these guys who would think, *why not me?*

KRISTOL: Yeah, it would be something to have a multi-candidate challenge to an incumbent president. But, again, we're not used to it, but of course it has happened. And '68 did have Bobby Kennedy getting in once McCarthy showed he was vulnerable.

I think that's a very good point you make. People kind of assume – I've been in so many discussions of this, just people sitting around Washington, especially the anti-Trump people: what's going to happen? It's all like, well, there will be a moment where everyone decides, "Well, this is the Trump alternative." And then everyone else says, "Okay, well that's the decision; he's announced." And then everyone else goes away as if – you're right – as if Ben Sasse and Tom Cotton and six other people can't –

MURPHY: What if Trump comes in third in New Hampshire? I'm sure Kasich is thinking he is McCarthy: "I can beat Trump in New Hampshire. That's all I got to do. I'll drive Trump from the race." But the shame ray doesn't work on Trump. But the embarrassment?

If two guys beat him there and then beat him somewhere else, then it would flock. Because Trump is – Trump right now rules by kind of – they don't see another scenario. The minute another live scenario pops up, particularly if we lose the House, and the machine has been badly harmed, and careers have been harmed, which – it's all career over country, apparently, now – then I think he could fold really quickly.

KRISTOL: And some senators start retiring, announcing retirements. The conventional wisdom is, "Oh my God, the Senate is going too." So much for all the advantages of having Trump appointing conservative judges, at that point.

MURPHY: So the most likely scenario, I think, for '19 is we have the Chinese civil war with the 20 warlords running around, and it's complete chaos. Panicking senators, impeaching Democrats, Trump even more unhinged under all the pressure, Melania with her divorce team and the tabloids fire with that. Fourteen guys hanging around New Hampshire thinking about running. Democrats smelling the presidency, having an epic battle between the Socialist wing and the more pragmatic wing. This thing, it's going to be a 1968.

KRISTOL: So if you have that degree of chaos, and that feels right to me, and I think it's also contrarian in a good way, in the sense that people are much too – having had a bunch of fairly normal elections, re-

elections, you know, '04, '12, '96, – well, except for '96 – two-party races, conventional, incumbent is moderately popular so he wins. It just feels to me that we're ready for like a '68 situation.

MURPHY: Yeah, I mean just all the forces are there. And then what if we have an economic, the cycle continues and the economy slows down a little?

The other thing is, we are heading for some – my God, I sound like such a doom and gloomer – I am ultimately an optimist about the country. But, you know, we've been solving every problem like Democratic appropriators. We are spending money like crazy. The tax cut was expensive; this new budget deal if it goes through will be expensive. Entitlements continue to compound. So, what happens when we start looking at real fiscal issues –

KRISTOL: And interest rates go up.

MURPHY: Yeah, and interest rates normalize and we can't afford to fund the deficit anymore. So there's no – This halcyon moment we're in is not guaranteed, and it could hit during the '19, '20 cycle when things start to revert-to-mean and we have real problems.

KRISTOL: So that reminds me of Ross Perot, who went from nowhere – people forget how nowhere Ross Perot was – in this would be the equivalent of, what? 1990. I was in the Bush White House then, and we knew each other then. I mean, he was a respected businessman.

MURPHY: I kept trying to say, "We could lose!" and I remember getting thrown out of the building.

KRISTOL: Totally, yeah. Yeah, that was in '91. But at this point, it's not even '91 yet. I mean, Perot was not even particularly politically active, as I recall. He was a great sponsor and backer of veterans and a kind of philanthropist and a very successful businessman.

But if you had said Ross Perot is going to be leading in the polls in '92 against George H.W. Bush and some serious Democrat, then drop out and come back, and still get 19 million votes?

Which does raise for me then the independent candidate question. If it's so much chaos, and if 2019 is, in the voter's minds, a slightly unhinged Trump administration on the one hand, and a slightly unhinged Democratic House in total warfare, and gridlock, and terrible rhetorical fusillades both ways. I mean isn't there room, more room than usual for an independent candidate in 2020?

MURPHY: Well, your point about Perot is a good one, because that's why I say look at the demand, not so much the candidates. Because the demand will find somebody – and then, whoosh, up they go. And then the media amplifier finds them and it all reinforces itself.

There's a tremendous appetite for an independent path, and there has been for a while in American politics. Generally, when we have a big wrong-track election and people are unhappy, they go find a George Wallace or a John Anderson – you know, there's somebody.

Now, they never get majority vote. And one of the problems they have got – it's kind of like a French vanilla ice cream thing: it becomes a niche deal. But there's energy for it. The problem is our system is very, very aligned to two parties. It is hard ballot access.

KRISTOL: Now, ballot access is more manageable – I've looked at this in 2016. If you gave me \$20 million dollars on January 1st of 2020, I think you could do ballot access.

MURPHY: I would take that bet. I have looked at it, too. You could get on a lot of states. Well, Bloomberg looked at it too and thought it was, with unlimited resources.

KRISTOL: And Perot got on every state, basically.

MURPHY: But don't underestimate the ability of the incumbent political system to make it hard. Legislators can –

KRISTOL: Yes, you have to go to court in the party in North Carolina, Texas. You'd have a couple of states that are very early and difficult –

MURPHY: You've got partisan attorney generals.

KRISTOL: No, I agree. You would have to have a massive –

MURPHY: So let's just say we disagree. It's either hard or extremely near impossible, somewhere in that spectrum. So that's a problem.

And then the second thing is, alright, you win. [Then] you go to the House and you tell the Republicans and Democrats to put themselves out of business in the Electoral College vote.

KRISTOL: So you have to just win 270 votes, which is hard.

MURPHY: Yeah, I'm working on a start-up idea in the blockchain voting area, because that will allow internet voting to actually work, which hasn't worked yet. They tried it in Estonia and Putin kept winning. It was easy to hack. But the blockchain technology and cryptography could make it work in the future. And once you have that, you can start to break down the distribution rules and have it.

But in the short-term, even though there is a huge appetite for it, I think it's hard to make happen. So I think there probably will be one. Whether or not it can be successful to win a plurality in our current system with the Electoral College, I can't see it. But you know, I have been wrong before.

One day it will happen because the demand will be met, but we need a few leaps and some changes on how the self-interested parties that run this now for themselves, how they can be forced or evolved into a thing that opens up the channel. Trump could be it, though.

Again, I still think Trump could be the big third-party person. That will be interesting, because the Republicans, some of them will want to put him on the ballot, and the Democrats will all not want to. Although the Democrat strategists argue split the vote, it's fine.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

MURPHY: So, again, part of the '19 chaos – What's the pragmatic point of view on that if you try something?

KRISTOL: And if the ballot access turns out to be somewhat manageable, you start launching lawsuits in 2019 that knock down a couple of the earliest obstacles and the biggest numbers of petitions you have to get and stuff. What kind of candidate is the best alternative to Trump and the likely Democratic nominee, assuming Trump is the Republican nominee? Is there a –

MURPHY: Well, in times of stress, there's always an attraction for a highly competent technocrat. You know, I don't think the Bloomberg thing is over. He'd have one more in him if there was a path, I think, just as an observer. I've done work for them on some pro-Republican stuff they've done.

But I think somebody like that. You know, the business savior; there are probably eight or nine CEOs who think they ought to be president. It's funny, I think I said this on the last time we talked, but out here

everybody talks about Jamie Dimon, and out in LA, Bob Iger. But a savior from – it's kind of the Wendell Willkie model.

And then, you know, maybe somebody who has a political movement they think could turn into a third party. That would be the argument for Trump if he tried to be a third-party person. Bernie, credibly, could do it. It would fail for all the same distribution reasons, but it would be real if he did; he's got a following. The thing I worry about –

KRISTOL: I guess you need a big issue, right? Or you don't need one, but it would be helpful.

MURPHY: Or identity politics, that is the other way. Somebody tries to do it like that. And I think that glue would be a little weak in the third party, but it's credible.

You know, there's an argument, too, that as dysfunctional as our system is, the majority two-party thing forces coalition glue, which is not a bad thing. I have worked in Latin America where, literally, the beer brands run somebody and finish 8th and 14th. You know, there are 17 candidates and you win 23 percent of the vote, and then it's slap fights in the legislature all the time. So I'm not sure the multi-multi, open the door totally, the multi-party is a good idea.

But being able to mount a, with a certain threshold that you may have to prove you're real, a third-party thing, I think there's a huge appetite for it. I just don't see mechanically how you get it done in the short term.

KRISTOL: And I am struck by the demand. I mean, more and more people say they're independent. They don't like the parties. The parties can look worse – I think this is an important – 18 months from now than they do today, and they are not so great today.

MURPHY: Right.

KRISTOL: But after 2019 if it goes sort of –

MURPHY: I agree.

KRISTOL: So that would be interesting to have –

MURPHY: Well, if somebody tried to do a competing Republican Party, that's the other kind of interesting thing. The breakaway Republicans that are also Republicans.

KRISTOL: Right.

MURPHY: And they try a third-party thing as part of a long way to –

KRISTOL: So that's a little more Teddy Roosevelt, I guess.

MURPHY: Exactly.

KRISTOL: But that probably just elects a Democrat.

MURPHY: Yes. Almost all the third solution splits one side.

And remember, the Dems now – The problem with the Republicans looking at every election like a primary and nothing else, is that can win the general election in some states, but in most states it won't.

And with demography, the Democrats looking at it like a primary can win more and more states, because the blue states would become even bluer. California is a good example of that.

So it will be interesting to kind of see how – that's part of the theory of the Democrats becoming more and more progressive, because that's the flavor inside their world at the time.

But for us, it's the wrong lesson; for the Democrats, because there are more of them. So many of these multiple-party situations, the Dems have the biggest base in raw numbers. Not in distribution across states – you saw that in the Trump Electoral College numbers. But in terms of – you know, there's a thing, 3,200 [counties], approximately, I think it's 3,241, I'm probably off by ten counties –

KRISTOL: Something like that.

MURPHY: Yeah, and Hillary got all her votes from 170 of them, you know, 61 million people. And they're all mostly the biggest counties.

KRISTOL: Right.

MURPHY: So, that concentration thing is what has really changed in American politics. What I've been surprised by is there was not more of a move on the Democratic side to start screwing around with the Electoral College after Trump.

KRISTOL: No, I mean, they lost now twice in 20 or 16 years they've won the popular vote–

MURPHY: Because it tilts our way. There is no doubt now that that distribution argument, which originally was found for good ideas about balancing power, has become a Republican advantage. So I'm fine with it.

KRISTOL: I am struck by the degree in which they are taking on gerry – the courts now, or some of them, the more adventuresome courts, are willing to strike down gerrymandering. That's going to be a huge Democratic issue in the state elections this year. And some of these governorships could flip. I mean, that could make a difference, too, post 2020.

MURPHY: Long-term, it's critical. That's been one of our great advantages: all the state houses we hold. And we have been pretty successful. Though, again, more dead canaries. You know, you look at some of the Wisconsin specials recently in state legislative races where Trump districts are going the other way.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

MURPHY: We can over-complicate this. We've got a really unpopular president, and so will his party take a pounding in the midterms? More likely than not, but we'll find out.

KRISTOL: And re-election, if it just comes down to a surprisingly normal Trump versus an average Democrat race? I mean, the incumbents usually win on the one hand; on the other hand, Trump is more unpopular than the typical incumbent, and he barely won in 2016.

MURPHY: Yeah – no, the numbers in 2016 – I think maybe we're retreading where we talked last time. But in Pennsylvania, my home state of Michigan, and Wisconsin, it was roughly 13,900,000 votes cast, those three states. His margin was 77,000 votes. I mean, it was one of these things that if 20 canaries had flown in a circle over Detroit and one traffic jam had happened, it could have flipped the other way. It was almost like a calculus thing where it is in a range. So, will he be better next time? Will they be as bad as Hillary? My guess is not. So, I think his re-election ability is really, really impaired.

But, maybe he'll change. I think we've had the year test: can he change? And we find no, he doesn't change. In fact, he doubles down. So, I think it's a pretty safe bet against. But, again, I was betting against him last time he did it. So the Rasputin thing is out there. But, in the end, they killed Rasputin.

KRISTOL: I mean, I suppose – and this is so far ahead that is kind of ridiculous – but if you end in 2021 with a Corey Booker presidency or something and a Democratic Congress, I mean, people sort of vaguely assume, I guess I do or my world does, that we're kind of back to normal. But that's not really true.

MURPHY: Right.

KRISTOL: Because then you have the massive fight about the Republican Party. And it's not as if everyone who supported Trump, or Trump himself, just go away, right? "Our problem is we didn't follow through enough; we were sabotaged by the swamp. We need a more Trump-y on trade, on populism, on immigration." Against, "We need to go back to a Marco Rubio, you know, Bush Republicanism or something." I mean, that would be a very –

MURPHY: No, there might be a third fusion of the new stuff. We don't know. But I will say this –

KRISTOL: What do you mean by that?

MURPHY: You know, it will be populism with less of the Trump snarl. That populist strain, which has been around the party a long time.

KRISTOL: Right.

MURPHY: But everything is cyclical. We're seeing – we see what the problems are. That will drive the debate because we will be in the business, hopefully, of having some solutions to it, and they could be fiscal.

Now the thing, though, I always remind people, is we always talk about the Trump voters like they landed in a spaceship. You know, "They're these new voters." First, the media discovered, "The Tea Party! Where have they been? Underground caves, they came up." These are Republican primary voters. There were a lot of Trump voters who voted for Mitt Romney last time and George W. Bush before that and Dole or Bush before that.

KRISTOL: A huge majority of them.

MURPHY: Or Pat Robertson – yeah. So they are the same people, for the most part. There are new young ones coming in. There are people moving in and out of politics. So it is dynamic. But the idea that these are robots that have one point of view for their entire lives? No, it's flavors, you know, not unlike fashion.

So, I don't discount the fact that things can rotate. They evolve and the string of populism, the strain of it, the force of it is still there, particularly if real wages don't rise. You know, that's what causes a lot of this. People working harder and not having real money for a decade or more.

But don't forget, it's often – mostly, not all – the same pool of voters evolving through points of view; so, they can evolve again. It requires intellectual leadership though, and that is something the party has forgotten. We act like we're a minority, particularly in the House, even though we are in the majority. We're always uncovering conspiracies or what's wrong. We don't do a lot.

KRISTOL: Well, with Trump there it's hard, I mean, it's hard to sort of say – well, we're fighting leadership for the party, except we have the president and both houses of Congress and they're ignoring you. I just

think the reform conservative agenda, all of these things looked sort of promising – I don't think we were crazy to think they were promising in 2013, '14 – obviously has just been stalled –

MURPHY: They were promising as policy, but we're all politics, all the time now.

KRISTOL: Yeah, and they didn't really have a political angle on immigration, on, you know, trade –

MURPHY: It will be interesting, speaking of immigration. We're taping this on, whatever day this is –

KRISTOL: February 7th, I think.

MURPHY: Yeah, and so it will be out in a couple of days. But the big news today is close to a deal on the budget. They're going to put immigration aside.

KRISTOL: Yeah, for a month.

MURPHY: And I read that headline, and every time I read a political headline in Washington I think, *What's Trump thinking over the breakfast McDonald's right now?* And, I'll bet he was looking at that – “Wait a minute, I want immigration to be part of any budget deal.”

So I'll bet in today's news cycle – even though I am sure McConnell sent the message, “Just do nothing, we got this thing; we have a vote on DACA. We'll get you your wall” – he may blow this up. Because he's not in the middle of it.

KRISTOL: Yeah, people are just – I think, again, just the volatility of these issues, the markets. People generally have too much – I totally agree with this – sort of a static view of where things – having been surprised so much, we sort of still can't help as human beings expect not to be surprised in the next year or two.

MURPHY: Right.

KRISTOL: We sort of want things to revert to what we think of as normalcy.

MURPHY: Right, it's easier. And part of it is Washington is speaking its normal code language, and Trump doesn't speak or care about that language. I mean, I was calling it “the screwball presidency” like a movie with pie fights because that's what I think is really going on inside the White House.

But Jeb nailed it back in the campaign. He said, “He's a chaos candidate; we're going to have a chaos presidency.” And that is really what it is. So, bet on more chaos.

KRISTOL: On that note, appropriate note to conclude on. Good, sound advice from experienced Republican strategist and thinker about politics, Mike Murphy. Mike, thanks for joining me today.

MURPHY: Thanks, I always enjoy this.

KRISTOL: We'll do it again in a few months and correct all of our false predictions, and this tape will vanish from the internet.

MURPHY: I think we should make one commitment to our viewer, Chet, which is, if there is a military parade, we'll cover it live from a little box somewhere.

KRISTOL: If they'll let us.

MURPHY: Yeah, if they'll let us.

KRISTOL: Yeah, exactly. That would be good. We'll do that; that'll be special.

MURPHY: "The Trump dragoons."

KRISTOL: That'll be a special "Conversation with Bill Kristol: the military parade, live."

MURPHY: It will be great.

KRISTOL: Okay, well, I'll commit to that right here.

And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]