

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Steve Hayes, Author and Journalist
Editor, *The Weekly Standard* (2017-2018)

Taped September 11, 2019

Table of Contents

I: Conservatism Today (0:15 – 37:28)

II: The Republican Party after Trump (37:28 – 1:14:59)

I: Conservatism Today (0:15 – 37:28)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol, welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined today by Steve Hayes, a colleague for 17 years I guess – is that right? Hard to believe – at *The Weekly Standard*. And one of our leading reporters, editors, commentators. Starting a new publication with Jonah Goldberg in just a couple of months, I think, in the new year. So we're looking forward to that.

HAYES: Thank you.

KRISTOL: Author of a very fine biography of Dick Cheney. A good book on Saddam Hussein and the war on terror. Anyway, welcome back. You spent a year in Spain with your family, which you enjoyed, right?

HAYES: I loved it.

KRISTOL: You adjusted?

HAYES: We're still adjusting to the return to the United States and the ferocity of the debate here; but it's good to be back and it's good to be here.

KRISTOL: You have to say that, "it's good to be back," even if it's – but did you really get away from it? No.

HAYES: I did at the end of the time in Spain. I wasn't paying – I was working hard on *Weekly Standard* stuff the first few months, and the new publication in the last six months. But yeah, I took Twitter off my phone. I didn't check Twitter on the computer very often.

KRISTOL: That's terrible.

HAYES: It was pretty great.

KRISTOL: So coming back probably has heightened for you what we'll talk about today, the moment, right?

HAYES: No question.

KRISTOL: I mean a moment that I don't think you expected to see –

HAYES: No question.

KRISTOL: – in terms of conservatism and the Republican Party and everything. You've been a conservative pretty much your whole – ever since I met you, your whole career in Washington, right?

HAYES: Yeah, yeah. I was a conservative. I mean I was one of these sort of dorky kids in high school who was really interested in politics and considered myself a conservative then. I grew up in the age of Ronald Reagan when a lot of conservatives my age were born, and that was sort of the model for what conservatism looked like. So I've been a conservative ever since then.

KRISTOL: So, where are we, what strikes you the most? I mean you had a little bit of a – not vacation away from it, but I mean stepping away a tad so you kind of come back and see it all. I mean, what's most striking and startling?

HAYES: Well, it's a mess. I mean there really isn't much to conservatism at this moment. I mean there's not much of a conservative movement anymore. And to the extent that people talk about conservatives and conservatism, they're identifying the ideology or the philosophy with the president, with Donald Trump. Who has become sort of the avatar of modern American conservatism, but doesn't believe the kinds of things that conservatives have believed over decades and you could argue centuries. So it's, I would say, chaos in conservatism right now.

KRISTOL: Yeah, it is striking. I hadn't really thought of it that way. The degree to which – I mean, I'm older than you, I was even at the – there was always a movement, right? And there were always leaders and there were different strands and fights and libertarians, and traditionalists, and hawks, and isolationists. But it was an intelligible kind of movement, didn't you find it? Well, you came to Washington in what – in '90 –

HAYES: Yeah. When I came to Washington – so, I moved to Washington in 1993 to take a job at The Heritage Foundation. So I came in and I was editing a newsletter for The Heritage Foundation, sort of doing journalism and writing in the heart of the conservative movement. So that was my baptism to Washington. I had done an internship at Heritage before then.

So, and I'm sure that this colors the way I look back on this to a certain extent. But you know, at that time it was kind of the heyday of intellectual conservatism, in some respects. I mean I got here a year and a half before, not quite a year and a half before the 1994 Republican revolution.

Which was, for – had some flaws, no question about it, but it was based on ideas. It was the Contract with America. I mean it was a big argument about the direction of the country based on ideas and based on our understanding of the best ways to limit government. That was the conservative conservatism that I grew up with and that's still the kind of conservative I am today.

But you've seen, through the years, through the Clinton presidency and then the Bush presidency, the Tea Party, the gradual transformation of conservatism into something that is really now – I mean, call it Nationalist Populism, or what have you – there's not really much of a coherent world view or ideology I think behind a lot of that. You can find it in the writings of someone like a Michael Anton, or some of the people from *American Greatness* there. But I think what they're doing is mostly imposing a set of sort of intellectual – well an intellectual framework on what is really just sort of the ad-hoc thinking of the guy who happens to be president.

KRISTOL: Well, and a lot of what they write is a very self-consciously more than a modification or reform or even critique of the older conservatism. It's just a thorough repudiation of it.

HAYES: No question.

KRISTOL: That it's a total failure, it was pointless. It was maybe flawed at the very beginning or not just flawed, but sort of deeply problematic from the very beginning. And so that's not a continuation of the movement, it's really a repudiation of it, I think.

HAYES: Right. I mean I think they would argue that it's an improvement on the old conservatism.

KRISTOL: Right.

HAYES: And some of them, I think still do call themselves conservatives and consider themselves conservatives. As our friends at the Claremont Institute would say, "we're conservatives and this is where conservatism was always headed, and this is, you know, it's a good thing that it ended up here." That's not my view. It's still not my view.

KRISTOL: So what strikes you the most in terms of the, you know, what's gone, or what were the core things that attracted you, or that you thought you were sort of a part of in terms of the movement, that now are just – ?

HAYES: Yeah, it'll sound cliché, but sort of core American values. The kind of things that were included in the Declaration, the Constitution, the basic parameters of setting parameters of government. The belief, a strong belief in federalism, that it mattered, that it was important. That the extent that government was going to be effective, it would be effective at state and local levels rather than the federal level.

And think about that now. I mean, we don't even have debates about federalism anymore, I mean really. And we don't have debates about any of these big sort of core ideas.

KRISTOL: Limited governments.

HAYES: You don't – I mean this is one of the things that I find most amazing about this particular moment as we head into the 2020 presidential election. You have some Republican challengers to the president and in all likelihood Donald Trump is going to be the Republican nominee.

In the general election we will have more or less a year of a debate about the direction of the country, the shape of our government. And there won't be a limited government candidate. There won't be anybody making the case, whether it's Elizabeth Warren or certainly Bernie Sanders or whomever on the Democratic side, and Donald Trump on the Republican side, there won't be anybody making a case for limited government.

You might have Justin Amash and maybe he can have some, maybe it'll help shape the debate on the domestic policy side. But that's a pretty striking thing, that neither of the two major party candidates will have, will be making a sustained case for limiting the size and scope of government.

KRISTOL: Yeah. And even the Republican candidates who were less in that direction. I guess George W. Bush in 2000 with compassionate conservatism, and McCain. Even so, that was a core distinction between the parties, and certainly between, if not the candidates themselves, their followers and their platforms. And that just seems to have totally gone away.

HAYES: Yeah. Even if they didn't make the argument well, they made the argument. Or they attempted to make the argument. And I do think, I would say it was probably, certainly as it relates to domestic policy considerations, that was the key distinction between the two political parties.

KRISTOL: Yeah. And I would say there was a kind of more theoretical limited government, more libertarian argument. And then there's the more practical, just, "Look," – this is very much a Republican talking point I think – "we know that government programs don't work well. They have unintended consequences. So we're the kind of grownups who are not going to just promise pie in the sky; we're

going to sort of be careful in reforming. We're going to *reform* welfare, we're going to have school choice, we're going to have ways of fixing government to have incentives and responsibility." That's – that just seems like another –

HAYES: Nobody's making that argument.

KRISTOL: Right. The left has its pies in the sky, and Trump has his promises. And it's sort of –

HAYES: It's all power politics now – I mean, that's all it is. We've shifted from a politics of ideology and philosophy in some ways. And you know people lamented this in the 1990s. Newt Gingrich was "too ideological, we're too polarized on ideological [grounds]." Now I don't think we're that polarized in ideological terms, depending on how you understand the current Republican moment; we're just more polarized on who gets to exercise power.

And I think Donald Trump, he probably wouldn't – if he were sitting here with us he probably wouldn't even really argue much that this is about limiting government. He would say, "no, no, this is about how we exercise power and I'm the person to exercise power because I'll do it well."

KRISTOL: Right. And friends and enemies and sort of who you represent, who you identify with, your tribe as opposed to the other tribes.

HAYES: Yeah. Well think about what he's done on trade. He's now, the Trump administration has now acknowledged that these are massive tax increases, that often hit the middle class. It took them a while to acknowledge it, but they're acknowledging it now. And then to bail out the farmers that these policies are hurting, they're just making payments. There's no pretense.

KRISTOL: With some kind of executive authority I guess they have under some law.

HAYES: Right.

KRISTOL: But again, the kind of thing conservatives would have just screamed about if President Obama –

HAYES: Right. It would be the – if Bill Clinton had done this.

KRISTOL: It's just like writing checks to farmers and boasting about it, too.

HAYES: Right.

KRISTOL: Not sort of, "Look, this is temporary", reluctant, you know, "we have to tide people over; of course ultimately we want to get back to a market situation." None of that.

HAYES: No talk of markets.

KRISTOL: Yeah, markets – that's a word you don't hear much, right?

HAYES: Right. And that was – I mean to go back to your question, when I came to Washington that was the buzzword. That was everywhere it seemed: free markets. We've got to get back to free markets in everything. And again, no question that some of this was shaped by my having been at Heritage. I went to every single lecture that I could go to and all the panel discussions. I was a Heritage Foundation junkie. So I soaked this stuff in, no question that shaped how I remember this. But it really did seem to be a much greater emphasis on ideas.

And Newt Gingrich was regarded as a chief ideologue at the time, and your efforts on health care. I mean that was an ideological case that you made, that the project made. And those aren't – that's not the modern Republican Party right now. That's not the modern conservative movement.

KRISTOL: Right. And when did it – I mean, has it been gradually eroding, and somehow just Trump brought everything to a head or did it just fall off a cliff? I mean, what's your sort of analysis of that? We all thought we were still engaged in debates of ideas, reform conservatism, and I think we thought that. We published a million articles on 'what's the right way to do health care reform? How do you combine the politically viable way of doing it with employer-based insurance but not having so much government regulation? And how do you do tax credits?

I think we all thought we were – maybe in retrospect one can say we were stale and it was warmed over and it wasn't creative and we were a little out of touch with people – but I think we all thought we were still engaged in that debate three, four, five years ago, you know?

HAYES: Yeah. I think this is where the critique of Michael Anton and others has, sort of rings the most true, is because we were involved in these arguments, we thought sort of everybody was.

Speaking for myself, when I was engaged in these debates, looking at the way that we were critiquing the Obama administration for what it wanted to do on domestic policy, my sense was that Republicans and conservatives around the country were sort of with us, and that this was primarily this crusade against every-expanding federal government. And it turns out I think that I anyway vastly overestimated how important that was to the average voter.

Now, there were indications that this was still ideological as late as the Tea Party. I mean the Tea Party, at least on the surface, was fundamentally an ideological movement. The whole thing was it started on spending and stimulus and Obamacare and that's what sustained it. And it swept Republicans to elections in 2010. And the Republicans who came in thought that they were here – I know this from having spent a lot of time talking to them – to really limit the size and scope of government and to push back on the Obama administration and its overreach.

But there were also, I would say, at the time indications that it might not have been quite as ideological. And I would point to the Rand Paul filibuster on drones and the idea, the argument that we were going to be sitting at Starbucks one day and you could be droned and this is the federal government with too much power. I don't think that the people who got excited about that – and that was a moment. I mean remember how Ted Cruz went down to the floor, and everybody was tweeting, and the Tea Party was very excited – I don't think people were fundamentally supportive of that effort, or into what Rand Paul was doing because they shared his concerns. I think it had everything to do with the fact that he was willing to stand up and fight against the Obama administration. And really take it to them, really go after the President.

And people forget that after Obama was elected, Mitch McConnell and John Boehner and others didn't want to take on President Obama directly at all. Now, over the course of Obama's eight years, it devolved into out and out warfare. But there was a time at which Republican leaders in the House and Senate didn't even want to mention Obama's name, so they would focus all of their attacks on Nancy Pelosi and not even criticize President Obama.

You look at where the Tea Party went after it came in. I think it ended up being much more about a willingness to fight than the ideological considerations that I thought it was mostly about.

KRISTOL: Yeah, and then the suspicion, the hostility to big government, went from being a sort of what you might call ideological hostility to a kind of "it's a conspiracy to get us."

HAYES: Right.

KRISTOL: And they don't – it went to sort of "they don't listen to us," which was fair enough, and "we're sort of left out of the equation and things have to be shaken up in Washington," to "they're actually conspiring against us."

And of course there were instances where citizens were being deprived of rights or conspired against to some degree maybe. But then it became sort of, it seems to me in the last, this was sort of a late-Obama administration phenomenon I suppose, kind of almost full-blown conspiracy theories. So I just didn't take them seriously I guess. And you know, I thought people were just – but it turns out the degree of alienation from the federal government and the political system as a whole was much greater than I at least thought.

HAYES: It was growing. And then there were, I would say, a series of moments that led us from that sort of, or what seemed at the time to be this ideological disruption, to now this disruption for the sake of disruption without really any end goal. I mean I think you can look at something like the IRS's targeting of conservatives.

KRISTOL: Right.

HAYES: And the revisionist history on that is pretty strong. Now people sort of shrug that off. "Oh, it wasn't – ." She went and apologized. She apologized for what the federal government did. I forget the woman's name. She apologized for what the federal government did and said it was inappropriate.

KRISTOL: Right.

HAYES: And virtually everybody agreed on that, on that targeting. And I think if you're an average Republican voter and sitting at home in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin – my hometown. And you see somebody acknowledge that this had happened and you have congressional hearings about it and everything. And then there's no accountability. And nothing really happens. And the media downplay it, and Democrats downplay it. I'm not defending sort of the conspiratorial mindset. I mean it's out of control particularly now in all of its manifestations, but there were reasons that conservatives, I think, were as frustrated as they were.

KRISTOL: Am I right? Someone asked me about this the other day. The Birther stuff in 2011, 2012. You and I were both on Fox at the time quite a lot. I was on Fox News Sunday mostly, as well as other coverage, but you were on Special Report at that point quite regularly, right?

HAYES: Right.

KRISTOL: Did we – did anyone take that seriously? I remember thinking it was just both crazy and trivial. And that no one – that it wasn't discussed much on panels and so forth. I mean I remember when Trump endorsed Romney. I think I'm right about that – I think I criticized Romney, this must have been on Fox News Sundays, for like giving Trump even ten minutes of attention about this. And it was no big deal though because everyone thought okay, fine, Romney's a little embarrassed to get his endorsement, but they told him it'd be kind of useful. So he got it, and Trump disappeared and Romney never mentioned his name the rest of the campaign to my knowledge.

HAYES: Right.

KRISTOL: And Trump didn't speak at the convention or anything. You know. I mean the degree to which – I mean that was a precursor I suppose of conspiracy – sort of for Trump it was an important moment.

HAYES: Sure.

KRISTOL: In retrospect. But it didn't feel that way at the time. I mean in that respect –

HAYES: No. It felt fringe-y.

KRISTOL: Yeah. The degree to which Fox and I don't know if Fox, I mean, the conservative media bubble and so forth, went from being conservative and a little overstated at times, to true conspiracy theorizing in just a few years is really pretty startling.

HAYES: Yeah. Right. And I would – the other story that I think contributed to that was Benghazi, which is, I mean, I think about –

KRISTOL: Which you did a ton of reporting on, yes.

HAYES: – how many hours I spent reporting on it, because I think it was a real scandal. It really was a scandal what happened. And the extent to which the Obama administration and its top-most officials blatantly misled the country about what had transpired on that particular 9/11. And the extent to which it was a part of a broader, of systematic misleading of the American public about the threats that we faced and I think continue to face. It really was a scandal.

The problem is, I think some parts of the conservative media, the fringe-y websites, blew this up and took basic reporting, things that were provable facts that you could point to, into these conspiracy theories that were wholly invented. And I think people just kept riding those.

KRISTOL: But now the conspiracy theories aren't sort of a sideshow to the actual critique of a bad foreign policy or the war on terror, or a bad domestic policy in Obamacare or whatever. They're the heart of, it seems, an awful lot of what passes as conservatism, right?

HAYES: Right. That is really – I mean to go back to your original question – that may be one of the ways in which conservatism has changed most fundamentally since the years that I came to Washington. Is that at the heart of the Trump case about the federal government is this conspiracy about the deep state.

KRISTOL: Right.

HAYES: And again, as somebody who's done a lot of reporting about the ways in which the intelligence apparatus has sometimes misled us, was politicized, all of these things in the Obama years which didn't get the kind of attention I thought it ought to have. There's now a sense, I think, if you listen to the president and some of his supporters, that the intelligence community, the FBI and others, can't be trusted ever to look out for the interests of the country.

KRISTOL: Right.

HAYES: They're always just – they basically exist to go after conservatives. And I do think if you listen to enough of that, that's the message that emerges. And it's so incredibly unhealthy. And it's also simply not true, it's not the case.

KRISTOL: No, I think it's a big difference between saying in this particular case these officials politicized a report and probably got some career people to cooperate with them on that. But you know, it was a limited handful of people really in most of the Benghazi or other cases. As opposed to the entire –

You know, in a way, to believe some of the claims of Trump and his supporters you'd have to believe that hundreds of people at the CIA or FBI, maybe thousands, you know, are just cheerfully lying and misleading and engaged in conspiracies and cover-ups. Which I mean – which is not something I think conservatism –

I mean, that's what the John Birch Society thought, and that's what others have thought over the years. But that was always marginalized. Maybe not always right away – Joe McCarthy. There were – McCarthy was a sort of a mainstream figure for a year or two or three, but ended up not being one, right? So that's – but only he was a Senator. And at the end of the day, the Republican establishment helped marginalize him.

HAYES: In important ways. No, I mean, obviously the main difference now is the chief conspiracist is the president. I mean, that's what –

KRISTOL: How much of it is that? How much of it is that? If Trump doesn't win in November, 2016, loses by a point to Hillary Clinton, are we looking at the total collapse, as you've put it, or the transformation of the conservative movement, or how much of this is dependent on one contingent fact, Donald Trump being president of the United States?

HAYES: I don't know, that's a good question. Because the antipathy the conservatives had, I would say, in many cases is well justified, towards Hillary Clinton, I think could have driven conspiracy theories too, right?

KRISTOL: Right, and he won the nomination, so it wasn't just about Hillary, it was also that Marco Rubio, Scott Walker and all these people were totally unacceptable.

HAYES: Right. And I think, to pull back a little bit, I think if you look at sort of the chaos of information these days, and the chaos of Washington, people are looking for ways to make sense of it all. And the reality, I think the cold truth of it is, a lot of it doesn't make sense. You can't sort of impose a structure on a lot of the stuff that we're seeing because we're in this moment of just tremendous volatility in both our politics and our media.

But people want that structure, and so they look, I think, first to, often to people who can provide them a story, a narrative. And the narrative doesn't necessarily have to be true. And when it's furthered by the president on the "deep state" or some of these other areas, you get people who sort of latch onto that because they want to have an explanation for what they're seeing and there isn't one readily available otherwise.

KRISTOL: Yeah, it's interesting. Just the president saying it is so important. I guess I go back and forth like we always – everyone does and what's the chicken and what's the egg here? But you can have a lot of fringe-y websites. You can have people on TV saying things that are irresponsible. You can have Senators, Congressmen, that's often been the case, all that. Having a president – the only president – echoing it, and not just echoing it, pushing it further, sort of reveling in it almost. That's really a different level I think.

HAYES: It is.

KRISTOL: You could have a sort of irresponsible politics on both sides that's a little out of hand and a little unseemly. But that's very different from having –

HAYES: He's driving it. I mean look, he's done this for his entire career. He did this in business. He was famously on the pages, in the pages, of *National Enquirer* a lot and had a deep relationship with the proprietors there that did his bidding and would help spin stories that weren't true. He made random phone calls to *The New York Post*, and honestly posing as somebody else to spin a story.

I mean, he did this a lot. He did it during the campaign when he suggested that Ted Cruz's father had been involved somehow in the assassination of JFK and wouldn't apologize for it. He would be called on this, again and again and again, he wouldn't apologize for it or wouldn't walk it back. And I think from his perspective he's seen it work to his advantage.

And I think now, I mean look, some of this is deliberate. We know this because he's told us this. He did this famous interview with Leslie Stahl, in which he was talking about the media and why he attacks and why he propagates these conspiracy theories. And he said, well I attack you because then when you write something unfavorable about me nobody will believe you. So he's actively seeking to discredit the media and undermine the media.

I would argue that the media have done quite a bit to set the stage for this. And that's something that I think most of our colleagues in journalism in the mainstream media have been late to acknowledge, if they've acknowledged it at all. There's a reason that half of the country was sort of prepared to say, "Yeah, I might follow him. This sounds a little crazy, but he's making good points about the media."

KRISTOL: Right. And somehow that it's all entertainment anyway, so don't take it too seriously. I mean I was thinking just as you were speaking about it, I come back to you covered the Trump campaign, this is 2015. And I still remember you calling me from Iowa. So tell the story, this is where – we're thinking about the same day, right? At the Saturday press conference where he flies out on Friday to Iowa, if I'm not mistaken?

HAYES: Right. Yeah, right.

KRISTOL: It's a campaign at the Iowa State Fair.

HAYES: It was the Family Leader Conference.

KRISTOL: So it was before the State Fair, so like summer, as I recall, July of 2015, maybe?

HAYES: Right. And I had gone there – again, this was my blind spot on Trump. I didn't see him being somebody who was likely to attract much of a following. I had basically gone there to cover everybody else. All of the candidates were there July of 2015. The six months –

KRISTOL: So it was like a long day where they each did 45 minutes on stage.

HAYES: It was before the caucuses on stage with Frank Luntz at the religious conservative get-together, gathering. And I was sitting up in the balcony and I'd sat through presentations of a number of others. Trump goes onstage. And I honestly thought about leaving and going and getting lunch. I just wasn't – but I said, "no, I'll just listen." And that was when he very famously attacked John McCain.

KRISTOL: Right. How did that even come up? Although McCain had criticized Trump I guess, right?

HAYES: Right.

KRISTOL: And so Luntz asked Trump – what do you think about McCain's criticism?

HAYES: Right. And Trump just lashed out and said all of these things about how he prefers heroes who don't get or can't get captured. He prefers prisoners who don't get captured. And really took on McCain, and in a way that left people – you know, I was sitting up in the balcony and it wasn't crowded but the people around me were gasping. Did he really just say that?

And the session ends and I immediately ran down to the basement where they, after the candidates appeared onstage they would go and do a little press Q&A. And I went down and waited for Trump and asked him about this, pretty aggressively I will admit. I was fired up.

And he made no apology about having denigrated McCain's service. He repeatedly – and this was what I thought was so striking and I think this is maybe the moment where I thought this is very different. He repeatedly just denied that he had said things he had said twenty minutes earlier. And I was reading his quotes to him and he'd say, "I didn't say that."

KRISTOL: And you were the questioner who kind of most pushed him I think. And he's –

HAYES: Yeah, I think I asked him like eight questions.

KRISTOL: And he snapped at you. Not snapped, but he sort of you know, –

HAYES: He did.

KRISTOL: – got annoyed at you.

HAYES: Very much.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

HAYES: But I was, you know, I'd say, "well how could you say this about John McCain?" And he would say, "I didn't – I was criticizing his – he hasn't helped veterans enough." And I'd say, "no, no, no, here, look, I'm reading you what you said, how could you have said that?"

And then the final question I asked him, I think I told him a little bit about what McCain had done as a prisoner. And said, this is what he did, "you know, doesn't that matter to you?" And he said – I'll never forget it – he said, "It's irrelevant."

I just thought, that's an amazing thing to say about – whatever you think of John McCain, whatever you think of his policies. And I certainly had my disagreements with him and I disagreed with him a lot when I covered him. We got along well, but I disagreed with him on – Think about saying that about somebody who'd served his country the way that John McCain served this country and made the sacrifices that he made for the country. I mean, that was an incredible moment.

KRISTOL: And I remember we talked several times that day I think, and later that evening. And you thought that –

HAYES: I was probably a little hysterical.

KRISTOL: You did, I think you filed something finally for *The Weekly*, for their prior website, if I recall.

HAYES: I did.

KRISTOL: And then I was on ABC This Week the next morning, here in Washington. Martha Raddatz, I believe, was the host. When George Stephanopoulos does the show he does it from New York, but sometimes they do it from Washington. And I was on the panel. And it was the big story the next morning.

And so I remember, this shows how totally out of touch I was, and Martha said to me, "Well, Bill, you're a Republican, and you're sort of a friend of McCain's, what do you think of this? And I said "It's really appalling in my personal judgement." But, and she said, "What do you think about the politics of it?" And I said, "Oh, he's finished."

I mean I think I said something like "Trump is dead to me personally, but I also think just he's going to be dead to the Republican Party." They're not going to nominate someone who's denigrating, not just McCain personally incidentally, but any POW. Because you're a loser if you were captured. That's what he said, right?

HAYES: That's right. I wrote that in the piece. So the piece that I filed for *The Weekly Standard*, that's what I said. You know, this is not only a horrible moment for Donald Trump in this campaign, but it's effectively the end of his campaign. And it wasn't at all the end of his campaign.

KRISTOL: I know. And foreign policy, speaking of Benghazi and POWs and so forth. I mean, that also is really the – again, there's always a strain, obviously. We were on the hawkish side and the interventionist side, no question. But there was a strain that was opposed to us in the Republican Party and had doubts, and that's fine.

But the degree of total, I mean, we have a whole party now that's pretending it wasn't the party it was. I think even in the Cold War or more specifically post-9/11, right? I mean, that was such a defining thing for the Republican Party.

HAYES: The way that you just described that is very accurate. And it's important to describe it the way you described it because you described it in the negative. It's a party that's not what it was. You couldn't describe it in, how would you describe the Republican Party on foreign policy today?

KRISTOL: Yeah, a lot of tough talk on the one hand. So in a way, sounds much different from President Obama. And then to the left of it, if that's the right word, more dovish than President Obama in concrete actual things they do sometimes, right?

HAYES: So it's not 'speak softly and carry a big stick.' I mean, it's really just speak loudly, period – that's it.

KRISTOL: And figure out stuff on an ad hoc basis.

HAYES: Then make a determination on what you think.

KRISTOL: Kim Jong-un or whatever.

HAYES: Whether you've talked to Lindsey Graham or Rand Paul moments earlier.

KRISTOL: Yeah, the chaos of it and the lack of – I think you're right. There are some intellectuals who try to put a sort of, make it coherent, but it is more the disintegration. It's more the disintegration of a movement than a transformation of a movement in terms of the conservative movement.

HAYES: I think that's right. That's exactly right.

KRISTOL: How surprised are you that the party has just gone along? I mean the actual senators, congressmen?

HAYES: I mean, I guess I'm less surprised that *politicians* have done it because that's what politicians do, right? They sort of shape shift to anything and make, become what they think will sell. And I've had conversations with many senators and members of Congress who say, in effect, "I have to do this because this is where my constituents are. I've got 85 percent approval in my district and when I take him on, I raise the risk that he'll come after me personally. And I make my constituents mad."

And the constituents – these members of Congress, will say – don't remember all the times that they've supported Trump; they remember the one time when they defied Trump. And there is this, I mean, I've never seen it before, this insistence on sort of everybody marching in lock step. I haven't seen it before.

KRISTOL: And the attacks on the dissenters. I mean, with Bush, god knows, people kept saying – Right, people say sort of "well, politicians follow the followers and they follow the president." But I don't know, there were plenty of people rebelling against Bush on immigration and on other issues. And President Obama didn't get everything through. We conservatives complained because he did so much in his first two years when they had huge majorities. But even so, he didn't actually get stuff through like Cap and Trade and other things. Because, guess what? There were Democrats who said – and I don't think President Obama pressured them in the way that a president always does, maybe tried to chide them a little.

But there too Trump did something that I wouldn't have thought one could get away with, which is just go after people who dare dissent. Support their primary opponents, that's pretty unusual. And really succeed in riling up their constituents against them.

HAYES: Yeah, and the effectiveness there is not just in the individual races in which he's intervened, of course. I mean, he has been pretty effective. He boasts about this. It's not true 100 percent of the time, but many of the places where he's jumped in, particularly in a primary, and you've seen those candidates do well.

And I think the secondary effect, but probably the more important one, is what it says to all of the other Republicans. So even Trump's skeptical Republicans desire his approval, desire his endorsement as they head into races. And that is different – that's new.

KRISTOL: And then you mentioned, you're not that surprised by politicians, but that implied you were more surprised by conservative think tank types, intellectual types, journalist types.

HAYES: Yeah. I mean, friends of ours with whom we'd sort of labored in the fields for, in my case, a couple of decades. And you assume that there's a sort of a shared set of core beliefs and that this really isn't it.

And no, I've been very surprised at how many people have adapted or, in some cases, made arguments purely the opposite of the arguments they had made for their careers. And are now making arguments that are pretty close to the opposite in order to accommodate Trumpism. And that's been, that's been shocking. That's been even, maybe this is sort of the naïve Midwesterner in me, but that's been a surprise.

KRISTOL: And I think there's some legitimate, of course, arguments and rationalizations, like "All this stuff is bad, but you get the good judges, so it's – the tradeoff is worth it." But even there, one wonders how much some of the appeal to the judges and the Constitution there is kind of, almost a leftover way of sort of saying we do believe in something. There's still one thing that we believe in, that we always believed in and that's strict construction or limited constitutionalism or originalism or whatever one wants to call it.

One sort of thinks, well what exactly – I mean, it's good to have those good judges, but if everything else is sailing out the window in terms of limited government and rule of law and constitutionalism in the executive branch – constitutionalism in the legislative branch, or the emergency powers and all this sort of stuff, what does it mean to even appeal to the great importance to these judges? Not that it isn't important in actual cases.

HAYES: Right. No, I think that's true. I mean, I do think if you look, in defense of the people who are defenders or supporters of the president, if we just did this as a checklist. And certainly compared to what I thought when he was elected, he's governed – again, set aside everything else and you've got a policy checklist. He's done more conservative things than I would have guessed for sure. There's no question about it.

I didn't think he was going to, I mean, maybe he'd nominate some conservative judges, but I didn't think he would have the impact that he has had on the court and in my view, a very positive direction. You know, there was talk that he would nominate his sister to the Supreme Court. I mean, that didn't strike me as that crazy. And he's actually picked two, I think, pretty terrific justices.

The tax cuts, I'm for every tax cut. And any time there is one, I think the context matters here; you worry about debts and deficits at this time. The deregulation, the strides he's made on deregulation, I think that matters.

And so if you go down and you're just looking at it as a checklist, I think you can check off a bunch of things that allow people who have become supporters to say look at all of this stuff. But it requires them to ignore so much of the other stuff. And as I say, that's been a surprising element of this presidency for me.

II: The Republican Party after Trump (37:28 – 1:14:59)

KRISTOL: So where do you think it goes? I mean, if someone, is it possible that it's a four year odd thing, celebrity president and a little bit of exhaustion in the conservative movement, but then it kind of reassembles in some somewhat new fashion? Or are we really in uncharted waters and who knows what comes next? I mean, where are you on that sort of –

HAYES: Yeah, totally in uncharted waters.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

HAYES: Yeah, I don't think it can sort of be picked up and picked back together. It can't be seen as a blip now. Because if he had lost – if he'd had a good run in the primaries and then lost, or even if he had been the nominee and then lost. I think with the benefit of a few years of hindsight, you could have said, "well, that grew out of the frustration of the American voters, of American voters and Republicans and conservatives in particular, the inability of Washington to get anything done. It was just a big – ."

But it's not that anymore. And now I think because you've had so many elected officials, in particular, not only following him and not only supporting him, but amplifying his arguments. Which is really important, actually, I think. Not just going along to get along, but saying the things that he's saying and building that out to where it's a Republican Party argument.

I mean, Donald Trump has changed where the Republican Party is on trade fundamentally. It's the opposite of where Republicans have been for decades. It used to be that Republicans were free traders with a small subset of Republicans who weren't or who had questions about it or challenged it. Now the party itself is, you have dissenting senators and people who sort of tentatively raise their hand and say – Mr. President, maybe not, \$300 billion dollars more in tariffs? But he's moved the party in a direction that I think people, if you just think about what it looks like when he's no longer president, whether that's in a year and a half or whether it's in five years, what are people going to say who have supported his policies all along? They can't suddenly become free traders, or they won't have much credibility, I don't think.

KRISTOL: Yeah, and I think that is a huge question for me. And I go back and forth a little bit on this because I think you're absolutely right that him making a good run in the primary and then losing is so different from winning the nomination. Winning the nomination and losing the election is so different from winning the nomination and winning the election.

HAYES: Right.

KRISTOL: Winning the election, conceivably one could have imagined this and then governing kind of in a lonely way where the party is just rebelling against you an awful lot. A little more like Jimmy Carter, I suppose. And you don't really shape the party and the party has its own existence on the Hill and it's kind of, you know. And there's a robust primary challenge to you, as Teddy Kennedy to Carter, so you couldn't really say the – not that Carter had such a distinctive ideology, but leaving that aside, you can't really say that that shaped the Democratic Party.

That would have been another way, but whatever the merits or whatever happens now in terms of these three primary challengers and whatever happens in terms of re-nomination and reelection. Yeah, after three years of being utterly dominant in the party, not expanding it much and not expanding the reach of the party and the electorate or certainly among elected officials much.

Still, I agree with that degree of dominance, it's a little hard to see how it just kind of goes away, even if he loses the election in November.

HAYES: And to go back to what we were talking about a little bit earlier. You also have a party that I think has, is not in the habit of persuasion anymore. I mean, they're not spending their time making affirmative arguments for limiting government. I mean, it's not how they spend their time.

They mostly spend their time legislating, doing the kinds of – legislating or performing, which seem to occupy about 50 percent of Congress' time on both of these, and then ducking reporters to avoid having to comment on what the president has done.

You just don't see these sustained arguments in favor of limited government anymore. And I think that takes, you have to do that. You have to be in the habit of making these cases. And I think there will be a credibility problem on the other side of Trump, because they haven't been making it for so long, and people are unaccustomed to hearing Republicans make it.

KRISTOL: And what young Republican legislator or even governor has sort of made his name by picking out a particular issue, or set of issues, or area of public policy and making an interesting argument about it?

HAYES: Right.

KRISTOL: In the Trump era – none. You'd think they could, actually, because Trump is so uninterested in most of these policy issues. He might not even be offended if you made, if you were the kind of Jack Kemp of, I don't know, "we have to rethink the entire tax code and move in this direction." I mean, I'm making this up, obviously.

But, you know, Trump might not do it, but I don't know that he would care much if some young senator or congressman gave a bunch of speeches along those lines and went around the country barnstorming. But it's funny – that, I think, is the dog that's not barking.

HAYES: Right.

KRISTOL: Which is why aren't people – I understand keeping your head down, not fighting with Donald Trump, not sounding like me or you or whatever. But the failure to sort of think, "Well, maybe I'll take this moment to advance some new ideas." It's amazing how little of that there is.

I mean, literally – I mean, I'm not even saying this polemically. I can't think of who has done that. Might have been [Senator] Ben Sasse a little bit on a couple of issues.

HAYES: Sasse did it earlier.

KRISTOL: Earlier, he's sort of backed off the last –

HAYES: Lately I would say. You can point to Tom Cotton, I would say, on immigration. Made immigration sort of his big – and has pushed the president in certain ways and has focused on it in his speeches.

KRISTOL: Right.

HAYES: Mike Gallagher in his focus on national security questions. Trying to sort of jumpstart a conversation on these important issues that's otherwise not really taking place. It's hard to do, though, if you're a relatively new member of Congress. And the president is not – if you're rowing along with the president, you can get some attention.

KRISTOL: And somehow in the old days, I mean, Gerald Ford is the president or whoever, or George H.W. Bush, maybe he wouldn't be onboard with you doing certain stuff, but you could do it and it wouldn't be – Now it's just, Trump takes up all the oxygen, so no one – I mean, the argument, I guess, kind of the argument is who would pay attention if someone gave some of those speeches.

HAYES: And look, we're attracting the kind of people to Congress – I mean if you look at the spate of retirements among Republican lawmakers in the past two cycles, you're losing the people who are most interested in ideas, in policy, and legislation, and reform and policy innovation and you're gaining performative lawmakers. You're gaining people who want to go out and be on television and say outrageous things and get more TV and be recognized in airports.

And that's – I mean, not to sound like too much of a scold, but that's a pretty unhealthy development for the country.

KRISTOL: Yeah, and hard to turn around quickly.

HAYES: Maybe hard to turn around, ever.

KRISTOL: See, that's the interesting – I mean, for me, I guess I've sort of tried to – you know, I've been very involved in trying to quote, "save the Republican Party from Trump and Trumpism" and find challengers to Trump. And people so often say, "Well, isn't it kind of hopeless? And shouldn't you just think about something else? I mean the third party, independent candidates, or whatever, but you're not going to succeed in doing this."

And my sort of response, which is honest, is well, but you can't just walk away from one of the two major parties—which has a pretty good tradition on the whole, and pretty important aspects of that tradition that have done good things for the country, I think, and need to be upheld and advanced and to be thought obviously in a fresh way. Better to at least take a shot at sort of the, you know – you can't just walk away from one of the two major parties. That would really be bad for the country if we have a nativist, more or less, authoritarian, populist, unserious, performative, for one of the two major parties that way.

HAYES: Yes.

KRISTOL: The other party from our point of view as conservatives has always been too much that way in a different way, if you know what I mean, you know?

HAYES: Right.

KRISTOL: And this was, the Republicans were supposed to be the more serious adult party. And what is that going to do to our politics?

But I think you're making, in a way, as a very serious version of the point that, "That's nice, Bill, that you're trying to do that, but is it really going to happen? And when it doesn't happen, I mean, what then?" I guess that's my question.

So, where are we then? I mean if we have, even if we lose, Trump loses in 2020, if you have a party that's gone so fundamentally in this direction, or a conservative movement that's gone in this direction? It's not like the world can't – that America can't exist without a conservative movement. But I mean, like, what happens? Is it rebuilt from scratch? Is it just --

HAYES: You're really trying to drive me into the darkness here.

KRISTOL: No, I'm just curious. I mean I think it's a very – but you've thought a lot about it, right?

HAYES: I have, I have. I don't know. I think on the one hand you sort of have to keep fighting for those things. I suspect that part of the reason that you have decided to wage a fight inside the Republican Party is because fundamentally you're still a conservative. I mean you believe fundamentally the same things you've believed for a long time.

And I think we've had colleagues of ours and friends of ours who started in our same, call it Trump skeptical place, and have just sort of dropped the things that they believed, or that we thought they believed, over the years. And it's easier I think for them to just say, "ah, I'm sort of done with it all; I don't really believe that stuff anymore."

I really, I mean, I'd love to have an answer. I have spent way too much time thinking about what comes next. But I don't know. I mean I think there will be this massive free-for-all and Trump will be involved. I mean he's not going away. He will, if he's not elected in a year and a half, he will be there, shaping these ideas and pushing his followers. And he's still relatively popular inside the Republican Party, if not quite as popular as he claims to be.

I think the real question will be how many, at that time, how many of the people who – elected officials in particular – who have sort of consistently said, I'm not really with him. Publicly, they're Trump supporters, but privately they're not. What are those people doing? And there's a lot of them. There's a lot of them – the majority of Republicans in Congress.

Tim Alberta actually was, gave an interview. He wrote this book about the Republican Party and what happened and he was asked that. And he said if he had to put a ratio on the number of Republicans who are actual Trump supporters to the number of Republicans who say they're Trump supporters in Congress, I think he put it at 50 to 1, which is even more than I would think.

But what do they do? I mean, is it the case that, because they've made or amplified Trump-ian arguments for these three years, that they're just in the habit of doing that and they'll continue to do that because they think that's where the future of the Republican Party lies?

Or, do they say, do they try to make the argument that, we were just entertaining – which is the, “boy, that was an interesting moment. We understand the frustrations of the voters. We understand why they might have turned to somebody. But that really didn't represent what conservatives believe and have believed and here's what conservatives believe and have believed.” I think that you'll have, people will fall in those two camps and probably many other camps.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I mean the obvious, the in-between camp is more of a – “things needed to be disrupted, we were out of touch, it's the 21 century, a lot of stuff that was appropriate for 20 or 40 years ago isn't appropriate today. There are new challenges, fresh thinking.” But not quite like Trump, which was more emotive and performative and unhelpful in many ways, but also isn't just Bush or McCain.

But then you really are sort of on a blank slate almost. Which is maybe fine. And maybe the country and the movement and the party need a really fundamental rethinking of an awful lot of things and maybe it's a moment of opportunity, in that respect.

HAYES: Yes, I think that's the case. I was for disruption. I was a fan of the Tea Party. I thought that was a great moment. I just was for ideological disruption, not disruption for the sake of disruption and now here that's what's won.

KRISTOL: And not disruption that exacerbates –

HAYES: Probably right.

KRISTOL: – ethnic divisions and racial. I mean that stuff is really bad.

HAYES: Right. No, so I think if there is that third group or that third path, that's probably where I would find myself. I mean I do think there has to be fresh thinking. I do think it was good that we've had disruption.

Now, I think a lot of the problems that I thought disruption could help us solve have been exacerbated. Debt and deficits are \$22 trillion dollars now and you now have two major political parties who are basically on record as saying that they don't want to address this. And nobody's talking about it, our debt. Nobody's talking about deficits. Nobody seems to care.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I think the counter-argument to what I just said, or at least the qualification would have to be, that's very nice intellectually. You guys could have a very good think tank in 2020, '21. And whoa, it's a new world, and what do we do about cybersecurity, what do we do about China, what do we do about domestic policy in eight different areas where we're not going to go back to what it was, but we're not going to be Trump-ians. So what's the new –? And it could be fun.

Meanwhile, reality doesn't really wait for you to resolve these things and it doesn't absolve you for what's happened over the last few years. So meanwhile the debt has grown. And meanwhile the world has gotten more dangerous and meanwhile the society arguably has gotten more riven with divisions and limitations on government have sort of disappeared. And people are out of the habit of even thinking in a kind of constitutionalist way, or rule of law way. And people get used to a kind of rhetoric that's extremely divisive and demagogic and so forth. And truth gets a little bit called into question as to whether that's really a – so, that's what would worry me.

I mean the flip side of my cheerful, "let's just have fresh thinking about everything," is, but the actual country that you're thinking about has been damaged in some pretty – and the political system, maybe even more than the country – has been damaged in some pretty fundamental ways.

HAYES: Yeah, I think that's undeniably true. And there's also the concern or the worry that the way that Trump was elected in 2016, and the things that he's done to command attention and to win, to put it in his terms, politically, becomes the model for everybody else.

And so, this is what Republicans decide they have to do. In that case, there's no incentive whatsoever to get serious about exactly the kind of problems that we're talking about. I mean you can just – you are a performer then. You are on a TV reality show.

KRISTOL: Right.

HAYES: You can talk to the American people. It's a bully pulpit without anything behind it. I mean that's all it is then.

KRISTOL: And Bernie Sanders got almost the same percentage of the vote in the Democratic primary in 2016 as Trump did in the Republican. And there's an awful lot of performative, kind of non-reality based, in my opinion, talk there, right?

HAYES: Sure, absolutely.

KRISTOL: Just forgive everyone's debt, and let's do this. And so if your politics becomes, you know, sort of Bernie Sanders promises and Donald Trump anxiety mongering, that's a pretty far from sort of actually grappling with the challenges of the 21st century.

HAYES: But there's no real sign, I would argue, that we're ready to return to that seriousness, right? I mean, I don't – particularly on those big issues. I mean, we're not having big national discussions on our cyber strategy. I mean, people are having them, in isolated places, but the federal government's not leading on that. Both parties, as I said, aren't taking – the inevitable debt question is the most predictable thing ever, predictable policy outcome ever. We will have a debt crisis if we don't do anything about entitlements. Nobody's talking about that at this point. I guess I don't see much hope that that returns.

Now, the one, I guess the one thing, the one way I could see it turning out differently is if after Trump loses – if he loses next year or in five years – he's replaced by somebody like a Bernie Sanders. And then you can see potentially Republicans and conservatives say, okay, we've been fighting amongst ourselves for these – for however many years. But that's a real problem. Like we need to be serious and actually make a case against a drift towards European-style socialism or welfare state. Maybe that could be a unifying factor. I don't know.

KRISTOL: I guess in thinking about this, we're having this conversation on September 11th, actually, of 2019. And what about national security? I mean does that seem, I mentioned, the world doesn't stop for us and it certainly doesn't stop in terms of national security.

We've been so unserious for these three years, I would say, and then of course people like us were very critical of the Obama administration. We had our issues with things that the Bush administration did, too. So there's an awful lot of not grappling with these questions that's accumulated by now, don't you think?

HAYES: I do.

KRISTOL: Where does that go?

HAYES: I mean, in a strange sort of way, I was as vocally opposed to most of the things that the Obama administration did on national security and foreign policy as anybody alive – virtually wrong about everything.

In retrospect, there was some comfort to be taken that there was an actual strategy there. Now I thought it was totally wrongheaded. I think the president was incredibly naïve about what his strategy could do, the reason for engaging the Iranians, the reason for the JCPOA, the Iran nuclear deal. Treating the Iranians as if they were sort of would-be allies rather than the enemies that they actually were I think was dangerous and foolish. But you knew what he was doing. There is no strategy here. I mean, it's just total policy incoherence.

And I think in part it's the ad hoc nature of the president's decision making. I mean, it's literally the case that he will talk to Rand Paul and then talk to Lindsey Graham. And these two senators who have his ear and have basically polar opposite views on the world have him sort of going back and forth.

And I think you've seen that within the administration, too. When the president talks to an advisor who reminds him – Steve Bannon in the early days – “Mr. President, you said you were going to get out of Afghanistan.” So for that day, he thinks he's got to get out of Afghanistan and that's the most important thing. And then he'll talk to somebody like a John Bolton who says, “Mr. President, if you leave Afghanistan, you're likely to leave this massive vacuum and that's the kind of situation that would create future 9/11s. And the Taliban is a group that supported and harbored Al Qaida and you don't want to be seen as soft on Al Qaida.”

And you have the sense that the president is just buffeted back and forth by the people he's spoken to and the people he's spoken to last. And then also the feedback that he gets watching Fox News and cable television where he sees how his decisions are regarded. And it really matters to him how it plays on cable television.

And that's the decision making. He doesn't come to the world with any kind of coherent world view. It doesn't mean he doesn't have strong views. He doesn't like the Chinese on trade, we've known that, we've known that for years. But there's no sort of deeper view that I think shapes his thinking on this.

KRISTOL: And just the utter, I guess what I'm so struck by, and this does make me both worried about the future in a big way even if Donald Trump goes away tomorrow, and also makes you think it's hard, it's going to take a while to recover from this or to build something anew.

The utter lack of seriousness of the public debate, which I think Trump contributes to a lot because once the president of the United States is conducting the debate at the level at which he conducts it, everyone else decides “fine, if that's all we have to do.”

I mean Iraq, may have not been a very good idea. We were obviously for it and I will still defend it. But you know, if you look back at that debate, it wasn't – I mean, there may have been exaggerations, there was some bad information, it turns out. But it wasn't foolish. I mean, there were serious speeches on all sides. We wrote a million articles. And “here's what we think the Middle East can be transformed [to].” Or “No, that can't be transformed. That's naïve.” I mean, “There's terror connections.” “Well, no actually, the terror won't get reduced if we take out Saddam.”

But those were actual arguments people made. And they were made in pretty complicated and detailed ways. And in journals and by politicians. And then there was always the over-simplification and some demagoguery on all sides and so forth.

Now the degree which people just say, “well Afghanistan has been very difficult, you know, and it’s been 18 years.” Since we’re having this conversation on 9/11, I’ll just mention it. And: “It’s an endless war. So we have to get out.” That is not an argument.

HAYES: No.

KRISTOL: That’s just – or maybe there is an argument for getting out and fine, if people can make that, but that’s certainly not an argument. Any more than just saying the opposite, “well, we’ve been there and so we should stay there,” is an argument.

But the level of discourse is really amazingly low. I mean, public figures gave speeches in the old days, Conde Rice. And again, one can criticize a lot of them, and they had views of things – McCain, obviously, had his own take. And he criticized Bush because there weren’t enough troops in Iraq and he and Don Rumsfeld had a very different theory of the war.

Could you even specify sort of competing theories of the Middle East and all the debates we had? Well, “you have to sort of half-embrace some of the Islamism because that’s kind of strong and you can mute it if you embrace it.” “No, we have to totally repress it.” And there was a lot of internal debates, even in the pages of *The Weekly Standard*, on that kind of thing.

And again, they weren’t all – I don’t want to romanticize it. But it was a lot of – if one went back and read it now, you probably would say “this wasn’t very well informed.” Or “this was misled and people were misled.” But I do kind of just feel the level of discourse is so low.

And the same on economics and so forth, and the debt and the deficit, and markets, and longer term consequences of policies. That seems hard to just come back from. I mean, everyone has sort of been dumbed down. We’re dumbing ourselves down. And certainly having a president who does it makes it so much more, don’t you think, harder to reverse, I guess?

HAYES: Yeah, I do. And I would add to that. I mean, again, sitting here on the 18th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks I’m struck by the fact that we haven’t had a crisis. I mean, to the extent that we’ve had crises they’re of our own making more or less. The trade war, I think, has been hugely problematic, but it’s something that, in effect, we chose or the president chose to engage in.

And you know, you see these, the video remembrances of 9/11 on the day and the day that followed and you saw how George W. Bush – whatever people think about his presidency – you saw how he conducted himself. You saw Rudy Giuliani conducted himself in the days after, on the day of the attack and the days that followed those attacks.

And there was a level of leadership and statesmanship that is just inconceivable at this moment. What would happen if we had a similar kind of attack? I don’t know. I mean, would the president tweet about it? Would he lash out at – I don’t know.

KRISTOL: It’s a scary thought.

HAYES: And in that sense I think we’ve been very lucky that we haven’t had anything, knocking on wood, that we haven’t had anything like that that really tests our ability to come together as a country, that tests our statesmen and women to help solve problems or to guide the president or shape outcomes.

KRISTOL: I mean, relative peace and prosperity.

Obviously, we had troubles in Iraq and Afghanistan, we had the ’07, ’08 crisis, but for the last decade or so we’ve dodged a fair number of bullets. We’ve had little disasters like Syria, which destabilized the region and Europe, and is a horrible humanitarian crisis, half a million people dead, but didn’t really affect us quite as directly.

So there's a weird combination, I would say, of complacency and then hysteria about relatively minor things.

HAYES: Yeah, little things.

KRISTOL: Yeah, which, I guess, those do go together, right? It's like if you're very healthy, you get all upset about a hangnail, you know. But if you like are dealing with serious problems, you kind of put things in perspective.

And I do feel like, in that respect, we are not, we have been so un-serious in the last several years. I remember when the Obama administration, and I do think Obama, maybe this is my conservative bias, has more responsibility for that than people realize.

You know, 'nation building begins at home.' I remember, I said to a friend of ours, an acquaintance of ours really, who served in the Obama White House. When President Obama said that in a speech announcing the, I think it was the plan to withdraw, to draw down from Afghanistan at the same time that he announced the surge into Afghanistan. That 'nation building has to begin at home.' I said you are just giving ammunition to Pat Buchanan – I was being more political – the right wing isolationists in our party because that is just an irresponsible thing for an American president to say.

Of course, it's true at some level of abstraction. But I mean, the previous American presidents of both parties have understood that it's always been a little hard to persuade people to make some of the sacrifices, financial or otherwise, that you'd have to make to keep our global leadership role. But people have also understood how dangerous it is to walk away from that, and to sort of make cheap arguments to make it easy for Americans to justify walking away from it.

And I think we're seeing, I mean, Trump has been much more irresponsible, but we're paying a pretty big price now, I think for that, and the level of discourse. I mean, maybe we're not going to pull out of Afghanistan because people were so appalled, just viscerally, by the notion of the Taliban coming to Camp David. But the actual level of discussion on that, or on a million other topics, is so unserious.

HAYES: Yeah. Well, I think if you look at that Obama speech was notable in part because it was the last big speech he gave on Afghanistan. He gave sort of little follow-ups, but this was a president who said, in effect, we're going to stay. We're going to start to pull out, but we're going to stay because this is important.

And I remember watching it, I think I was sitting in the studio at Fox getting ready to react to it and thinking all right, well, I certainly didn't like that it was literally within two sentences from when he said, 'we're staying,' to 'we want to start to get out'. Which, of course, told the Taliban, I mean, they heard half of that sentiment.

But he recognized the threat of the Taliban or at least rhetorically spoke about it, but then he didn't talk about it for the rest of, basically the rest of his presidency. And we were just there and we sort of grew accustomed to this. And that was also of a piece with the broader Obama administration efforts to downplay the nature of, I think the nature of all threats, all external threats. But the nature of the Jihadist threat in particular as it relates to both Iran and Al Qaida, and the broader threats that we face, he just didn't, the president didn't engage on that.

And I think we've seen that here. I mean now, the difference now is President Trump sometimes talks about those things when he talks about pounding ISIS. And we had some success, I would say. He could point to some success on pushing back ISIS and certainly depriving them of territorial advancement.

But the White House or the administration made some of the very same mistakes the Obama administration made on the Taliban, on negotiating with the Taliban. Remember, I didn't like the Obama administration's approach to the Taliban and the negotiations that they sought. The Trump administration

basically picked up where they left off, and I think it had the same effect of downplaying those threats at a time when they can't be downplayed.

KRISTOL: Just more generally, it seems, who would give a speech today – I was reading some old speeches for – I was teaching a class. You know, presidents would say, “Look, this is going to be difficult.” Or “there are tough trade-offs here and we have to do certain things that we, I don't want to do much, but the downside of not doing them is even greater.”

And people can use these arguments for bad policies or good policies, but that rhetoric was pretty common. You know, “We're going to have to make a budget deal where don't like all of it because it's better for the country.” Or “No, we don't have to make it, it's not good for the country.” But then you'd have a debate about it, you know? Which was fairly substantive. About economic growth and whether these programs are worth saving or not. And if Democrats are demagoguing on Medicare and the Republicans are “oh, we have to stop the rate of growth.”

I mean, it can't just even imagine the level of discussion that, let's say, Paul Ryan and Larry Summers or whoever Obama's economic advisors were, the level of debate they had – with all of the demagoguing that was mixed in and the simplification that was mixed in – over Medicare and entitlements in 2010, '11, '12. I mean, we're so below that now, I think, don't you think?

HAYES: So below that. No, absolutely. I mean, and on both sides. I think both sides do this, as you pointed out. Look at Elizabeth Warren's policy prescriptions. She deserves some credit because she's thought through these things and there's something semi-coherent there. I mean, if you sort of dig deep into them, there's a case that she's making there. But there's nowhere an acknowledgement that these things could actually happen, that this is realistic that you could do this. It's just – I think it is more performative. I mean, both sides are doing this. They're basically, it's a show for their –

KRISTOL: And that gets back to the reality TV. The degree to which we've become, I mean everything has become performative and it always was, obviously, to a considerable degree. Unfortunately, politicians didn't think about that.

HAYES: But now it's, I mean, that's that old Neil Postman book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. You go back and you read that now and it's incredibly prophetic. I mean, we're seeing a lot of what he – and I remember when I read it back 25 years ago and I sort of poo-pooed it. And I thought his critique of the corporate media was overwrought, and I still think some of that was, it was overwrought.

KRISTOL: Particularly to Reagan – I went back to look, you recommended it to me and I assigned it, actually, for my class at Davidson and went back and read it. And yes, we all didn't like it because it was sort of anti-Reagan and like “Reagan is just a showman.” And then the corporate media. But a lot of it comes across as very prophetic – we should have a discussion about that. I mean, it really is, amusing ourselves to death. Politics as entertainment, really.

HAYES: Right, and that's where we are.

KRISTOL: And it used to be sort of maybe you could argue happy talk entertainment, which people said well that's not really sustainable and there was a fair amount of that on Reagan's side and then on Clinton on the Democratic side. But now it's not even happy talk entertainment. Now it's kind of just, you know, whatever you're upset about, I'm going to be even more upset and tell you that you're right to victimhood –

HAYES: Yes, exactly.

KRISTOL: And that's got to be even less healthy in a funny way. Happy talk, okay. People get a wakeup call, as they say, from reality: get mugged by reality and the happy talk kind of goes away.

The victimhood stuff, once you get that going, that's, I guess, maybe we should close on this, this depressing note. I mean, once you get that going, it's hard to know how you put that back in the, that genie back in the bottle, I suppose. Except maybe challenges that people can rise to –

HAYES: But it's hard, I mean it's hard. And if you look at, and I mean, I think this is a place where the left deserves an overwhelming amount of blame. We've had this sort of victim culture propagated by the political left in America for years.

And I think unfortunately, now you're seeing elements of the right trying to sort of imitate what the left has had for so many years, whether it's identity politics or new woke-ness. It's all grievance politics all the time. And again, a president who specializes in that – I mean, for him, it's grievance politics, but it's all his personal grievances.

KRISTOL: I guess, so my final question is, I mean, how much of that is, you went to Spain for a few years, you came back, you went to the Midwest, saw your family and Karen's family and stuff.

So I think the happy version of this is, our politics is pretty deeply broken and now, obsessed with grievances, but also Congress just doesn't work, there's no policy process, etc., the debates are very low level, as we were saying. But the *society* isn't quite as broken as the politics. And so people in their lives aren't quite living, I don't think, mostly lives of extremely unhappy grievance mongering. They're going about trying to better themselves and taking care of their families and so forth. And it's a funny, maybe it is – I mean, it's a funny thing.

HAYES: You're right, that's a pretty profound point, actually.

KRISTOL: Bill Galston made this point, he was in the Clinton administration. Liberal thinker, but also served in the Clinton administration. It's funny, we did an event at Berkeley on the 50th – so it was about a year ago, a little over a year and a half ago. It happened to be, that wasn't the point of it, it was the 50th anniversary of Bobby Kennedy's assassination. So this was 2018, I guess it was on, I think, isn't it April or June 4th I think he was assassinated right after the California primary. And of course, it was called to our attention, and someone said a few nice words about Kennedy. And Bill and I both reminisced a little about what we remember about the time.

And then we sort of said well, in some ways things aren't as bad now as they were then. I mean, riots in the streets, assassinations of leading figures, 500,000 troops stuck in Vietnam in a war that we didn't really have a strategy to win. Incredible social tensions and students getting killed at Kent State a couple years later. And we were just sort of reflecting on this, I suppose.

And Bill's formulation, which I thought was very good, was that – I guess I said something like "yeah, it's not as bad now," whatever. I'm not one to pull my punches on Trump, but I mean, it just isn't, you know, the situation objectively is not.

HAYES: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And Bill said, "Our society is healthier than it was 50 years ago, but our politics is less healthy, is more dysfunctional." And that might be a true formulation.

And which way does that cut? Does that say well, then if the society is healthy, ultimately the politics could be fixed? Probably true to some degree.

Or, the politics can actually make the society less healthy and that would be the dark kind of –

HAYES: That's the worry. And I think some of our conservative friends would object strongly to Galston's proposition that societally we are in a healthier place than we were. Because if you look at the ways in which I think the left has prevailed in a lot of these culture war fights. The conservatives, our friends who support Trump, I think one of their arguments is well, at least he's fighting on this stuff. He's fighting

these culture wars. He's like the most improbable person to every fight culture wars on behalf of some sort of social and cultural conservatism, but he's fighting them anyway and with sort of an urgency – maybe not an urgency – an energy that his predecessors as conservative leaders didn't in a general way.

Anyway, I think your overall point is interesting. I mean, I do take the darker view. I'd like to be happier about it, but I do worry that our politics is going to drag society further in that direction as it becomes more and more broken.

You know, putting this in context, this moment in context. You did this a while ago, so I'm stealing this from a point that you had made. I mean, the extent to which we're in this moment of massive volatility can't be overstated. I mean, the 2006 was a change election, democrats took the House. 2008 was a real change election when Obama won. 2010 was a change election going the other way. 2012 was the exception that proves the rule. 2014 was a change election, again, moving towards Republicans. And then 2016 was sort of the, it was the electorate saying "you might have thought we were kidding – we're serious about change. We don't care what kind of – we were serious about change." And then 2018, of course, was a change election the other way.

So you see literal change in control of Houses of Congress. You've seen sort of this massive volatility back and forth, all against the backdrop of, I would say, less ideological polarization and more partisan polarization, which is an important distinction. It's hard to see how, for me, to see how that gets better before it gets a lot worse.

KRISTOL: And on that note, we will come back in a year and see if it's getting, maybe a year and a half, after the 2020 election, or maybe during the campaign and see if it's, if somehow the society is generating in itself some solutions and some, I don't know, ways to get better or not.

HAYES: Here's hoping.

KRISTOL: Here's hoping, though. Steve Hayes, thank you for joining me today. Very stimulating, thought-provoking discussion.

And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]