

# CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

## Conversations with Bill Kristol

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### **I: The Threat of Authoritarianism (0:15 – 36:01)**

KRISTOL: Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol, and I'm very pleased to be joined today by Bob Kagan, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, author of many books ranging from big history books on American, history of American foreign policy – *Dangerous Nation* is the first of how many volumes, I don't know.

KAGAN: I think it's four now, but I haven't told my publisher yet that it's four, so, we'll find out.

KRISTOL: But it's the one that exists.

KAGAN: That's the one that exists right.

KRISTOL: Up until 1900, is that right?

KAGAN: It goes to 1900 right.

KRISTOL: The founding, the beginning until 1900. And many other books, many really terrific shorter books which people might want to begin with, but they can begin with *The Dangerous Nation* too. Most recently "The Jungle Comes Back" is that –

KAGAN: Grows back.

KRISTOL: Grows back.

KAGAN: Like jungles do.

KRISTOL: Right, and author of a recent piece as we speak in March, really terrific piece in *The Washington Post* but a long piece, much longer than a typical *Washington Post* piece on the return of authoritarianism. Well maybe just begin for a minute on "The Jungle Grows Back" and then get to the very interesting argument you make about authoritarianism. So what does that mean "The Jungle Grows Back?"

KAGAN: Well, it means that what people sometimes refer to as the liberal world order, but basically the American order created after World War II, I think at a certain point came to take for granted that democracy and prosperity and general peace which characterized that – Great Power Peace – had sort of become the norm.

You know if you think back on Frank Fukuyama’s famous “End of History” article, that somehow human beings have gone through an evolution and this was the sort of triumph of a certain idea. My argument is – I don’t think it’s original – but that’s what I say in this book is that we really need to think of this period as an aberration from history. And that there are a lot of forces, natural forces, in the international system which tends toward chaos and anarchy and conflict. And in domestic politics, democracy is the rarest form of government.

And there’s a lot of other things going on, anyway, if you just think of this period as an aberration. And what we see now I think is things returning to normal. It’s basically the jungle taking over the garden. It’s like if you build a garden, it’s an artificial construct just the way liberal order is. If you just let things go naturally it disappears under the jungle and that’s sort of what’s happening.

KRISTOL: And someone used the jungle metaphor right? Or is that –

KAGAN: I don’t know, I remember George Schultz used to talk about gardening.

KRISTOL: Oh that was it, okay, that’s what I’m thinking of.

KAGAN: So I do, you know it is sort of like the jungle and garden metaphor.

KRISTOL: That you have to keep, pull up the weeds, otherwise the garden –

KAGAN: Right, if you know, I’m not a gardener but I understand the principle of a garden, which is that you can’t plant your garden, walk away, come back two weeks later and expect to see a garden. You’re constantly pushing against, not evil forces by the way, just natural forces, weeds and vines. And I think the same is true of the international system, and of politics in general.

KRISTOL: And you wrote a book called *The Return of History* which is more explicitly kind of, this is what ten years ago maybe.

KAGAN: That was yeah, 2008 that came out. And that was really about how we were returning to traditional geopolitical competition, as well as the traditional challenge which is what I write about in this most recent *Washington Post* essay: the traditional confrontation between authoritarianism and liberal democracy.

KRISTOL: So talk about that, because I think some people would say, “Yeah of course, jungle, it’s a jungle out there. But you know that leads you to kind of a realistic foreign policy of you know, making allies wherever you can and not getting involved in messy matters.” And sort of not I’d say the kind of foreign policy that you, and I for that matter, have been mostly associated with, which is a little more about American leadership of the liberal world order. So explain why.

KAGAN: Well I just think we – if you think about the whole progression of the last you know 100 years or so, let’s say – I think most people thought that, well communism is an ideology that’s at odds with liberal capitalism, liberal democratic capitalism, but that once communism was gone there really was no ideological challenger to liberal democracy. There might be individual authoritarians who are more or less dangerous for whatever reason, but there’s nothing to worry about in terms of a coherent. and let’s say also exportable, authoritarian ideology.

And I just think that that loses sight of the fact that really ever since the birth of liberal government, which is really the United States after the Revolution, that conflict has been ongoing. That liberalism really was

a challenge to traditional, authoritarian, hierarchical society and from the very beginning there's been a fight.

What happened during the Cold War is that authoritarian governments just happened to be very weak and the Soviet Union was very strong, and so the challenger looked like communism. And we weren't used to the idea that authoritarians could also pose not only a strategic challenge but a challenge to liberalism itself. And now we're seeing, as authoritarian powers have become powerful and have sort of gotten up off their backs after the end of the Cold War, that it's not just that they're strong, they're actually, they represent a critique of liberalism which is eternal in a way.

It's the critique that one can make of liberalism, by the way and things that your father wrote about a lot, about the things that liberalism doesn't provide to human beings that they want and need.

KRISTOL: And elements of the critique are not incorrect I suppose.

KAGAN: Right.

KRISTOL: And intelligent liberals I would also say – something that people don't realize these days so much – have always understood those, not always, but usually often, understood those limitations and thought about how to address them within the context of liberal democracy, etc.

KAGAN: Right, I mean –

KRISTOL: It's that, people do treat it these days like, "Wow, I've proven that liberalism has some dangerous tendencies. So forget about liberalism." Right?

KAGAN: Or people just say, "Well obviously, liberalism is, as the Founders said, 'self-evidently correct.'" And I think, in a way, you know rather that I would like people to stick up for liberalism, but as you say sticking up for liberalism also means understanding the trade-offs. And there are real trade-offs.

And I think America has been wrestling with those trade-offs since the Founding. I mean for instance the relationship between religious tradition and liberalism has always been a complex relationship in America. And I think that what we're seeing politically today is a certain amount of traditional rebellion against some of the consequences of liberalism for American society.

KRISTOL: Right. I suppose the conventional, sort of 20<sup>th</sup> century view is more often liberal democracy has these enemies on the left and right, communism and fascism, that are sort of uniquely ideological. And there, of course, were all kinds of other regimes that were just dictatorships basically, but they weren't, somehow – no one thought that much, people tended not to think there was much ideological oomph there. It was just whatever the country happened to have, kind of.

KAGAN: Right. And I think what we didn't recognize sufficiently was that that was really more circumstantial than anything else. If you think about the –

KRISTOL: "That" being communism and fascism.

KAGAN: Well that communism – well first there was fascism. Then there was communism. I don't know if fascism even qualifies as an ideology.

But in any case, but during the Cold War if you think about all the authoritarian governments, most of them, if not almost all of them, were dependent on the United States in some way. And also they were not – certainly after the end of the Cold War when we sort of had a liberal hegemony for a period of time – they were not going to get up and say we disagree with liberalism. In fact, they had to go through a lot of the forms of allowing sort of a certain amount of rights because they were under a tremendous amount of pressure to do so as part of their relationship with us.

And I think what we've seen as our power has sort of retracted a little bit, and as they've grown stronger, is that they are less and less pretending that they agree and are much more outspoken now about not just not being democrats, but sort of proudly not being democrats. So if you look at Chinese leaders and the Chinese press, they have a full-throated critique of liberalism, which I think you could have read in Metternich's Austria.

And the same goes for Vladimir Putin who claims to stand for traditional values, the Church, the Orthodox Church as against a lot of this kind of expansion of rights. Whether it's about you know LGBT issues or women's rights etc. And now you can see in Eastern and Central Europe there's also this strong commitment to what Victor Orbán of Hungary calls "Christian Democracy" with an emphasis on the Christian.

KRISTOL: And explicitly not liberal, right.

KAGAN: Well he says it's illiberal, he says it's, he explicitly says it's illiberal, it's anti-liberal. And I think the idea being that "liberalism is allowing these immigrants to come through, liberalism sort of stands up for the rights of people which are destructive of our traditions and our culture." And again I think you know if you went back to you know Tsar Alexander he would have said the same thing.

So I think we're just not used to taking this critique seriously, but the critique is real. And of course there are Americans making the same critique. And there are some conservatives who look at Putin and look at Victor Orbán and see basically fellow travelers in this struggle against what they call liberal imperialism.

KRISTOL: And we're using "liberal" here throughout to be, with the small "L" kind of.

KAGAN: Well I think for some conservatives they've blurred.

KRISTOL: Right.

KAGAN: I mean in a way I think it used to be, and I think it's still true that many conservatives want to conserve the small "L" liberalism of the Founding, and then fight against the sort of Left, what we would call Left Liberalism. But I just wonder whether these days, and in recent years or maybe even longer than that, there's been a conflation between small L and big L liberalism in conservative minds.

KRISTOL: So they've lost sight of the, that they do want to conserve, or should want to conserve liberal democracy, the liberal world order. The word liberal still is – I've been struck by this, I was thinking of writing something about this – is a respectable word. Conservatives defend liberal education.

KAGAN: Right.

KRISTOL: Mostly defend the liberal world order, liberal democracy, they recognize that that's the regime we live in that they like. But that liberalism is, I mean it is something different. But it's also funny how much they, you know how sharp, how hostile you can be to liberalism while defending what's liberal.

KAGAN: Well and again, I mean you know there's always been this tension which I think conservatives have felt most acutely, the tension between the effects of liberal principles on traditions. And you know in America I think there's always been two, at least obviously, but two conceptions of what is the grounding of our principles.

And so you could on the one hand believe, "well it's all part of the Anglo-Saxon inheritance." Or you could say "No, it's because of the Declaration [of Independence], which in a way rejected that as the grounding." And so in a way there's like two competing definitions of what the American nation is. And I think we're seeing that again. I think that goes as kind of a stream throughout our history and I think we're seeing that fight, that debate come back again.

KRISTOL: That is interesting. Do you think, just a historical footnote, but how much should one understand let's say the 18<sup>th</sup> century battles between I guess Britain and Holland, on the one hand, and the continental powers, as also kind of a defense of proto-liberalism? Or kind of liberalism against authoritarianism? I mean do you want to make it really begin with America? Or is it fair to look back to post-1689?

KAGAN: I mean until you have, I think the reason you can go to 1689 for Britain I think probably primarily, and it comes up interestingly after, after the Napoleonic War and the Vienna settlement when you know the Eastern autocracies, Metternich, Alexander, the Prussians are busy actively stamping out revolution. And the British are immediately, they're supposed to be allies in keeping the peace. And they are allies in some respects, but the British are immediately uncomfortable with the idea of stamping out revolution because of course they also think of themselves in some ways as a revolutionary power, because of the Glorious Revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. And I think at that point, you start seeing the distance opening up.

And I think we forget that the 19<sup>th</sup> century was just a highly ideological century. That there really was an ongoing struggle between the liberal powers and the autocratic powers. It plays out in Germany in 1848 when there's an almost German liberal revolution, which is basically crushed by the autocracies. Which sends Germany off in a very, I would say problematic direction, that there wasn't a liberal revolution in Germany.

So in a way I feel like we have returned to that kind of world. It's obviously very different in some ways, but I don't know that the issues aren't in a way fundamentally the same.

KRISTOL: And what I thought was particularly bracing about your article was the insistence that the illiberal regimes aren't just illiberal, they're anti-liberal both at home and to some degree, a considerable degree abroad. I think the more conventional view, which I have probably slipped into many times, is you know there's liberal democracy and that has a certain power and does seek to, it almost has to seek to export its principles and ideals.

And then there are these autocracies of various kinds, strong, and traditional ones, monarchs and so forth which resist but they're kind of, the resisting can be unpleasant and they can do bad things to their citizens and all that. But they're not really, they're not on the offensive. And I think that's what you, one thing you emphasize so much in your piece.

KAGAN: Well again, you know, let's just start with the fact that, and this was true in the 19<sup>th</sup> century too, that the mere existence of a powerful, liberal, democratic society is a threat to an autocratic society. And you know, what they were stamping out was the contagion of liberalism. Because you know their people can look across the ocean, or across a border, and say, "Well they're free. So why can't we do what we want to do?"

And so from the beginning there is an effort by the autocrats to push back. And then they are powerful enough to push back. In the case of throughout the Cold War and just after the Cold War, they had no power to do it so they couldn't, but now they are again.

And some of it has to do with shaping international norms. You know we had created, we the liberal world, had created a whole set of liberal international norms about how, not only about how people could behave, nations behave internationally, but also to some extent how they behave toward their own people. So one of the things that these autocracies have been doing has been wiping, trying to undo all that, to take the pressure off themselves.

And also, because these – and we haven't gotten yet to the question of the new technologies – but the new technologies exist that allow them, in a way that they never could before, to penetrate liberal democracies and create all kinds of havoc. Which I think Russia and China have a geopolitical interest in doing.

But I think they also have an ideological interest in doing that. It's not an accident that Putin supports Italian populists, Hungarian populists, German populists, French populists. And I don't even like the term "populist" because I think what we're really talking about are anti-liberal forces in most of these cases. Nationalist, tradition oriented forces that you know, they're very active in them.

KRISTOL: I guess why are they, getting back to basics for a second there, why are they so challenged by liberal democracy? I'm thinking of the fact that these regimes are based somewhat on particularist claims: you know, "Putin embodies the soul of Russia," or whatever. And "Xi is Chinese greatness." So why can't they let America be America, and not be too worked up about it one way or the other?

KAGAN: Well again, I think ever since the birth of a liberal government back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the case of the United States, you know liberalism presents an inherent challenge, what it stands for presents an inherent challenge to all traditional, authoritarian, autocratic regimes in the follow sense. Our liberal government is based on Lockean principles that say that first of all, the rights of the individual are primary over the state. Throughout history it's always been the primacy of the state, not the individual. The individual is supposed to be subordinate to the state. This is the first time we ever had a situation where the state is subordinate to the individual. It exists only to protect the rights of the individuals to life, liberty, and property, as Locke put it. And perhaps most importantly if people felt that the government was not securing those rights, they had a right to overthrow that government.

And this was the great challenge that the United States basically, the American republic laid down to the autocratic, divine right monarchies of Europe and they talked about it explicitly. In fact, the reason I call the first volume of my history *Dangerous Nation* is that's a quotation from John Quincy Adams who at the time, was in London in 1816 and just reporting back to his father that you know the entire, all of Europe regarded the United States as a dangerous nation because of what it stood for.

And Adams himself would give a July 4<sup>th</sup> speech in which he would say to the people of Europe, "Go thou and do likewise." And so –

KRISTOL: And Adams is regarded a little bit as a –

KAGAN: As a conservative realist, right.

KRISTOL: As a less interventionist type than Henry Clay or whatever, right?

KAGAN: Right, I mean I've always thought that there was a little bit, he was a little bit more complex figure than that.

But in any case, so the mere existence of the liberal idea is a challenge to autocracy. And for Putin this [threat] was very real during the 2000s when we had what are known as the "color revolutions," where governments in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan were – autocratic governments – were overthrown by popular democratic movements and became democracies.

And Putin was really petrified that the same thing would happen in Russia. Again, it's this idea that autocrats have, that a system that respects individual rights over the state is inherently threatening to state control. And that is why they are pushing back as hard as they are.

KRISTOL: Yeah, one thing I really liked about the piece was – what I think some others might be critical of – is the attempt to really say, and I think it's analytically correct, these autocracies have more in common with each other than you would realize. I mean of course they can be very, very different. The fifth generation of a monarch is going to look different than a colonel who takes over in a coup, and is different, obviously.

But I think when you read the Founders, you get a little – they don't really care that much about these distinctions. It's sort of democracy and dictatorship, or liberty and despotism. I don't know whether they use – You would be more familiar with what exact phrases they use, but –

KAGAN: Right, but that is what they [used]. They talked about despotism. They didn't look – You know in a way, I think we look back on monarchy and we're sort of enthralled to the inherited monarchy that somehow – that has, it had greater legitimacy. And I'm sure to some extent that was true, but if you look at who these monarchs were, most of them were like – it was inherited, but it was about *their* wealth, *their* power. They did not care about their countries very much.

And so you know I think we glorify them a little bit, but they were authoritarians. Now they were authoritarians at a time when there was nothing else and so you didn't, it wasn't even a question. It becomes a question when the United States, when the American Revolution comes along and says there is another way of doing this.

So of course there had been liberal ideals and enlightenment principles before that: questioning the divine right of monarchy. But it wasn't until the United States that it actually happened.

KRISTOL: Yeah, and it is striking how much in the political science and history literature, actually, people always want to get away from what you're pointing at. So Henry Kissinger writes that famous book which I guess we all read in college on the Congress of Vienna.

KAGAN: *The World Restored*.

KRISTOL: *The World Restored*. It's friendly to all these autocrats who seem a little more civilized than all these brutal dictators, and were, I suppose, somewhat more so. It's not like you can't have different gradations.

KAGAN: Actually they were pretty, they were pretty awful.

KRISTOL: Okay, that's, yeah.

KAGAN: But again, you're absolutely right.

KRISTOL: But I'm saying your point doesn't mean that you couldn't have really horrible regimes and just pretty bad regimes. But anyway, it is funny that the conventional view was so – Was that the conventional view? Or was that just Kissinger being Kissinger? I mean what was –

KAGAN: Well, there's two elements of the conventional view that I think are mistaken. One was that sort of Kissingerian – which he's thinking mostly about foreign policy, and I don't even know whether he would, he didn't necessarily say I agree with the way Metternich, the way Austria was ruled.

KRISTOL: Right.

KAGAN: But it's not as important to him as the fact that they came up with a way of keeping the peace. And they did because they had shared values, in terms of you know divine right monarchy.

KRISTOL: As you were saying earlier, they kept the peace by suppressing liberal revolutions. Not simply by being wonderful, enlightened, statesmen.

KAGAN: No, no, no, I mean it's just, it's worth remembering what they actually did. First of all, these were sort of the prototype of the modern police state. They had vast spying networks, they arrested people on suspicion of holding liberal views. They censored books. They censored Dante because of some of the unfortunate things in *The Divine Comedy*.

And then of course they used force. They you know intervened in Spain, in Italy, in Poland, in the Germany principalities to stamp out revolution. These were very aggressive guys who used power. Now they just look like a great statesman to us, and I think that's a mistake.

And the other thing is our idea of what traditional society was before liberalism. And you get this to some extent from Jean Kirkpatrick from her famous “Dictatorships and Double Standards” essay from 1979. In which she talks about how autocrats are just, you know they’re traditional autocrats who respect traditional mores, and traditions, church, etc. And you get the feeling that until communism came along, all governments just left their people alone.

And of course that’s not – you know if you do any reading about the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries you know that the opposite was true. That in the age of religious conflict, every single individual was potentially subject to being burned at the stake for deviating from whatever the doctrine was about the Eucharist at any given time. And that people’s lives were heavily controlled.

And it really wasn’t until the Enlightenment, liberal idea came along that said a person’s body is sacrosanct. What they believe, they are allowed to believe whatever they want, it’s not for the state to impose on them. It’s why the founders did not want to have an established church. They created the separation between church and state. That was a very conscious effort to move away from what had always been even in a relatively enlightened Britain.

KRISTOL: Doesn’t one of them at some point say they won’t accept the phrase, that we’re “a Christian nation.” Even though it is overwhelming a Christian nation, of course. Is that with the signing agreement? I can’t remember anymore.

KAGAN: Yeah I don’t remember either.

KRISTOL: It’s like Washington or Adams or something, maybe in signing something, maybe it was the Barbary pirates or something. I don’t know. It comes up explicitly and they [say]. “No, that is not the right way to characterize the United States.”

KAGAN: No, they had an opportunity to say we are part of an Anglo-Saxon, Protestant tradition. They certainly were. And I think you could argue that that was the only place where anyone ever thought these rights – anyone who actually believed in these rights. But they very explicitly rejected saying anything like that, and said instead these are universal rights. And I think they even understood, I mean I know even then they understood the implications of what they were saying. They knew for instance that this was contradicted by the fact that they were slave holders.

KRISTOL: Right.

KAGAN: But they didn’t, they didn’t, didn’t try to run away from that. They just hoped maybe slavery would eventually go away. But they meant *everybody*, when they came up, when they promulgated these universal principles.

KRISTOL: And a historian could show, maybe you know pretty convincingly, that you know the ground of English – England provided a better place for this to grow up than other, was a friendly environment for this kind of liberalism to grow up. But still it’s not the same as the environment, you know the environment in which it grew is not the same as the actual liberal democracy itself.

KAGAN: Right, and you know again we, this is like some of the largest questions there are. But how much of that was accidents of geography, the fact that it was an island? How much of it was the fact that Henry the 8th needed to get a divorce and the Pope wouldn’t give it to him? You know, the whole Reformation is – there’s no way to say, “well democracy was what everybody had on their mind.”

KRISTOL: No, no.

KAGAN: Obviously, it wasn’t what they had on their mind. It was kind of a product of accident and war and divisions within the church, etc.

KRISTOL: But once it happens.

KAGAN: Right.

KRISTOL: *The Federalist* makes a big point of this, once it happens, we need to secure it here. As a choice, not an accident.

KAGAN: Right, exactly. And but that's why the United States is so, is unique. It was an active creation of a liberal republic with a nation founded not, as we always say, on blood and soil like every other nation including England, but founded on a set of universal principles. And that is what distinguishes the United States from every other country that's ever existed.

And I think it's also what we have always as a people wrestled with because, even for us, it cuts against certain kinds of traditions that people have valued.

KRISTOL: And wrestle with it in another way I guess, which is it's hard, as *The Federalist* says, to preserve liberty and self-government. There are many temptations and traps that we could fall into, so it's a challenge.

KAGAN: Right, and then of course we get into the other issue that you know, elevating, I mean having a state who's really sole function is to protect the rights of the individual, well there's a lot of other elements of human existence that are not taken care of by that you know.

KRISTOL: Right.

KAGAN: People's faith. People's sense of community, and the people's ethnic sense of belonging. And I think we're seeing that cropping up today, but it's cropped up throughout American history.

KRISTOL: Yeah, and I suppose, the accident – it's interesting the whole question of, I mean it's very, I think as I said bracing for you to emphasize, okay sort of freedom versus despotism. It was such a big intellectual attempt to distinguish totalitarianism in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century [sic], so after the Nazis as the Soviet Union was there.

KAGAN: The 20<sup>th</sup> century.

KRISTOL: Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Hannah Arendt I think that was the theme of her book almost, that it's not like traditional dictatorship.

KAGAN: Right, right.

KRISTOL: I'm sure there are ways in which it's not, or it's much more so than traditional dictatorship. But I wonder if that was a bit of a – I haven't looked at these books in a long, long time – but it might be interesting if I went back and looked at it how well that would stand up. And whether it's more of a continuum, or just an exaggeration, or kind of crazy extension of autocracy, rather than a different form almost, which is how I think she treats it for example.

KAGAN: Well I mean, you know, without getting into – I think Hannah Arendt was also kind of trying to save German culture from – But I think you know it was true that the, you know the Bolshevik Revolution did attempt to wipe the slate clean in the same way the French Revolution did.

KRISTOL: Right.

KAGAN: You know, it's "year one" of the new – In a way that, I mean certainly that's not what autocracies have generally done. They're more likely to just take traditional modes of dictatorship and continue them. They really tried to – And I think you know one of the reasons that communism failed was it was such a radical effort to sort of mow down economic order, social order, even familial order.

But I think what we, again what we lose sight of, and I think this is the point I'm making, and I think you could argue I'm dividing things too simply, because I really am saying now it's a really a binary choice: you're either liberal or you're not liberal. And my argument in the essay is that we get so caught up in those dictatorships which allow these certain rights, or they have a little bit of a free economy, they don't bother you in this area and this area.

But I think my feeling is if they're allowing you to express yourself, or have this right or that right, it's conditional. They're doing it because they need it. They're doing it because they have no choice, they're under pressure. But that they can take it away in a heartbeat.

And I think whatever distinction ever existed between authoritarian, totalitarianism, is now being erased by technology. And that's the sort of, that in a way in the sort of most I would say troubling and worrying element of what, of what I'm writing about in this essay.

KRISTOL: Yeah, let's get to that in a minute. But I kind of liked the binary-ness of it. Because I think one alternative, if one thinks back, it might have been real totalitarianism, if you want to call it that – for whatever the 60, 70 years it existed, is that right, about 70, yeah – was a bit of an exception to the rule. The sounder way to think about 250 years is liberal democracy [versus] despotism, let's just call it authoritarianism, different forms of authoritarianism, which posed different threats and different degrees of just mistreatment of their own citizens. Different degrees of aggression abroad, depending on their doctrine. You could distinguish obviously Germany from the Soviet Union and all that.

But, but still it's in a way that 20<sup>th</sup> century period may be a bit of a misleading guide to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And the 19<sup>th</sup> century is in a funny way a better guide.

KAGAN: Right, I mean I think you know for me it's either the society and the government and the structures of government are built around protecting individual rights or they're not. And if they're not, then they may be nicer for a while, they may be less nice, but eventually they can do whatever they want to you. And that is what we're seeing all around the world today.

KRISTOL: And they're not dependably nicer even if they're nicer for a while, right.

KAGAN: Right, right.

KRISTOL: They can easily –

KAGAN: And I think the reason we thought a lot of these autocracies during the Cold War were nice was because we were so powerful, and had such control over them that they were doing their best to look like they were not flouting our basic liberal and democratic principles. They had to hold phony elections. They had to allow human rights protests sometimes if we insisted on it. But that didn't mean – and then we sort of took from that that they were therefore evolving. When in fact they were just making the concessions they needed to make to survive, and now they don't need to make those concessions.

KRISTOL: And once we started to retreat some, they were happy to forget about the concessions.

KAGAN: Right, I mean to me, like for instance an interesting example is what's happening in Egypt today where a guy like el-Sisi is now talking about basically passing legislation which will allow him to be president indefinitely. There's no way he would have done that 10, 20 years ago. He might have wanted to be president indefinitely but he would have gone through whatever charade he would have needed to go through to pull that off.

Just like the Somozas did in Nicaragua. It's not like we never allowed this to happen.

But in a way this sort of brazenness now, Xi Jinping has basically declared himself president for life. El-Sisi is doing that. Putin interestingly enough is still going through the charade, but he's now been in power longer than many Tsars and probably will still be in power you know ten years from now. And

there's just less and less feeling on the part of autocracies that they have to pay any, even lip service, as they used to, to liberal principles that the United States supports.

KRISTOL: And another bracing aspect of your piece – we've touched on this just briefly but you can elaborate – is that the democracies, liberal democracies were never – We think of them as, "Well that was most of the world somehow. Or at least the leading edge of the world. And then there were these retrograde regimes or weird totalitarianisms that, thank God, we've gotten beyond."

But I suppose that's not – I mean it's better to think of liberal democracies always as in a minority, and sort of struggling against a bigger sea of autocracy, right? Just as an actual empirical matter, I mean.

KAGAN: No, and I mean, and this is something I touch on at greater length in *The Jungle Grows Back* book, and in an earlier book I wrote, which is we have been misled by what the world looks like in this American dominated order that's existed since 1945. I mean we've seen an explosion of democracy around the world, from maybe less than two dozen on the eve of World War II to over 100 today.

And somehow therefore we got the impression that this just meant, "well democracy is just spreading." When in fact what happened was that we created an international situation that was very conducive to the success of democracy. But if you look at the whole sweep of human history you would say democracy is the rarest, most fragile form of government there is.

Again, because we're all children of the Enlightenment, one of the core elements of many people who are Enlightenment thinkers is the idea of progress. And so if we see democracy spread around the world, that's just proof that the human being, you know the human race is just moving up to a new level. When in fact I think that's just an optical illusion. We have lived in an era where a democracy was the most powerful country in the world. Not surprisingly, we've seen the spread of democracy. But if that country ceases to be the most powerful country in the world – And we're already seeing democracy being rolled back and others, sort of authoritarianisms, sort of on the move.

## II: Defending the Liberal Order (36:01 – 57:27)

KRISTOL: So two aspects to that that I think you could elaborate on a little. It's very interesting. How self-conscious was – Was the international order about America being strong enough to prevent another ghastly World War I, or World War II. And it sort of accidentally also therefore, we were the strongest, and we were a democracy, and so it also sort of led to a spread of liberal democracy?

Or was that fairly self-conscious, that it was going to be a sort of *liberal* order that would *favor* as it were liberal democracy.

KAGAN: Well you know like everything else, the sort of the statesmen who put together this order – which is basically the generation of Dean Acheson and George Marshall and George Kennan and Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman – they'd all lived through the two World Wars and they'd seen, and they'd learned – what they wanted to do obviously, as you say is prevent, they were trying to prevent the last terrible thing that happened.

KRISTOL: Right.

KAGAN: However they did have a sense that you know, the two World Wars were the product of A) dictatorships run amok; B) a breakdown of the security system; and C) a protectionist, autarchic economic system, you know internationally. And so they wanted to create an order that would reverse all three of those. But I mean at that point I think –

KRISTOL: And those were interlinked, the free trade side of it, the net security of it, and the –

KAGAN: And generally, an effort to promote democratic government. Right. I mean people thought, it was because Nazi Germany was a dictatorship that it was dangerous. Japan was an imperial autocracy

which is why it was dangerous. Now that may or may not be necessarily the reason, but they certainly believed that.

Now on the other hand I don't think they had any thought of like transforming the world into a democratic world. They had much more, again like statesmen do, they had much more immediate concerns. But they did therefore create a world which was, you know, historically conducive to democracy in a way that had never existed before.

And I would say the two things that were the most important developments were the, not only the conquest, the defeat of Germany, not only the economic resuscitation of Germany, but the democratization of Germany and Japan. So that in, what you had had –

KRISTOL: Which were not as inevitable as everyone now thinks.

KAGAN: They weren't inevitable at all. No one sitting in Germany in 1945 would have said, "Oh don't worry, it's just natural to become a democracy."

KRISTOL: Right.

KAGAN: I mean first democracy was kind of imposed and then, you know then it took root. And if you looked at the whole history –

KRISTOL: But I also meant weren't inevitable as choices by the conquering, by the victorious power.

KAGAN: No, absolutely. I mean that had –

KRISTOL: We could have set a friendly quote, you know "strong man" up as people often recommend in those countries, right?

KAGAN: Right. Although I would say it was a, I think not surprisingly, American idea that –and again this gets back to the old ideological conflict that we have to be worried about dictatorships because they're more likely to be dangerous.

KRISTOL: Right.

KAGAN: That is the oldest American idea in the world. And so, I think that if it had been a different country they might not have worried about it, but I think it was very, it was almost, it was very almost inevitable that America would attempt to do that.

Anyway, so if you think about the transformation of those two incredibly powerful countries from aggressive dictatorships to pacific democracies, it had a huge ripple effect in their regions. Previously countries had to arm themselves against a potential German or Japanese threat, now they didn't have to. Previously their economies weren't intertwined because they were at conflict with each other. And so it really created you know the two core areas of the world, East Asia, and Europe became prosperous, democratic regions. I think everything flowed from that.

KRISTOL: Well, and when do – and it's clear that you think we've slid back a little. We the U.S. have slid back in maintaining our, upholding our responsibilities as the kind of guarantor of that liberal order in recent years. Do you date that to a particular time or decision, or just inevitable post-Cold War kind of?

KAGAN: Yeah, I think that, I think I date it to pretty much the end of the Cold War when I think most Americans thought, "Well you know we did this to deal with the Soviet Union." They didn't really realize that – People forgot – And by the way I'm sort of astonished at how many very highly, you know, impressive scholars forget that we didn't actually create NATO just to deal with the Soviet Union. We also created NATO to deal with the German problem in Europe. That's very much what the British and the French wanted.

But Americans thought after 1989, the Soviet Union is gone. International communism is gone. We can go back to being – In fact it was Jean Kirkpatrick who I think very famously wrote, I think in 1990, in the *National Interest* it's time to go back to being a normal nation.

KRISTOL: Right.

KAGAN: And it's true, we had been, the United States had been, acting as no other nation in history has ever acted: to take responsibility for security of other countries thousands of miles over an ocean is really quite an extraordinary undertaking. I think it was only natural that Americans would say, "So why do we have to keep doing this?" And I would say more and more over the past 30 years Americans have increasingly been saying, "What, why, what's in it for us?"

And then certainly when wars go badly like in Iraq and now in, you know people have decided Afghanistan was also a mistake, then that acts as a kind of catalyst to that feeling. So we get to ultimately someone like Obama, President Obama talking about nation building at home, not nation building abroad.

And I think it was only, in a way it was a very logical step to a Donald Trump saying we're getting ripped off in this situation. "Why are we, you know this is not what we should be doing." And I think Americans of all political parties have a very strong conviction that this is not really in our interest because it's easy to forget why it was all created in the first place, all these many years later.

Unfortunately I think it's very dangerous, and we're about to make pretty much the mistake we made after World War I where we kind of said, "Why do – We don't want to be involved in this." And eventually it all comes back to bite us.

But especially now I would say with the new technologies where I just think even you know, the oceans were never that much protection, but now they're even less protection.

KRISTOL: Yeah, so let's talk about this, if I could just say as an addendum to what you were just saying, I guess this is a case about more than a domestic policy, where reality kind of hits and certain policies don't work, and citizens say "this is terrible." In foreign policy, you really do need presidential leadership to explain this I think.

KAGAN: Right.

KRISTOL: Obama and Trump in very different ways, neither had much interest in explaining that it was very, very important for America to play this forward leaning role –

KAGAN: Right. I mean the question always is –

KRISTOL: – protecting the world order.

KAGAN: And I mean this is an interesting question for which there is no obvious answer. Do presidents really ever lead the country in a direction that they, that the country basically doesn't want to go in? And if you think about the most gifted politician in our history was Franklin Roosevelt.

KRISTOL: Right.

KAGAN: And you look at the incredibly difficult time he had convincing Americans, you know after Poland had been invaded, after the fall of France. One has sympathy for presidents when you say, "well why can't you just explain it to the American people you know?"

KRISTOL: Right. I mean Reagan's reversal, which was so important for us in '80, '81 when he became president, was so, that is kind of a very unusual when you think about it, right? I mean we lose Vietnam in '75 and everyone's in the dumps and then five years later.

KAGAN: Very quick.

KRISTOL: You elect someone who thinks Vietnam was an honorable cause, mishandled. of course. And who has a very opposite, let's say, agenda.

KAGAN: Right. But I think that was communism and the Soviet Union. I think that, you never – You know American foreign policy has starkly, if you begin at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is like a sine wave, right? There's periods of high intervention followed by periods of retrenchment – Steve Stonovich has written about this. And we had a very long period of retrenchment after World War I. Twenty years of just really absenting ourselves from the world.

But during the Cold War, there's an oscillation, but it's a very shallow and quick oscillation, right? That we wanted to bring the troops home after World War II. But then like two years later, "No, we have to deal with the Soviet Union." Then you have the Korean War. Then you have Eisenhower retrenching, but then you're back up again.

And this is what happened after Vietnam, which was you know, a much worse catastrophe for the United States than Iraq was for instance. And yet as you say within five years after the last of Vietnam you've got Ronald Regan: it's morning in America, let's build up our forces.

Now we're talking, we're 16 years after the start of the Iraq war and Iraq is still dominating our foreign policy discourse. And I think that to me is less about Iraq than it is about the general mood of the country.

KRISTOL: So say a word about why it's so dangerous. What if someone said, "Okay well look maybe *you* would like a world where we did more, and maybe the people of those countries would benefit from that, but at the end of the day how much does it affect us, really, or what we really care about?"

KAGAN: Right, I mean, well and we're not even talking about intervention in the Middle East or anything like that.

I'm talking now about our commitments in Asia and Europe which are I think very much in question now. And of course the answer – Here's the problem, even though I think there's an answer. It is absolutely true that the rest of the world will collapse and we'll be the last to feel the effects. Because we are in fact far away from every other great power. And therefore when you start trying to explain why this matters, it does require a kind of imagination.

But very simply put, if we withdraw from Asia there is going to eventually be a conflict between Japan and China. Because Japan is going to rearm, go nuclear, Korea will go Nuclear, South Korea. And we will be back in what had been an incredibly conflictual era in Asia. You know, our friend Aaron Friedberg has said you know, "Asia's future is Europe's past." Basically it's back to you know like a 1914 situation. So do we imagine that if there is conflict between China and Japan we can just sit back here on the other side of Hawaii and say, you know, huge portions of our trade are with that part of the world. Our access to markets, our access to our other allies, all will be effected by that. So we would have to think, well that doesn't matter to us, they can have a conflict and we'll be unaffected.

I think people are absolutely dreaming if they think that when the United States pulls out of Europe that Europe will just stay this calm, placid place. I think that we will throw Europe back into the same problem. And you don't have to talk about Nazis or Hitler or any of that to say the norm in Europe is competition, conflict. And if we think that that's over, I think that history tells us otherwise.

And then again, so do we wind up – can we allow Europe in a way to fail as a liberal system without it affecting us? Again given the level of our trade, given the level of our communication, our involvement with them.

I mean it really is in a way the same case that it was hard to make, but I think proven in the 1930s. Very sensible people – You know we sometimes look back on those isolationists, “they’re so silly.” They were very straightforward. They were the realists of their day. You know Robert Taft was not an idiot.

KRISTOL: No.

KAGAN: It was a very, it felt like a very sensible position to say, “it doesn’t matter what happens out there, it doesn’t matter what happens in Europe, it doesn’t matter what happens in Asia, we’ll be fine.” And that turned out to just be as wrong as it could possibly be.

I think that you know that is exactly the kind of mistake that we are getting ready to make again.

KRISTOL: And you seem more alarmed because of the technology. So say a word about that.

KAGAN: Well the technology – on the question of the struggle between liberalism and authoritarianism – you know I think there was a time where we thought that technology was going to benefit us. I mean you know people argued that the internet was going to be a source of freedom. Well of course we’ve seen that in fact it’s actually a great tool in the hands of dictators.

And I think what’s happening in China today, in particular, ought to be truly frightening. And we’re so happy that China is not communist anymore, so allegedly it’s not totalitarian. But what China is now, what the Chinese government is now able to do, and is accelerating this with facial recognition technology, with access to everyone’s social media, telephones – The Chinese government can now know where you travel, what you buy, who you talk to, what you say to them, what you see, what you hear.

And they are in fact using this to create a means of population control. They’re establishing what they call a social credit system where certain kinds of activities count against you, certain kinds of activities count for you. If you don’t have the right score you can’t get on a train. You can’t go to a bank, you can’t travel and worse.

And they’re using this technology now to control the weaker, the minority population in China. The totalitarian aspects of this are – I think Orwell could not actually have imagined it, didn’t imagine it. That’s the first problem.

The second problem is China is exporting this technology to everyone. And all autocrats are going to want it. It doesn’t matter whether we think they’re our friends or they’re not our friends. You know el-Sisi, the ruler of Egypt is going to want it, he’s going to want to use it and is already acquiring it.

So every dictatorship in the world is going to acquire this technology and the data. So more and more, all the data that’s out there is going to be scooped up by all the, by these autocratic governments and used for their purposes. And that includes our data too. And so we’re already seeing, we saw in the elections, we see it every day how foreign governments are able to manipulate what we see, know what we’re saying.

And so I think the dangers are different, of a different order than they used to be before. And that’s why, again, I feel like then the only thing that matters is: are you a liberal government, are you not a liberal government. Because only liberal governments are going to work to protect your privacy in any way. There’s no reason for an autocrat – doesn’t respect anybody’s privacy.

So I’m seeing the world – I’m not the only one who makes this point – essentially being divided up into two sectors: a surveillance state sector and a non-surveillance state sector. And the surveillance state sector is growing and the non-surveillance state sector is shrinking.

KRISTOL: And I guess – just to be even more alarmist – there’s just the more old-fashioned technological question of an aggressive power far away can hit us much faster than they used to. Nuclear proliferation is a danger maybe of a different kind than one faced in the ’20’s and ’30’s, where ultimately we did get attacked, but it took a major power doing a huge amount of preparation and deception and us being somewhat negligent probably to let that happen.

And even so we were able to come back and win. That’s pretty, don’t you think – I mean that is something that we take – I mean speaking of complacency and taking for granted, the fact that, what are there nine or something like that, nuclear powers now?

KAGAN: And there’ll be many more in the years to come, right.

KRISTOL: Slowing the growth, or retarding the number of new powers from the original couple to five and then gradually to nine over decades, nine or so over decades, is actually much more of an accomplishment than people realize.

KAGAN: Right. No, I mean again this, the things that we take for granted about the system that we have created and sustained, not the least of which is that we haven’t had really any threat, any real threat of great power conflict. Not only between us and somebody else, but between other great powers. And we have this assumption that A) there can’t be great power conflict, and B) that if, that there will never be the use of nuclear weapons.

And I think you know, again, if history tells us anything it’s that at the end of the day there is no weapon that goes unused. And so this sort of peace that we just – just peace in terms of great power conflict we’ve taken for granted, it doesn’t have to continue that way. And we are in a much more dangerous world in terms of weaponry than we were in 1914 or even in 1941.

KRISTOL: And these weapons can be used by rogue states and even groups obviously. 9/11 was bad enough, but it was ultimately airplanes. It wasn’t – they didn’t have the weapons that they were sort of working on getting. But of course there’s no reason in principle why that couldn’t happen. Or why authoritarian regimes couldn’t either just decide to make money by selling their weapons, or decide to cause trouble for us by giving them to other bad actors.

I know there are many war games on this with Pakistan, but – and it hasn’t happened, so one has a little bit of a boy-crying-wolf problem, I guess, here that lets people [say], “Oh, we all worried when Pakistan went nuclear, oh my god, that could really be dangerous –”

KAGAN: Well it would be dangerous –

KRISTOL: And it has been dangerous incidentally.

KAGAN: But partly it has been less dangerous because we have been playing the role of keeping India and Pakistan from losing it with each other. And again, that’s another thing I think Americans take for granted.

KRISTOL: And checking the proliferation to some degree.

KAGAN: Well and just checking –

I don’t think Americans are really quite aware the degree to which every nation in the world before they do anything has to calculate what is the United States going to do about it. That’s just the way the world has been because of our enormous power and influence. Increasingly they don’t have – If they don’t have to consider that they’re going to make different decisions. They’ve made decisions which are mostly in our interest because they have to worry about our power. They will make different decisions if they don’t have to.

And by the way, on the weaponry thing, it's not only nuclear weapons. I mean we've moved into new technologies, people talk about you know, I don't remember what it is, but there's a kind of, you know warfare now that is almost entirely robot driven that's driven by artificial intelligence. Where you know things may be over in minutes because of the new technologies. And so we are in a technological race with the, particularly the Chinese now in terms of that.

These kinds of conflicts that may come in the future. You know, Hans Morgenthau of all people once famously said that Americans are always waiting for the curtain to fall and the game of great power politics to end. And I think we, I think that is a true observation. What we have a really hard time facing up to is that it never ends. That the competition, both in strategic terms and in ideas, never ends, and there's never a moment when you can say, "okay, that's it."

KRISTOL: And the danger I suppose is both the great power danger, which I suppose most people would say China is the number one. But then just the chaos danger, right? I always think of this sort of as the great powers getting into war either for aggression, let's say that's the thirties, stumbling in a way in 1914. But there's also just the Roman Empire situation, where there's no real great power, it's just the whole thing kind of just: chaos.

KAGAN: Which is the natural state of international relations. Any kind of order, even if it's a bad order or a good order is an artificial imposition. The natural state is chaos and conflict and who knows what direction that leads.

I have to say by the way that you know if you go to speak to an American audience about these things and go through this history, and talk about what things were like before 1945, I find most Americans that I talk to – and I'm not just talking about you know the elite. I'm talking about – they understand it. I actually think that if we did a better job of explaining, just going through the history again, that we have a better chance of making them understand.

KRISTOL: Well on that note of alarm, but also hope that people might learn the lessons of history, we should come back and discuss this more. Both what we should be most worried about, but also how we can deal with these actual problems. But maybe that's a better topic for another conversation. And I look forward to another conversation. So Bob, thanks very much for joining me today.

And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]