

Conversations with Bill Kristol

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Table of Contents

I. Moynihan and the Great Society (0:15 – 30:54)

II: America and the World (30:27 – 1:00:50)

I. Moynihan and the Great Society (0:15 – 30:54)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol, welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined today by Greg Weiner, Professor of Politics at Assumption College. Formerly worked here on Capitol Hill for Senator Bob Kerrey and others as well, I believe, right? No one ever works for only one person. Author of three books, all very much worth reading – a book on Madison and the Constitution, a book on Daniel Patrick Moynihan which we'll focus on today. And a very recent book, which everyone should get, [*Old Whigs: Burke, Lincoln and the Politics of Prudence*](#).

And since you talk about Burke so much in the Moynihan book, maybe at the end we can talk a little bit about why you find Edmund Burke so helpful to understand Moynihan, Lincoln and American politics, since he was a British thinker and statesman.

But let's talk about Pat Moynihan, whom you admire, as you say, in this book. And have written, I think, really the first, maybe only biography that tries to really capture his overall thought and work.

I guess, we should say I worked for him, so I feel – I'm very interested in this myself. But I suppose not everyone today remembers him. It's been, it's hard to believe, what, 16 years since he died in 2003, left the Senate in 2000. Say a word just about the biography, and then we'll talk about what you think is most notable for us to understand, this major figure in American politics and in American intellectual life.

WEINER: Sure, thank you for having me. The book tries to capture his political thoughts. So it's less, not even quite intellectual biography, it's more exegesis of his, mainly of his public writings, which are vast. He wrote or edited 19 books and there are hundreds of essays, as you know, and speeches and many things beyond. So there's quite a lot of material to work with.

KRISTOL: And so he came to prominence – well he was a political aide and got a PhD, but then worked for Averell Harriman and all this – but I guess got known in the very early '60s as a John Kennedy administration official.

WEINER: Right. So he came, he worked for Harriman in the late '50s and then came as Assistant Secretary of Labor in the Kennedy administration where he had a very, the title was, I think, Assistant Secretary for Research. Which gave him a very wide ranging portfolio which was, I think, suitable to his

expansive mind and interests. And he did all sorts of things from working on the War on Poverty to the Report on the Black Family.

KRISTOL: And then went back, ended up teaching at Harvard and then Nixon's domestic policy advisor.

WEINER: Right. So he worked for Johnson briefly. Johnson never quite trusted him because he was a Kennedy man and a sort of northeastern liberal.

And Jim Wilson recruited him to run the Joint Center at MIT and Harvard. And during that period, he had some correspondence with Nixon and at that point he felt there was a certain ideological exhaustion in the Democratic Party in the late '60s. So it's not that Moynihan's ideas had changed; it's the events around him had. And he saw Nixon as a vehicle forward for those ideas, so he did that.

He went back to Harvard for an interval. The story there is that Harvard would grant you a leave for, to work in government, for whatever period time.

KRISTOL: Two years I think was the max, yeah.

WEINER: Well, his was expiring and he called the chair of the department and said I'm telling the president that I'm resigning. And the chair of the department supposedly said well, the president is going to be very disappointed. And Moynihan said – no, I mean President Nixon. And the chairman said – oh, that president.

KRISTOL: That's good – it's too good to check, that story, right?

And so Moynihan comes back to Harvard, then he's ambassador to India. Then ambassador to the UN where he has a famous stint, which lays the groundwork for his US Senate bid, which I worked on in 1976 in the primary where he wins the Democratic Primary that defeats Jim Buckley, the incumbent, one-term incumbent. And then is a senator for 24 years, I guess, so that's been kind of his overall career.

So let's talk about his, more his thought, I guess, than what he did in the Senate, which was itself interesting and complicated, obviously, and we can touch on that. But you call it the, the subhead of the title of your book is "the uncommon liberalism of Daniel Patrick Moynihan." So I mean, describe a little bit his liberalism.

He was friends with neo-conservatives, like Jim Wilson or what people thought to be neo-conservatives, my father, Jim Wilson, that *Public Interest / Commentary* circle, but always somewhat different in his thinking. Friends with Bob, the Kennedys, but somewhat different from maybe a typical Kennedy liberal.

WEINER: Right. So he remained a New Deal liberal all his life. I think that's a very consistent strain. But liberalism changed at some point from what I call New Deal liberalism to Great Society liberalism. And that was something he never – I suppose you might say he was involved in the creation of it, but sort of saw very early that it was going wrong.

I called it "liberalism with limitation." So as opposed to progressivism, which is a permanent, not just faith in progress, but a desire to propel progress. Moynihan had a great appreciation for the subsidiary systems of society, for the complexity of society, the inability to engineer society. And that is a type of liberalism that really has been lost since his death, I think.

KRISTOL: And so you would say the New Deal liberalism had, remained within that kind of liberal perspective.

WEINER: He never lost his faith. I shouldn't even say he never lost – he always maintained his faith in government as an agent of improvement. I wouldn't say progress, I would distinguish those. Amelioration, certainly.

But the point he made was that the New Deal did what government does, is capable of doing with respect to poverty, which is collecting money and cutting checks. Which it is quite competent at; Social Security has eradicated poverty among the elderly, more or less, and so forth.

The problem with the Great Society was that it moved into social engineering. So he quipped once that the net effect of the Great Society was probably to have redistributed income upward because you were, at least initially, you were taxing poor people to pay middle class social workers to minister to them.

So the Great Society became politicized very quickly with the community action programs and the idea of empowerment rather than understanding poverty as simply a lack of money.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I always thought Moynihan's account, though, of the New Deal, don't you think, is a little – He's making it something slightly different from what it was at the time. There was a heck of a lot of, an attempt at social engineering, if you look at the first, the early New Deal. That kind of got pushed back by the courts and by the system, the political, by Congress. And it ends up being remembered for Social Security in a more kind of, you know, policies that are consistent with a limited understanding of what government can do. I'm not sure that was what they were thinking in '33, '34, '35.

WEINER: Right, so if you figure as of '38, '39, it changes character because so many of the engineering attempts had been struck down by the courts and the battles with the Southern conservatives and the Democratic Party. So I think when Moynihan says "New Deal liberalism," or when I say it of Moynihan, I think it's more the redistributive aspects than the social engineering aspects.

KRISTOL: And so Moynihan is skeptical of the ability of government to engineer in a complex way policy outcomes, I suppose, and social, changing society, so to speak.

WEINER: So I would say he's not skeptical of changing society; he's skeptical of transforming society, if that's a useful distinction. He quoted Michael Oakeshott once whose inaugural lecture at the London School of Economics he attended.

KRISTOL: And he spent a year or two there.

WEINER: He spent a year or two. And Oakeshott said something to the effect that politics isn't the art of transforming society; it's the art of making improvements. He has criticisms of Oakeshott, but I think that stuck with him.

KRISTOL: So that aspect is a kind of conservatism to Moynihan or wariness of social engineering.

WEINER: A wariness, I would say, a wariness.

KRISTOL: Moynihan becomes famous, I guess, for the *Moynihan Report* in 1965 which was hugely controversial at the time. An obscure Assistant Secretary of Labor puts out an 80-page or something somewhat technical, really, government report and it splashes onto the front page of *The Times* and gets Moynihan denounced and so forth.

So say a little bit about that, because that was his – was that not? I guess he had written articles that were noticed before, and he was known to insiders as an impressive young operative politically, an intellectual in terms of the articles he had written already. But that was really his first big public –

WEINER: It's certainly a big public controversy. And you know, the report if you actually read it, is quite theoretically rich. It opens with a discussion of the distinction between liberty and equality and so forth. But the denunciations are curious because he is, in a sense –

KRISTOL: Say a word about what the report says first before the –

WEINER: Sure. So the report refers to a tangle of pathology in the African American family that is causing accelerating out of wedlock births and the deterioration of the family into what he calls matriarchy and the sort of things you're not allowed to say today.

KRISTOL: I think the report was called *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*.

WEINER: Well, and *The Case for National Action* is often forgotten, right?

KRISTOL: Yes.

WEINER: Because he's –

KRISTOL: He's famous for giving the account of this – what he regarded at the time as disastrous breakup of the family, which really meant, I think, unwed mothers, right?

WEINER: Right.

KRISTOL: That's really what he focused on. Which as I recall, maybe I'm wrong about this, that the rate of birth outside of wedlock in the African American community had ascended to 20 percent?

WEINER: I don't remember the exact number.

KRISTOL: 25 percent or something.

WEINER: It was a steep ascent, and a very sudden ascent. That is now –

KRISTOL: And happened at a time of progress for African Americans too. So it wasn't as if they got – you know, they were more distressed than they had been. So that was the puzzle I guess he saw, right?

WEINER: Well, and one of the other puzzles is that the datasets were from before the Great Society. So one of the narratives about the aftermath of the report on the African American family is that Moynihan blamed the Great Society for the rise in dependency and the breakup of the family. But quite the opposite. He maintained his whole life that there was no proven correlation there or causal relationship.

KRISTOL: But it is amazing. I mean he was very early to see the family breakup question. But of course now, 20 percent is half of the overall national –

WEINER: Right, and the trends are across racial and ethnic classifications and so forth. He also noted it was happening across the Atlantic world, regardless of variations in welfare policy, or at least the early indications of this trend.

KRISTOL: So it was kind of a cultural and social thing or whatever I suppose.

WEINER: Right.

KRISTOL: But he thought it was a real problem.

WEINER: Definitely thought it was a real problem. Was one of the first, I wouldn't say the first, but was one of the first public officials to trace it directly to the legacy of slavery. So it certainly, this notion of, Ryan's notion of blaming the victim, I think is, reads like someone who didn't read the report.

KRISTOL: But I think it was kind of a purposeful left, the left used it as an occasion to attack, I don't know exactly what, since it was a case for national action. And indeed, isn't the report and even for going beyond a kind of, simply providing equal opportunity. Because wasn't one of the points Moynihan made that given the problems, you almost had to give people a hand up who had been disadvantaged in the past.

WEINER: That's right. It leads to Johnson's '65 address at Howard University where he says that you can't take someone who's been hobbled by chains, put them at the starting line of the race and say you've been fair.

So I mean, it was quite a – it was a liberal endeavor on Moynihan's part. And it's been forgotten about that in this whole, again, the notion of blaming the victim. But I guess about three or four years ago there was the 50th anniversary and there was sort of a revival of that kind of rhetoric. And it's a shame that it's not been understood as what it was.

KRISTOL: And I suppose you could argue that, since in the book you tend to argue, I'll let you speak for yourself, but I mean, that Moynihan's liberalism is not as common, what you say, uncommon liberalism. I suppose the attack on the Moynihan Report showed, it was a moment where the left seemed unwilling to accept certain truths that were just social science truths, really, at that point. And sort of a hard-headed look at what could and couldn't be done as opposed to just denouncing people who --

WEINER: Well, this is a period in which the New Left is, I suppose it would be the early days of the New Left. But Moynihan had very little patience for the New Left, particularly for the violence and the lack of concern with bread and butter issues. He noted once that the Port Huron statement in '62, I think it was, said nothing about poverty. It was completely addressed to the sort of enemy of middle class college students who were suffering through a sense of alienation and this and that, but had nothing to say about the disadvantaged.

KRISTOL: Which was always a focus of Moynihan's. People sort of forget that, too, but we'll come back to these other issues, so famous for some foreign policy stuff and for other issues and defining deviancy down and sort of cultural, his shrewd cultural analysis. But he always, I think, thought, one thing government should do and could do, to some degree, if it did it carefully, was actually help people escape poverty. And that that was really worthwhile and important.

WEINER: Yeah, he said once, Jimmy Carter had given a speech in which he was, it was, I suppose, an attempt to tack right a little bit. And Carter said – well, government can't cure poverty and government can't do this, government can't do that. And Moynihan said well, no, it actually can cure poverty. A good welfare bill would do that if you redistribute income enough. What it can't do is provide moral values to people who don't have them and things of that nature.

KRISTOL: And I guess near the end of his Senate career, Moynihan had opposed the Clinton Welfare Reform Bill.

WEINER: He did, and in a sense, on Burkean grounds. On the grounds that there would be unintended consequences. I think he saw it as an attempt at social engineering. Just another attempt, like the War on Poverty, to kill poverty with a single shot.

KRISTOL: But on that one, maybe, did he come around to accepting that Clinton's bill had been less disastrous than he expected?

WEINER: He certainly said it had been less disastrous. But by the time he passed away in 2003 and it had not, I would say, been fully tested at that point because the economy had been relatively strong.

KRISTOL: Right.

WEINER: So there continued to be debates about the very bottom. There does seem to still be serious deprivation at the very bottom. But I do think that, it's hard to escape the conclusion that some of those warnings were more dire than was warranted in retrospect. I think that's important. In prospect. I think there was a strong element of caution that was appropriate.

KRISTOL: I mean, it's interesting, because at the time, I remember Moynihan was viewed as a critic of the existing welfare system which famously, he had said this in '65, that paid, seemed to encourage and incentivize or encourage fathers to leave homes, or at least not discourage it, or reward, let's just say.

You know, if you were a mother with dependent children, you got the government check, not if you were a two-parent family. And I think that was one of the things Clinton was allegedly changing and Moynihan had been a critic of that for so long. But nonetheless, he was worried about, I guess, the abruptness of the change.

WEINER: Well, the abruptness of the change and the dramatic nature of the change, of taking away the guarantee of support. Moynihan had actually written a bill in 1987, I think it was. One of the dynamics in the welfare reform debate in '95 and '96 was this innovation by governors and so forth. That's traceable to Moynihan. Moynihan wrote a bill that gave governors the – states I should say – the freedom to experiment on welfare. So he wasn't opposed to that at all.

But the big change was from a federal guarantee under the Social Security Act of benefits to people who fell below a certain income level to block grants that didn't rise or fall based on the level of poverty.

KRISTOL: I do think Moynihan, I mean, he always thought government could ameliorate some problems and should act aggressively to do so.

I think his first work, I think you discussed this in the book maybe, wasn't it on auto safety? Moynihan was involved in so many things, he had a sort of zealot-like. He was like with Ralph Nader before Ralph Nader became famous. Didn't Ralph Nader work for Moynihan?

WEINER: He hired Ralph Nader, if I'm not mistaken. So the traffic safety thing is a wonderful illustration of his capacity for re-conceptualizing problems. So he looked at it through the lens of epidemiology because up to that point, the conventional wisdom had been that the problem with auto accidents was bad drivers. And by looking at it epidemiologically --

KRISTOL: There was a huge amount invested, as I recall, in the late '50s in driver education that was going to really improve what was then a very high fatality and toll on the highways, I think.

WEINER: Right. And he showed that through the epidemiological data, that the problem was car design and the lack of seatbelts and so forth.

So it's an illustration of the ways in which he could re-conceptualize problems. I think that was, in many ways, his particular genius. So he sees secrecy as a form of regulation, he sees all sorts of things in new ways. Someone called him a great spotter of ideas. So he had a wonderful flair for seeing things in new ways. Defining deviancy down, would be another example of this ability to sort of expand on some insights of others in ways that illuminated things in a new way.

KRISTOL: I mean, on the auto safety, I think part of the reason it does seem like his kind of liberalism as opposed to a kind that tried to change the way human beings think or even behave, really was look, you can change the cars. You can have seatbelts, you can make it required to use them and have a pretty stiff fine for not using them. You can have, later, air bags and so forth. And so the social engineering side of liberalism, "let's make everyone a wonderful driver" or even make sure no one ever drives when drunk, that you can do that by laws, partly, he pushed a little bit aside.

Which I think is more the progressive side of things, right? Let's just make everyone behave better. And instead, it was we can actually fix, improve the outcome without having excessive expectations from human nature I guess would be --

WEINER: Yes, and it was sort of a simultaneously modest and transformative use of data. So he's known as someone who was a devotee of social science, which is true. But one of his most important insights was that social science was better used for evaluating policies than for crafting them. When it was used

to craft them, it tended to become utopian and unhinged. But in terms of evaluating things that had already occurred, it could be quite useful.

KRISTOL: And often it showed you that policies didn't work right or had unintended consequences. That was the sort of, the old-fashioned use of the term, the neo-conservative side of Moynihan, I suppose.

WEINER: Well, he always resisted that term, as you know. But Peter Rossi, the social scientist, had said that if there was any conclusion from decades of social, the Great Society and so forth, it was that – if I'm getting this right – the expected value of any intervention is zero.

KRISTOL: Ha.

WEINER: And Moynihan called that 'Rossi's Iron Law.'

KRISTOL: That's good, yeah. It is, I mean, Moynihan looked at an awful lot of programs in that light and I think found that they didn't work as they were supposed to.

WEINER: Right, often because they weren't integrated. He referred to "policy liberalism" versus "program liberalism." And programs were these discreet efforts to intervene in social or economic life that were not connected. As opposed to policy liberalism that attempted to attack problems in an integrated way that respected the complexity of both the problems and of the society.

The family is an example of that. He thought that there was a need for a family policy; not for discreet programs.

KRISTOL: No, I first really got to know Moynihan when I came in between high school and college to work for him as a very, very junior, I mean literally opening envelopes kind of job in the Nixon White House in 1970. And he was pushing the Family Assistance Plan. Well pushing it – they had developed it, they had submitted it, it was a piece of legislation. I remember, I went to some of the hearings that were held on in the summer as it got killed, actually, more by opposition from left and right, I guess.

WEINER: Got squeezed between the two.

KRISTOL: So say a word about what that was and what the idea behind it was.

WEINER: The Family Assistance Plan was essentially a guaranteed income that, an idea that had first been developed by Milton Friedman, actually. So the idea was that it would incentivize work because the more you worked, that you wouldn't lose benefits by working. But he had also noted that the wage system didn't take account of family size and so forth. But more or less was a guaranteed income.

In my mind it is a bit of an outlier in Moynihan's career because it is a large prospective transformative effort.

KRISTOL: It would have replaced a lot of the other –

WEINER: It would have replaced virtually all the other welfare programs. But would have – he noted at one point that if a third of the money that had been spent on the Great Society had been spent on giving money to poor people, there would be no more poverty in the United States, at least understood as material deprivation.

But it is curious that it's, I would say the one instance in his career of a truly prospective large scale transformative change or attempt at a change. It got squeezed to death, as you note.

Although there's a scene when he's in the Senate in 1976, it would be '77 I think, where he was holding a hearing on welfare reform. And there had been some experiments in Seattle and Denver on, controlled experiments on a guaranteed income. And supposedly there's a Perry Mason moment where the data

comes in, the results come into the room while he's holding the hearing and they showed that it was increasing family dissolution. This has since been disputed, this data has been gone over 101 different ways.

But he wrote a letter to Buckley that was published in *The National Review* saying we were wrong about the guaranteed income and it's calamitous. And that's the state of social science right now and we're bound by it.

KRISTOL: I mean, I suppose in '69, '70, it seemed to the Nixon administration and to a lot of people, that the Great Society had been such a sort of fiasco or at least hadn't worked out as people hoped. The case for sort of cutting the Gordian Knot and doing something bold which had sort of Milton Friedman-like support on the right, and some support among liberals because it was generous, I think. It would have perhaps resulted in more actual money in the wallets of poor people. You can see why Moynihan might have been tempted for that.

WEINER: Absolutely. And it was, I don't want to say it was – it wasn't sort of a professorial concoction. It was the result of, at that point, many years of reflection on the welfare system.

KRISTOL: And I suppose I said before that the Moynihan Report, when he really became famous, but he had become pretty well known, now that I think about it for a second, with his work with [Nathan Glazer](#) on ethnicity in *Beyond the Melting Pot*, which comes out in, what, the early '60s, as I recall.

WEINER: I was going to say late '50s, but somewhere in there.

KRISTOL: Yeah, but before.

WEINER: Before, yes.

KRISTOL: And that was a continual interest of his, too. It is amazing how many issues he wrote about and worked with other people on, whether it was other intellectuals who were very well known, Jim Wilson, Nat Glazer. But say a word about *Beyond the Melting Pot*.

WEINER: Well, the notion of – the conclusion, I should say, of *Beyond the Melting Pot* is that, what was called the liberal expectancy, which was that all the ethnic groups would melt together and ethnicity would disappear in a free society, had simply not happened. He wrote in the conclusion, Moynihan wrote the conclusion. And he wrote the point about the melting pot is it did not happen.

That ethnicity was persistent, and I think persistent in some ways valuably. That it could be a, when Moynihan tended to quote Burke's dictum about little platoons that connect us to the larger society, he tended to mean ethnic groups. He did say once that there was some potential for tragedy in all this.

But I think that was what enabled him to foresee the dissolution of the Soviet Union is that early work on ethnicity, or at least the manner of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. He had said, not to get ahead, but he had said in 1979 that the Soviet Union will break up along ethnic lines within a decade.

KRISTOL: And here in America, and how was *Beyond the Melting Pot* taken? I guess it became sort of accepted wisdom over time.

WEINER: It did become accepted wisdom. It was commonly used, as I understand it, as a textbook in college classes for quite a long time.

One of the wonderful things about Moynihan that I think is a lost – is true of Glazer too – that is a lost art in academia is the learned generalization. You observe facts and you draw general conclusions. And I think if you've tried to put – *Beyond the Melting Pot* is justly a classic. And I think if you tried to get it through a dissertation committee now, they'd want to see the regressions and the contra-factuals and so forth. So it's become very hard to generalize.

KRISTOL: No, what I think with Moynihan, this was very true personally of him, because he was such a lively character and a lively mind. But there was that kind of play of mind that you don't see that much in social science these days. I mean, not the kind of earnest attempt to be pseudo-rigorous and prove X, Y or Z.

WEINER: In the narrower and narrower specialization.

KRISTOL: Yeah, willing to speculate, based on data and based on history and understanding.

WEINER: Well that, I think was informed by his intervals in public life and eventually his wholesale devotion to public life. One of his wonderful aphorisms is that in academia the imperative is “publish or perish” and in politics it’s “speculate or perish.”

KRISTOL: That is good. I think a book of his essays was collected, just to stick on domestic policy for another minute and then the foreign policy stuff is very interesting, also. In '73, this came out I think when I was in college, I think it was called *Coping*.

WEINER: *Coping* – which is a wonderful title.

KRISTOL: Yeah, isn't it? It really captures the spirit of that kind of liberalism, I guess you'd say, right?

WEINER: Right. The introduction to that book is about 50 pages and I think is his most extended focused reflection on politics as a phenomenon.

KRISTOL: That's good. I haven't looked at that in a long, long – decades.

WEINER: It's quite good. And one of my favorite passages is, because he's reflecting on the excess hopes of the 1960s at this point, particularly the late 1960s. And he says suppose that Kennedy – he rewrites Kennedy's inaugural address.

And he says suppose that Kennedy had said, “so let every nation know that we would be *crazy* to bear any burden, and oppose any foe and support any friend” and so on and so forth. He says there would have been no inspiration in this. There might have also been no Vietnam.

KRISTOL: So don't try to do too much.

WEINER: Don't try to do, be measured and thoughtful about it.

KRISTOL: And prudent.

WEINER: And don't cast things in absolutes, right? He would later say it, it was in a much different context, but the first president Bush had said there was “no price too great to be paid for liberating Kuwait.” To which Moynihan responded – well, there is an excellent case to be made for liberating Kuwait, but it's absurd to say there's no price that's too high to pay for it.

II: America and the World (30:27 – 1:00:50)

KRISTOL: Now Moynihan became famous again, you might say, on the foreign policy stage more as ambassador to the UN in '75, '76, arguing against the Zionism is racism resolution, of course, in the general assembly. And writing articles and being somewhat different in tone from Kissinger who was then Secretary of State and didn't, I think, much like Moynihan's –

Moynihan was a very early advocate of making, putting human rights and democracy at the center of American foreign policy. That I remember being in grad school and thinking well, that's pretty striking. I mean, before Jimmy Carter, Moynihan would have done it in a somewhat different way from Carter, but –

WEINER: Right. Yeah, George Will said that, a few years after Moynihan, Reagan was calling the Soviet Union the evil empire, and one may have been connected to the other.

The UN career starts with a wonderful article and commentary called “The United States in Opposition.” And that’s another example of re-conceptualizing a problem. Because I think he felt we had sort of fallen into a pattern of apologizing for ourselves and trying to manage the criticism at the UN and so on and so forth.

He said – look, there’s a parliamentary system here and we’re the opposition party, the free nations are the opposition party now. And we have to act like that. And the greatest power of an opposition party is rhetorical.

KRISTOL: Had to speak up for freedom.

WEINER: Had to speak up for freedom, right.

KRISTOL: Which he did more than Kissinger wanted, I think.

WEINER: I think definitely more than Kissinger wanted. Kissinger said that Moynihan didn’t understand, I forget the exact phrase, but the realities of the environment or something like that. So Kissinger, for example, said that the way to handle the Zionism is racism resolution was to kill it quietly through the parliamentary process. And I think Moynihan saw it as the evil that it was.

KRISTOL: And Moynihan, I remember, when he ran for the Senate in ’76, he also was a Scoop Jackson delegate to the Democratic Convention.

WEINER: Right.

KRISTOL: He ran as a Scoop Jackson delegate. I don’t remember if he actually went as a Jackson delegate. I’m not sure if Jackson won at that point – by the time of the New York primary, I’m not sure Jackson was still much in the race in ’76. But he always thought of himself, I think, as a Scoop Jackson democrat.

WEINER: I think so. I think, Norman Podhoretz tells a story of Jackson calling him and saying what, can you do something about your friend, Moynihan? Because this is in the late, I guess at this point it would be the early ’80s when Moynihan had concluded the Soviet Union was going to collapse of its own weight.

And Jackson at that point wasn’t, at that point and no other point was onboard with that. Jackson is another example of someone who was a Cold War liberal in the classical New Deal sense of the term.

KRISTOL: Yeah, Moynihan I remember when he came to the Senate, he disappointed a lot of us who were sort of hawkish Scoop Jackson/Reagan types because he was analytically very strongly for freedom and for the US having an important role in the world.

But he also didn’t like, wasn’t particularly fond, as I recall, of Reagan’s military buildup and of the wars in Central America and of the kind of faith in the military and the CIA. He was a skeptic.

And then he did have this unusual analysis which turned out to be very prescient, I guess, of the weakness – the Soviet Union was much weaker than we all thought.

WEINER: So he saw demographic data in the late ’70s showing that the life expectancy, as he said, was nearly impossible, was declining in the Soviet Union. And that was enough to convince him that the Soviet Union was a spent idea. He gave a commencement address in the early ’80s that said that what we have yet to realize is that the Cold War is over and we won.

The Soviet idea, he said, is spent. It commands, there's some fear, but it commands no loyalty. He said history is moving away from it at astounding speed. And he said let's just let it happen and be here, our old selves, and be able to say that freedom did indeed prevail.

KRISTOL: I guess the critics would say that the Reagan buildup and other things helped that along more than maybe Moynihan would have said.

He was a big critic of the intelligence community and CIA.

WEINER: He was.

KRISTOL: He was also prescient given various mistakes that they made later.

WEINER: Right, they completely failed to foresee the collapse of the Soviet Union. And he used to say that, I think it's in his book *Secrecy*, that the foreign service exam, up until the Soviet Union collapsed, if there was a question that said which is larger, the East German economy or the West German economy.

If you answered the East German economy, you got a job in the Foreign Service and if you answered the West German economy, then you got a job in Finance and went on to great –

KRISTOL: That was the official government statistics, that East Germany was doing better than West Germany.

WEINER: Right, and he said you could ask any cab driver in Berlin and they could tell you that, which was bigger.

KRISTOL: He was willing to be contrarian on a lot of things.

WEINER: He was. And this is an important role that senators play, certain kinds that senators play, is the gadfly role. So I would say he was more or less a critic of every president with whom he served. It's not to say there was any inconsistency in his own ideas, but was certainly a critic of Carter, of the Reagan military buildup after he had concluded that the Soviet Union was destined to fail of its own accord. Certainly never got along with –

KRISTOL: And there were other aspects, like of Reagan's Central American policy and stuff, he was not –

WEINER: Well, he was a devotee of international law, which had fallen out of vogue. Reagan had said at one point that a nation has a right, if it's in its interest, to take actions that it feels are necessary. That was with respect to the mining of the Nicaraguan harbors to prevent interference in El Salvador. And Moynihan said that was a completely normless statement to say you have a right to do whatever you believe serves your interest.

KRISTOL: Anyway, you were going on, sorry I interrupted you.

So Reagan, he had a, I think, a respect, respected Reagan. I remember when I came to Washington in '85 to work in the Reagan administration, everyone on our side of the Reagan administration was throwing around Moynihan's comment from '80 or '81 that the Republican Party suddenly has become the party of ideas, which was a nice tribute. And maybe he did it more to get the Democrats to rethink things than out of genuine praise for Republicans. But there was some genuine respect, I think.

WEINER: Genuine respect. And one of Moynihan's wonderful characteristics was he was always drawn to the company of people with whom he disagreed. He was fond of quoting Lionel Trilling, I think it was, who said that when liberalism was an unchallenged ideology, it was not doing itself any favors by shutting down criticism. That it needed the benefit of thoughtful opposition.

KRISTOL: And then just to run through the presidents, since that's kind of interesting. George H.W. Bush, Moynihan respected, I think.

WEINER: I think did respect and there's, I would say, less there. I mean, the first president Bush spoke in at least the argot of international law, the New World Order and so forth. And I do think Moynihan respected that.

KRISTOL: And I think the kind of institutionalism of Bush would have appealed to Moynihan. But I remember working for Quayle, I was Dan Quayle's Chief of Staff, Vice President Quayle's Chief of Staff. And we had the big vote on the First Gulf War after Saddam invades Kuwait and we sent all those troops to Saudi Arabia.

And it was, the Democrats controlled Congress, as you know. And we had a pretty big margin in the House, though. There were an awful lot of old-fashioned, kind of hawkish Democrats who weren't going to not vote to authorize war when Saddam is sitting there and threatening Saudi Arabia and we had all these troops over there already.

But the Senate was closer. I mean, the majority was – the Majority Leader was pretty firmly against the deciding call. And I remember Quayle saying to me – can't you do something with Moynihan, you know. And I "I don't think I'm going to change Pat Moynihan." I think I went to see him, I mean, just as a kind of, I had the closest relationship to him, I suppose, of the people in the Bush White House. So I did my duty, but I didn't convince him of it. But I think it was only, something like eight Democrats voted for the authorization.

But it's funny that Moynihan, for all the sense I think people have generally of hawkish, Scoop Jackson, standing up at the UN, which is all true, he was pretty cautious on the use of force and not quite where a lot of us were actually on that range of issues. I mean, I guess we would say that he didn't understand how important the actual threat or use of military power is to back up the things he cared about. He would have said we were being maybe reckless or –

WEINER: Well, remember he was, his sort of consciousness about this was formed with the power of rhetoric, the power of rhetoric in defense of freedom, which is a much – not antagonistic to it – but is much different from the pursuit of force.

I find the vote against the First Gulf War one of the harder things to explain. And the reason I say that is not because I find it surprising that he was cautious. I think that was his natural, and in some ways, Burkean disposition. But there had been so much infrastructure of international law built around that, going through the UN system and the enormous coalition and so on and so forth.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I mean, you would have thought that Secretary of State Jim Baker's efforts to – I mean, he went out of his way to *not* have this be kind of arbitrary and "us alone." And we had a huge alliance, and we had the UN Security Council, authorization and all that. It would be worth going back and looking. I assume Moynihan must have given a speech on the floor of the Senate, I guess? Most of them did, I don't know.

WEINER: I'm sure he did. I can't recall what he said. What I do recall, and actually perhaps this is from the speech, was the line about objecting to Bush's sort of unmeasured rhetoric.

KRISTOL: Right. I don't think he had a very high opinion of the Kuwaitis. They were the victims of Saddam, but they were themselves a sort of semi-tyrannical, oligarchical little kingdom. And why are we going all of this – it's not like we're defending democracy or anything there. Or that we were going to impose democracy. He correctly saw that Bush would stop short of that, I suppose.

It is amazing to have – and then secrecy, say a word about that, because he was really quite possessed of that. I remember when I would see him in the '90s, he was really –

WEINER: Right. He wrote a wonderful book about it and he, again, re-conceptualized the problem. He said secrecy was a form of regulation. That in domestic regulation, the government says what you can do, and with respect to secrecy, it says what you can know.

And that secrecy, at least excessive secrecy, almost always led to poor conclusions and bad policies. To the point where he, at one point I think perhaps to make a point more than meaning for it to pass, suggested abolishing the CIA and folding it into the State Department and starting over.

KRISTOL: I think, and he thought the whole classification system, had just gotten totally out of hand.

WEINER: Completely out of hand. He gave numbers on the annual classification and it was extraordinary and politicized. In some ways, you could say he was prescient with the sort of breakdown of those structures in predicting 9/11. You know, he described secrecy as a form of hoarding in bureaucratic power.

KRISTOL: So the compartmentalization, which meant the FBI couldn't talk about the CIA and all that, I suppose.

WEINER: Right.

KRISTOL: And then, of course, the failure on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, was maybe also kind of too much talking to each other and accepting certain analyses. Which when you go back and uncover them, really, it's someone's conclusion, some junior level of the CIA based on some intercepts or some extrapolations that aren't necessarily correct.

WEINER: Right. And if my memory is correct, he passed away the day that – of the invasion.

KRISTOL: It was around then, is that right?

WEINER: It was the day or right around the date. So I don't think we can speculate on what he would have thought, but there's not a long record.

KRISTOL: More broadly, I think, a couple of things on his liberalism. I mean, so many of the famous things he did were – quote – “conservative” sort of. I mean, the Moynihan Report, the Zionism speech, defining deviancy down. That was what, '92, '93, something like that?

WEINER: Somewhere in there.

KRISTOL: And that article had a huge, made a huge splash. And it was, what was the sort of point of that?

WEINER: The point of that was that society has a certain level of deviance that it can tolerate. And when that threshold is exceeded, we define deviancy down, we just redefine previously impermissible conduct as now acceptable.

And he said that's done altruistically by people who want to sort of excuse the conduct of others, but it's also done for the purpose of protecting society.

There was a, I believe, a sociologist, I want to say Kai Erikson, who he quotes in that article, who had done research on the Puritans, and the degree to which Puritan moral standards changed. And as Moynihan characterized it, he could often characterize other people's research better than they had themselves, was that the degree of moral regulation more or less aligned with the supply of whipping posts.

KRISTOL: But he thought it was a problem, that we were sort of, standards were kind of just, people didn't want to be judgmental and so they were not upholding standards and that this was a hard thing to fix once you went down that path, I suppose.

WEINER: Yes, I think that's right. Now I think he would dispute the idea that that was a conservative notion. It's become more, I think perhaps the moral language has become more aligned with conservatism contemporarily. But I think he would understand that. He spoke often of the liberal tradition of respect for facts, right, which is a sort of a Burkean tradition, as well. So I suppose the label is less important than that commitment.

KRISTOL: He had a wonderful language. I think he was playing off other people at the time who were saying culture was so important and so forth, which goes something like what, "The central conservative truth is that culture determines the success of societies. The central liberal truth is that politics can change culture." I don't remember exactly where he said that.

WEINER: You can change a culture and save it from itself. That was in his, I believe, in his Godkin Lectures, which were published as *Family and Nation* in the mid-1980s.

There's a line that comes right after that, that is often forgotten, and it's, "witness the civil rights legislation of the 1960s that Republicans so opposed."

And the reason that line is important to me is it gives real meaning to what it is for politics to change a culture. Because he noted that for all the things that were frustrating about the '60s, that's one clear example of government success.

You open the 1960s with what amounts to a caste and class system. It's not completely changed. It's obviously not eradicated by the end of the 1960s, but the legal infrastructure is certainly completely changed by that point.

KRISTOL: That's an important point you make, that one shouldn't make him too much of a conservative, sort of after the fact. That all he held them in balance. I think you say this in the book, in 1967 or '68, as the New Left is going strong and Moynihan is out of government at this point. And at Harvard, looking at the chaos of kind of life in America in '68. Doesn't he sort of call for a liberal/conservative alliance almost, of the center against the extremes of both right and left?

WEINER: He certainly was deeply concerned by the New Left and particularly by the violence of the New Left. And I think in some ways, not the violence quite, but we're seeing a resurgence of that dynamic on the left now of ever moving further and further in sort of a process that has its own logic.

KRISTOL: And on the right.

WEINER: And on the right, yes.

KRISTOL: Which was true of the '60s too. One forgets Goldwater became a well-respected elder statesman, and he lost by 20 points and no one had to actually live with a Goldwater administration. And how some of the people who were hanging around with Goldwater and the Birch Society and so forth. But one forgets how much extremism was around in the '60s on both sides.

WEINER: Right.

KRISTOL: And semi-respectable, I guess you'd say, and semi-fashionable, really.

WEINER: Right.

KRISTOL: And Moynihan really – and that is Burkean, I mean to be very, very distrustful of both of those, right?

WEINER: Of both extremes and of the sort of suddenness of this. And really without – Moynihan opposed the Vietnam War, but mainly because it was distracting us from other commitments, other foreign commitments that could be more productive.

He had said at one point that we should – that one of his complaints against President Carter was that he continually framed Vietnam in a way that made us culpable rather than merely fallible.

And so it was based on – he called it once a ‘mystique of youth.’ Right, that the liberal belief – he said the liberal belief in things like due process and things that are, you know, maybe less sort of attractive, or less headline-worthy, shouldn’t be frittered away, he said, in deference to a mystique of youth.

KRISTOL: And it is amazing just how again, coming back to how many things he was involved in. He was Ambassador to India, a country he had some interest in and I guess fascination with. I don’t really know why or how, but anyway. It was the world’s largest democracy, as he liked to say.

And I remember, those of us who – I knew him slightly at the time. I had worked for him before he went to India. And it was sort of we all thought, well that was, you know, Nixon was – there’s nothing left for him to do in the Nixon administration and in fact the Nixon administration was going down the tubes, basically.

WEINER: Right.

KRISTOL: And it was a way for him to get out of the country and have a – do some good, and be an ambassador, which was, what’s not to like? And he was so interested in cultures and art and architecture and all that.

WEINER: Right.

KRISTOL: He would love being in a place like India with all that. I think we underestimated, I certainly did, how much – how important he thought it was actually that the two largest democracies get along better than they had. We had tilted towards Pakistan I guess in ’71 in the conflict that led to Bangladesh.

So, again, he was sort of way ahead of everyone. And now it’s taken for granted the US/India, a very important relationship and it’s developed under Bush and Obama. But this was way back in ’73, I guess, or ’74.

WEINER: ’73. By the way, Liz Moynihan became a leading authority on, I think it’s Mogul Architecture, which she remains today, or landscape architecture I want to say – I may have that wrong.

But he negotiated the largest debt relief for India, and tried for several years to get the Guinness Book of World Records to record that he had written the largest check in history.

But I think the Indian experience was probably central to that article, “The United States in Opposition.” Because he saw this sort of casual, almost reflexive socialism that was descending from these [countries]. Everyone had studied at the London School for Economics and had gotten these ideas from the same places. And I think that was central to that Indian set of ideas.

KRISTOL: And India prided itself, from Nehru on, as being the leader of the non-aligned nations in the Third World and all that.

WEINER: The non-aligned nations, right.

KRISTOL: And I think Moynihan didn’t think that was a very – I mean he thought they should be with the West against the Soviets.

WEINER: Right.

KRISTOL: That was an attempt to clarify that situation.

You worked on the Hill when Moynihan was a Senator.

WEINER: I did. I worked for Bob Kerrey, who was Moynihan's closest friend in the Senate for those years. They had met when Kerrey as a governor was working on welfare reform.

KRISTOL: Oh, is that right? I didn't know that.

WEINER: And I met him – quote/unquote “met him” – it's not as though we were acquainted – but I met him when we had – don't let me get too far afield here –

KRISTOL: No, go ahead.

WEINER: But Kerrey was working on entitlement reform and had a Social Security bill that had three sponsors on it, including himself. It was Al Simpson and I think Chuck Robb, which Moynihan then took up, in I think a very courageous way.

But we had developed – this was before Power Point became the rage – but Kerrey was going around and making presentations to colleagues. And one of his proposals had been that we give everyone a \$1,000 dollar retirement account at birth so that there'd be compounding interest that would catch up with the sort of shrinking Social Security benefit.

So if you recall, there was the dancing baby that was all the rage in the '90s on the internet and somehow this ended up in this presentation. So one day I was with Kerrey in the Capitol, and he saw Moynihan, pulls him over and says you've got to see this. And my clear recollection is Moynihan, all six foot five of him sauntering off, muttering, well I'll be gosh-darned. That's not exactly what he said.

KRISTOL: Right.

WEINER: But from everything I understand from people who worked for him, very amiable and demanding in alternating –

KRISTOL: Yeah. And many of my friends went to Washington to work for him, because in the world I moved, you know, Harvard grad student, that was an obvious recruiting pool for him. He had taught there, he had many friends like Jim Wilson and Nat Glazer who were there, who would send their best students, or Harvey Mansfield and others. And foreign policy people too – Sam Huntington. And yeah he was a tough boss, I think.

WEINER: Right.

KRISTOL: Slightly kind of one of those, you know. He would have an idea, call you up, I mean they're all a little like this, right, at 3:20 in the afternoon. “I read something somewhere, check it out.” And this is pre-internet of course.

WEINER: Yeah.

KRISTOL: You can't just Google, right? So, “check this out, find out what the truth is, and get back to me at five.” And it was like, I don't know if I can.

But he had been in government as a young man. And I remember him telling me this too, that I was saying something was hard to research. “So call up the people who know.” I said you just can't just call. I don't know, don't you have to like go to the library and look things up? You can't just like call up people.

But he had actually, this is an advantage I think of working in government when you're pretty young, you realize, I mean of course it's the advantage is if you're working for Governor Harriman and you call, people hop to it and are happy to help you.

WEINER: Right.

KRISTOL: You call the leading expert at Columbia on X, right, on auto-safety, and he'll answer your call, or take your call. And I think Moynihan – but of course if it's true if you're an aide to Pat Moynihan too.

But I think that's a hard thing to train people in, that you have more ability to get information than you think, because you just came out of grad school where you would trundle off to the library to look things up.

WEINER: But I would think particularly given the fertility of his mind and the fact that he was fascinated by so many different things.

KRISTOL: Yeah. So he was very impatient with, you know, people telling him they didn't have something.

WEINER: This was slightly before my time, but he was the only co-sponsor of a healthcare bill that Kerrey had introduced in '91, '92 something like that. And they had a press conference in Moynihan's office. And as I heard it described, it was like a graduate seminar. Everybody was sitting in a circle. All the reporters were sitting in a circle. And every once in a while he'd point at one and say, "now I notice you haven't asked a question yet."

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's funny. Talk more broadly about his liberalism. I think that really is such, those of us here in the summer of 2019, uncertain about the future of conservatism, or whether it does have a future or should have a future. Uncertain about liberalism too, given what's happening on that side of the aisle. Moynihan really does seem to stand out I guess, and talk a little bit about that.

WEINER: Yeah. So, a liberalism that respected limits in multiple senses. That there were – that the social organism was complex and couldn't be reengineered, but could be improved and ills could be ameliorated. He had a great respect for the Catholic principles of subsidiarity which is that you solve a problem at the level closest to the source so as to strengthen local institutions.

He distinguished also between statist liberalism and pluralist liberalism. So, he was very disturbed – I think it was George McGovern at one point said it was hedonistic to not want essentially more of a role for the state in addressing social ills. And Moynihan said he was disturbed by that, because there was a great role to be played by trade unions and ethnic groupings and all sorts of subsidiary institutions that were a buffer between the individual and the state.

And that's another, by the way, example of his belief that politics could change a culture. So he would, for example he argued for many years I think Bob Packwood was his cosponsor on this, for what they called an above the line deduction. So that you could deduct charitable contributions even if you didn't otherwise itemize. He fought for many years to make parochial school tuition deductible and so forth.

So a great belief in those subsidiary systems of society, and I think a great distrust of ideological politics. He was asked once, I think by *The New York Times* what his politics, how he would describe his politics. And he said, "well, I was never a Stalinist and I was never a Trotskyite," which of course was in his youth was one of the great divisions. He said, "I guess if I had to say," then he interjected, "and I don't have to say, but you asked, I would say lack of ideology."

KRISTOL: Really. But at other times he said he was a liberal or a proud liberal, I think, right?

WEINER: But not in the – definitely a proud liberal. That he was unrelenting on. But not in the sense of an ideological blindness.

KRISTOL: Right. I do think he, I mean I've thought myself about, could one re-appropriate the term 'liberal,' which the progressives don't seem to want it and conservatives, god knows what conservatism now means, so.

And liberal has a great tradition, a great tradition. And also it's still used in ways that are very favorable and capture, I think, something of what is best about being a liberal – liberal education, liberal democracy, a liberal world order. These are all good things, right? For conservatives, sensible conservatives and sensible liberals alike. And I think he would have been very attuned to that meaning of liberal, but skeptical of liberalism, I suppose.

WEINER: Progressivism in particular. I think this switch from liberalism to progressivism is quite significant because it's hostile to –

KRISTOL: You wrote a good piece on that a couple of years ago – a year ago in *The Times*?

WEINER: Something like that, yeah.

KRISTOL: When did that happen, do we think? It's not like –

WEINER: It seems fairly recent to me. And I don't know that I can demonstrate that. But I think it began with the sort of Dukakis and the discrediting of the word 'liberal' and people being afraid to embrace it, so I think progressivism became the label du jour.

But the problem is, that ideology carries a lot of baggage with it including, I think, an inherent hostility to moderation. Because if what you're in favor of is progress, people in the way who are always retrograde. And you can never have enough. More progress is always better.

KRISTOL: And I think the hostility to pluralism, which he really cared about. I mean, it's funny, that's a term that's used so little these days. It was a big term in my sort of college and grad school days. I think people wrote books about pluralist democracy and so forth. But it's not so fashionable. Progressives never liked it, they didn't like it in 1920. It's messy, complicated.

WEINER: It's messy, it's complicated, it's unpredictable and it's uncontrollable, which is part of its, the joy of it.

Moynihan actually, and I think perhaps in too belabored of a sense, drew a, if not a straight line, at least a connection between the liberalism of Mill and the liberalism of Roosevelt. So he saw a continuous tradition there. There's probably, Mill was more of a progressive, I think, than is generally appreciated, but certainly there's a big difference between the sort of caricature of Mill as a libertarian and the liberalism of the 1930s.

KRISTOL: Right. And Burke? I mean, I want to talk about Burke, but did Moynihan himself talk about Burke much?

WEINER: Moynihan quoted – I don't know of any, I mean, I would think of this in terms of an affinity, not a causation. In my notes of Moynihan, he quotes Burke about a couple dozen times. So enough that it's clear that he read him, but he was certainly not a Burke scholar, certainly never described himself as a Burkean. I think drew on Burke's wisdom in the same way that he drew on a lot of people's.

KRISTOL: So talk about Burke since you mentioned him, though, you call Moynihan, I think, a Burkean liberal.

WEINER: A Burkean liberal, right.

KRISTOL: And then you have the new book on Burke and you explicitly, a whole section, half the book is on Burke, Burke and Lincoln, which is very fascinating. The juxtaposition, since Lincoln doesn't seem to have known anything about Burke –

WEINER: Right. I seem to have a proclivity for associating Burke with people who we don't know –

KRISTOL: Then talk a little bit about why you find Burke a useful guide to American politics, especially to American politicians whom you admire, and maybe we all admire.

WEINER: Right. I think Burke had, Burke most fully, at least since Aristotle, theorized the virtue of prudence as an ability to distinguish between, Aristotle calls it the ability to choose the proper means to right ends, and Aquinas as well. Burke gives it a moral component that is based on the limits of human reason.

And I think we live in an age where there's an unbridled faith in reason and science and technology and so on and so forth. And when injected into the political sphere, that's given to exactly what Hayek called the 'fatal conceit,' that the idea that everything can be engineered.

So Burke spoke of, he said his forefathers, his British forefathers had a moral, rather than a complexional timidity. That it was rooted in a respect for the limits of human reason. And that's something I think we have substantially lost.

One of my favorite Moynihan-isms, and I can't recall the context, but he said, "if you want to know the difference between the United States and the Soviet Union, read *The Federalist* and read Lenin." Because *The Federalist* refers back to things that have already occurred and lessons that can be drawn from them, and Lenin's writings are all about the future state of the world.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's good. And Burke, as you point out, especially in the new book, I mean, he's a reformer, but also, I mean, he's supportive of the American Revolution much more than most British politicians, hostile to the French Revolution, supportive of various reform efforts. I mean, he was a Whig, he wasn't a status quo defender of every aspect of aristocratic government. He was a reformer on Ireland and on the Catholic Church.

WEINER: India.

KRISTOL: Britain, India. Very important to the British Empire be governed in a liberal way, let's call it that, maybe, and not in a harsh and unjust, exploitative way.

WEINER: Right.

KRISTOL: That impeachment of Hastings he pursues for years.

WEINER: Seven years I think it was.

KRISTOL: Which it ends up, and people don't understand why he's obsessing about it, but I think he thinks it's very important as an example, right? If you're going to become an imperial power, you can't set the precedent that it's fine to do anything.

WEINER: Right. And so the speeches on Hastings contain some of his most eloquent defenses of international, what we would today call international law. I think he used the phrase, 'the law of nations.'

Burke was very skeptical, I think the difference he saw between the French Revolution and the American Revolution is the American Revolution did not seek to uproot all sorts of, all social institutions. So as I've explained this to students before, the old story about Rip Van Winkle, if I'm getting my stories right, takes a nap and wakes up after the American Revolution and doesn't know what's going on.

That's really not the case. If you had slept through the American Revolution, you wake up the next day, certainly the political arrangements are a little bit different, but you're not living in a fundamentally different society.

KRISTOL: And even in The Declaration, for all the abstract truths, which are extremely important, I would say, it's still the justification is that the King is violating various practices.

WEINER: Traditional rights, right.

KRISTOL: So that they are restoring, to some degree, the rights of Englishmen and so forth.

WEINER: Right. And Burke says when I reform, it would be in order to restore. So yeah, I think the complaints are the most overlooked part of The Declaration.

Moynihan, one of the things Moynihan notes about Burke and about the French Revolution is the re-ordering of the calendar, the Revolutionary calendar, that 1792 becomes year one and they have to reorder the days of the week. And I think Burke – Burke saw before that point, but sees how this is going to go south and how it's fundamentally different from an American Revolution that was meant to restore an antecedent state, and a French Revolution that is meant to really tear everything up, root and branch.

KRISTOL: I mean, one impressive thing about Burke, and just based on reading your account of him, which is somewhat, Moynihan follows in this, I think, is that people forget that *Reflection on the Revolution in France* is written so early.

I mean, it's one thing after the terror and the guillotine and Robespierre and the collapse and Napoleon to say – well, that really went badly. And it was always intrinsic or likely that it would go in this direction because of this flaw or that flaw.

But Burke writes that book when things look like they're – it's not obvious it's going to go in that direction. And he sees that that's the spirit of it, though. 1790, I guess, was the year.

WEINER: 1790, right. He calls it 'metaphysical madness,' he refers to metaphysical madness. And I think what he sees in particular is that a philosophical politics on the model of a Rousseau or certainly even more of a Voltaire, is intrinsically, not only inclined, but destined to become unhinged. Because it can't understand, it can't accept and is inherently hostile to the idea of moderation and limitation.

KRISTOL: And liberty ultimately, right?

WEINER: And liberty. If you're – well, Rousseau is an excellent example of this. I mean, and it's the same debate we're having today, again, over progress. If you're standing in the way of liberty, equality and fraternity and these abstract ideals that, as Martin Diamond noted, there's no point at which you sort of cross the goal line and spike the ball and say you've achieved those. What you have is a recipe for permanent violence.

KRISTOL: And what about today? So let's conclude with that, since we've discussed it some ourselves, in other contexts. I mean, how possible is it to have, to restore, or have an updated version of a Burkean understanding, a Moynihan-like understanding on both left and right? I'd be curious about your just judgements as we sit here in, what is it, mid-June 2019?

WEINER: Right. I think the most alarming thing about our politics today is the lack, not only the lack of, but the hostility to nuance. So in Moynihan's rewriting of Kennedy's inaugural, one of the opening lines was 'things are complicated over here.'

And you blame it on technology or social media or whatever else, but we don't deal in nuance in the same way. And we are, I would say, outright hostile to the idea of limitation, the idea that there are limits to everything to what we can accomplish.

That said, I don't think Moynihan was ever a despairing person and Burke perhaps more so. Toward the end of his life he asked to be buried in an unmarked grave because he was convinced the Jacobins were going to march across England and come for his remains and so forth.

But I think we have to be able to find a way to recapture the idea of complexity. And that's hard to do in 140 characters or 280 characters, whatever it is now.

KRISTOL: And what about the liberal, I guess, what would you say to both, to people who are inclined in a liberal direction or people who are inclined in a conservative direction in terms of substantively how to come back to this? Obviously they should read Moynihan, they should read Burke, read your books.

WEINER: They should read mine, but they should buy my books – that's the key step. [Laughter]

KRISTOL: That's the key step, and then they can go read all the – Moynihan's 19 books, right?

WEINER: I think I would say respect for what you don't know which is, have respect for what you don't know. Which is not something we're very good at these days. It's not, it's very hard to run for president or for Congress on a platform of prudence.

I mean, as you know, George Bush, H.W. Bush, was mocked mercilessly for saying things wouldn't be prudent. And I'm not aware of a president since then using that term, but it's –

KRISTOL: It's interesting – I hadn't thought of that. Yeah.

WEINER: It's a very rich and vital concept that we've completely lost. I use the example with students of the difference between the sort of visionary leadership for which we have an endless appetite, and governance, sort of prudent governance. Some moments call for transformation, but some moments call for chugging along.

KRISTOL: And even the moments that call for transformation, to be successful requires prudence.

WEINER: Requires prudence, right.

KRISTOL: I mean, whether it's George Washington or a Lincoln, you know.

WEINER: Right. And Lincoln gave a wonderful speech early in his – when he was 29 years, maybe 28, 29 years old, to the Young Man's Lyceum of Springfield, in which he said the greatest danger to American liberty would come from the pursuit of greatness in times that did not require it. That's my paraphrase. Which of course is ironic because his times eventually required greatness.

But there's a profound concept of prudence there, that you have to calibrate statesmanship to the circumstances of the times.

And among the 20-some odd Democrats running for President, of course they are all staunchly opposed to Trump-ism. But if you can imagine a more normal environment, you don't stand out on that stage by saying, well, we'll keep kind of things running along, and I'll govern, and solve problems and so on and so forth. You have to promise something transformative to stand out.

KRISTOL: Yeah, even just saying, I did X, sponsored this legislation which actually has improved lives in this way. Or as governor – governors and mayors do it a little more because they have had executive positions. But even, I'm curious to see how many of them cite actual achievements in the real world, or even proposals framed in terms of real effects and achievements, as opposed to, as you say, a kind of promise that's abstract and theoretical.

WEINER: Right. Well, and that abstraction was what was most troubling to Burke about the French Revolution, and what distinguishes it in many ways from the American Revolution. The American Revolution has a specific achievable goal.

The French Revolution, when have you achieved fraternity? It's hard to know that, so it becomes a license for endless revolution. There's a reason the Cuban regime is calling itself a revolution after 60 years, or whatever it's been.

KRISTOL: And as someone like me on the conservative or Republican side all these years, it's more shocking to have conservatism abandon this perhaps than liberalism which one could have always said had a certain tendency away from prudence; and progressives have been around a long time and you know there was always that element to Utopianism on the left.

I guess there was some on the right, but I don't know. That part for me is even more – it shows, I guess, how strong some of these tendencies in moderate thought or modern life are away from any kind of, as you say, moderation, prudence, respect for just forms, due process, all those sorts of things.

WEINER: Well, the forms in particular. Moynihan was quite an institutionalist with respect – not only with respect to the Senate, but with respect to the Presidency because he had served in the Executive Branch so long.

And we had no – I mean the Senate, the ambition is no longer counteracting ambitions. The Congress has no interest in recovering its power over tariffs. It's quite striking to me that Mitch McConnell says his greatest legacy will be the confirmation of judges who are serving in another branch of government.

KRISTOL: Yeah, right. And what are they doing? I mean let's think about it for a minute, putting aside resolving cases from private parties which is fine, but what they're doing from a sort of Constitutional point of view, is what? I mean you think if you're a Senator you would want to be doing, resolving a lot of those things yourselves one way or the other, checking your President, or passing legislation.

WEINER: Right. Unless, and I'm not saying this of McConnell, but unless you want the job to have the job, not to do the work, which is –

KRISTOL: Or you'll get blamed for certain things, you know.

WEINER: Right. So if you can ask the federal district judge to remake the local school system, or the local water system or whatever else, you can complain about it without having to –

KRISTOL: Or check the left through the courts, but not through the political fights.

WEINER: Right.

KRISTOL: And not have to disappoint a lot of constituents or antagonize them I suppose. No, it's an interesting point. I haven't really thought about how odd that is as a formulation for a Majority Leader of the Senate, with a President of his own party.

WEINER: Right.

KRISTOL: You know, thinking, the best thing we can do is put people in another branch. But to do what? The judges don't do anything affirmative. So they're stopping some things I suppose. But I don't know, isn't it better to win elections and stop things that way?

WEINER: Right.

KRISTOL: And just – do you think – I'm just curious about this, I mean if Moynihan, Liberalism, Burkean Conservatism, put two together – Burkean Liberalism and Moynihan Conservatism; which worries you?

Do you think the way they would reassert themselves in America is through each of the parties? Does that remain, do you think, the route?

Moynihan was a Democrat even though he worked in Republican administrations. Or could you imagine the parties going off in this progressive direction on the one hand, and I don't know what you want to call it, populist kind of authoritarian direction on the other with Trump? And a kind of centrist party that used to not really exist but informally exists in a sense, right, with Moynihan and Packwood, or Moynihan working for Nixon. And that kind of across the aisle – I don't know, is the system, I guess, is set up to so strongly favor two parties?

WEINER: It is. Of course those parties have become vehicles for different things over different periods of time.

You know, one of the striking things to me about the institutions is how long the Senate made it on institutional culture, which has collapsed. But it's really – Aristotle talks about this, in Burke as well, and Tocqueville and so forth. That it's the norms that sustain the institutions much more than the words you write down on parchment, as Madison would have said. So those are the genies that are hardest, I think, to put back in the bottle.

Burke referred to the 'all-atoning name of liberty' and in Trump's case it's the 'all-atoning name of judges.' That anything else he does is okay because he's got the judges in the right place.

So if you like all the Trump judges, and I like many of them, say they're going to transform the courts for 30 years, 40 years. Judges come and go, and taxes rise and fall. Norms are very hard to put back once you've shown that they can be disrupted without consequence. So that legacy, I fear, will outlast whatever else has been done.

KRISTOL: And one does wonder whether to put that back, you'd almost need a coalition government. And we don't have those in America, but in a parliamentary system, one might say, just as in World War II, there was an actual coalition government. And in Burke's time, actually, in response to the French Revolution at times, right?

WEINER: Right.

KRISTOL: That maybe that would be somehow a way to kind of – it's hard to see how working within either party, a Moynihan liberal, what would he do in today's Democratic Party or what would a –

WEINER: And I think in today's Democratic Party, we're seeing, in some ways, a revival of the New Left, the [unintelligible] mentality that no enemy's to the left and so on and so forth.

KRISTOL: And in the Republican Party, something analogous, the New Right, if you want to call it that.

WEINER: Right. And I'm often asked, could Moynihan be elected today? And you know, Moynihan is so unique that it's, I mean, I want to say yes, just the sheer flair and uniqueness and depth and whatnot. But boy, it's hard to imagine Moynihan in 280 characters.

KRISTOL: But I think he could be – I mean, he was a tough election in '76. He won the Democratic Primary by one percentage point over Bella Abzug, who attacked him, among many other things, for the *Moynihan Report* and for this and that. But actually, for serving for Nixon.

I mean, think of that. Could you win a primary in a liberal state, moderately liberal state in the Democratic Party if you had served in the George W. Bush administration, which would be the equivalent in 20 – eight years after you had served – so if you ran in 2016 and you had served in the administration of the other party. Well, I guess we got a little test of this with –

WEINER: Jim Webb was –

KRISTOL: Right, or people who had served a little bit in other administrations. But I just it's become so – don't you think, so partisan, that that would be almost like a knockout blow, if you had been George W. Bush's domestic policy advisor, if you ran for the Democratic nomination for Senate.

WEINER: Right.

KRISTOL: That would just be such a devastating attack line and similarly, the other way, I mean, obviously. I think Huntsman had this didn't he, or Huntsman, when he ran in 2012 for the Republican nomination for president, I think had served Obama for two years as ambassador to China. And it was one reason, among others, that he just was sort of – like he was a friend of Obama's – you can't nominate him.

WEINER: Right, right. I forget who the – I don't know when this began, but I forget who the Congressman from Rhode Island was who told the story that he used to play basketball in the House gym with members of, with whoever, pickup basketball, whoever came by.

And supposedly Gingrich called him in in '96 and said, or '95 it would have been, and said that's the end of that. That if you recall, in '95, Gingrich put out the list of words to use, it was like George Carlin's list of words to use to describe your opponent, and it was despicable, grotesque and so forth.

It's not to date it to Gingrich, but the partisanship, and I would say not just the partisanship, the polarization, but the attachment to personality I think is really foreign to the American, the structure of the American regime.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I just wonder more than I would have two years ago whether you would need almost an extraordinary independent candidacy in 2024. I don't know, I'm just making this up, obviously, or a unity ticket almost at some point to really try to break through the current bizarre – it's gridlock of hyper-polarization, which those things don't usually go together. Or oscillation of hyper-polarization, I suppose, is a better way of putting it.

WEINER: Right. Well, historically in America, new parties arise from single issues with intensity, and then they broaden from there. So the Republican Party would be the classic example of that. And as you say, the incentives for a two-party system are so strongly built in that it's interesting that the insurgency that you would expect of an independent candidate was really Trump and he had to capture the, he had to capture the Republican Party in order to pull it off, if only for the infrastructure.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I guess who knows. I mean, everything else, things are so up in the air, and Trump is so unusual, not to say unprecedented. Maybe one could imagine other things happening that would be pretty unusual.

WEINER: Right.

KRISTOL: And I think Moynihan would probably tell us that don't assume things would go on. He had seen a lot of reversals.

WEINER: Well, and I think he would say despair is a sin, right? It does you no good. And there's a lot of inertia behind the basic premises of the American system. So I wouldn't say I'm sanguine, but I'm less concerned than many that things are completely falling apart.

KRISTOL: That's a great note to – that's what has to pass for optimism in our day.

WEINER: That's right. Not completely.

KRISTOL: You're less concerned than many that things are totally and completely falling apart.

WEINER: Right.

KRISTOL: Greg Weiner, thanks for this very interesting discussion of mostly of Pat Moynihan, but also of Edmund Burke. And people should look at those books and then they should go read Moynihan. I'd totally forgotten about the introduction to the *Coping* book, which I think may be in print, but anyway, that really is worth going back to look at. So thanks for that.

WEINER: Thank you.

KRISTOL: And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]