

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

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I: Nationalism and Identity Politics (0:15 – 38:16)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very glad to be joined again today by Jonah Goldberg, senior editor at *National Review*, the holder of the Cliff Asness Chair in Applied Liberty in the American Enterprise Institute. Very impressive.

GOLDBERG: It is. It's very impressive sounding, I agree. [LAUGHTER]

KRISTOL: He's a great guy.

GOLDBERG: He is.

KRISTOL: Mr. Asness is a great guy, so it's good of him to do that. And author of the new book, just out, I think as this conversation –

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: Coming out in about a week as we speak. But out as we release the conversation. *Suicide of the West*.

GOLDBERG: Yes.

KRISTOL: It's a cheerful title.

GOLDBERG: It is.

KRISTOL: I think I've seen that title somewhere before.

GOLDBERG: You have. You have. James Burnham wrote –

KRISTOL: Say a word about that. Do you just appropriate other people's titles, you know?

GOLDBERG: Well, that was –

KRISTOL: No conservative respect for private property, or –

GOLDBERG: Well, no, first of all, let us be clear that you cannot copyright titles. Second of all, I had some trepidation about it, even though a big chunk of my argument is somewhat inspired by Burnham and by the intellectual currents that inspired Burnham – more his *Managerial Revolution* than *Suicide of the West*, which was really just sort of a sequel to *Managerial Revolution*.

But this title was in part negotiated amongst the publisher and myself, among other options, and one of the reasons why I ultimately went with it is that – I think the key term is – and we can talk about more of this later – I didn't call it "The Decline of the West," right?

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: I didn't go [Oswald] Spengler, right? Or anything like that.

The reason I say it's "The Suicide of the West" is because ultimately suicide is a choice, right? It's not the death of the West. Big part of my thesis is that what I call the miracle of liberal democratic capitalism, right? This thing that emerged only 300 years ago; we kind of stumbled into it by accident, and the only way we can sustain it is by choosing to sustain it.

And so much of our culture is dedicated to undermining the moral, political, legal foundations of Western civilization while the rest of us are generally complacent about it. You know, "Oh, I got my work to do. Let them go do the silly things in academia and the popular culture." That the people who actually do love this civilization, and appreciate it, generally don't do the hard work of fighting for it. And so, as Charles Krauthammer said, "Decline is a choice." So is suicide.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's good. No, that's good. I think if we'd been having this conversation five years ago, we would have probably got started speaking about how the left is doing all these things to undermine our confidence in various Western principles etcetera, and institutions and – But the subtitle. And we should go back and have that conversation...

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: ...at the end of this conversation...

GOLDBERG: [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: That remains true.

GOLDBERG: Yeah. Yup.

KRISTOL: But with – here, the threat is "How the rebirth of populism, nationalism, and identity politics is destroying American democracy."

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: So let's begin by, I mean, talking about that. You had a wonderful column just a few weeks ago. Let's hope Steve Bannon never comes back from his European tour. Bannon had gone over to Europe and spoken to, I think, Marine Le Pen's party, the National Front, and embraced kind of blood and soil nationalism in Europe. And you, correctly, in my view told him to stay over there, which he did not listen to, I believe.

GOLDBERG: Alas, alas.

KRISTOL: Let's talk a little bit – how – why is that? Where did that threat come from? Is it as much of a threat as you suggest in this book?

GOLDBERG: Well, all right, so – rewinding just slightly, right? So one of the things that a lot of people today just sort of assume is that – first of all, forget nationalism. The nation state is a natural thing. But nation states, you know, come out of, what, the Treaty of Westphalia, right? And the thing that we call “nationalism” is actually a remarkably recent ideological construct. You know, in the academic literature a lot of it is just called *romantic nationalism* because it comes out of the Romantic era and starts basically in the 1800s.

And, you know, it's funny that the – you know, we hear all this stuff “the globalists” and all of that kind of thing. Western civilization used to be much more globalist.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: The Catholic Church was a *global* institution, by definition.

KRISTOL: And the Enlightenment.

GOLDBERG: And the Enlightenment, and the universal principals of mankind.

KRISTOL: Right, right.

GOLDBERG: All these sorts of things, and romantic nationalism reemerges as a sort of angry response to the Enlightenment. And, specifically, it emerges as an angry response to the Napoleonic invasions of Germany and Europe. And all of a sudden you get people like Johann Herder and Johann Fichte inventing this idea of, in the case of Germany, *the German nation*, right? And one of most fascinating things, if you go back and you read Fichte's address to the German nation, is how to the modern ear it sounds like he's a Nazi.

KRISTOL: Hm.

GOLDBERG: But it's totally unfair to him to call him – even though he was a terrible anti-Semite, but he wasn't a – the biological racism as a concept didn't exist, you know? It was 150 years later that comes – or 100 years later comes around.

For Fichte, it was all about the German language. Also for Herder. And they wanted – they believed that the German language was the most authentic, real language. It was the only language unsullied by the taint of Rome and Latin and all this kind of stuff; and what you find is that it was this rebellious impulse against having the Enlightenment imposed on people.

And so part of my larger, big-picture argument is that the Romantic era never went away, because what Romanticism should properly be understood as, as sort of your internal human nature rebelling against modernity, against the Enlightenment, against the – all the various forms of the division of labor that come from living in a modern society.

KRISTOL: Bourgeois.

GOLDBERG: Bourgeois lifestyle, right. This idea of living in an open, free society based on contracts and the rule of law. It feels unnatural *because it is unnatural*, and so it requires a sort of constant vigilance.

As Reagan used to say, you know, “We don't inherit liberty in our blood. Every generation is one step away from barbarism.” And I think that's exactly right. Or as Hannah Arendt said it, “Every generation, Western civilization is invaded by barbarians. We call them children.” Right?

KRISTOL: Mm-hmm.

GOLDBERG: And we have that – Civilization is a process: where you civilize humans in the raw and turn them into citizens in a free society. And that takes a lot of work. And so one of the amazing – just to fast-forward – one of the amazing things about America is that it was not invested in or a product of the sort of romantic nationalism of Europe, and it was the only successful, at least at the time, Enlightenment-based revolution.

And what the Americans did is they took these quirky, weird attributes of English culture that had less to do with philosophy and more to do with the fact that the English were just weird – they were weird people for all sorts of Whiggish, weird artifacts of history. You know, they never had standing armies 'cause they were an island, so you never had a really powerful king who could impose absolutism. The Roman Empire really never had the kind of impact on them that they did in other parts of Europe, and they had these strange notions of property rights going back to the 12th century.

And so what Americans did is they took the – those sort of cultural aspects, kinda put them in a centrifuge, spun them around and turned them into abstract principles, and we founded a nation basically based on those. And this is why – you know, and my friend Rich Lowry doesn't like this quote, but that's why Bill Buckley always used to say, "I'm as patriotic as anybody there is, but there's not an ounce of nationalism in me," because what nationalism does –

First of all, there are many different kinds of nationalism, and there's a certain kind of civic nationalism that is healthy, and I've always argued that a little nationalism is a good thing. But certainly ethno-nationalism, or the sort of hard nationalism that says all you need to know about somebody is their nationality, is no different from any other form of identity politics.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: And if I could recommend – I know I'm going a little far afield here, but...

KRISTOL: No.

GOLDBERG: ...you know, I've been locked in my room like Howard Hughes with Kleenex boxes on my feet writing this book for several years, so if I could recommend to viewers or listeners – however you imbibe *Kristol Conversations* – one of the best essays that Orwell ever wrote was called *Notes on Nationalism*. And he begins by saying, "I can't – " basically, I'm paraphrasing, but he says – he begins by saying, "I can't quite come up with the right term for what I'm talking about, so I'm gonna call it nationalism." And what he's really identifying is identity politics – feminism, racial identity politics, all of these kinds of things – which, as he puts it, force people into these abstract categories that allegedly tell you all you need to know about them.

And that's why I think that sort of hard nationalism, just like hard populism, is really just a form of identity politics. It's the logic of the mob that says "We are part of this undifferentiated we." "We are sacred. We are sanctified. If you're opposed to us you are an external enemy."

And I think that that is hardwired – that tendency is hardwired into every human heart. It is part of human nature because we grew up in tribes, and we grew up in little troops, or evolved in these little bands, to have this us/them distinction. The trick of a civilization is to keep human nature, to some extent, in check. So people like Bannon, who I think has a thumb-less grasp of most of these things, he very much wants to – I mean, he admits he's a Leninist. I mean, he uses the term.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: He very much subscribes to this idea of, “the worse, the better.” And he wants to tear down existing institutions. He wants to tear down “The Establishment,” however defined. And the very definition of a radical is someone who – you know, going back to the Latin, *radix* for “roots,” right? – wants to tear down things from the roots or destroy things from the roots.

But he has no conception of what to replace it with. And so he – when you have that, like with all radicals of the left and the right – he has a very high propensity to say incredibly asinine things, because he’s invested in keeping people extremely angry and resentful.

And so, you know, he says to the French, you know, convention – what was it? National –

KRISTOL: At the National Front?

GOLDBERG: National Front. He says, you know, “Let them call you a racist. Wear it as a badge of honor,” right? Which is insanity, right? But that is his approach to these things.

And I do think we should be grateful that there was a time, I think, when we – One of the first times I was on here where it seemed like the alt right and that crowd was gonna have a lot more cultural oomph than they do now, and it turns out that so much of that fever-swamp nastiness was really just sort of, you know, epiphenomenal to this cult of personality of Donald Trump.

And, you know, it turns out, I would argue, and I’ve argued at great length, that we should stop thinking of Trumpism as anything like a coherent political ideology, or even a political platform. It’s a psychological phenomenon. Right? And it emanates from Donald Trump’s lizard brain, and it has all sorts of corrupting influences, but he has no serious time horizons about the kind of country he wants to see. He is not a chess player. He is driven almost purely by his narcissistic desires for respect and for admiration. And you just have to wonder what – how much worse things could be if he had, say, Pat Buchanan’s brain, you know?

KRISTOL: Or could still get, though. Because, I mean, I think you do make the point in the book, as you just said, that – let’s go with Rousseau – you make the Rousseau versus Locke distinction. So this Rousseau-istic tendency in human nature, is real. And we would prefer, I think, society to be organized along Lockean lines, and we might make – and you make in the book – a more complicated argument about how Lockeanism doesn’t preclude a healthy kind of civic patriotism. And Lincoln thought a lot – It’s not like anyone –

One of the most annoying things I find about the current nationalists is they talk about liberalism in such a cartoonish way. As if intelligent liberals ranging from statesmen, like Lincoln, to thinkers, like Tocqueville and [John Stuart] Mill and everyone, really, Raymond Aron, [George] Orwell, you name it...

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: ...didn’t think a lot about, well, how do you strengthen these aspects of a liberal society with a healthy kind of civic spirit? Anyway, but I’d love for you to talk about that, too.

But even if Trump were to go away, I mean, the tendency is there. And it does seem to be somewhat around the world, too – that this revival of a certain – you know, a feeling of liberalism hasn’t panned out or is boring or is –

GOLDBERG: Yeah, no, I think that’s right.

KRISTOL: And that this – we need to kind of look back to this nationalism-populism, which I agree in – sort of in a liberal context looks kind of romantic and a little entrancing and a little sense, frisson of excitement. But, of course, you lose track of how quickly it can go off the rails, right?

GOLDBERG: No. That's right. It's – I guess I should just back up and do my sort of how we got here point, right? You know, in the book I start 250,000 years ago, but I'll skip ahead a little bit.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's good.

GOLDBERG: [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: The next conversation we'll go through them, yes.

GOLDBERG: You know, one of the –

KRISTOL: 13-hour conversation.

GOLDBERG: [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: First 249,000 years, right? [LAUGHS]

GOLDBERG: One of the biggest influences on me in working on this thing was reading Joseph Schumpeter. And it turns out that Schumpeter, I think, was an influence on a lot more of the mid-20th century conservative intellectuals than we realize. I think Burnham gets a lot from Schumpeter. I think your dad got a lot from Schumpeter.

KRISTOL: Yeah. That book was bigger – I mean, I'm a little older than you – when I was sort of going to college, in that world, that book, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* had a huge impact and reputation. I think it's really faded.

GOLDBERG: It's –

KRISTOL: Do people talk about it anymore?

GOLDBERG: Bizarrely so, because I think it's actually being borne out quite well.

KRISTOL: That's interesting. Well, talk about that, yeah.

GOLDBERG: And – all right, so, you know, Burnham [sic] was an interesting guy, right? He said – he has this great line. He says, "I have set out in my life to do three things, to be the world's greatest economist, the world's greatest –"

KRISTOL: Schumpeter. This is Schumpeter.

GOLDBERG: This is Schumpeter.

KRISTOL: You said Burnham. Yeah.

GOLDBERG: Oh, I'm sorry, Schumpeter, yeah.

KRISTOL: Yeah, yeah.

GOLDBERG: He says, "I've set out to be the world's greatest economist, the world's greatest lover, and the world's greatest horseman," and then takes a pause, and then he says, "It's not working out so well with the horses." [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: [LAUGHS]

GOLDBERG: But he – so he has this argument that he basically, as his biographer, Tim McGraw – or McGraw, I can't remember his first name – puts it, he flips Marx on his head, right? And according to Marx, the proletariat will realize their class consciousness. And they – it's essentially a materialist version of the Christian narrative where the meek will inherit the earth, right? They'll take over and overthrow their rulers and break their chains and live in essentially a romantic utopian world. And Schumpeter turns that on its head, and he says, "No, if capitalism goes – " and he thought it would – "it'll go because of the children of the rulers."

And he makes this point that – which I think is absolutely borne out sociologically, with the obvious exceptions – that rich people, industrialists, they tend to have lawyers as kids, or poets, right? Or social workers or artists or authors, or whatever. They have intellectuals for kids, speaking broadly, and because of the affluence that capitalism creates, these intellectuals – what he calls "the new class," right? Which Burnham calls "the managerial class" – they have a mass market for what they're producing because people get rich enough to actually care about this stuff.

And at the same time they are filled with Nietzschean resentment, right? Nietzsche uses the phrase *ressentiment* which is the French version of resentment, so we'll go that way.

So in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, which Schumpeter gets a lot from, Nietzsche tells the story about how the priests, who don't have any real power, they use words and ideas to undermine the existing virtues, right? They invert the existing virtues and turn them into vices. The knightly class, the rulers, the aristocrats, they don't care about, you know, these abstract notions of morality because they make their own morality and they are in charge and they run things.

And so what the priests do is they come in and all of sudden they say that strength is actually a vice, not a virtue. They say that courage is not as good as the opposite of meekness, right? And it's part of Nietzsche's anti-Christian, anti-Jewish stuff.

But this dynamic and for Schumpeter works pretty well, where you get a priestly class, a new class, who are raised to be deeply resentful of American capitalism, and they are sort of like backseat drivers. They are constantly saying that liberal democratic capitalism is bad. "We could do things so much better." You know, whether it's the Paul Krugman types or whether it's the Occupy Wall Street types, you know, there are different varieties of it, but the indictment is always the same.

And the problem is, is that as capitalism succeeds more and more and more, it creates more and more and more of these – of this resentful class, until it really, truly becomes a mass class, and they control what Lenin said were the commanding heights of the culture.

If you go to Hollywood – you just listen to any award ceremony coming out of Hollywood, right? You read most the stuff from the *New York Times*. You read most of the way history is taught in universities, and it's just an unending indictment of the society that we live in.

And the way I often – the metaphor I like to use, remember the movie *Goldfinger*, right? The *James Bond* movie, right? So *Goldfinger* didn't try rob Fort Knox. What he wanted to do was irradiate all of the gold in Fort Knox so that it would become unusable for anybody else, and therefore his stockpile of gold would become infinitely more valuable because he had the second biggest stockpile.

If you look at, like, say, Howard Zinn's *History of the American People*, what he does is he says – he's explicit about it. Most widely read history textbook in America, right? Still. And he says, "My history of America is the history from the view of the Native Americans, from the slaves, history of the – from the Trail of Tears, from the oppressed coal miners," right? It's just one victim group after another, and what he's doing is saying that this is the only usable history that we can have.

And the history that says this is a good country, the history says that says we should be proud of the American experiment, that we should be proud of the unfolding liberty that comes out of the Declaration and the Gettysburg Address and Martin Luther King's March on Washington, that's all nonsense. You can't have it. You can only think of Columbus as a genocidal murderer.

And that's all of what the new class is doing. Like, you watch every documentary that's up for an award at the Oscars; you watch sort of every political movie that comes out. It is always – it is considered the height of bravery to just pee from a great height on the American tradition.

KRISTOL: Mm-hmm.

GOLDBERG: And so I basically closed the book by saying, "What the country is really suffering from is a profound lack of gratitude. And we teach people not to be grateful for this country."

KRISTOL: But that seems – I mean, that – so I think that is very much the narrative that my father and many, many other people thought was applicable to the New Left in the late '60s: spoiled kids of pretty wealthy parents. And then that's why, the reason Schumpeter and these others were so –

GOLDBERG: The kids pulling up the paving stones in the '68 riots were all the sons of rich lawyers.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: They weren't, like, construction workers, you know?

KRISTOL: Right, and it was construction workers and the cops who were more grateful to this country and thought they had a chance to do better.

But what about the – this is really the – so how does that manifest itself on the right? I guess it is what I would say.

GOLDBERG: Okay, so part of it is – And this is why I think identity politics is so unbelievably pernicious, right? For the last 30, 40 years – Mary Eberstadt had a fantastic essay in *The Weekly Standard* about this. You know, we get this rise of identity politics basically out of the breakdown of the family, and that, what happens – in part because we are all wired to want to belong to a group, to get meaning from the group, to feel like we're part of a tribe, right? And that's the Rousseauian part of us, and it is a valuable and important part of us. But you get this rise of identity politics in part because people aren't getting from civil society, starting with the family, the proper sense of belonging and meaning, the feeling that they are needed in their own communities.

And we talk about social media making all this worse, but this is a – this is the – what you get when you get to the breakdown of civil society. And so instead, people race to these abstractions; and, you know, racial identity politics is the best example of it. All this nonsense about intersectionality. We don't have to get in the weeds and all that.

And so for the – if you go look at the course catalogs or the literature from any Ivy League school: and there are scores of classes on African-American this, on Hispanic that. There are African-American study centers. There are black studies centers. There are gay and transgender lesbian study centers, and all these kinds of things. This grand archipelago of identity politics both in the classroom and on the campus. In a smaller number of campuses, but a growing number, there's also these things called whiteness studies, right? And so in all the black studies, in all the Hispanic studies, it's all about teaching the greatness of racial solidarity, identity politics, solidary, black pride, and I'm not against teaching some of that stuff. That's not my point.

But the whiteness study stuff is expressly – read the syllabus of any whiteness studies course. It's all about dismantling whiteness, dismantling white privilege, white supremacy, all this Ta-Nehisi Coates stuff about white supremacy everywhere, right? About the immutability and the iron cage of race and racial identity and how we can never transcend it.

And so we've heard from the culture, from elite culture, from popular culture that white people are just bad, right? And I don't know about you. We both grew up in New York City. I've never in my life ever said, "Well, you know, as a white person, I think –"

KRISTOL: Yeah, right, right.

GOLDBERG: I mean, I just – I never identified my identity as white. It was never really part of – And if you say that, see, people on the left, they say, "Well, that just shows you how deep your false consciousness, white privilege garbage is."

And so you have – because of the new class, all of these people being taught that the history of this country is evil, that the greatest accomplishments of this country are evil, oppression, cruelty, whatever. That we have never – we've never gotten past slavery and that things really haven't changed much since slavery. So many people have said this, right? You never – you know, no one gets to say, "Hey, look, my ancestors fought for the Union Army. I'm not responsible for slavery," right? It's just – it's this blanket American sin, permanent and undilutable. And so when you do that, when you are by definition encouraging people to think of themselves in terms of their racial identity.

KRISTOL: Mm-hmm.

GOLDBERG: And I argue that one of the reasons why the right went off the rails as much as it did was because – and I've written anti-populist stuff for 20 years. I love all these people who tell me, "Oh, you just don't like populism 'cause of Trump." Well, no, I mean, go back and read stuff I wrote in in 2005, you know?

But the Tea Party movement was the only populist movement I ever supported, right? And because it was – first of all, it promised to fulfill that ancient libertarian prophecy of libertarians taking over the government and leaving everybody alone, right?

But second of all, it was exactly what you – if you could – I didn't think was possible you could design a populist movement to fight for it – a return to limited government, constitutionalism, living within our means, balanced budgets, low taxes. It was – I mean, yeah, there were some idiot freaks and cranks at the periphery; but idiot cranks, and creeps show up at any big, popular movement where there's a chance to monetize it or get attention, right?

KRISTOL: No, I totally agree. The Tea Party always struck me as the populism in the service of something close to classical liberalism.

GOLDBERG: Yeah, it was –

KRISTOL: ...which was great, because if you're going to have populism anyway –

GOLDBERG: Right, but this was the kind – And I think the reason why we got the Tea Party was a lot of it was a delayed backlash against George W. Bush and John McCain. But we can get into the rank punditry about that later.

My point is, is that these guys were – I mean, I used to go and speak to little Tea Party groups where they would have book clubs reading the Federalist papers, you know? And yet the new class, the

mainstream media, Hollywood, all these guys – they call them racist anyway because they couldn't get out of their head that this happened under Barack Obama, and they demonized them as racist.

My old friend Andrew Breitbart, you know, he offered a \$100,000 reward if anyone could provide evidence that the claim from the Congressional Black Caucus guys who walked through a Tea Party protests were pelted and spit upon and called, you know, the N-word and all that kinda stuff, and there must have been 10,000 iPhones up or cameras up. There was no evidence of it. The Congressional Black Caucus just made it up. And MSNBC round the clock calling them racist. And I think that for a big chunk of the populace, right there was a kind of psychic break, and it happened not just at the grassroots level. It also happened at the leadership level.

KRISTOL: Mm-hmm.

GOLDBERG: Michael Anton, who wrote the famous Decius, "Flight 93 Election" thing, in a debate that he since has deleted, he and I went after each other about the notion of colorblindness, which I think is sort of essential to the American creed. It is essential to sort of liberalism properly understood, and this is all in the context of Trump attacking the Mexican judge – who wasn't Mexican – and Anton, then under the pseudonym Decius, says, "Look, that old standard is dead. Colorblindness is dead. Merit is dead. We now just live in a society full of identity politics, and our only choice is to have our own identity politics and to fight fire with fire."

And I think at a lot of levels what the right did was basically cave to the racial-essentialist categorical thinking of the left.

And this is not to say that all Trump supporters are white supremacists or anything like that; but if you tell people all the time that their culture and their heritage, and the heritage that they associate with their father and their grandfather, and that they associate with the movies that they love, and the stories of their country that they love, and all you do is tell them over and over again that this is all white supremacy and evil, it is only human that you would start to say, "Hey, wait a second. You know, my dad was a pretty good guy." Or "I thought World War II was a pretty good, you know, effort."

And you start owning your racial identity, and – so there's all this social science that shows that people who expressly considered whiteness to be part of their core identity voted for Trump overwhelming.

KRISTOL: Mm-hmm.

GOLDBERG: I don't want to encourage anybody to think whiteness is their core identity. At least American is a more capacious term, right? And – but it was – you know, during – as an aside, but I remember the *New York Times* had a review of a book on the history of the Ku Klux Klan during the height of the Tea Party stuff, and the author, the reviewer in the *New York Times* opens with, like, four paragraphs about how Herman Cain, an African-American leader of the Tea Party, proves that Klan-style racism can take new forms in our modern society, right?

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: And so when you tell people that, you know, having black leaders doesn't mean you're still not racist. Or that you believe in colorblindness and limited government and all that kinds of stuff, that means you're racist. If you just say the Constitution is racist, which you hear from very intelligent people on the left all the time, you encourage people to think in these same ways, and so I think that a lot of the populist backlash –

You know, it's funny. So you tweeted out praise for this response that Ramesh and I in this exchange with Rich Lowry about Trump criticism. And E.J. Dionne tweeted out a thing, "This is very good, but maybe you guys need to think about what conservatives did that made Trump possible," and I

responded, "I'm fine, and I think I've been doing that quite a bit. Maybe liberals should think about some of the things that they did that led to – that made Trump – the backlash that made Trump possible, too."

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: And hundreds of "How dare you say liberals have anything to do with it? How dare you say the left is at all responsible for creating any kind of climate that made Trump possible?" Barack Obama deserves a lot of the blame for the creation of the moment that we're in with Donald Trump. Hillary Clinton deserves a lot of the blame; Democratic Party, the mainstream media, these guys fueled a resentment, day in and day out, on the right. Fox deserves a lot of the blame, too, and I've said that many times. But this is an American problem.

It's a cultural problem. It's much larger than just sort of finger pointing, but what we're having – and anyway, just to wrap it up, the reason why populism becomes so much more attractive in all its forms, nationalism too, is that the ecosystem of civil society, which is sort of like wetlands, it serves as a filter, right? It allows pollutants and nitrates and all these things to be absorbed into the soil before they go out to the sea. The local institutions, that ecosystem is in really dire shape.

And so what happens is people, as Robert Nisbet would put it, have, you know, this quest for community innate in them, the desire for meaning that is innate in them that was an evolutionary adaptation. If you didn't have social solidarity in the tribe, you were wiped out by another tribe; Darwin talks about this at great length. And so, when you can't find meaning and belonging and that sense of community at the local level, you retreat to things like Facebook, which gives you this – which do not give you community.

What Facebook gives you is confirmation of your worst instincts, and they reinforce your resentments. And so what happens is people start looking to Washington for meaning that they can't find closer to home.

This was the essence of the *Life of Julia* thing, right? Yuval Levin is brilliant about this in *The Fractured Republic*, where Barack Obama, in his second inaugural, lays it out plainly. He sees America as having two fundamental units: the individual and the state, nothing in the middle, and it's the middle stuff that is really important 'cause no one lives the United States of America. They live in their own communities.

And so – and I think I've talked about this before on this show, but, you know, the opening words of the Democratic Convention 2012 were, "Government is the one thing you can all belong to." And for me that's creepy. But for a lot of people, what they hear is an invitation to belong, to feel like they're part of something.

And populism is this way of feeling like you're part of this national group. It's a really cheap and shabby form of group and community, but it feels real. It's the ecstasy of the crowd.

And because we're all retreating to our homes and we're not actually engaging in civil society, we are now increasingly watching politics as if it's a form of entertainment. And when you watch things as a form of entertainment, you just simply want to root for your heroes and against your villains.

And so much of our culture now is defined by what I call in the book "ecstatic schadenfreude," where you just – you don't care if it's good policy. What you care is if it makes the other side angry. Right? That is so much of what Trumpism now, is: "Oh, their tears are delicious." As if this is a justification for a tax policy or anything, right?

But that is the sort of psychic moment that we're in, is this romantic desire to punish your enemies, to – this tribal desire to feel part of one group that is conquering another group, and we all do it basically virtually online and over television.

KRISTOL: How much – I mean, since you mentioned Facebook and all that, how much do you think social media – I mean, these – you know, obviously liberalism could be strengthened or weakened by all kinds of technological developments, economic developments and so forth. Or both at the same time. And it all depends on how they get managed. How much do you think though, social media, broadly speaking, contributes to this form of conservatism rising and the other form of, let's call it classical liberalism-type conservatism declining?

GOLDBERG: Yeah, I think it plays a huge and significant role, but, you know, one of my favorite lines from Orwell is he says, you know, "Man can feel himself a failure and take to drink, and become all the more of a failure because he drinks," right? Our problems are upstream of social media, but because we take them to social media they become worse.

A good analogy, just by way of explaining, is – pedophilia, right? Bear with me for a second. A hundred years ago, if you were a pedophile, very difficult to find another pedophile who shared your...proclivities, right? You were really socially isolated. The internet allows these people to, first of all, feel like they're not alone, right? Which is a hugely important part of people's psyche. And further, it allows them to feel like there's nothing wrong with what they're doing.

And so social media allows – you get this feedback where you say something absolutely disgusting and terrible about somebody else, and 500, 1,000 people tell you, "Right on. Go for it. You're so brave. You're so awesome." And it exacerbates these things.

Also, you know, take it away from pedophilia for a second, or maybe forever –

In local communities – and Robert Putnam gets at this quite a bit – liberal sociologist from Harvard – he did this huge longitudinal study. He hated the findings, so he held off for a year hoping that he could disprove them. He couldn't and found that large, sudden waves of immigration or "diversity" in a community are deeply corrosive in the – at least in the short and medium term – to social trust.

And it's not because of racism. It is because of – by simple virtue of the fact that if you have ethnically or culturally homogeneous populations, they all share the same customs: dances around a maypole, whatever you want to call it, Little League, whatever. And they know how to adjudicate interpersonal conflict face-to-face, right? If your neighbor is also a Norwegian guy in Minnesota, it's pretty easy to say, "Hey, you know, your tree's dropping crab apples on the lawn." If he's a Hmong from Vietnam and he doesn't speak your language, it's much more difficult to have that kind of civic, social, polite interaction.

And so what you find is that people, first of all, withdraw from civil society. But, second of all, they start looking to the state to adjudicate problems they used to be able to do themselves or maybe go to their pastor or their priest or whatever to adjudicate them.

And the second thing they do is they retreat to online; and they go onto social media and they would go onto Facebook. And on Facebook, you know, they might say something terrible about immigrants. And people they don't know, people who they don't meet say, "You're absolutely right. I'm 100% with you." And it becomes this confirmation and acclimation kind of thing that I think is deeply poisonous.

And in a – Facebook, I'm not on Facebook, but Facebook, I think, is really good for maintaining contacts with friends you already have. It is a very different thing with people that you don't know.

And so you – what you want – you know, and Ben Sasse, you know, he points out that we have a loneliness crisis in this country. The share of people – the number of friends that the average American has, close friends, has fallen almost in half in a very short period of time. And I think a lot of that has to do with this atomization that you get from the breakdown of civil society, from people retreating to online communities, which are not the same thing as real communities. And it leads to this polarization and this sort of tribal mentality that you get in our politics.

II: Defending Western Civ (38:16 – 1:19:53)

KRISTOL: So is this, I guess, reversible? I mean, so many conservatives you and I have read over the years have embraced different versions and degrees of, this is what liberalism is: atomism, individualism, something like the social media. "It's no accident, comrade," that you put together technological development and this kind of country that we have, and the breakup of the family and a million other things, modern capitalism, and you get this development.

And you and I could sit around yearning for something other than either nationalist populism on the right or identity politics on the left, but aren't those the kind of semi-inevitable outcomes of modern democratic capitalism? And aren't we – so it's not really suicide. It is kind of a decline of the West.

GOLDBERG: Yeah. Now, I mean, look, you know, Schumpeter –

KRISTOL: Over-simplifying a massive argument here, but –

GOLDBERG: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Schumpeter's more pessimistic than I was, right? He kind of almost made it a dialectic – that it was doomed, right? Because part of his point was that capitalism depends on institutions – what he called "extra-rational concepts," it's basically social capital – that it cannot create and cannot restore once lost, right?

And this sort of relentless creative destruction and rationality of inefficiency of capitalism, isn't corrosive to just bad institutions – I mean, people forget that so much of human liberty is the product of the market. Right?

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: I mean, the market is – You know, up until the invention of money and market mechanisms provided, for the first time in human evolutionary history, a solution other than violence for the exchange of goods and services, right? So, in man's natural condition, if you have a basket of apples, my way of getting an apple from you is hitting you over the head, right?

Money gets to say – or trade allows you to actually have non-zero sum exchanges.

And what the market does is it lowers the price of dealing with strangers, right? Because we are wired not to like strangers, and it's a very powerful part of our wiring. And the market tells us, "No, no, no. A stranger isn't bad. He's maybe a customer." And it's corrosive of discrimination. I mean, one of the things people don't remember is that among the chief opponents of the segregation laws in the old Jim Crow South were the bus companies because they – for them, this was an outrageous regulation that said we're gonna – you know, "It's putting regulatory burdens on us."

KRISTOL: Mm-hmm.

GOLDBERG: Markets don't like discrimination because they are, by definition, they lower your customer base.

But markets are also corrosive of other things, right? And they're corrosive of some good things, and, you know, we're all prone to nostalgia about the era – about the wonderful businesses that closed because they can't make it in the modern economy, and look what's happening to bookstores and all of the rest.

And so I do think that conservatives are not cognizant enough of the costs of having a free-market economy and the creative destruction that's necessary. Even though I would not get rid of them under any circumstances.

But what is required is doing a better job of civilizing people.

And, you know, I wasn't a huge fan of Arthur Schlesinger, but the concept of "the vital center" is an important one, right? And I close the book – you know, basically I try to explain it – on the suicide thing, if you were suicidal, what would I try to tell you to keep you from making a bad decision? And among the things I would tell you, "Look, you still have so much to live for. Look at all your great things that you've accomplished. Look at how many people care about you and need you."

And I would basically teach you that you should have not despair, but gratitude, right?

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: And we have a gratitude crisis in this country where, you know, the opposite of gratitude is entitlement, and entitlement is just sort of a legal version of resentment. It's basically saying, simply by virtue of my existence and my feeling of grief – aggrievement, I deserve more than I'm getting, and you are obliged to give it to me, but if – but gratitude says, "My god, look at all these amazing things that we have. I should be grateful for this."

Now Yuval Levin likes to argue that conservatism *is* gratitude because you only want to conserve those things you are grateful for.

But we live in this very romanticized culture which says the ultimate source of authority is your internal feelings, right? That is the essence of romanticism going back to Rousseau, that the inner lamp of your feelings is what guides your way in the world.

And that, you know, if you talk to college – you know, if you follow the politically correct nonsense on college campuses, you know, you get these people, like that stupid controversy at Yale about the dorms and "the Masters" and all that, you know? You have this guy trying to reason with the students saying, "Hey, look, you know, I – let's have a conversation about this." And she says, you know, "I don't want to have a conversation. I want you to respect my feelings," right?

And that we are teaching people. You know, these things are being – I'm a big believer, and one of the big influences on me in the book is Deirdre McCloskey who basically says, this miracle was created by words, just words. But the rhetoric, this bourgeois rhetoric that emerges in the 1700s that redefines what is right and good in the world –

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: And so I think we can repair this stuff, but what is required to repair it is to start teaching kids that maybe they should be grateful to be in this country. Maybe they should be grateful for the accomplishments of our ancestors. Maybe they should be grateful because, yes, we had slavery, but we also fought a war to end the slavery, right? And instead it's this constant harping on the victimization thing, which breeds entitlement, which breeds grievance.

And, you know, in the Bible, you know, the commandment is to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Remember is not just simply a thing about your memory, your recall. It is an activity. It is a verb. It is an action, and it's a –

KRISTOL: You know, honor, yeah.

GOLDBERG: Yeah, you have to honor and with – you have to teach the barbarians that are born in every family why they're lucky to be here; why this is ultimately, flaws and all, a good and great country. And you don't do it in this jingoistic, nationalistic way. You do it in a classically liberal way of open heartedness, of gratitude, of being open to your foibles but nonetheless seeing that we are different.

You know, the American exceptionalism debate, I think we've talked about this, but it's so depressing.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: It used to be that American exceptionalism was understood, you know – Donald Trump hates American exceptionalism because he doesn't understand it. He says, "Oh, that – you're just saying that America is better than other countries," as if he doesn't believe that anyway.

KRISTOL: Mm-hmm.

GOLDBERG: But what American exceptionalism – going back to Seymour Martin Lipset and those guys, and Bryce and all of those guys, and de Tocqueville – was a two-edged sword, right?

It was this – On the one hand there were these wonderful things that make America different because we didn't have a feudal past and because we have this culture of this bourgeois culture of equality and all the rest. But on the other hand, we have things like we're more violent than other countries and all these kind of – but we're just different.

We now can't teach or talk about American exceptionalism because a lot of really smart, dumb people instantly hear white supremacy or nationalism.

And so I think we can repair a lot of this, but it is required is for people like you and me and the people who are watching this show to actually open themselves up to having a conversation about the good side of the coin of America and our culture.

KRISTOL: I think immigration helps with this a lot. You could make a case that, a little oversimplified, that throughout American history – in fact, what Schumpeter expected and what Daniel Bell and a million other people have talked about, happens. That is, the actual descendants of the successful people in America get complacent and take it for granted and so forth.

But you have these waves of immigrants. And they are very grateful because they know what the alternative is, and they just fled from it. Whether it was, you know, Ireland in 1840s, or Russia in the 1900s, or, obviously, Europe in the 1930s. This is what humbles me.

I was giving a talk last week actually, and got an unusual question – this is at a college – from an intelligent conservative kid who was actually active in the conservative politics and who had gone somewhat alt right, though. And so it was sort of a – it was, "Oh, Mr. Kristol, it's – you speak about all these democratic norms, that you're worried that Trump is damaging and the rules and conditions of a liberal democracy, but that's – I find that boring," you know? And don't most people find that – you know, people can't fight and die for that. They don't live for that. I want something to live for in my politics."

I gave a somewhat lame answer, I think. I was so surprised to get that question. I'm familiar with the argument, obviously...

GOLDBERG: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

KRISTOL: ...but I just sort of – and I tried to explain, "Oh, this there's so much worth. You can get your fulfillment existentially from other things. You don't want this kind of fulfillment of politics. It's very dangerous."

GOLDBERG: Mm-hmm.

KRISTOL: But afterwards this young man with a – somewhat something of an accent, so an immigrant of some kind – his parents had been immigrants and he, you know, had come over as a kid, presumably – came up to this other kid and gave him a really much better answer than I gave him.

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Saying, "Look, you can take it for granted. For me, living in a free country where I can choose what – to, you know, pursue my education and what books to read and..."

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: "...where to live, that is – that's exciting. That's not boring."

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And, of course, in that respect, wars and enemies and all the challenges of life, bring it home, I suppose. You don't want to have wars for that sake, and you don't have depressions for that sake, and you don't want to have crises in Europe so America can be rejuvenated, but there is some truth to that.

GOLDBERG: No, look, I'll – look, I agree with you as a historical matter very strongly.

I want to push back on it a little bit, though, in the current context and only in this sense. At the University of California they issued a memo last year or something with a list of problematic trigger phrases that you're not allowed to use with the students. Among them, "America is a melting pot." That is now considered a bigoted and insulting thing to say. "Assimilation," bigoted insulting. Right?

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: America's had previous waves, big waves of immigration, for which I think we should be grateful. –

KRISTOL: But into a classical liberal milieu –

GOLDBERG: But into – and it was – there was – The amount of pressure, I mean, under Wilson and some of that the pressure on Germans was, I actually think, tyrannical and evil, you know?

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: People banning German language associations, you know? I mean, the – it was almost totalitarian in the sort of oppression that a lot of German Americans went through back then. But the ideal was to err on the side of turning people into Americans.

And now the idea – I mean, remember when Bobby Jindal said "that immigration without assimilation is invasion"? And now I get it. He was doing a little populist spiel there, but his basic point was pretty decent. And the scorn that was heaped on him about that "he's an Uncle Tom Indian" and all this nasty stuff that was hurled at him. If the idea of becoming an American is now considered to be, you know, a form of oppression and tyranny, we're screwed.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: And so – and again, and the right – you know, the left deserves enormous amounts of scorn for what they're doing, but this is a perfect example of how the right is saying "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em," right? So at CPAC this year – well, I'll keep the story short. A moderate Democrat radio host

was on a panel, and he said, "You know, I lived in Mexico for a few years, and some of the people down there were really culturally conservative, and, you know, you guys would like them a lot." Audience boos.

He then says, "You know, I was – I happened to be at a courthouse one day when there was a swearing in ceremony for American – for immigrants, and I have to say, it was just this unbelievably moving and beautiful thing." Audience boos. He then says, "You know, the Democrats do this thing where they have a table set up outside the room, and they register people as Democrats once they come in. You know, Republicans would be kinda smart to do that, too."

Loud sustained boos. That is mind-bogglingly stupid, right? I mean, it is – it has been – forget evil or bigoted or dumb, you know, but it's – these are no longer –

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: These are American citizens, and there's now this idea that – I get the argument, "We don't want them in this country." But as a political matter, saying we don't want them in our party, you know, we don't want their votes...

KRISTOL: Yeah. That's –

GOLDBERG: ...[LAUGHS] That is that is truly suicidal and repugnant.

And so you're now getting the left saying, "You can't – don't try to assimilate to America 'cause America is corrupt and bad. Don't go to the Republican Party 'cause they're evil and corrupt." And you're getting Republicans saying – or conservatives saying, "And we don't want you anyway 'cause we think you're filthy foreigners." This is a recipe for a real problem.

KRISTOL: Yeah, whereas I would say, I mean, despite our bad, foolish way we try to – don't try to assimilate anymore and don't teach civic education, etcetera, and there's a welfare state, which has its own issues with...

GOLDBERG: Sure.

KRISTOL: ...with mass immigration, I still would say a lot of the immigrants actually do have much more naturally, just because they can't really –

GOLDBERG: Yeah, that's right. They bring a lot of social collateral with them.

KRISTOL: Exactly.

GOLDBERG: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

KRISTOL: I mean, we don't really.

GOLDBERG: Yeah. Yeah.

KRISTOL: You know, our stupid school system can't quite beat it out of them, but, you know, I was thinking about this. So just – we're speaking, what, April, Friday the 13th...

GOLDBERG: Mm-hmm.

KRISTOL: ...so nothing else happens the rest of this day.

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And then –

GOLDBERG: We're gonna emerge from the studio and intelligent apes are gonna be ruling the planet.
[LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: Yeah, exactly. Would that be good for the book or bad for the book sales?

GOLDBERG: Eh, probably not.

KRISTOL: And so –

GOLDBERG: Depends how intelligent, actually. [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: Of course, yes, and so earlier this week, Paul Ryan announced that he was stepping down – not running for re-election to the House and therefore ending his term as Speaker at the end of this year. And I – we all had written about it, but I thought that, listening to you here, one of the very few politicians in America who would have understood, and I dare say enjoyed this conversation, and maybe will watch it, in fact, on CONVERSATIONS is Paul Ryan.

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And probably one of the ones who would have most – been most sympathetic to your argument and about classical liberalism, and 2012 it seemed, yeah, he was Romney's VP. He had succeeded in persuading House Republicans, a pretty impressive achievement, to get on board dealing seriously with entitlement reform and so forth. He had a – I think a set of views that were very consistent with what you and I like, and that was the rising new Republican Party and star of the conservative movement. And six years later he's gone and Trump is president.

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: I mean, really, what an arc in six years. So –

GOLDBERG: No, to the point, I mean, it's funny. You know, I mean, 2012 was also around the time where Arthur Brooks, our friend, president of the American Enterprise Institute, was making real headway in his – you know, he saw his mission as going out and converting the left and convincing them that really conservative policies can do more to help the people that they claim they want to help.

And Paul Ryan was deeply influenced by a lot of that stuff, and, you know, it wasn't necessarily George W. Bush compassionate conservatism. But it was this idea of sort of getting past a lot of the stale categories of policy and whatnot and actually going down on the ground.

You know, so Paul Ryan did his poverty tour and all these kinds of things, and it really seemed like, both on the intellectual side and on the political side, that even though Obama won that, you know, things look fairly promising.

And, yeah, that's over.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: And I think that, you know – I've been arguing for a long time now in the era of Trump that stripped of all its ideology and prudential and traditional adornment and all of these things that you and I care a lot about, down to the basic metaphysical struts, conservatism basically is just about two things. It's about the idea that character matters and the idea that ideas matter, and this is the liberal part of it,

right? And – or the classic liberal part of it. Because when you say ideas matter, what you're saying is that we can employ reason and facts and evidence and logic to persuade people that one idea is better than another idea.

That is the essence of the good part of the Enlightenment, right? And it's what democracy depends on, is this that you can – you know, if we live in a deliberative democracy, the whole idea of deliberation only makes sense if people can change their minds about things.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: And the character part gets at the heart of what it means to be a – sort of a cultural conservative, which is that there are certain eternal best practices, habits, right?

I mean, I think the most profound thing that changed civilization was when the concept of God-fearing went away, because God-fearing suggests that even when you're alone there is this external entity watching you and judging you. And it is a real check on human nature and human conduct. And good character is sort of – you know, the Hallmark-card version of good character is simply, "what you do when nobody else is watching."

And it seems to me that one of the reasons why I was opposed to Donald Trump from the beginning is that he stands athwart both of those pillars completely. Utterly uninterested in ideas, utterly, except in an instrumental, mercenary way about how well they aid his sort of Nietzschean will to power and his narcissism and all that.

And his relationship to good character is an ocean apart. I mean, it is just – the – you know, this is a guy who cheated on his first wife with a woman who became his second wife, and then cheated on his third wife with a porn star.

And he defines, you know, all good behavior based purely in relation to the loyalty to him. You know, this is a guy who – you know, he gave his famous take on Roy Cohn, and his old – you know, the guy, his old lawyer, and he said, you know, "All these white – " I think it's in the *Art of the Deal*. He says, "You know, all these proper Wall Street guys who think they, you know, are all prim and proper and do the right thing and all of that? They're not really your friends 'cause if you're in trouble they're gonna run away from you," right? By which he basically means if you act scummy, they're not gonna want to have anything to do with you.

And he says, "But someone like Roy Cohn, he's with you no matter what, right? He's with you to the end. He'll visit you on your hospital bed." And the only reason I bring this up is that when Roy Cohn got AIDS and was in the hospital, Donald Trump, because of his bigotry about all of that, completely severed all ties with him and didn't reciprocate the loyalty one way at all – or another at all.

And in that sense, Paul Ryan stands as almost the exact opposite of Donald Trump and really exemplifies. You know, look, I mean, he cares about number stuff in ways that I don't, and he's a bit of a geek and all of these kinds of things, but Paul Ryan is an intensely decent guy who believes in good character. He's a family man. He has solid, real values, and he models them in his life as best as he can, and he cares deeply and passionately about ideas.

And so for me, it's this almost literary moment where this guy who was essentially too good for what the Republican Party has become has just said, "I can't do this anymore."

And it's very – I mean, it's symbolic more than anything else because it became Trump's party a while ago. But the symbolism is really sad.

KRISTOL: But also the fact that Ryan and – you're welcome to defend or criticize this. I think I'd be on the critical side, but understanding – while understanding, I think, what was motivating him – that he went along with Trump.

GOLDBERG: Oh, yeah. I'm not saying that I'm not disappointed with him.

KRISTOL: Right, so I'm saying that that too makes it even more – but that's –

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: It makes it more tragic. If – you know, it's not that he – it's one thing to just stand up and fight and lose. In a way, he –

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Because of where he was and Speaker and represented the whole conference, and could he moderate Trump? And could he get some good things done? He sort of gave up a fair amount of what he cared about...

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: ...over the last couple of years in terms of standards and, you know –

GOLDBERG: And I –

KRISTOL: Stopped saying what he believes.

GOLDBERG: I – exactly. I had that conversation with Ryan where, you know, I had said to him, you know, "The damage being done to the party is just enormous. The brand of the party, the brand of conservatism," and, you know – and his standard response – it was an off-the-record conversation, but I've heard him say basically the same thing in public many times, so it's – I think it's fine, but he said, "I can only focus on what I have control over..."

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: "...and I want to – I have to help my caucus, and I've got – " you know, and to be fair, as a political proposition, he's got a caucus where you've got guys who were elected in a +20 Trump district, and you got guys who were elected in a + Hillary 5 district, and how you keep that kind of coalition together is very tough.

But it would have been nice if – I do like to think that if he had just been the head, still the head of the Budget Committee...

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: ...we would have seen a better version of Paul Ryan during the last couple years.

KRISTOL: Oh, yeah. That's quite possible. I do think this book really gets to what I think has made us so unhappy about Trump, and critical, and – in the sense that –

I was struck, again, on a panel a week or two ago with a conservative we know who's a thoughtful guy, smart guy, would very much like this book and be familiar with a lot of the arguments in the books and articles you draw on and so forth. But he was sort of, "You know, look, it's been mostly a conservative

administration. You know, he's not my cup of tea. He's not as good as the others would have been, but it's not – you shouldn't be too hysterical about it, so – "

GOLDBERG: Mm-hmm.

KRISTOL: And I guess for me, what he didn't see – and I'm curious to what your thoughts, but it was precisely this.

GOLDBERG: Mm-hmm.

KRISTOL: That he's turning – I mean, there's a risk of an admirable conservative tradition, one that's really done with quite a lot of good, I would say, for the country and for the world, really.

GOLDBERG: Mm-hmm.

KRISTOL: And also rather unique one in the sense that, where else has a conservative tradition been both successful and in the service of liberty and prosperity, mostly, and decency – not universally, but mostly – turning that into a European-style, Bannon-style conservative tradition.

And I think that some of the Trump reluctant defenders, the ones who are intelligent and don't like him or anything, don't see –

Maybe we're wrong. Maybe I'm wrong to be so worried about this, but I think that's where we sort of differ. That's why I'm more alarmed and have more of an urgency about my opposition to Trump, and they have a little more of a relaxed attitude.

It'd be sort of like if you get a, I don't know, you know, a party or a team or a social gathering and there were a couple of – there's a jerk there, and he's dominating it even, and he's making it kind of unpleasant, but at the end of the day it'll end, and he'll go away, and you won't invite him next time.

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: And, you know, the social club goes on. Whereas I worry he changes the whole character of the gathering.

GOLDBERG: Oh, yeah. I agree with that entirely, and – although again, I don't think – and again, it's like the man who takes to drink and becomes more of a failure because he drinks – our problems predate Trump.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: Trump is a symptom of our problems, *and* Trump is making our problems much worse.

KRISTOL: I very much agree with both those things. Some people say the first as a way of not saying the second.

GOLDBERG: That's right. That's right.

KRISTOL: He's a symptom, not a cause.

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: You know, well, what does that – yeah, sure, but if it's a symptom that makes things worse, you know –

GOLDBERG: Yeah, but if I'm an alcoholic and I start drinking grain alcohol...

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: I'm gonna get even –

KRISTOL: If you're sick and you're misdiagnosed, you'll be sicker.

GOLDBERG: And so there's a catalytic issue going on here, and I think that part of the – part of the way to think about it is, is that particularly for a certain kind of conservative who has – who basically sees politics as a game, you know – and I don't mean that in a belittling sense. I just mean that's sort of the paradigm that I think of.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: Points on the board. Right?

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: If you are – if your kids were playing basketball or little league or something like that, you would still have this notion – you would want to hopefully have this notion of sportsmanship going on, right? And...

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: ...and that if your – if the winning kid, if the key, star player's just constantly cheating, and whenever the ref isn't looking he's throwing elbows and all these kinds of things, you would be more cognizant of the fact that that is modeling behavior that the other kids shouldn't mimic.

And instead what we're getting is that – and I think what this – I really do believe that a lot of this comes from a kind of – partly that psychic break thing I was talking about earlier, but also this deep-seeded Saul Alinsky envy on the right, which has turned a lot of formerly intelligent people kinda nuts, where –

I mean, I remember. I wrote a – I was one of the guys who put Saul Alinsky on the conservative map in my first book.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: And – but people took from that not that, oh, the left is – that the left cheats, right? They then went to the next step and said, "We have to cheat, too."

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: And then it's – this is the whole world – you know, the whole world's blind kind of, you know, result, and you now have, like –

The other day I gave a talk at Denison University, and I made this point about character and ideas, and my friend Kevin Holtsberry tweeted it out, and as always happens whenever I make this argument, all these people say, "Oh, that world's over. That's dead and gone." Well, I don't want that world to be dead and gone. I don't want to live in a – sort of just a hammer and tongs power politics world, and –

KRISTOL: Right, and what made it dead and gone? Like, one election?

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: When did the –

GOLDBERG: Just to defend this guy?

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: You know? And so – but I look at things – I mean, you should have my friend David French on to talk about this stuff.

But, you know, the most – and there are lots of different examples like this, but the one that I find most depressing and most unbelievable if you try to put it in a novel, in 2011 – I think it's Pew – they asked this question, "Can a politician live an immoral or – immoral or indecent life in their private life and still be a good public servant?" Right?

And as you might expect, in 2011, the people who were least likely to agree with that proposition were self-identified white evangelicals. Only 30% said you could be deeply, morally flawed in your private life and still be a good public servant. Right? And so they were the most judgmental.

Fast-forward to 2016, ask the same question, 71% of white evangelicals now say that you can be a decent – you can be a good public servant even if you're cheating on your wife and whatever.

And so now – I mean, the shocking thing about that is not only did the number more than double in favor of the proposition, if those numbers are still true today in 2018, the single most tolerant demographic in American life of marital infidelity and immoral behavior in politicians are white evangelical Christians.

I've spent – you've spent longer, 20 years, defending the Christian right, you know? You know, you used to be friends with Bauer and all these guys, and your dad was a big defender of a lot of this.

KRISTOL: Mm-hmm.

GOLDBERG: And I always thought that one of the most disgusting bigotries in American life was the sort of heaping of elite scorn on decent Christian Americans, and I still believe that's true. I mean, I still find a lot of that stuff repugnant.

What I also find repugnant though is this psychic break that we've seen from people like Jerry Falwell, Jr., who now want to defend Roy Moore or defend Donald Trump all purely on this transactional basis, completely defenestrating this old argument that I thought was right, which is that you should expect our leaders to model a certain minimum of decent behavior.

And instead it's sort of, like, the Hannity-ization position of the American right, where it – Hannity gets a call from Donald Trump and says, "You gotta defend this today," and he goes, "Okay, boss."

And it trickles down to American people, and that is deeply poisonous, and it is going to elicit a horrible reaction on the left, which is – 'cause, well, that's what – all of this is dialectic. The left does something bad, the right because their –

So one of the things about our tribal nature is we have this thing John Tooby calls "the coalition instinct." When you're in a tribe, you are in a coalition, which he's talking about in an evolutionary sense. You are willing to make all sorts of allowances for lapses of people on your own side. You don't see it as defining their character.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: Right? But when you see it on the other side you think that one lapse defines who they are, right? And so Bill Clinton, he proves that Democrats are just scummy, adulterous pigs, right? Oh, "But what Donald Trump did? Ah, that's different. You know, you have to make allowances."

And so what happens when you have a tribal political dynamic is one side does something bad. The other side says, "See, that represents how they do everything." And then they say, "We have to do it even worse." And then the other side sees that, and by the end of it everyone is locked into this Alinsky-ite nonsense, which just simply says do whatever you can to win because winning is all that matters. And it's gonna get worse before it gets better, I think.

KRISTOL: Just final point, maybe. You mentioned the psychic break – what did you call it? The psychic – yeah, a couple times, and I very much agree – well, it has that sense. I mean, people like us who've been pretty close to it here for a while, and it did seem to come a little bit out of nowhere. It wasn't obvious, and there were always elements...

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: ...in there with Pat Buchanan. They were there with Ron Paul, but they were beaten back it seemed like, and it didn't seem to be gaining, particularly.

Was there a moment you think that was key for the break? Was it Obama – you know, and I have some of the feeling it seemed like things got much crazier after Barack Obama got reelected.

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Why exactly the re-election of a president by three points...

GOLDBERG: Yup.

KRISTOL: ...should have been such a psychic blow? I mean, I wasn't happy about it, but, I mean, why exactly that would – you know, but it does seem like that's what set up the "Flight 93 election"...

GOLDBERG: Mm-hmm.

KRISTOL: ...and all that kind of hysteria, which then leads to justifying everything because if it's Flight 93, you don't ask about the character.

GOLDBERG: That's right.

KRISTOL: But the guy next to you who's...

GOLDBERG: That's right. And also the eschatological – the apocalyptic rhetoric about Hillary Clinton, too.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: You know, and look, I mean, I think my record on Hillary Clinton is pretty solid. [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: Yeah, but, I mean, really, what are we – yeah. I –

GOLDBERG: No, I agree. I don't know. I think part of it – you know, there are a lot of guys on our side who deserve a big chunk of the blame who said over and over and over again in 2012 election, you know, that it'll be the end of America if Mitt Romney [sic] wins.

And then really in 2016, I mean, I remember Hannity would begin his radio show –

KRISTOL: Or if Obama wins. Yeah.

GOLDBERG: If Obama wins, yeah. And then in 2016 it was – Hannity would begin the radio show, "32 days left of the election that will decide whether America survives or not," right? And I do think – so – and part of that, I think, was sincere; wrong but sincere. I always used to argue if America's one election away from ceasing to exist, it's already over because the whole point of this country is that it doesn't work that way, and –

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: But I don't know. I mean – and again, I do think Barack Obama deserves a good deal of blame, his share of blame, right? I mean, it's not his fault, per se, but he did like to troll and poke the opposition. But the opposition love to fall for it and go to 11 on everything.

And I bet we could look back – and I remember talking to John Podhoretz once about, you know, this amazing decline in the faith and trust in institutions that you see across the board, and we were trying to figure out what was the thing that did it, and, you know, his best guess was the Catholic Church sexual abuse crisis, which is plausible, right? But you can always find one thing a little –

KRISTOL: It's always a perfect storm, too, right?

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: I mean, the social media hitting at the same time is – you know, that probably –

GOLDBERG: But I do think it's really worth pointing out – I know my logorrhea is going over long here, but –

KRISTOL: No, no, no. I want you to –

GOLDBERG: You know, I had this argument – I've had this argument with a bunch of people on the right, including our friend and my boss, Rich Lowry. There is this desire to say that Trump is normal because all Republican presidents, and all presidents, really, have a coalition that involves populism. And I think that on the surface that is true, right? As an analytical matter, if you're gonna stop at that sentence you would say, "Fact check: true."

The problem is that not all populism are the same, right? I mean, first of all, left-wing populism is different than right-wing populism, but not all right-wing populism is the same.

KRISTOL: No.

GOLDBERG: Ronald Reagan's rhetoric was, you know, openhearted, grateful, aimed at pro-immigration to a large extent. Right? It was the narrative of immigration, and his rhetoric, which again, I think rhetoric is hugely important, right? It defined ideals for the country in a certain way. He never talked as if Democrats – one of the – Democrats were bad people, right? Donald Trump's populism is much more European, to bring it back to the Bannon-style, right?

So the old-style European populism, romantic nationalism, basically says that the leader is the authentic voice of "the people," and anybody who doesn't follow the leader is now no longer considered a legitimate member of the people, and that they are internal enemies, bad people, evil people, and that is the rhetoric – that is the populist rhetoric of Trumpism. Where it is simply – you know, he had once said

at a rally, you know, "All that matters is that the people are with me. The other people don't matter," you know?

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: And that sort of sanctification of *your* mass of followers and the demonization of all the other – Reagan never did anything remotely like...

KRISTOL: Right, right.

GOLDBERG: Nixon might have believed it, but even he didn't do much of that!

KRISTOL: Well, and it makes a big difference just to add a footnote to your point, really, is that – I mean, all these huge country coalitions can have all kinds of people in them, but – and I'm sure if one went back and looked at every congressman in the Reagan era and even at some of Reagan's stray comments you'd find elements of, let's call it, "Trumpism."

GOLDBERG: Sure.

KRISTOL: But – and certainly if you look at Trump's coalition today, you'd find much more honorable elements and people just fighting for the good – for – you know, for what they believe in. But it hugely matters who's at the head of it.

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: And especially when that person's the President of the United States, and I've always thought that. And people say, "Well, you're too obsessed with Trump, Bill. You know, it's a symptom, and, of course, there are all these other things going on. I mean, look what's happening in Europe."

But once he becomes president, he's a symptom who has a huge effect on...

GOLDBERG: Sure.

KRISTOL: ...what happens after that, and the fact that Trump is Trump and Reagan was Reagan change – even if in some mathematical way, you know, the coalition was 20% this 15% that, the fact that it's Reagan shaping it gives it one tone and color and character, and – of course, and Trump the other. So –

GOLDBERG: Yeah. I mean, like – it's like, you know, the Constitution was written with George Washington in mind, right?

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: And they knew that George Washington modeled certain virtues, and, like, remember, these were revolutionaries – these are guys who lost brothers and families and just fought a war, and – but they knew, because of George Washington's character, that the Constitution would work, and I think the Constitution is still working now, sort of...

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: ...but Donald Trump is talking about these things, and modeling behavior and encouraging forces – you know, your rule of law stuff is exactly right – that at the very minimum sets a terrible precedent for the next populist.

KRISTOL: But the Founders had a great belief in the Constitution that they had set up with checks and balances and all that. But they also – Hamilton was willing to sacrifice his life to make sure Aaron Burr didn't become president, precisely because they knew that, for all the strength of the institutions and the construct that's keeping us – that's working, you'd also need to – it matters who's in charge.

GOLDBERG: It matters, yeah.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: And have you ever read up on the – what Aaron Burr did with the rest of his life?

KRISTOL: No. I mean, I actually – no, I need to, because Burr does seem like, actually, a sort of Trump-ity figure.

GOLDBERG: It was fascinating. I had no idea, and then I saw *Hamilton* with my daughter, and you look it up, and he goes to Europe for a little while, and then he goes out West, and he tries to start some kingdom of Burr, you know? [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: Right. [CROSS TALK]

GOLDBERG: And there's a lot of weird stuff there. I'm probably getting it wrong, but, you know –

KRISTOL: He's more impressive than Trump in the sense that he really was kind of addicted to – I mean, he had an ambition to be Napoleonic or something like that.

GOLDBERG: Yeah, yeah.

KRISTOL: Whereas Trump is way more vulgar, and – But just the vulgar can do a lot of damage too. I mean –

GOLDBERG: But, you know, he's also – I mean, Kevin Williamson's made this point. There's a reason why he does his apartment up in the Versailles style. There's a reason why he named his kid Baron.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

GOLDBERG: You know –

KRISTOL: Branding the name the Trump Tower.

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: It's all about him, yeah.

GOLDBERG: And he created his own official heraldic seal, which is meaningless. And it's funny, Schumpeter actually has this – makes this point. He says that the ambition of every industrialist, every businessman is to create as close to a facsimile of an aristocratic dynasty.

KRISTOL: Hm.

GOLDBERG: And I do think that is – that comes in our wiring, too, is this idea of creating, you know, a kingdom within the kingdom. And I think so much of what Donald Trump's presidency can be – so much of Donald Trump's presidency can be understood if you understand that what he really wants to be is a monarch, right? And he wants to be seen as the symbol of the people.

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: And he wants to be respected, and he keeps not going to London 'cause they won't throw him the kind of parade that he wants. And he loves military parades, and he – and one of the reasons why Paul Ryan made the decision that he made was that Donald Trump had promised him that he was basically gonna be a ceremonial president...

KRISTOL: Right.

GOLDBERG: And that Paul Ryan would get to do policy, and that lasted for about five minutes.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Yeah, it could – I mean, right, because somehow it turned out that Trump – well, he might have been better off deciding to be a ceremonial president.

GOLDBERG: Oh, I think it would be great for him. It would have been better for the country.

KRISTOL: But something about him makes him also want to, you know, muck around and all of the – There's actually the question why that is, actually.

GOLDBERG: Yeah, no, it's hard to quite figure out, but –

KRISTOL: I think – we – partly it was the modern populist can't be ceremonial because being ceremonial means some distance from the public, sort of a "mainstream" point, I would say.

GOLDBERG: Right, you can't – you can't appease your base if you're a symbol for the whole country.

KRISTOL: Yes, and he loves the day-to-day adulation, praise, fighting.

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: You know, and that – if you do that you can't then be the constitutional monarch, so he's sort of in conflict in that respect.

GOLDBERG: Though –

KRISTOL: You can't decide whether to be Huey Long or to be, you know, some guy with a heraldic crest.

GOLDBERG: You know, that's right, and he also is bizarrely – while he loves controversy, he hates interpersonal conflict, and so, I mean – I was wondering this. Maybe you know the answer. All these people who have been fired from the White House in the last – has he ever done it himself?

KRISTOL: Yeah, I don't know.

GOLDBERG: You know? I mean, [CROSS TALK] –

KRISTOL: He's good on *Apprentice* at pretending he's doing it though.

GOLDBERG: That's right, so –

KRISTOL: It's a reality TV thing. You know, so we have a nationalist populist threat that's not gonna be the suicide of the West, I hope.

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: You could have put a question mark there after the – in the headline, but that's always wimpy to do, right? And you never – publishers always tell you don't do – no question marks.

GOLDBERG: It didn't occur to me.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

GOLDBERG: [LAUGHS]

KRISTOL: Well, that's good. That's courageous. That's courageous of you to take on the – but, no, I think you're – you make a very good point. You see the headline – I mean, honestly, I saw the title of the book, and you think, "Oh, it's, you know – it's depressing," or...

GOLDBERG: Yeah.

KRISTOL: ...or it's gonna be a – but actually, as you say, the – it's not the decline of the West. That is deterministic.

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: I mean, it was. I think that...

GOLDBERG: Right.

KRISTOL: ...in Schumpeter's case, whereas this is a choice, as you say.

GOLDBERG: Yeah. I mean, the first sentence of the book is "There is no God in this book," and the reason why I say that is there's – there's no outside force, no *deus ex machina*, right? There's also no Marxist teleology or dialectic or any of that kind of stuff. We create the world that we want to live in.

And if we choose not to do that, we will revert back to human nature, and man's natural environment for 250,000 years was barbarism, violence, and poverty. And "the miracle" is this thing that we should be immensely grateful, for instead we're taught to resent it.

KRISTOL: That's an appropriate note to end on. Thank you for this conversation. Thank you –

GOLDBERG: Well, it's great to be here. Thank you for having me.

KRISTOL: Thank you for writing the book.

GOLDBERG: Yeah. Thank you.

KRISTOL: And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]