Conversations with Bill Kristol

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I: America's Strategic Position 0:15 – 36:41

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol, welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined today by my friend, Eric Edelman, former Foreign Service officer, ambassador, a senior official in the Defense Department, many distinguished government positions. Now I think the Hertog Professor at SAIS, at Johns Hopkins SAIS, which is a very distinguished institution here in Washington. And many think tanks, many other titles, I won't belabor. But anyway, good to have you with us.

EDELMAN: Bill, it's always great to be here with you.

KRISTOL: And you are a voice that's widely respected as a voice of clarity, but also on foreign policy, but also well-informed historically. I think you actually have a PhD in history, is that right?

EDELMAN: I do. Misspent youth.

KRISTOL: It didn't ruin your career in Washington, that's amazing.

EDELMAN: It almost did, but.

KRISTOL: Would you like to say how?

EDELMAN: No. I mean, it's – in the Foreign Service when you enter, they don't think anything you learned before you swore your oath to the Constitution matters.

KRISTOL: Right.

EDELMAN: So I had to disabuse myself that my education actually contributed anything to my Foreign Service career.

KRISTOL: That's funny. So in recent years, since you left the government really, you've advised presidential candidates; been called to testify on the Hill many, many times; talked privately to senators; publically. I mean let's say forget about the particular person who's in the Oval Office now, or the

particular people running even. Someone calls you in, 2020, maybe the Secretary of State in the next administration, maybe the President himself. And how do I think about this moment? What's your basic guidance? I mean if you step back from the details of, we're speaking in late August of 2019, with all kinds of things in the headlines, from Russia to Greenland to everything. But stepping back to get a little bit of some perspective.

EDELMAN: Well I think for people who are either charged with leadership or thinking about taking the responsibility on, I think the most important thing is to be able to diagnose and understand the circumstances in which we're in.

And I think we are in a period of transition which I think is always difficult for people to understand and analyze. And I think we've exited the post-Cold War Era. When the Cold War ended, the United States found itself as a sort of sole remaining superpower. It didn't ask for that responsibility, but it found itself executing those responsibilities. And we are now in a very different kind of international environment.

And it's probably worth ticking off the things that made the U.S. the sole superpower after the Cold War, that essentially look very different in today's world. So you had the overwhelming U.S. military preeminence at the end of the Cold War with the collapse of the Soviet Union. And the U.S. margin of military superiority has dramatically declined over the last few years. That was the subject of a Congressionally-mandated commission that I co-chaired with Admiral Gary Roughhead, the former CNO, that reported last November.

The second thing is the period of relatively cooperative superpower relationships or Great Power relationships with Russia and China of the 1990s has now given way to a much more competitive relationship with Russia and China. That's something that's recognized in President Trump's national security strategy, and in the national defense strategy that our commission was commenting on.

Third, at the end of the Cold War we also had what my former SAIS colleague, Frank Fukuyama, called 'the end of history.' We had the Washington Consensus, the notion that Western ideas of free markets, open societies, had definitively triumphed over totalitarianism. We now have a lot of ideological contention in the international scene. We've got authoritarian governments, we've got a wave of populism sweeping through Western democracies. We've got, in other places, agitation for democracy, as we've seen in Hong Kong and in Moscow just in the last few weeks. So there's much more ideological sort of confrontation going on.

And we also have a different category of problems to wrestle with in the international order which is, these competitions with near-peer competitors like Russia and China are much more serious. Not to diminish the kinds of problems we had to wrestle with in the Cold War, which were sufficient unto the day. But humanitarian intervention, ethnic cleansing, pandemic diseases, counterterrorism, are a different order than the kind of great power competition that we are seemingly engaged in now with Russia and China. As much as we had Great Power competition, unfortunately, in the 20th century that led to some pretty catastrophic conflicts. So the circumstances, situation is vastly different. And I think it's really important for people to grasp that.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's really interesting. I guess it's 30 years since the Berlin Wall basically. And you're saying that epoch really –

EDELMAN: And that's over.

KRISTOL: That's over. I wouldn't say that's the conventional – The conventional view, I think is still – maybe from more from conservative types, "If only we hadn't had the weakness of eight years of President Obama, and some of President Trump's mistakes, we can kind of restore that post-Cold War, somewhat happy period." And from liberal types, "If only we had – I don't know, more international cooperation and more diplomacy, we could restore it." And you're saying actually those are both kind of misleading, you think.

EDELMAN: I think that – I don't think we're going back. I think we're in an era of – I mean the United States still is, you know, I would say, let me put it this way. I said that our margin of military superiority had declined. I think that's not debatable. There is a debate about how much it's declined, about how serious a military challenge Russia or China could represent. I mean, our forces have been at war for 15 years so they're battle-tested. In some sense that is an advantage in conflict. That's all true.

But we are not going to go back to the uncontested supremacy that we had in the '90s and the early part of the current century. That's just not happening.

And so it is very, very different from what we had. We now have a period of contested American primacy and the margin of primacy is declining pretty rapidly.

KRISTOL: And it sounds as if for those who were shaped by the 30 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall are going to have to adjust; and those of us who even remember back before that, it's not going to look like that either, right? It's not a Cold War again.

EDELMAN: No. And it's not going to be exactly like the Cold War, although there are some elements of the current, I think, competitions that could benefit from looking back at the Cold War and seeing some of the things that worked, some of the things that didn't, when we were engaged in a Cold War.

I think the real issue that we're facing is that we have not been thinking for a number of years that we had to operate in a competitive environment. I don't just mean militarily, but economically and politically and we're in a much more competitive environment. And that's going to require a different kind of thinking about things.

You know, it's not like people haven't wrestled with the idea that the unipolar period has ended. I mean ten years ago, the National Intelligence Council in its Global Trends Report, was predicting a multi-polar world was going to emerge. I don't think we've seen that, either. I don't think, really, there are a lot of countries signing up to be part of an alliance with China or with Russia, although they each have some countries that collaborate or work with them.

So I don't think it's so much that we've got multi-polarity. It's we've got an international system where it's not clear that there is any country playing the sort of hegemonic, organizing role that the United States played after World War II.

KRISTOL: I think I've heard you use the phrase, an 'a-polar world' as opposed to a multi-polar world.

EDELMAN: It's a-polar or non-polar. Richard Haas and Neil Ferguson have talked about both of those terms. It's not clear who's making the rules any more.

And you can see that playing out in things like the struggle over 5G, for instance, you know, who sets the rules? And that will be a very important question. And again, I think the administration is correct to focus on 5G as an issue, although it's not clear that they actually have a strategy for dealing with it. But who sets the rules for things like this can be enormously important, both economically and in terms of national security.

KRISTOL: Now it seems to me one interpretation people might take from this is, the world is extremely complex, very a-polar, and so we need to mind our own business and get our affairs in order and probably prudently deal with some threats and so forth. But you can't have the kinds of grand ambitions we had either, in a funny way, in the Cold War era, or in the post-Cold War era.

EDELMAN: I think we're going to have to adjust ourselves to not, I would say, a lower level of ambition, but a higher level of risk in a variety of areas. I think we still have an important role to play, or could, in organizing, trying to organize the world in a way that mitigates or diminishes a lot of the disorder that we're seeing flaring up.

But if the United States completely absents itself from this, we're going to see people basically not looking to the United States to organize security frameworks or economic orders and rather go it alone. And we are likely to see them do things that we don't like.

I mean so if you don't like the way our allies and friends in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have played their hand in the war in Yemen, you need to realize that a lot of that has to do with the fact that we absented ourselves from the civil war in Syria, and then the civil war in Yemen and our friends felt that they had to fend for themselves. If we don't help organize things, they are likely to do things that we think are stupid and don't like.

KRISTOL: And dangerous I suppose.

EDELMAN: And dangerous.

KRISTOL: I mean in terms of nuclear weapons and stuff – I mean, how worried are you about that? Because what if – the post-Cold War period preserves, maybe to a surprising degree, the Cold War semi-ban or taboo on many more nations joining the nuclear club. That's seems, I've always wondered how long it could last; or it's obviously not written in stone that that would be the case, right?

EDELMAN: Well, President Kennedy, when he gave a press conference in the spring of 1963 after the Cuban Missile Crisis, was asked what kept him up at night. And he said the thing that kept him up at night was the prospect of 20 or more countries having nuclear weapons and how that could be managed.

You know, since that time, at that time there were four nuclear powers: the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain and France, soon to be joined by China. So, five roughly, I mean, it was a year after he died that China tested a nuclear weapon. Since then only five other nuclear powers have emerged.

So we've done, by some measures, better than people anticipated. And I would argue that the nonproliferation treaty and the nonproliferation regime is actually the greatest achievement, and maybe the only real lasting achievement so far, of arms control.

But it is at some serious risk because of the developments in North Korea and now potentially with Iran as well. And at some point additional nuclear powers make it impossible to maintain the entire regime. I mean there'd be others.

And particularly if the United States which has provided a nuclear umbrella for its allies and an implied nuclear umbrella for many of its non-allied, but special relationships around the world, like Israel and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and others in the Middle East.

If the United States is not playing that role, then again you're going to get people fending for themselves. And in a region where it looks like more and more powers are going to be getting nuclear weapons, I think you're likely to see that.

This is the so-called cascade of nuclear weapons that a number of government panels have predicted over a period of years, might happen in the Middle East. And will it happen all immediately? No, but you'll start to see more and more countries moving down a nuclear path.

You already see a lot of countries hedging their bets by developing commercial nuclear power as a way to kind of hedge their bets and keep open the option of ultimately developing a nuclear capability of their own.

KRISTOL: I mean, listening to this just makes me – I'm thinking, that makes me wonder whether, obviously in a way there was a Cold War for 40-plus years, and then the post-Cold War era for another 30. But I suppose you could also argue, and people do say this of course, that we had a 70, 75 year period, really, of a liberal world order more or less, with America more or less as the hegemonic power.

EDELMAN: Yes.

KRISTOL: It happened that the first half of it had a divided world and the Soviet Union as well. But in both cases, I guess there's actually quite a lot in common in a way of those two eras in terms of alliances, non-proliferation –

EDELMAN: Increasing trade.

KRISTOL: Yes.

EDELMAN: Increasing of free trade.

KRISTOL: That's right; a lot of the economic policies continued, really. And in a way the Soviet Union in retrospect – one could say the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc were kind of an outlier.

EDELMAN: And then they began to be included in all these other institutions.

KRISTOL: Right.

EDELMAN: So you have NATO enlargement, which brings a lot of the former Soviet Bloc countries into some of the security institutions. They get into the EU. So it really was an expansion of those institutions as well. So, yes, I agree with that. There is a lot of continuity in that.

KRISTOL: Is that still something that one could aspire to continue, with obviously appropriate modifications for the new world we live in? Or is that just ridiculous to be nostalgic for that?

EDELMAN: Well I think there will be some changes, there will have to be. And you see some indications of that: The growth of the G7 into the G20 as a result of the economic crisis in 2007 to 2009, the Great Recession.

But I think the biggest challenge to, not just to a resuscitation of the order, but trying to manage the current set of international relationships, is the question about what role the United States will play. And I think a lot of Americans – you mentioned earlier people saying we need to take care of ourselves here at home.

I mean, after the recession, in the wake of two inconclusive and in many ways unsatisfying wars in Iraq and Afghanistan for quite a while, I think there was a sense that the United States needed to do as President Obama said, 'nation building at home' rather than nation building abroad. And so that we needed to get our own house in order.

We undoubtedly have to get our own economic house in order to play an international role. That is almost axiomatic. But if the perception is that the United States is pulling back from its involvement in the world, then you start to get all these other knock-on effects that we have been talking about, that make the world less-manageable and more difficult.

And even though I think Americans have had for some time a sense that the United States maybe needed to be a bit more restrained, when you poll them and ask them about the results they see in places like Syria and Yemen, Americans are uncomfortable with that, I think.

And so I think there is still an argument to be made and a debate to be had about what the role should be. But after two terms of President Obama, who clearly wanted a more restrained U.S. role, and President Trump who has also talked about putting a stop to America's endless wars, et cetera, the forever war in Afghanistan and Iraq. You know, I think a lot of international actors are wondering is this the new normal for the United States, or will there be at least some reversion back to some more engaged leadership role by the United States?

And to be honest, even if someone who wanted – someone who had the views I've just discussed became President in January, 2021 – things don't just snap back. There's going to be a lot that is going to have to be done in order to get to the point where you can play that larger role.

KRISTOL: I want to ask you about that because I think that's so important about when you're going forward what practically can be done? And just I mean how deep do you think – I guess I'm struck that we have a Republican President who's explicitly for 'America First,' and you know, he sort of sounds like a tough guy. But he basically is not interested in the kind of traditional post-Dwight Eisenhower, you know, Eisenhower through Bush I would say, through McCain and Romney as well, view of the Republican – of what – of the American-led world order. You have Democrats who on individual issues, don't like what Trump has done, but you don't hear a lot of them sounding like John Kennedy or –

EDELMAN: No.

KRISTOL: – Scoop Jackson, or Bill Clinton, to be fair. I mean the Clintons ran against George H.W. Bush from the right to some degree on foreign policy.

EDELMAN: Yes.

KRISTOL: And so, I mean, how deep do you think the aversion in the U.S., especially when – and you teach a lot of young people at SAIS and elsewhere. I mean, how much does it just seem like it would be another world if someone came on and said, you know what? We really do need to kind of care if there's a civil war in Yemen. And we do need to care if a country looks like it might go nuclear here. And we need to worry about the world trading system, even though some of it does in the short term undercut some of our businesses.

EDELMAN: Right.

KRISTOL: And just so forth. I mean, and we need to spend more on defense. And we need to spend more on diplomacy. And we need to have serious intelligence services. And we need to think about all kinds of cybersecurity issues. And that might be very expensive. And I mean, are people – ?

EDELMAN: It's a great question. And you know, I don't have a perfect answer to it. I do think among young people there is a very strong kind of libertarian streak that is sometimes consistent with a much more restrained view of what role the United States should play. A notion that the more we get involved in the world, the more damage we cause and the more problems there are. And if we only just minded our own business, you know, everything would be okay. The problem is, when vacuums occur around the world, usually the forces that fill them are malign, not benign.

You know, President Obama, talking to some of the folks in his administration back in 2011 when the civil war in Syria began, they would make the argument that greater U.S. involvement in arming the so-called moderate opposition, and debate about what that was, but that that would only lead to more violence, more death, more radicalization and more just violence across the board. And it wouldn't really solve anything.

And so the administration really was, despite debates inside it because there were a lot of people who wanted to be more active, they basically held back for quite a long time. And the result they got was precisely what they said would happen if you had a more active U.S. role.

KRISTOL: Right.

EDELMAN: Now, can I sit here and say if we'd had a more U.S. active role it would have turned out better? I can't, because you can't prove a negative. But on the other hand, it's hard for me to imagine it could have turned out much worse. Because you've now got Iran very active on the ground in Syria. You had the recrudescence of what had been Al-Qaida in Iraq, which reemerged as ISIL, which actually required the Obama administration to go back in militarily.

And I can't help but thinking that a stronger U.S. role and hand might have at least cauterized some of the bleeding wound that Syria still represents today, with a Russia that's now reemerged as an Eastern Mediterranean power. Iranian involvement, the massive flow of refugees that it's triggered, which has become a major crisis for our allies in Europe. I mean the second and third order effects of that failure are still rippling and are enormous.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I mean, on the left it's sort of "Iraq is the great destabilizing adventure the U.S. shouldn't have set out on." And that's a debate worth having. But it's just empirically, I would say, very hard to see that at the end of 2008 after the Surge and things had basically calmed down in Iraq, and there was an acceptable sort of status quo, and we were beginning to draw down, it's very hard to see that we had destabilized much at all. Frankly we had destabilized less than we hoped to in terms of some of the, you know, progress for democracy elsewhere.

And I do wonder whether the – for me, the 2011 moment, now maybe this is a bias because I approved more of the Bush administration's actions than the Obama administration. But to feed the failure of 2011, the Arab Spring, something we had said we wanted and really did want and should want.

EDELMAN: Sure.

KRISTOL: Because it's that important to the world, right? The utter failure to be able to shepherd that through to anything like an adequate solution, or that's probably too strong, but some adequate outcomes. And then the real fiasco and disaster of Syria.

And I really wonder if historians will look back and think that was a moment where we just, things really turned a corner. And Trump is, of course, just in that respect the continuity of Obama/Trump is much greater than the discontinuity.

EDELMAN: Yes.

KRISTOL: And then if you think about on the trade issues and the fact that Hillary Clinton and Trump together in 2016 turned their back on –

EDELMAN: And Bernie Sanders.

KRISTOL: And Bernie Sanders, and Hillary under pressure from Sanders, yeah, on the TransPacific Partnership, and sort of a very –

EDELMAN: And trade issues.

KRISTOL: Important, you know – not hugely important in terms of the economics, but I think symbolically and politically very important step forward in kind of reassuring our Asian allies, it goes away. And they're very – this last decade has done a lot to unwind things, it seems to me.

EDELMAN: It has. And there's a paradoxical kind of result here. Which is, if you look at polling right now, actually support for free trade has actually gone up in the Trump administration, despite the trade war with China, which was supposed to be 'good and easy to win,' which is turning out to be maybe not so good and maybe not so easy to win.

So there's more public support for trade now than there was, but the politics of trade have gotten enormously more difficult. I mean if you think about the trade agreements that were passed in the 1990s or under the Bush administration, the Bush 43 administration. I mean, NAFTA and the subsequent agreements. They were approved in the Congress with a very small number of Democratic votes, because of concerns about environmental and labor standards, and an overwhelming number of votes in the Republican conference in the House of Representatives.

And Trump's ascendency in the Republican Party, I fear has really changed that. It's not changed it in the popular view, but in Republican political terms it has. And members I think are much more chary about supporting a trade agreement now than they would have been in the past. And so I think the politics of this now have gotten very dicey.

And it's very important to remember, you were talking about the 75 years, the trading system that was established at the end of World War II, the General Agreement on Trades and Tariffs, and then the World Trade Organization, Doha Round, all of that, raised literally billions of people out of absolute poverty and gave rise to the greatest period of wealth creation in the history of the world. And that is being lost sight of, I think, in this kind of very contentious trade debate that we have now.

KRISTOL: And I do wonder if someone, even if they were a more hawkish Democrat than any of the Democrats now looks to be, took over in 2021, or if the Republican Party changed its stripes and there was a sort of Reagan type Republican. And one of them, either one called you in and said, okay, you've been in the State Department, you've been in the Defense Department, you've followed Congress closely, American public opinion. I mean, do we – are we even set up to sort of begin to pursue the kind of policies that I think you would like to see? Where, taking into account all the new challenges we face and the differences between 1989 or 1945 or whatever, that you can imagine sort of not simply letting things slide further out of our grip?

EDELMAN: Yeah, I think many of the tools and instrumentalities of statecraft have atrophied in the United States. Now, part of this is because of our overwhelming power in the post-Cold War era that we were talking about. We didn't have to think about these things. We didn't have to invest in them. We could basically just tell people what we wanted them to do. And by and large people were willing to go along with what the United States was proposing in the '90s.

I mean, there were always debates and there were difficult summit meetings that required a lot of attention. But more or less we were able to persuade people to go along with a lot of what the United States wanted and sometimes we had to make adjustments to what our friends and allies wanted, which is the normal state of affairs in international undertakings.

Today I think, for instance, the diplomatic service that I entered in 1980, is just a shell of what it used to be. And it's going to take a lot of time and some effort in terms of funding to recoup some of that.

One thing I learned in government is it's very easy to take down a capability; to restore it actually takes much more time and money. And so I think we have damaged our ability to influence people through diplomacy because we have not invested enough in our diplomatic platform, as it were, around the world. And in the personnel we've lost an awful lot of people at the peak of their, you know, the point at which they're really meant to contribute back after a 20 year apprenticeship. And they've left government service now. Some of them could perhaps be persuaded to return to government service in a different kind of environment, but we're going to have to change that environment and change the incentives.

The military, you know, we've had a sort of period of a decade in which we've had about a trillion dollars in defense cuts, punctuated by a couple of bipartisan budget agreements for two years where some money gets restored. But that's made it very difficult for the military to actually invest in the kind of capabilities that we need for the competition we're in now.

We've spent the last 15 years focused on counterinsurgency, counterterrorism. We now have near-peer competitors who are investing in all sorts of new capabilities: hypersonics, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, quantum communications. We have to completely kind of redirect the Department of Defense in new directions and that takes more stability in leadership and less vacancies in key positions than we currently have, in order to be able to do that. Although I'm very hopeful about the newly ensconced Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper, who is someone I have a lot of respect for.

And in other areas, we have to recreate capabilities we had in the past. So we are facing enormous challenges in what I would call a political warfare front, from both our near-peer competitors, Russia and

China. We focus in this town, of course, a lot on the Russia piece of this because of the election and the Mueller Report, and all of that. If we were having this conversation in Australia or New Zealand, we would be talking about China and Chinese political warfare.

And yet the instruments we had for waging this kind of non-kinetic conflict in the area of information operations, cyber, covert operations of a political kind – we've really denuded ourselves of the capability to compete in this kind of environment. We were able to do it – we did some of it in the 1940s and '50s under Truman and Eisenhower.

We then tended to take a break from this kind of stuff after the Bay of Pigs in 1961, and we did a little bit of it under Ronald Reagan, particularly the kind of covert support to solidarity in Poland. But since the end of the Cold War, we have completely taken apart the apparatus to engage in this kind of stuff. And so a lot of instruments are going to have to be retooled, redeveloped for us to be able to try and play this kind of role in the world again, if we want to do it.

KRISTOL: But you think in principle it's doable? I mean we're not looking at a world that's so – where just power is so dispersed, and then things are happening beyond our control, and we could, you know, not really be able to really affect them fundamentally?

EDELMAN: Power is more dispersed; we don't have one adversary as we did in the Cold War, we have a series of sort of regional contests with China in the Far East, with Russia in Europe, with Iran in the Middle East. We've got the complication of North Korea in Northeast Asia.

So we've got a series of almost interlocking regional challenges that we have to deal with, which is one of the reasons why this is a very daunting set of circumstances. I still think we have the ability to manage this. We're going to have to rely on friends and allies and partners, which is one of the things the National Defense Strategy says.

Ironically, you know, in many cases our partners and allies are less capable just at the time we need them the most. They are less capable for a variety of demographic and economic reasons to be able to give us the kind of help we need.

So that means we've got to make the most of those alliances, but also seek out new partners who are – or prioritize among those alliances with partners who are more capable. And I'm thinking here of Poland, Australia, India as a potentially new partner to work with.

So it's going to rely on some of the relationships from the past, but some new relationships that we have to develop. It will be extremely challenging. But I think still doable, at least for a few more years.

You know, at some point, this becomes, things become so fragmented and the challenges become so overwhelming that perhaps that it gets to the point where, you know, trying to take this on becomes a bridge too far. But I'm not there yet, I don't think we've gotten there yet.

KRISTOL: I was going to ask about that. How alarmed should one be? How much of a sense of urgency? Because that's the other thing. I think a lot of people might nod as you speak, it seems reasonable and stuff. But if a candidate actually stood up and said, just to start with, we probably need to spend X amount more on the military, and we'll also fundamentally revise aspects of our procurement and stuff. We need to really shake up the State Department because it presumably needs to be structured in different ways than it was 70 years ago.

EDELMAN: Yes.

KRISTOL: But we also need to spend more on that, and intelligence, and working with the private sector on things where they're – Google and stuff in terms of trying to –

EDELMAN: And that probably means we'll probably have to pay a bit more in taxes, and we probably – you know, we almost certainly need to reform entitlements because that's a big challenge that we face in a fiscal point of view. And everyone talks about getting our house in order at home. But what that really means is, reforming a system of Medicare and Medicaid and Social Security that were developed in a period of time when people like me had been dead for five years. So I mean those were supposed to be the beneficiaries. And we've got to change that in order to be able to afford all this and be able to do it.

And then the other thing is, look, I'm for a very robust Defense budget, but there's not enough money in the world to be able to develop a fully foolproof risk-proof defense against all of the challenges we've just been talking about.

Which is one reason why we need new capabilities. We need to do things smarter and need to make the most of the defense dollars that we do invest, which I don't think we're necessarily doing right now. But there's no amount of money that was going to just solve the problem. It's got to be more than just money.

II: Defending the Liberal Order (36:41– 1:14:01)

KRISTOL: Yeah, I guess that's what strikes me. I mean in the past we retreated from the world at different times, but with fairly good excuses, you could say at least. World War I was tough, tougher for the European nations than for us, but you can see why no one in the '20s or early '30s had much of a stomach for getting back into the business of perhaps intervening and stopping powers from building up. And of course World War II, it was understandable that we would think, "could we get a little bit of a break?" And we drew down very quickly, and then had to build back up very quickly.

But I guess in that case in particular there was a memory of what the world would look like when we had absented ourselves. And that helped I think very much in the late '40s and probably helped through the Cold War period and let us get through all kinds of really bad events.

And that's what's actually striking when you look back at the history sort of, and get out of – you and I we've lived through it or it was pretty recent history. So one of my memories of it, if you step back historians would look at it and think, geez, they fought World War II, then the Korean five years later. Which is not a very happy or successful story really. And then Vietnam another 10, 12, 15 years after that.

EDELMAN: Right.

KRISTOL: And yet still the country kind of –

EDELMAN: Yeah, came back, and –

KRISTOL: Yeah. Which is sort of impressive. And then you might have a huge sigh of relief after the Berlin Wall goes down, Defense dividend, we probably drew down again a little too much. But again, basically stepped up, I think one could say, into the '90s in terms of some of the alliance structures in Europe, and then after 9/11.

What's sort of amazing at the current moment is, why are we so tired? And why are we so averse to doing things that don't seem that daunting, I don't think. But I guess – I don't know.

EDELMAN: I think some of it honestly is leadership. And you need leadership in order to explain, you know, in clear terms what the real choices are before the American people and what is really likely to transpire if we don't do things.

And the Americans have been for many years reluctant participants in the world. We were separated from Asia and Europe by two vast oceans, so we were kind of an insular power. We were protected at least for a lot of the 19th century by the Royal Navy. So we didn't really have to spend that much on our

own defense while we developed this vast continental empire of our own, you know, in the Western Hemisphere.

And so for Americans, being involved in alliances, being involved in political obligations in other parts of the world, is really a fundamentally unnatural act. And we learned, as you were saying, from the 20th century after World War I and World War II, that, look, there was just no way that we could live in a world that wasn't more orderly.

And therefore took some steps that created a system of alliances, invested in it, created in leading the development of an increasingly open trading order to benefit essentially everybody's economy – all those things that we did. Those were big exertions. And getting the American public to do these things actually I think was much harder than we tend to remember, kind of looking back on it.

But if you think about, for instance, the early Cold War, you know, President Truman when facing the issue of Britain not being able to play its role in Turkey and Greece in 1947, which led to the Truman Doctrine. When Truman went forward to the American people to explain that, he was encouraged by his Republican colleagues who were supporting this, "Mr. President, you have to scare the hell out of the American people to get them to do this." Because people did not – I think Dean Acheson's words were, 'you have to make it clearer than truth.' And I think that's still the case. Americans have to have it explained to them why they need to be playing this really kind of extraordinary role.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I don't – my sense is, it's not that the people are happy with a world where everything falls apart.

EDELMAN: Right.

KRISTOL: I think the opposite almost. They're complacent that things won't fall apart.

EDELMAN: Right.

KRISTOL: You know, you say, you need more diplomats. But okay, well, come on, in the modern world with cellphones and stuff, do you really need a lot of people? You know, the third Deputy Attaché for Cultural Affairs? And in the military, we do have these fantastic abilities and drones and cruise missiles. And do we really need to have all these people stationed all over the place, and the business sector is all globalized. So, do we really – you know, that seems to be chugging along I suppose.

And so do we really need to worry about new treaties? I mean you can see how people – I feel like that's more the – there's a kind of – and I guess we haven't really seen a terrible, you know, I don't mean to be, I'm not rooting for anything terrible. But I mean that part of it is you don't see the consequences of – you don't realize you have things good until you realize what, you really see what the alternative is.

EDELMAN: Yeah, my colleagues at SAIS, Hal Brands and Charlie Edel, just wrote a recent book on this subject. And one of the things they basically are arguing is that, by and large, the history of international affairs is a pretty tragic history. And we have tended to forget the potential for tragedy that exists out there. I mean, Syria is a great example, but it tends to be far away from the United States.

Again, because even in the modern world with the internet and television and air travel, et cetera, we still are pretty remote from a lot of the world's problems. And so it's easy for people to be preoccupied by the day-to-day issues that can consume most people.

Again, I think that's why we need leadership. That's the – Lincoln said, that's the task of statesmanship, which is to lay before the people the real choices that face them, and not look for easy answers. I'm not saying it nearly as articulately as he did in the Lincoln-Douglas debates, but that was really the gravamen of his remarks in those debates with Douglas.

KRISTOL: How much do you think China really ends up being the center of a lot of our efforts? I mean that would be a little more like the Cold War, I suppose, if that becomes the looming alternative to us, and things start to get organized along that competition.

EDELMAN: Well, China is the biggest long-term challenge that we face in a geopolitical sense. I mean there are other challenges, of course, that we face in terms of artificial intelligence, and automation, and climate change, and the potential spread of pandemic diseases as a result of all. I mean those are very big challenges that we face.

But in a geopolitical sense, China is the biggest challenge and it's a challenge across the board. There's a military challenge, because China has been engaged in a very serious military buildup that again people tend to say, well, you know, the United States spent so much more money. But we are forced to play away games in the Far East and in Europe and our potential adversaries have home court advantage, as it were. And China's been involved in a double-digit annual defense increase buildup for 20 years, since the late 1990s. And so they've got a lot of capabilities that are aimed in particular at the way we have tended to wage war, and make it more complicated, difficult for us to operate.

And that's going to be a huge challenge. It's a big economic challenge, obviously. I think President Trump is not wrong that China and its predatory economic practices present a real problem for us that we have to resolve.

I'm not sure a trade war and the kind of tariffs that have been imposed are the right way to go after the problem. But the fact that the problem exists and needs to be addressed is clear. And the points you were making about Secretary Clinton and Bernie Sanders abandoning the TPP in 2016 is just an example of the fact that that's the case.

And then there's this political challenge, a contest for influence that China is waging both in places like Australia and New Zealand, in the United States with the Confucius Institutes and various other instruments that are used to try to spread Chinese influence in the United States.

This is going to be a very, very big ongoing challenge for, I'm sure for the rest of our lives because China is so important. And that question is, you know, we were talking about an apolar or nonpolar world. The question is, will China emerge ultimately with more global ambitions, and as a potential replacement hegemon for the United States?

And a number of years back there was a book called *When China Rules The World*, by Martin Jacques, a British author who basically argued that people aren't going to be that comfortable with a Chinese-organized world. Because the Chinese have had for a very long time a kind of very vertical sense of organization for the world, in which China is the Great Power and others are tributaries. And that's not the kind of horizontal way that the U.S. has managed the world since 1945, which for all our flaws and all the mistakes we've made, has made it much more palatable to other countries.

KRISTOL: But I guess you could get a world, just thinking as you speak to me, in which you have a major power challenge from China, and challenges of chaos and dissolution so to speak, of the world order, nuclear proliferation and stuff. They're not mutually incompatible.

EDELMAN: Well, and Russia. I mean another challenge we have is that Russia and China have been working together. How long Russia will allow itself to be essentially a kind of junior partner in this enterprise I think remains – is a question that remains to be seen.

But potentially, there are some very big challenges to us there. A conflict, and this is something we pointed out in the National Defense Strategy Commission Report that we issued last November, we talk about having a global strategy with three different theaters.

We're prepared to win one conflict with a near-peer competitor decisively. What the strategy doesn't really address is what happens if you have two of those near-peers challenging you at the same time?

And that would be a very serious challenge for the United States. And it would – the answer you get when you ask people in the Pentagon about this is, well, maybe like World War II or World War III it would require total national mobilization.

And that's correct. That would require total national mobilization. But it's not something we talk about, and not something we've really planned for, for a very long time.

KRISTOL: I guess I come back to the question of how quickly this could turn around. And I wonder if people at my or our age really miss – I can't help but – I remember Vietnam, I was in college and grad school. That seemed really disastrous in '75 and it objectively was.

I mean, you think about the snapshot of the world or the U.S. in ignominious retreat, and the Soviet Union seeming to be ascendant. And anti-American forces generally in the ascendancy. And so then it reverses very quickly with Reagan.

And then at the end of the Cold War there's a sense of, you know, we get Saddam out of Kuwait, but then we don't do anything about Milosevic, and it looks like we're kind of just maybe going to let things drift.

But actually we sort of rally, we deal with Milosevic, we expand NATO, and then after 9/11 we rally again, I would say. We may have a slightly – I don't know; I mean could it kind of reverse pretty quickly? Or I guess that's the question to me, how deep is the problem? And how much building of institutions has to be done, and – ?

EDELMAN: So one of the characteristics that I think the United States has as a society, which I think stands us in good stead here, is that we are a remarkably resilient society and have been historically.

Having said that, I think it's hard to underestimate the scope of the challenges we face today. It's very hard to think of a time when the national security environment was as complex and difficult. Which is not to say that the Cold War was easy and that it wasn't hard; it was very, very hard. But this is, I think, really quite challenging, for all the reasons we've been discussing today.

And we will need to have, as I said earlier, we're going to have to retool some of our institutions. We're going to have to resuscitate some things that we let fall by the wayside and try and bring back those capabilities. That's going to take time.

But all of this takes leadership, both in the Executive Branch and in the Congress. I mean you were talking about the Reagan Revival. I mean, to be completely non-partisan and fair about it, I mean some of this started actually under Jimmy Carter. It started with his $150 billion dollar increase in the Defense budget in his last two years in office.

And there was, I think the thing that worries me maybe the most is, even when there was a lot of partisan debate about these things, there was always partisan debate about these things, but there was a kind of consensus on broad national purposes, that I think stood us very well from 1945 until the end of the Cold War. And I think since the end of the Cold War, partisanship has been on the upswing. And so the ability to have policies that transcend one administration to another, has become much harder to maintain just because of the intense polarization of our political system.

You know, there's a whole debate as you know, among political scientists about whether the polarization is just polarization in the political class, or over the country as a whole. I tend to think it's more the former than the latter. I think polling is pretty clear that the country is made up of a moderate centrist majority, and that they oscillate between center-right and center-left. But that's not what we see emerging in the political parties which are very beholden to activists who tend to be on the fringes, both right and left, in both parties.

And unfortunately, the commonality that they have, both right and left, is that they both tend to be somewhat allergic to the United States playing a large role in the world.

KRISTOL: And I guess the question would be, even that center which you and I would probably prefer, [inaudible] a lot of policies and politics, you could imagine a center that's more sane if you want, more responsible than the left and the right, but not really committed to a major U.S. role in the world. It would just be kind of a center that wants to keep a lid on things as much as possible, but let's not overdo it. I mean that's what sort of would be the rhetoric, I'd say, you get from a certain number of centrist Republicans these days, and centrist Democrats. They're not ideologically critical of the U.S. the way the left wing of the Democratic Party is.

EDELMAN: Right.

KRISTOL: They're not committed to some America First revisionism the way the Trump wing of the Republican Party is. But they're not really enthusiastic.

I guess I come back to that. I mean, your Acheson quote, or it's a quotation you're citing, is, and I've heard before, and I guess I think it's real, right? It's not just a – is it just a reported statement of his or I think it's something he wrote even?

EDELMAN: Yeah, he may have written it.

KRISTOL: A memo at least or something.

EDELMAN: But he certainly said it.

KRISTOL: "Clearer than –

EDELMAN: "Clearer than truth."

KRISTOL: – than truth." But I mean so that would emphasize, in a way, the fear side of it almost. That you need people to be alarmed. And that was certainly – there was a lot of that in the Cold War. But don't you need the other side of it, the sense of, look, this is something –

EDELMAN: That can be done.

KRISTOL: This is our history – well, A, yes. So, B, that it can be done. That's very, very important I think. That it's not hopeless and that it's manageable. And then C, the kind of pride side of it. I mean that this is sort of our mission. You know?

EDELMAN: Yes.

KRISTOL: This is kind of something we should – we're happy we're Americans, not Denmark or Danes let's say, just to take since they're in the news these days with Greenland and all this. It's a fine country, a very nice country. But you know this is kind of our historic moment. And this is sort of in the tradition – we're the heirs to Rome and Britain. That stuff can get overdone a lot. But there is something you need a little bit of that, too. Otherwise we can just be a bigger Belgium or Denmark.

EDELMAN: No, of course. Absolutely. No, I agree with that. One thing that gives me a little bit of hope is that in both – in the most recent electoral cycles we have a growing number of members of Congress who have experience in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

And now, some of those people come back and are like Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, and just want to – you know, retreat from the world and get out. But an awful lot of them have a pretty good sense of the importance of the U.S. role.

They've seen it up close, they realize why the United States needs to remain engaged. Even if they've got criticisms of the Bush administration, or the Iraq War, they still understand that they know ultimately the United States is a force for good, and has to be engaged in the world.

And that may be, I think, the best hope we have that we can get back to some kind of bipartisan discussion of this. It will be very interesting to see this play out, by the way, in the context of the discussion and negotiations over Afghanistan.

KRISTOL: Yeah, say a word about that, since that's looming I think ahead of us. And that was the original 9/11 war, and – ?

EDELMAN: Right. And it's been very frustrating, because we've been involved now in Afghanistan for 18 years. It's America's longest war. It's very unsatisfying in many ways, because the U.S. – there needs to be some continued U.S. role, I think, in order to maintain stability.

We've got, you know, my former colleague, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad negotiating an agreement. I think, unfortunately, I think Zal's role here has been undercut a little bit by the President, because the President's made it so clear he wants to get out, that it makes it harder to actually negotiate a meaningful agreement.

But there is a real danger here that we're going to see in Afghanistan a repetition of what we saw in the Obama administration's exit from Iraq. Which is that we're going to see a rebuilding of the kind of forces that led to 9/11.

And just in the last couple of weeks there's been a report on Operation Inherent Resolve, which is the Iraq/Syria operation, which says that we're seeing ISIL actually begin to reform in Iraq and Syria. But there was a recent front page story in the news the other day about the role of ISIL in Afghanistan and in fact ISIL just took credit for this big bombing of the wedding hall in Afghanistan.

If the United States actually withdraws totally, the degree to which we are likely to see a total collapse of authority in Afghanistan, and having it become a base for terrorism against the United States and our friends and allies around the world is, it seems to me, highly likely.

KRISTOL: I suppose people will tell themselves, if we have drones and we have ways of stopping it, and we don't need to fight these wars; we just do counter-terror. But you could never prove that one way or another. Obviously there's some truth to that.

But again, what a whole world that's sort of looking at a retreat by the U.S.? I mean, let's come back to that. You mentioned Ambassadors you've spoken with, and foreign diplomats and officials. I mean that I think people haven't internalized. What does that – we've never really – you know, we've made mistakes in certain parts.

But even with like in Vietnam, and I wasn't paying close attention then, but if you were in Asia you thought, geez, we got out and that was it. But I don't know that it really – I don't think anyone thought at the time, well that means we're not committed to NATO, you know.

EDELMAN: Right.

KRISTOL: It was a sort of way in which we could compartmentalize some of these problems. Whereas –

EDELMAN: That's right, or even Asia. I mean we still had bases in Japan. We still had a major presence in South Korea.

KRISTOL: Right. Yeah, no one thought the U.S.-Japan defense treaty was at risk I don't think.

EDELMAN: Right. And then the United States – we took a blow in Vietnam, but we never completely withdrew. We didn't – there was not a perception we were completely withdrawing from Asia, although there were people who were worried about it. There was a great deal of fear about it.

And there are some people who argue, Lee Kuan Yew, the late Lee Kuan Yew, one of them, that the war in Vietnam actually bought a lot of time for other countries in Asia to strengthen themselves and become less susceptible to communist movements or nationalist movements with communist leadership.

So, it's a different I think, thing. But you're right. I mean a lot of foreign diplomats that I've talked to ask me, okay, we've had almost 12 years now – two terms of Obama and one term of Trump, almost one term of Trump; eleven years in which the United States' leadership is basically telling us it doesn't want to play this role. Is that the new normal or is that a passing phase? And can you tell us what will happen after Trump? And the problem is, I don't think we know.

KRISTOL: Yeah. And I think if you looked at it from some distance and you were a thoughtful foreign leader, again you might think, okay, well here they had to do this, or they – Iraq was a tough war so it's understandable that President Obama wanted to get out, it's understandable if President Trump wants to get out of Afghanistan.

But you put that together with something like the TPP and with Venezuela in our own hemisphere where we say where it's unacceptable, and then we really don't do much I think at this point at least. And Hong Kong, we sort of wish them well, but that's not much there. And there's an actual, you know, there were commitments made, right, in '97?

EDELMAN: To the British.

KRISTOL: To the British, right, but we could easily back up our NATO ally on that. And so, you sort of look around and you start to think, boy there's an awful – and then you look at Eastern Europe, and you start to think, Ukraine – are we really doing much? And you start to think there's an awful lot of – it's more than one instance. The exceptions become the rule, I guess, is what if I were a foreign leader I'd sort of start thinking about that.

EDELMAN: Well the thing that worries me a lot recently is that, you know, we've talked about China, we haven't talked that much about Iran although we've talked a little about it, and Russia. But those are sort of the big challenges that our strategy is focused on, et cetera.

But if you think about all the pots that are boiling around the world right now. North Korea is continuing to boil. There's a crisis between the Republic of Korea and Japan, two of our allies in East Asia, essentially the anchor points of our alliance. The northern anchor points of our alliance in East Asia, our alliances in East Asia, in Australia, and New Zealand in the South, Southern Pacific.

But we are kind of *hors de combat* in Japan, Republic of Korea debate. In the past the U.S. Secretary of State or some envoy would have been out there trying to compose the differences between our two allies, and trying to get them to work things out.

You've got a crisis brewing in Kashmir. You and I served in an administration where when there was a 1990 crisis in Kashmir the then-Deputy National Security Advisor and later my boss at the Defense Department, Bob Gates, got dispatched by President Bush to go off and try and moderate or mediate that conflict, or at least cool it down a bit.

We've got Afghanistan, we've got Iraq, we've got the stuff that's going on in the Persian Gulf, we've got Venezuela, as you mentioned. There are just so many pots boiling right now. And one of the things that worries me is, under the best of circumstances, our political leadership in Washington doesn't do very well dealing with more than like one and a half crises at a time.

KRISTOL: Right.

EDELMAN: And that would be in administrations that are fully staffed without a whole lot of vacancies or "actings" in key positions. And I really do worry. I mean this administration has been very fortunate that there has been no major crisis.

We've got Hong Kong, add Hong Kong and the demonstrations in Moscow to what we were talking about. There are just a lot going on in the world. And you could easily imagine some of these things that are simmering boiling over. And if two or three of them boil over at the same time, I worry a lot about our ability to respond in a coherent way.

KRISTOL: And I wonder if our ability would be to – if our instinct would be therefore to say, too much.

EDELMAN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: "We just, we can't do much, and we'll batten down a few hatches, but we're not going to even start down the road of responding." It's almost more dangerous to do that, people might say, than to not respond at all. And then you really could have a moment a year from – sooner than people think, I'd say.

EDELMAN: I think that's pretty much what the President said about Hong Kong. Yeah, it's a problem, but President Xi should really work that out with the people of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong authorities.

KRISTOL: And he said the other day, again we're speaking in late August, I think the Syrians will have to work things out for themselves. And you know, some of those things of course are partly true. I mean no one thinks we can work everything out for everyone else.

EDELMAN: Of course.

KRISTOL: But you start saying that about every place, and it's sort of, well what exactly is the U.S. role and then what signal does it send to Americans? I guess I always come back to that too. The degree to which the difficulties of Afghanistan and Iraq and various failures of probably of the Bush administration, and failures of everyone obviously.

But then particularly the repeated lessons of the Obama years, and now the Trump years. Ten to eleven years is a long time, right, for it to be hammered into people that at best we can lead from behind, or we lead in our own interest but we're not interested in the interests of the world. This is the Trump side of it.

You combine that, both left and right. I guess maybe it seems to me a little unusual is that both left and right have sort of ideologies or at least doctrines they can sort of hang their hat on to justify doing very little.

EDELMAN: Right.

KRISTOL: The center can sort of justify doing very little if it wants by just "it's very complicated and confusing and we should do a little more, but let's not go crazy or anything like that." And so you really could imagine a political situation here at home where there's just not much support for doing much. And some of these things can boil over, to use your metaphor, without immediately damaging us, I suppose. So it's not like there'd be a huge reaction necessarily, like 9/11 or something.

EDELMAN: Although, I mean one thing that always brings this I think back home is, you know, capital is a coward and uncertainty is extremely bad for markets. And we're already seeing a big slowdown in lots of the developed world in terms of economic growth.

There's concern about the bond yield inversion here in the United States and whether we're on the cusp of a recession or not. But a bunch of these things boiling over at the same time could actually, I think, have an impact on tipping us into a more serious recession.

KRISTOL: I suppose, moving this to an end, but I suppose it would require people – not just political leaders, but leaders around the country and civic leaders, business leaders – to explain that all these other things we like and take for granted sort of depend on some basic political structures and decisions.

And you can't just have a wonderfully interpenetrated global communications system, and the ability to travel and be a tourist anywhere in the world, and buy things from everywhere around the world. And all these nice things we like, you know, that depends on things that are a little bit under the surface. And need to be maintained, and sometimes aggressively maintained.

Because it seems to me, people are – I don't think people are really going anti-internationalism. I don't really think majorities of young people are going to decide that they don't like traveling abroad, or they don't like having foreigners come here, and foreign products, and having a sort of more – I don't think people are really going to turn against globalization in that sense.

They may inadvertently damage it because of certain policies and all that. But it's the broader – yeah, it's the real sense that without American leadership, and a pretty comprehensive and tough-minded in a political way. And with a real pride in that kind of role of America, that the rest of all these things that are kind of nice to have, don't quite – you know.

EDELMAN: So, globalization, the global economy, it's brought enormous benefits to people, that you were just describing. But there's also the sort of underside of this that it has created a lot of understandable concern on the part of people.

KRISTOL: Right.

EDELMAN: There's the big global migration crisis. There's some cultural products that move across borders that people don't necessarily like or approve of. There's the fear of cheap labor undercutting U.S. wages. There's the concern about environmental standards and the fact that other countries don't have the same standards we do.

All of those things are understandable. I mean, it requires U.S. leadership to mitigate and modulate those things so that the benefits keep flowing, and that the downsides are managed.

The concern I have is if you don't get that, if you get a triumph around the world of these nationalist populist forces and countries start to move into more autarchic kinds of approaches – I mean – that's where we were before World War II. That's what all the countries in Europe and in developed Asia were trying to accomplish before World War II. Make themselves essentially completely autarchic and invulnerable and it led to a gigantic catastrophe.

I mean, people are talking about decoupling the U.S. and the Chinese economies. To some degree, particularly because in our Commission study we worried a little bit about the Defense supply chain and the role that China plays in it. That's something we do have to kind of disentangle a little bit.

But the idea that we're going to completely decouple the U.S. and the Chinese economies, I mean that's kind of crazy. And that's, I think, what I worry about. That we have to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time and we have to be able to manage this in a – there are tensions that have to be managed and balanced. And right now I worry that we're not doing it.

KRISTOL: And I think underneath it there has to be some real belief in the importance of what America could do and that it has to do and also some pride in it. I mean, so you could imagine politics, and I haven't really thought this through, but where you get a kind of populism you were talking about – populism for the masses let's say. Davos for the elites. They get to live nice, coastal elite lives in terms of their personal lives and in terms of even what the kinds of companies they work for, right?

EDELMAN: Right.

KRISTOL: Google's not going anywhere. But neither of the coastal elites nor the populace masses – to be wildly oversimplifying here and stuff, probably getting in trouble – you know, have some appreciation of what underlies all of this. I mean, either a decent a life for the many, or the privileged life for the few.

Which is this kind of order, which has a real tough backbone underneath it all. And that could be – and again, I guess a final point I'd suggest, and I'd like your comment on it, it does seem to me these things don't erode – they erode step by step, but then they erode suddenly. I mean it's not sort of a – you don't have like a warning that ten years out, hey, you'd better attend to this, right?

EDELMAN: Who was it who said that I went bankrupt very slowly, and then all –

KRISTOL: All at once.

EDELMAN: All at once.

KRISTOL: Yeah. That's what I think – and there are a lot of phenomena in life that are a little like that, right?

EDELMAN: I think that's a potential real danger. And that's why I said I don't think we're there yet. But three, four years from now – if we're having this discussion, we might be discussing, you know, how do we just get through – how do we just survive now, you know, in this sort of very, very ugly world in which [inaudible] everybody for themselves?

KRISTOL: Yeah, our friend Steve Rosen at Harvard said to me, I think in a conversation I had with him here about a year ago. You know, it's not inconceivable that we'll be building nuclear fallout shelters ten years from now. And you say that to people and they go, "that's crazy, that was already crazy in the '50s and of course we're never going to go back to such a world."

But when you really look at the actual kinds of people who might get various weapons of mass destruction, not just nuclear. Maybe that would be the least of our problems, but that wouldn't be the main or the only problem, with biological and other kinds of things. You could imagine a world that really is very, very different from the one that we have taken for granted for quite a while.

EDELMAN: Well, in that *Back to the Future* vein, you know –

KRISTOL: We're ending on a big high note here.

EDELMAN: Yeah, so it's very uplifting.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

EDELMAN: But you know, we've had recently this accident in Russia, which we don't really know a lot about because the Russians are, unfortunately, typically not sharing very much information about what happened. It seems to have been a fairly catastrophic accident. A lot of key scientists were killed.

At least one speculation is that they were working on this nuclear-powered cruise missile that President Putin unveiled a year ago at his press conference with great fanfare, which was meant to be able to reach anywhere in the world. Now this is something we looked at ourselves, 50, 60 years ago and decided not to pursue, because it was too dangerous to have a nuclear-fueled missile. So we may well be going back to some of those scary, *Dr. Strangelove* days, unfortunately.

KRISTOL: Well, you said we should have this conversation in three or four years. We'll have it in maybe just a year or two. Maybe as the next administration comes into power it'll be interesting to really see, you know, either Trump's second term or post-Trump, how these things look. And to see how much has changed or not changed. And whether –

EDELMAN: If you keep inviting me, I'll keep coming back.

KRISTOL: And whether we are facing up to this challenge. Which I think you've really – I really thank you for helping illuminate in a serious way. Even if not always the most cheerful way, but reality is reality, you know?

EDELMAN: You know, I was always raised to be a short-term pessimist and a long-term optimist. And right now, the short term does look pretty pessimistic. I'm just hoping that the long-term becomes optimistic.

KRISTOL: I am, too. So, Eric, thanks so much for joining me today.

EDELMAN: Thank you, Bill.

KRISTOL: And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]