

# CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

## Conversations with Bill Kristol

**Guest:** Andrew Ferguson,  
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### **I: Identity Politics & American Culture (0:15 – 29:24)**

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol, welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. And I'm joined again by my colleague at the late, lamented *Weekly Standard*, Andrew Ferguson, author of so many excellent articles which you can still read, luckily, in the archives, [weeklystandard.com](http://weeklystandard.com). Some of which were collected, including articles you did earlier, in your fine book, [\*Fools' Names. Fools' Faces\*](#). And then the great book on Lincoln, [\*Land of Lincoln\*](#). And [\*Crazy U\*](#), your tribute to our excellent institutions of higher education.

FERGUSON: [Laughter]. A love letter. A love letter to higher education.

KRISTOL: Yeah, some of your pieces are love letters to your subjects, you know.

KRISTOL: Anyway, you should certainly all read Andy's work, but here we're going to talk about the state of our culture.

FERGUSON: I think it's probably a combination of it's crazier, and we're saner. Or it's dumber, and we're wiser. Although I doubt that very much actually, at least I'm that much wiser. To use a word I hate, the parameters of everything has changed, and what's permissible, what's understood as common place, what's considered extraordinary, what's out of bounds, what's mandatory, obligatory. So many things are simply a matter of etiquette now that never would have been before. And a lot of matters of etiquette from 30 years ago are now considered offensive, to one degree or another.

The great change has been what was in train by the time we came here in Washington is the rise of identity politics which has filled a bunch of – lots of different kinds of vacuums intellectually, I think. And sort of substituted for a politics that was grounded more in, let's say, economic realities or cultural realities and those sorts of considerations.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's interesting. I hadn't really thought of that as the key element. Explain that? What, as opposed to ideas? Or?

FERGUSON: Well, you started to see it – I guess the groundwork was laid in the infamous phrase, "the personal is the political." And I've noticed – this is slightly off the subject but not quite, it's an extension of the subject – I've noticed in watching people speak, people when they were just sort of talking off the

cuff, they'd say, "well, I think that that's really not the best approach to that issue." Now what you'll hear people say more often, and not just younger people but, "I *feel* that that's not the right approach."

So there's been a kind of a shift in wanting to sound smart, to wanting to sound sensitive. And a lot of that comes in either from or through identity politics, where everything is a matter of personal sensitivity towards people different from yourself. Different being defined not as different ideas, but as different socio-economic background, a different cultural background, racial background.

KRISTOL: I mean, you would think the personal would be more individual, not more group identity.

FERGUSON: Right. Well, see I think that's where a lot of people thought that that was going when it started. And I think a lot of people, like me, conservatives like me, who are kind of nostalgic for the '60s, where "the personal is political" started, thought that that's where it was going: a kind of a celebration of eccentricity and individualization, individualism.

One of the big pieces I did for the *Standard* last year was about the Summer of Love, and there were several huge exhibits in San Francisco at museums there. And when you went back and you looked at the art that was created right there at kind of the dawn of the '60s, the Pop Art.

KRISTOL: This is '68, the Summer of Love itself was '67.

FERGUSON: It was '67, yeah. And of course it quickly went down the tubes. But a lot of the art and of course the music, but the fashion, was *highly* individualistic. It was expressive but also disciplined in the kinds of art that resulted from it. And you really got the sense, like, wow, there's a lot of crazy people in charge and this is great.

When that started to go bad, it was replaced by this really kind of humorless, un-exuberant, deadening identification of groups. Of, you're in your group – And so the idea of diversity wasn't diversity of ideas. It wasn't diversity of approaches to life. It was diversity of very strongly defined groups.

KRISTOL: And I wonder, did that have to happen? Or was there a key moment when –?

FERGUSON: I don't know – I've thought about that. Was there something built into it at the very start that led it to this point? I don't necessarily think so. I don't know quite what the intellectual origins of all that kind of pre-hippie or early hippie kind of thinking was. But clearly there was something destructive that entered into it and that had this deadening effect.

KRISTOL: And I supposed you could say if it was a Tocqueville point of view, that these assaults on conformity and all that in the name of individuality, end up, in a democracy or in a modern democracy, not really being about individuality.

FERGUSON: Right, because people tend to coalesce and join a group. And I think that's a very deep insight of his.

KRISTOL: And which groups strike you as – I guess feminism was a huge part of this.

FERGUSON: Yes, right. Well I have been thinking a lot about this, the new Congressman who everybody is thinking a lot about and talking about, Alexandria Ocasio Cortez from the Bronx in Queens, who's 29 years old, the youngest member of Congress, and proudly identifies herself as a feminist, and as a long list of other things.

And I noticed from one of her – I guess it was a Twitter feed, one of the respondents to her Twitter feed, said something like, "If it weren't for AOC," which is her initials obviously when people call her, "I never would have heard about feminist intersectionality."

And I was thinking, well, now there's an argument against a Twitter feed if I ever heard one. But it's – intersectionality, which – there are many people who can speak about that more eloquently than I can, and you've talked to Christine and others – is a way of trying to juggle these group identities and without ever kind of asserting any given individuality, without sort of breaking out into your own self, as opposed to just being a member of a series of groups.

KRISTOL: Yes, I hadn't really focused on intersectionality. It always seemed like this wacky thing from the academy. But I guess you're right, it's a very clever way, in a sense, of doing justice to the fact that people are parts of several groups. And letting them claim to be, or take pride in being parts of several groups, without privileging one over the other, I guess. But, as you say without, above all, letting them just be individuals.

FERGUSON: Right. And I think you can privilege one over the other, but it's a shifting privilege. It depends on circumstances whether you get to be a feminist before you're a Latina, or a trans person before you're Hungarian or whatever.

KRISTOL: So what is the real effect of that? Do you think it really does drive people's thinking and lives?

FERGUSON: Well, it's very hard for that stuff to soak down into the day-to-day life of ordinary human beings. I think ideas don't have as many consequences as we would like to think they do. But I think in a general sense, it's a deadening of the culture. It's a discouraging of spontaneity and sort of individual exuberance, and the kinds of things that, as I say, some of us thought the '60s were going to be about.

And it also becomes unadventurous. We were talking, using the phrase 'dumbing down.' That's a very important element of all of this. That the lack of intellectual adventure and the sense of like striking out and thinking new and thinking fresh really gets buried in a lot of this. And so the ideas get tired and become more catechisms than they are schools of thought.

KRISTOL: And I suppose the kind of pride that I think we took in trying to be different or contrarian – I mean people want to be first, I suppose, with a clever formulation.

FERGUSON: That's true, that's true.

KRISTOL: But not really contrarian, I would say.

FERGUSON: No, at least it doesn't strike me that way. I mean, and this is not a leftist phenomenon exclusively by any means. I think this is really something that transcends politics because certainly the kind of conformity that Trump people want to impose on their fellow Republicans or fellow conservatives or whatever, certainly is not a sign of intellectual adventurousness, or a tolerance for individuality.

KRISTOL: I mean, I've been struck when I've been in arguments and someone says – well, that lost, or the majority disagreed with you. And one's instinct, at least my instinct is to say, "Well fine. I mean, what does that prove?" That is less, I think, less said today than it would have been 30, 40 years ago.

FERGUSON: Right. Well, I think it's a funny thing. I mean, you and I are part of that generation although, as I mentioned, you are much older. [Laughter]. But that when we became conservatives – I think you were probably always more or less conservative. I was a typical radical leftie and then became a conservative. But I kind of became a conservative because it was contrarian – not because it was contrarian, I did it because I thought it was right. But it happened to be contrary to the whole drift of the Republican Party, certainly the Democratic Party. And so you had a kind of sense of joy and pleasure in engaging with things, because not everybody was like you. And that was nice.

KRISTOL: Yeah and certainly even in my case, in high school, it was the late '60s and everyone was on the left, and I just thought it was silly. "This is the greatest generation ever. We know much more than our parents." And I was like, "Really? My classmates don't know anything."

FERGUSON: Right. Well, it came to me in graduate school, the way it did with a lot of people. I mean, hanging around the faculty lounge, or going out for beers at the end of the day and you just – “I know what you think, and I know what you think, and I know what you think, because what you think is what he thinks, and what she thinks – it was just sort of, come on, can’t we mix it up?”

I’ll never forget one time, this was, I guess in ’81 or ’82, a bunch of us, I was in graduate school at the University of California, in the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. And we were kind of going on agreeing about politics and patting each other on the back for being so smart. And one of the guys, actually a very, sort of a mentor of mine, just popped out – I think he had had too many beers. And he said, “Well, you know, I voted for Reagan.” And you could have – it was almost like one of those commercials where all of a sudden the whole bar quiets down and everybody turns around and looks at him.

And I tried to be appalled, and I think all of my other colleagues were appalled. But deep down inside I thought “Wow, that’s cool. How did you get the nerve to do that? Or to say it?” I don’t know, I just see much less of that nowadays, of people wanting to just pipe up.

KRISTOL: And I do think people don’t understand if you weren’t around then, how much of the appeal of conservatism was that. If you were intelligent, you saw that the clichés of the left were somewhat stultifying and outdated and just false, about history or about economics.

FERGUSON: And unworkable.

KRISTOL: And yeah, Buckley captured that well in his spirit, I think.

FERGUSON: Yes, absolutely. And he was able to coat it with a great deal of charm, which is why he became so famous and successful I think.

KRISTOL: And so what happens to something like conservatism or liberalism when it doesn’t – when it loses that, I guess is the question, right?

FERGUSON: I think we’re seeing that. We’re about to find out. The idea of liberalism kind of not really cracking up, as our old friend Bob Tyrrell said, but of kind of re-aggregating itself as this collection of people who think of themselves purely in terms of ethnicity and sexual orientation and these other categories that one wouldn’t have thought were that important, is – looks to me like a late stage of something. It doesn’t look to me like a sign of health.

And certainly, on the Right, I think you and I agree about this, although lots of our fellow Republicans don’t, I think that Trump is a dead-end. And after Trump, God only knows what will happen, ideologically.

KRISTOL: Well that is a good question, what happens once the tribalism or the identity politics runs its course?

FERGUSON: Yeah. Something has to fill vacuums. And in fact I think that one of the things about identity politics is it filled a vacuum where people couldn’t resort to the other ways of being identity. You could – “I’m proud to be an American,” or – well, how could you be proud to be an American? Have you not heard of what we did to the Indians? Have you not heard of slavery? Have you not heard – you know, one thing after another. When people have a very superficial view of their history, those kinds of traditional forms of identity are foreclosed to them. So all of a sudden it becomes a matter of, you know, who you like to sleep with or something.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that’s interesting. So you think that the more traditional forms of identity – I suppose on left and right, you know Marxist kind of working class, you know go away – and then you get this kind of moment of individualism, but it quickly becomes a new form of identity.

FERGUSON: Yeah. And it's a kind of sort of – a sort of slavery actually. One interesting thing about Ocasio Cortez, who, actually I've discovered paying attention to her, is actually much cleverer than a lot of people want to give her credit for, on both the left and the right, is she is deeply imbued in sort of old-fashioned Marxism.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

FERGUSON: And she loves class talk. She loves talking about the working class, and that she herself is working class, although I'd say of the upper working class. So there is some of those traditional Leftist elements in there. But again, that's just part of the intersectionality, I think.

KRISTOL: If probably makes her somewhat refreshing actually, that she's a little –

FERGUSON: Yeah. Well, there's a lot about her that's refreshing. One is, just she is a personality built for social media. I mean, either her personality was created by social media, or she just happens to have this sort of combination of characteristics that really, really adapts itself well to the Instagram Story, and she's extremely good at Twitter. Which is something that I never thought I would say about anybody as a compliment but – being a Twitter-phobe myself. But she really knows how to use it. And her energy comes across and all that sort of stuff.

But she's also really smart. I noticed, and just as a politician for example, her mother cleaned – was a house cleaner and drove a bus when they were growing up after her father died. And so when she talks about that, she'll say something like, "Well, you know, I learned that when I was cleaning toilets with my mother," you know. Well, I'm sure she cleaned a lot of pewter kitchen fixtures too, but she knows enough, "when I was cleaning houses with my mother," isn't "when I was cleaning toilets with my mother." That's a – she's got – messaging as we used to call it in politics – she's very, very crafty.

KRISTOL: Maybe she heralds a kind of comeback of a certain kind of individual.

FERGUSON: That would be nice, except she's so hamstrung by the ideology, I think.

KRISTOL: You mentioned social media – how much has that contributed, do you think, that sort of technological changes? That again was supposed to liberate, differentiate, individualize.

FERGUSON: Yeah, I'd have a better sense of that if I used them more. My sense is that it's just been a – and certainly I'm not the first to say this – it's just been sort of a race to the lowest level possible. I mean certainly you see that on Twitter. I mean, Twitter is a sewer. And there's very interesting people saying very interesting things, and sometimes some of the threads can be very substantial. But basically that's all just – you know, that's just a lifeboat skidding across the top of a big sewer, as far as I'm concerned.

But what accounts for that, is it just that a certain kind of human nature has now been unleashed by the technology? I don't know, really.

KRISTOL: It does seem like, yeah, everyone publishes, everyone writes. There's a kind of democratization.

FERGUSON: Right.

KRISTOL: Which in some ways is good, if you don't like the old, stultifying certain aspects of the old elite, of course.

FERGUSON: Right, right. And I think that, again, that was one of the hopes for the liberationist potential. But instead, for example, in politics on Twitter where everyone gets to be an expert, what you find, at least in my experience, and maybe mine is too limited, but what you find is, you still find the herd of independent minds that people used to accuse. Clement Greenberg's great phrase about academics, that there's a herd of individualistic, independent minds on the right and on the left, and they're all just

kind of scampering around like a herd of antelope going this way and then they go that way. So I don't see a lot of individualizing potential there.

KRISTOL: And how much do you think the sort of knowledge has to do with a lack of understanding, lack of teaching of history, lack of teaching of other things? I mean, is that –

FERGUSON: Well, I'm sort of a totalist when it comes to that. If I had to go back to anything it would be, do you remember the Left-wingers used to talk about the great march through the institutions, and the long march through the institutions. And the first one they went after, to the extent that it was even an organized thing, and it was to a certain degree – was education.

And specifically, they dismantled disciplines of history and civics, political philosophy, obviously as you know well. And when that was sort of gone, and the humanities began to decline as a result of that, that's the point I made earlier. That's sort of what identity politics came to fill, was a way of understanding yourself that would have been fulfilled by a deep learning about your country, its traditions, how things work, a rudimentary understanding of science, and a familiarity with at least a handful of great books. And when those things were gone, or at least subsumed into a kind of political agenda, then something had to respond to people's need to feel an identity.

KRISTOL: But I suppose the earlier identity or the earlier thing to which people aspire, it was a kind of enlightenment, somewhat enlightenment, somewhat universal appreciation of high culture, or maybe high middlebrow culture depending on what level one was working at. But if you look at the '40s, '50s, sort of Great Books kind of –

FERGUSON: And the ultimate of that was the individual flourishing. There was a point to the Great Books, a familiarity with it. There was a *reason* to understand the history not only of your country and your civilization, but other civilizations. It was because it was liberating and it was individualizing. Once you kind of had that base, you could be who you were supposed to be.

I'm not saying it was like a self-help thing, but that is one of the consequences, or was one of the consequences held out by people who believed in classical and liberal learning, was that this is the way you become a flourishing human being.

KRISTOL: And you could choose whom you most liked and wished to study, and wanted to be most influenced by, and were most influenced by.

FERGUSON: Right, right.

KRISTOL: And being from a certain ethnic group didn't mean you couldn't love James Joyce, and Tolstoy and all those. There was a certain amount of edification, of edifying sort of nonsense there.

FERGUSON: Absolutely.

KRISTOL: But I mean, it was also authentic I think.

FERGUSON: Well there's some great American writers. Even Richard Wright who was an African American who was a communist for part of his life, Ralph Ellison – I mean, these guys took as – Ellison in particular had, loved, great writers. He wanted to be Flaubert as much as he wanted to be a great African American writer. He didn't see any limiting in that aspiration, to want to be somebody regardless of whether they were French or American or Black or –

KRISTOL: DuBois, who was a communist for much of his political life, has that beautiful statement about Shakespeare which I can't remember, but something about transcending the boundaries of race and time and culture.

FERGUSON: Right. And this is one of the things that V.S. Naipaul, who I've been reading a lot of lately, ended up being despised for, is that this is one of his, later in his life, one of his great cultural points was this kind of older point of, these are liberating forces. The knowledge of Western Civilization is liberating to you as an individual, not to you as a person of a certain ethnicity or race or sexual inclination or whatever.

KRISTOL: Yeah and when you mentioned Naipaul, I was thinking Tom Wolfe, the late Tom Wolfe, who was a great rebel, and individualist also. Unleashed things which did not now look like Tom Wolfe.

FERGUSON: I think he was slightly abashed at that by the end of his life. He never really said too much about it, but I think he wondered where it all went.

KRISTOL: But the later novels, not all of which I've read I should say, but I mean, hold up as models kind of a certain type of universe. Someone who's studied, each in philosophy, or literature. This sort of a certain type of human being who was not – does not define himself by some identity or trendy –

FERGUSON: Yeah, one of his great heroes is, in *A Man in Full*, who's a young, working class guy, who liberates himself and comes to his own individuality by studying the Stoics and becomes quite serious about Stoicism. Which I think Tom Wolfe was himself. I think he found in it, his knowledge of Stoicism, a leveling and gravitational pull for himself and his way of thinking. He felt very comfortable with all of that. He wasn't religious or anything – that had no appeal to him.

KRISTOL: I wonder how much like comes back to where, that does, sort of like me, that's all such an attractive model and attractive, those are attractive writers and interesting debates among them, that was the always the point of the Great Books. And there was a kind of overly earnest and edifying version of the Great Books, which made them all seem like they agreed with each other, and that you just had to read them all and then be a good person. That was a little silly.

FERGUSON: Right.

KRISTOL: But the more serious version of Great Books and Western Literature and the kind of Trilling and all of that whole tradition. Boy, that doesn't seem to be around.

FERGUSON: It became – well, I kind of understand why that died because it really did take a wrong turn. I remember, do you remember the actual Great Books series, that Mortimer Adler put out?

KRISTOL: I remember seeing it.

FERGUSON: So on this end is Herodotus and up there is Marx and then in between there's 30 volumes and they all look exactly alike. And they all, open them up and they are all in this tiny print and double columns and the pages. And it looks like the worst possible version of homework that you could ever imagine.

And there is no sense that there is a difference between Herodotus and Marx. It's just this big uniform march through culture, which is the exact opposite of what we were talking about before: the power to liberate and turn one into oneself that these various books have. So you know, you kind of looked at it, and earnestness is one word for it. But it was a really, it was a wrong turn that people made in the '40s and '50s and early '60s.

KRISTOL: Yeah, they follows on the progressives – it is kind of progressivism of an intellectual sort. One builds on the next and they all have some truth. And the later ones are probably truer than the earlier ones. Not the exciting way of thinking about the clash of some ideas.

FERGUSON: If you think about your best teachers, your favorite teachers, they made these things thrillingly alive. And you'd walk out of class, just like sort of buzzing. And then you go and you look at Mortimer Adler's shelf of books and you think – oh, I can't do that.

KRISTOL: And people like Bloom and others were not fans in the way of the Mortimer Adler way of doing the Great Books. They get conflated a lot as “conservatives,” you know, and it’s sort of from reading some of the same books. But not the spirit –

FERGUSON: It was a different thing. I mean, one thing I think that Bloom made a mistake about with Adler, I mean, and the admirable thing about Adler, Mortimer Adler, who had been the editor of the Great Books series, was that he was a democrat. I mean, he was a small d democrat. He really did believe that this was all available to everyone, which makes it even doubly sadder that he didn’t find a way to sell it to the demos the way he did. Instead, he kind of made it look like, “You too can be a snob.” And that didn’t work.

## **II: The Decline of the Academy (29:24 – 51:38)**

KRISTOL: And higher education. I mean, how, do you see any signs of hope there? I always think that there should be rebellions against this kind of stultifying conformity, but institutionally, I think it’s hard to do that though, these days.

FERGUSON: It is, obviously. And you know, I mean, I don’t know. I’m sorry, I look around all the time. I follow it as closely as I can. And you know, the stranglehold that certain people have over their colleges is, there’s a new problem with the American Society of Classicists, I can’t remember what the professional organization is called, where they’re just absolutely driven to include as many people based on race and ethnicity and sexual preference and sexual identity and all that. It’s absolutely preoccupying the entire profession or discipline. And to the extent that classics will be taught, it will be taught as an instrument of that identity politics, as another way of approaching identity politics.

And I see that in one professional organization after another. I don’t even think that ordinary well informed Americans are aware the degree to which all of the professional academic societies have been taken over as activist groups. And that, of course, changes the way that, the makeup of the university departments and so on.

KRISTOL: And do you think in the actual classrooms it’s as bad as conservatives sometimes make it seem, or worse or better?

FERGUSON: I don’t know. I talk to people just out of college and my view is skewed by the fact that most of them are people I encounter in my line of work, which means that most of them have gone to liberal arts colleges, usually very expensive ones. And they all seem to suggest to me that it’s not a classroom problem. But again, that’s just my own –

I gather it gets worse the less distinguished the professor is. It doesn’t matter if the professor is leftist. If he’s a true scholar, he’s not going to be, he knows enough not to try to indoctrinate kids into whatever his enthusiasms are politically.

But most kids now are taught by adjuncts and people who have one-year appointments, the kind we used to call academic gypsies back in my day. They’d load up the microbus at the end of every school year and you go and you’d try and find another one year appointment. And I think that’s, the people who can kind of live that kind of life are generally driven by something other than pure scholarship. It’s usually they have a mission that’s ideological.

KRISTOL: I guess what is striking about this moment is the combination of boring conformism and crazy apocalyptic –

FERGUSON: Hysteria.

KRISTOL: Yeah, how does that work?



FERGUSON: Boredom and hysteria.

KRISTOL: Well, maybe that's how it works.

FERGUSON: Well, again, this gets back to the lack of general historical and cultural knowledge. I mean, if you don't – what's the, when we were just talking about the t-shirt that says "I'd Rather be Russian than a Democrat."

KRISTOL: Right.

FERGUSON: That's being worn by people at Trump rallies, some people at Trump rallies. I'm sure that that's wry in its own way. But nobody who knows the history either of Russia or the Democratic Party can actually seriously say something like that. But, if you don't know anything about either of those things, then it kind of becomes a little bit more permissible.

And you know, it's the same way of, on the other side, you can attack or see as the central driving forces of America history as patriarchy and homophobia and sexism, but only if you don't really know anything about other cultures or world history or even American history.

That vacuum creates this kind of, this sort of implausible and eventually hysterical understanding of the world. And so everybody gins each other up. So the world is about to end all the time.

Just to go back to the actual practical politics of it, the big agenda of the left – and Ocasio-Cortez is the leader on this – is this thing the Green New Deal.

KRISTOL: Right.

FERGUSON: Well, nobody who knows anything about the New Deal really thinks that this has anything to do with that kind of approach to government. This is an absolute takeover of just about everything and would require a destruction of personal liberty that, first off, no one will tolerate.

But it's only because it's the half-knowledge that they've heard the word "New Deal" and so let's call it the New Deal and we can pretend that these are the kind of things that Franklin Roosevelt would do. But if you really know anything about Roosevelt, if you know anything about the New Deal, if you know anything about political movements and progressive political movements in the early part of the last century, you'd just – there are certain things that only really ignorant people can try to pull off.

KRISTOL: I do think the centrality of history is striking, or the lack of history. I mean, that wasn't my discipline, but. If there's one thing you'd want people – They could do without the great literature, even the political philosophy, but somehow the lack of historical perspective really makes it, just leaves you at sea. You just don't know what's –

FERGUSON: And you see how hard it is for people to make sense of history because there's this sort of lack of – I mean, a knowledge of history creates a kind of moderation, in my opinion. I mean, there's sort of a humility about what you can think you can accomplish politically or ideologically.

And I go back to Lincoln who is such a puzzling figure to people, both on the left and the right precisely because he was a moderate in the sense – he despised extremism and tried, with as we know, great skill and eloquence and ultimate success, and through a great knowledge of American history and what was possible in self-government – to steer between those two things.

So people now seem to be able to say, only see him as a racist who didn't get it. He wasn't Thaddeus Stevens, he wasn't somebody who was an abolitionist which would be acceptable to us today. And on the right he has to be a totalitarian dictator. Because they can't quite, they don't have the historical imagination to account for the way Lincoln operated. And sometimes contradicted himself and zigged

and zagged. So there's just this kind of encouragement of extreme readings of contemporary events and historical events.

KRISTOL: And extreme hopes and then I think extreme anger.

FERGUSON: When the hopes are frustrated.

KRISTOL: Like Obama and Trump in a way – not a ridiculous sequence in a certain way. You know “hope and change” and frustration; and then just anger and anxiety and lashing out.

FERGUSON: Yeah. You wonder to what degree the new Democratic House members reactions are rooted in a frustration with Obama and Obama's ultimate moderation. I mean, of course, Republicans don't like to say that, but I mean he didn't do what they desperately feared he was going to do. The great thing was Obamacare, and that's – was terrible, but it's done. But he didn't try and socialize everything. And I'm sure that it creates tremendous frustration on the ignorant left, people who don't get a grasp of politics because they don't have a grasp of history.

KRISTOL: So where does this go? I mean, we're not going to suddenly get –

FERGUSON: Straight down the tubes.

KRISTOL: Yes, that's us, two conservatives getting on a little bit, discussing the future.

It's more of a problem, I think, for conservatives in the sense that conservatism depends so much on a sense of history. On the left, the reason none of us, most of us, were not leftists was because we thought they lacked that.

So I mean, practically, they could do a lot of damage, but as an intellectual matter, how do you have a conservatism that doesn't appreciate historical reality?

FERGUSON: Right. You know, or have a kind of, a selective reading of historical reality that disorients you rather than actually places you in the situation we're in. You know, there are lots of glimmers of hope in terms of, well just this narrow view of history. I'm just reading this book by Michael Beschloss about presidents at war. It's called *Presidents of War* or something.

It's not particularly well-written or anything, but Beschloss is an example of a glimmer of hope in that he's one of these presidential historians, which is a new job title, at least in the last 20 years. But people un-credentialed from the academy, mostly popular writers who actually want to write straight history and try and inform an intelligent public about how things worked before.

And you know, there's tons of them – Doris Kearns Goodwin and Richard Norton Smith. They have their drawbacks, I suppose, but it shows that there's a real – David McCulloch, of course, also. He's probably the king of them. It shows that there's a hunger for this, that people actually have a sense that they're missing something from their educations.

And those books do exceedingly well. And I think that the people who buy them are the people who are in a position to sort of spread the good news. That, in fact, you can really learn a lot about your country. And when you learn a lot about it and about your civilization, you end up with a kind of respect, however grudging, and a humility about your own position in the world.

KRISTOL: And a sense that there are plusses and minuses for most arrangements and that it's not all black and white and so forth. That part is what strikes me so much, especially on the right.

FERGUSON: Well, it used to be – you know, I have always used this phrase, “muddling through.” I've always been a big fan of muddling through, which I think is the ultimate conservative position. Which is,

you have to avoid grand schemes. You have to keep moving. You can't just sit on the past and tradition. Tradition has to be your guide.

Which is why it strikes me as radicalism, on both the left and the right, is so destructive of the conservative temperament and a conservative politics. You know, the famous now essay that the Claremont Review published, "The Flight 93 Election", which essentially said, "it's now or never. We're going down if we don't elect Trump." Well, we elected Trump and we may be going down. I don't know how that works. But that to me is an ahistorical and extremely un-conservative view of the present situation.

KRISTOL: Yeah, and just hard to know how people get – Do you need some shock, an external shock, almost, to get people open to a more conservative view. To see the consequences of a kind of flip radicalism, if that's the right way to say it.

FERGUSON: Right. Well, I think in a way people were misled to think that the shock that the system needed from outside was Trump. And I think that that's not correct.

KRISTOL: But the education system is not going to produce the solutions, so it's going to have to come from – ?

FERGUSON: That's why I say, it comes from the outside. But because – It's one of the great things about having a market economy and a self-governing people is that they can find their workarounds, as they say. And I think that people like Beschloss and Doris Goodwin and Richard Smith and McCullough are a way of people finding a workaround of this monolith in the academy that has actually turned out to be rather destructive.

KRISTOL: And to the degree that people are "mugged by reality" and people can help explain why they're being "mugged by reality," I suppose that also offers some hope, right?

FERGUSON: Yeah. It's an interesting question of whether social media can be mobilized to assist in this cause. Actually, it's funny, I was just talking to somebody about this this morning, Beschloss has a fantastic Twitter feed, which I think probably rouses the curiosity of lots of people. He picks out an obscure picture of the Capitol Building under construction, or the Union Pacific Railroad. And so I think social media could be handy with a lot of that.

KRISTOL: Yeah, sort of "on this day, 50 years ago, 100 years ago," and people do learn some history that way.

FERGUSON: Yeah, sure.

KRISTOL: Maybe it's too episodic, I don't know. That would be the question.

I guess the other question is sort of more of a psychological and emotional question whether people just so much want the excitement, the drama, the – you know.

FERGUSON: It's funny, that in a popular culture which seems to have been built around constant stimulation, people still want to seek stimulation from their politics, you know? I mean, you're not getting enough from Grand Theft Auto 8? I mean, I'm dating myself. So you have to have a President who screams over Twitter 20 times a day? I mean, isn't it – you have to have, get your excitement and stimulus from things that ordinarily should be conducted in a very calm and reasonable manner?

But it's a paradox that people want to gin up politics just the way they've ginned up electronic entertainment and all the rest.

KRISTOL: Yeah, but I suppose that emotionally and psychologically maybe it's not a paradox because it's the same search for a kind of constant novelty.

FERGUSON: Oh yeah, right.

KRISTOL: And shock, surprise. Every shock has to be a little greater.

FERGUSON: Right. I guess it's the idea – I guess it's just some of have shock fatigue after a while.

KRISTOL: Yeah, you'd think. But which way does that go? Does that go back towards back to sanity, or does that go to –

FERGUSON: Ever greater levels of stimulation.

KRISTOL: Yeah, the successor to Trump and the successor to whatever we have on the left today, more radical versions.

FERGUSON: Well I think we'll probably learn a lot about that in the next 18 months to see what is going to be the Democratic reaction to Trumpism. Are they going to go for, in a Casio-Cortez-like figure? Extremely smart and savvy, but built on this kind of ferocious ignorance? Or do they try and put up somebody who's mature and reasonable?

KRISTOL: You could argue that one either way, right? If there's a – what, the better contrast is for them.

FERGUSON: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Or, what appeals.

FERGUSON: Well, I mean, I know what would appeal to me.

KRISTOL: Yeah, right.

FERGUSON: But you know, I'm like –

KRISTOL: But psychologically they could either react to Trump by saying this is nuts, we need to be sober and reach out and be centrist. Or they can say, this is nuts and we need to fight –

FERGUSON: We need our own nut, yeah.

KRISTOL: And what do you think? I mean just from looking at both the politics but also the kind of intellectual headwaters of the left?

FERGUSON: I think that there's still enough maturity left in the party. It's interesting to see how Pelosi, for example, reacts to Ocasio Cortez, which is, "okay, nice girl," you know. Condescension. "Okay, yes, you can have your committee about the Green New Deal and then, now let's get back to our work of screwing Republicans." So if it's somebody – I mean I never thought I'd think of Nancy Pelosi as a stable name in –

KRISTOL: Yeah, this is a great irony, right?

FERGUSON: Either that, or craziness on my part – but a stabilizing influence. And Schumer, I do think, definitely is a stabilizing influence. But who know? Who knows who is going to be voting in those primaries? California's comes first.

KRISTOL: Yeah, or early.

FERGUSON: Or early, yeah.

KRISTOL: And then if Trump were to lose, would the reaction be to go back to a more moderate kind of politics, or?

FERGUSON: Well, I can't think that far ahead. I do expect that there will be a lot of blood on the floor in the Republican Party after he departs. The animus is so great among people – you've seen this obviously.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

FERGUSON: I'm reminded of when I first came to Washington I met up with this guy, a man named Harry McPherson, who had been a Democratic functionary in the '50s, and still as a young man was Lyndon Johnson's – one of his very closest aides and was there as Vietnam went bad. And a very loyal Democrat, a lifelong Democrat, an apparatchik of the Democratic Party. And he told me what it was like in the late '60s to be a Democrat. It was, friendships were broken. People parted company and didn't talk for 25 or 30 years, and people who had been intimately friendly. And something like that is I think the reckoning that we're going to deal with.

KRISTOL: No, I think it's already happening.

Maybe this is the final point. I mean, what strikes me about this moment though, and is most mystifying to me is, it feels like the '60s maybe on the Right, the way they were the Left. But they had Vietnam and they had riots in the streets. And you could understand why. I mean I don't honestly understand why in America 2019, why this is happening, in some sense. I'm sure this shows I'm out of touch and so forth. But still, it's not obvious, right?

FERGUSON: Right. Well, I think there's a couple of analogous things. I think that the war in Iraq transferred or disrupted our politics; not to the degree that obviously Vietnam did, but it still has lasting effects.

I was interested – this is really ancient history – I was interested when President George H.W. Bush died, and there were a lot of old Bush hands around and everyone was just unanimous in saying how great it was that the President broke his no new taxes pledge in 1990, 1991, which he had been elected on. And a couple of us were saying, you can actually trace a line from that broken pledge, which is absolutely central to his person as a public figure, and Trump. Because it was a point at which people said, "God, you can't trust any of these bastards. They're all – he can't even keep a simple straightforward, up or down pledge like that."

And so sure enough, then there was this Ross Perot who came out, a crazy man out of Texas. But a symptom of that kind of alienation that started to build there and that ended up in Obama in a certain sort of way and then the Tea Party and then Trump.

So there have been things bubbling underneath the surface that have been serious events in the political culture. But again we don't have people – we don't have assassinations, we don't have riots in the streets.

KRISTOL: Or the financial crisis. No, I think there are plenty of reasons to lose confidence in elites. But it's just striking how much confidence was lost, when you look around the country you don't quite see that it's – The hyperinflation and all the things that one reads about that lead to huge reactions. We haven't had that kind of reaction yet so maybe we won't.

FERGUSON: Trump was a pretty big reaction.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I think that is right.

Okay, we'll come back in 18 months when my voice is back, and we can judge what the reaction on the left and the right is to Trump after four years, instead of after two, and to the whole moment in American politics and culture.

FERGUSON: There will be another moment then.

KRISTOL: Good. Andy Ferguson, thank you very much for joining me today.

FERGUSON: Thank you, Bill, and be sure to gargle.

KRISTOL: I will do that. And thank you for joining me on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]