

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

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Republican Political Strategist

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I. Trump vs. Biden (0:15 – 44:51)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol and welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined today by my friend and fellow conversant on several other Conversations, Mike Murphy. Great Republican political consultant involved in many successful campaigns at many levels, and a few unsuccessful ones, and –

MURPHY: What?

KRISTOL: I know. I won't mention those.

MURPHY: No, of course –

KRISTOL: The list is too long.

MURPHY: More than a few!

KRISTOL: We have only an hour Mike, so I can't really go through that. [Laughter]. This is an audio conversation. Obviously Mike and I are socially distanced here, and Mike is in his secure undisclosed location out on the West Coast, right?

MURPHY: I am in the general vicinity of Los Angeles, California and it is fantastic to be here. I miss the TV cameras, as I'm sure our nation does, because it's actually an act of mercy not to have to look at us squinting at each other, so it's great to be here, Bill. I always enjoy these.

KRISTOL: It's going to be bad when we get a ton of mail saying, "You know, those audio conversations are great with the two of you, we don't really need the video anymore."

MURPHY: Radio, yeah, keep it that way.

KRISTOL: That's going to be, yeah, we'll suppress those incoming emails, and texts, and so forth. Okay, so let's talk politics. It's May 13th as we talk. A little over three months after Iowa. That's hard to believe that was only three months ago, right?

MURPHY: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Two months after the coronavirus really came to everyone's front and center, got everyone's attention, and really changed life here in America. I thought what we could talk about is where we are, what we've sort of learned, what's happened, what we've learned in the last three months. And then maybe, what you expect over the next three months. Really from Memorial Day to Labor Day, as a traditional time where, on the one hand it's not as intense as September and October, but I think studies show that it actually affects the outcomes of campaigns quite a lot this summer. Whoever's ahead Labor Day tends to – the Labor Day results tend to look like the Election Day results.

So what do you think? Where are we? What's your basic take on it? What's happened that surprised you? Didn't surprise you over the last three months, et cetera?

MURPHY: Well, I would say first of all my old joke about crazy times demands a crazy president is clearly come true. We are in a very – This is somewhat uncharted water. I mean I'm a fundamentalist, I always go back to history and data, but this is a different time. Obviously, the novel coronavirus has rocked the country, put us into a public health crisis like none of us have ever really lived through before. You can maybe argue the AIDS crisis, but the way this has stopped the economy and put a spotlight on the president's weaknesses has been an earthquake to politics.

We're at a point now, just to kind of think about it. We've now had more Americans die in the last six months of coronavirus than in Britain who've died from all the bombing, both the Battle of Britain and later, the Blitz in London in World War II.

KRISTOL: Yeah, last three months only really, so –

MURPHY: Yeah, yeah I mean it's been a huge shock to the economy. Now it's in different places and we can talk about that, it's very different in New York than it is in rural Nevada right now, but the economic pain is everywhere and that's rocked politics, and it's created a world where, how do you campaign? Obviously: digital, virtual. Biden's in his underground undisclosed location, but it's hard. The parties are struggling right now with, how do you do a convention like this?

With Trump, they're going to line him up because the leader wants to have an adoring crowd. But you're really going to put cops lives at risk by packing people together for a vanity show? I think the Democrats have already moved their convention back to mid-August, are really trying to wrestle with that. So, we have all these problems in how do you campaign? And how does Biden emerge to take advantage of Trump's weaknesses? Now the polling for Biden is good –

KRISTOL: Let's step back for one –

MURPHY: Good for a while for Democrats, yeah.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I'd like to step back for a second. What's most striking, and I think you very well expressed is just the uncharted waters we're in, and the economy. Obviously, none of us have seen this public health situation, and yet here we are. What do you make of the fact that the front runner, Joe Biden and you and I are both sort of skeptics maybe that he can pull this off –

MURPHY: We were wrong, at least I was. I didn't think he would win the nomination.

KRISTOL: Yeah, ended up front running in a slightly bizarre way. Ended up losing Iowa and New Hampshire, and then in an unprecedented way, coming back from that to sweep everyone away. So that's sort of interesting. And then the actual Trump/Biden matchup, the Republican core with the Democratic core matchup level with the presidential, those numbers haven't changed much either, so it's sort of amazing. We've had this incredible turbulence in the real world, in the economy, and in terms of how we're living our lives. We're both here in our houses having this audio conversation as a result of

that, but on the other hand in a certain way, we're having what superficially looks like a very normal conventional almost predictable politics at this point, right? Biden's up by a few points –

MURPHY: Yeah, yeah.

KRISTOL: So what do you make of that? What does it tell us?

MURPHY: Well, if you take out all the tactical problems of running for President and just look at the fundamentals. Since the day Trump was sworn in as President, the Republican party as a function of his unpopularity for the most part, has underperformed just about everywhere. We've lost a lot of governor races; we've lost control of, I think it's 10 or 11 state houses, I mean gubernatorial control. We've lost the majority in the House by pretty big standards; we've lost a lot of special elections. And even the ones we won, like yesterday in a Republican district in northern Wisconsin, we've underperformed dramatically.

So, that plus the lousy polling, just hangs a big lantern on the fact that Trump has put himself, by always only running the politics of a Republican primary, into a demographic cul-de-sac of 44-45% of the population which is very tribally loyal to him, but it doesn't look like enough to win a Presidential election.

So then you come to the normal model, which would be, "All right, Trump is losing. The polls say he's losing, he has politically been losing for several years, what can he do about it?" Well, a normal candidate – I'd even argue, as such a Trump critic, a sane one – would use this moment of crisis to improve their numbers, to rise to the occasion. Trump can't do that. In fact, his reaction to this crisis has hurt his numbers because he just doubles down on being Donald Trump. So, theoretically, if nothing happens and the election is held tomorrow, and that's based on the assumption we have an election where people participate putting the virus issues aside, Trump loses. That's what the polling says.

The question is, what'll happen going forward in the campaign? And I just quickly say, I doubt Trump will do anything to fix himself. But he will go to the playbook he already has, of every incumbent in trouble, which is trying to make the election not about him, but all about the flaws of Biden. And you can see him starting that with the "Biden's loopy attack", which is now on TV. And they're just going to keep pounding away, hoping that they can hold that Trump tribal base and just beat the hell out of Biden; and maybe Biden will fall into that trap with mistakes and bad choices, VP, et cetera, and he can therefore narrowly defeat Biden.

It's the only path he's capable of, and that's the one he's on. It's tough, presidential campaigns tend to be a referendum on the incumbent, and that's the worst race for Trump. But he's sure trying.

And I'm sure you feel it in DC. I feel it in California, but there is definitely an insider – and these are common – but there's an insider's panic on the Democrat side going on right now because they have such limited faith in Biden's ability to go out and campaign, and part of it coronavirus, but part of it just Biden.

KRISTOL: That's very interesting and that's the next three months, so let's come back to that in a minute. But just two questions about the preceding three months about where we are now, before we look ahead. Are you surprised that Trump hasn't paid more of a price for what I think has been a pretty historically mis-management of a crisis by our president? You got a tiny "rally around the flag effect" and that's kind of dissipated and he's basically where he was three months ago. A) His base – not just his base, it's 42, 44%, which is a pretty big base – has been amazingly resistant to deserting him, A. And B) say a word about Biden's victory in the primaries and if there's a lesson there.

MURPHY: Well, I've been, I think like you have, and we've both been around politics long enough to be exposed to the cynicism that's the stock and trade of the racket. But I've been surprised at what a large swath of the Republican leadership strata has stuck with Trump. Just as a question of patriotism and other things like that, because the blinding incompetence hurts the country, let alone rule of law and the other issues. And man, they've been with him all the way.

Now, there's some new polling showing that only 70% of Republicans trust him on what he says on the coronavirus. That's pretty significant because the Republicans are vote that you want to see 90% if you're running a campaign. And they have a third of Republicans say they can't trust their guy to a pollster on the phone or on the internet, is a telling crack in the wall. But, I don't know, his numbers are –

KRISTOL: Do you think that crack sort of gets magnified if some senators and governors-type desert? Or is it just the public moves the way it wants to move and the Republican elites have very little effect? What do you think?

MURPHY: I think a quarter of the Republican vote – and again, there's a difference between hardcore Republican primary voters and just voters who say, "I'm a Republican." And I think a quarter of them could be in play. But it is incumbent on Biden to send a lot of the right dog whistles. And I have low confidence they're going to do that, VP choice being one of them.

Now, about the primaries, you're right. I didn't think Biden would get nominated. And I felt that from the very beginning. I kind of like the guy. And ideologically he's far to the right from a lot of his opponents. So I was not uncomfortable with the idea, I'm a conservative, so this whole thing is uncomfortable, but I can't abide Trump. But I never thought he'd make it. And in some ways, so shame we missed it. He did, I was wrong.

But he's the turtle on the fence post. He lost. In the competitive contest, he got clobbered in Iowa where he started out as a "front runner," got clobbered in New Hampshire, and was elevated to his position, hence turtle on the fence post, by the loyalty of the African American vote in South Carolina and the organizational primaries for Jim Clyburn. So Biden got there through his long record and relationships and politics, but not through his campaign or candidate performance.

And I wonder, I hope that the bulk of the Biden advisors, and there are some shrewd people there, they've got that figured out because they can't be complacent and betting on Biden's skills because when they were road tested everywhere but South Carolina in a competitive field, he got clobbered.

That was a weird primary because Buttigieg really got screwed. In pure talent, he came from, "You're kidding me, right, mayor zero percent," to essentially surging in the classic model through Iowa and into New Hampshire. But he was denied the big New Hampshire bump in the media, which is part of that formula. And then you had Amy Klobuchar with a little tailwind from the media obsession with identity politics kind of gumming up his New Hampshire moment.

And so none of the challengers who earned their way up and were successful early, did quite enough to be able to race into South Carolina and de-thrown Biden who had that great relationship with the dominant voting community there. So Biden won fair and square, but it's almost like Biden won a prize rather than won a battle.

KRISTOL: And the reaction after Sanders won Nevada was kind of a sign – and he had therefore tied or won the first three. The reaction of 60% or so, at least of the Democratic electorate, just to say, "Oh, God, we cannot go down this path," was pretty striking, right?

MURPHY: Yeah.

KRISTOL: I think if it had been Warren, for example, as the alternative, that could have been a different story too. So, you're right, Biden won by Buttigieg and Klobuchar not quite making it as the younger insurgents, Warren being, for various reasons, not being the –

MURPHY: Couldn't take the [inaudible] healthcare.

KRISTOL: – alternative, and then Sanders being unacceptable, apparently, to a majority of Democrats, and not having deep relations with the African American community, was a lot of things – And Biden, to his credit, was capable enough to benefit from all that. But your right, he was.

MURPHY: Yeah, he had a lot in the bank and he cashed it, so to speak. And that was earned: the Obama association and his record. So I don't take it away from him. I don't think they ought to be pinning medals on each other in Biden headquarters about the badass campaign machine they have, is my point. And that's relevant to now.

KRISTOL: So let's go to now. Yeah, I don't think they are either, but some of them do think, I think, and maybe this isn't wrong, that they basically need to be cautious, normal, make no mistakes, and let the country just have a referendum on Trump. And they'd probably win that by six, eight points it looks like now. And they just need to not gum that up.

I always get nervous when presidential campaigns, and I think you and I share this impulse, play that kind of defensive, you might say card. On the other hand, maybe it's right this time. So, tell me, do you think that's how they're thinking? Do you think it would work? Do you think it's doable?

MURPHY: No, they've got a point and they can say, "look at the polling." The more we stay away and Trump grabs the spotlight, the worse Trump does. I just have an aversion to passively campaigning. I think that's how the Romney campaign got in such trouble against Obama. They had great early numbers and they thought, "All right, Obama's going to lose, we just need to let that happen." And then Obama went out and defined Romney and changed the race.

So I think Biden has had some time. I'm not really worried that last week Joe wasn't in an airplane doing loops over swing states. And again, I'm totally sympathetic. It's very hard for him to campaign in this coronavirus environment. But I think the good news for Biden is also the bad news. The Trump guys have now teed things up in a way that really simplifies Joe's world. They're going full bore with this Biden is a crazy old man, he's senile, loopy, "sleepy Joe," all that stuff. They've got it on –

KRISTOL: And China, I think, right? That seems –

MURPHY: Yeah, they're trying. They're trying to make the whole race about China, which I think if I were the Biden people, I'd be careful about fueling that fire, because the economy is going to be the central thing and incompetence. And playing defense on China just confuses people. And the default position is going to be "bash China" and Trump will always do a better job of that than Biden will.

The loopy thing tees Joe up. If Joe is great, loopy goes away. Loopy's easy to knock down by appearing and being sharp and being good and being prepared for the debates, which will be critical, et cetera, et cetera. But if Joe was slapdash and running on competence but the campaign appears to be incompetent, that's a big problem.

And it's abetted by the fact, just the psychology of the leadership circles. There's the old J.S. Mill quote that we always use about "the stupid party" and "the evil party." Well, in campaigning lately, the Republicans, we're kind of still the stupid party, we do the dumb things. But the Democrats are the neurotic party. They just turn on themselves in a minute, "Oh, my God, Trump's got a secret kazoo he blows to the yahoos and we can't win." And you're seeing a lot of that around Biden now. And there are reasons to be concerned, but fundamentally Joe's got the better card because he's not Trump in a "fire Trump" election. The question is, can Joe get out there, kill the loopy thing by operating? Which means they got to step up their aggression.

MURPHY: The other problem that they got is they got no money. Biden's not a great fundraiser, he's never built an internet fundraising base. It's hard for him because that tends to be for the progressive, younger, hipper, closer to Bernie vibe candidate. So, the Trump guys were able to flood the airwaves right now, the beginning of the real battle, and Biden doesn't have the money to, so he's doing web videos. And the new one's pretty good. He pivots to the economy. I think exactly the right move. But who's going to see it?

Now, the Dems do have a bunch of independent expenditures that are going to be very well-funded. The problem is, like most of these IE things, vendor politics, who's getting paid, squabbling, it's very hard to unify them all, because they have commercial interests as well as political interests. So there's, I think, legit concern in Democrat world. How do we get the hundreds of millions of IEs coordinated into one place?

And then the last missing piece is the most competent non-party operation out there to really run an IE that would have tremendous resources and political skills is Bloomberg. But right now, other than a very generous, I think \$16 million donation to the DNC, they've been on the sideline, because I think the mayor is trying to decide how committed he'll get into this. My guess is he'll get there because he can't abide Trump for the good of the country. But right now the organizing focus of a big smart Bloomberg guy is definitely missing.

KRISTOL: That's all interesting. Let's go through some of those different issues. On China, I guess the counter argument, in a sense, is a tactical question. But there are people in the Biden world I know and people on the outside groups who say, "No, no, we need to fight back on China, fight it to a draw at least, show that Trump himself was incredibly accommodating of China and that Trump himself didn't do what he could have done to stop, to act effectively against China." He's actually always been an apologist for Xi and so forth. And they need to fight that to a draw before, in a sense, to make sure they're not wounded on that issue, and then go on the offensive on the economy. You think they should more just ignore that?

MURPHY: Well, my view, and again, they might have voter data I'd like to see because I'm not running a campaign, I'm just watching one. The China thing is Trump's home turf. When you're wrestling around China, you're in Trump's backyard because Trump can always out-bash you. And I doubt that swing voters in Wisconsin or Pennsylvania are looking for a nuanced, thoughtful, 40 year history of our relationship with the PRC. Well, Trump can just call names. And if I'm Trump, I like debating China with Biden because I'm going to have the bumper sticker, "Screw China, I'm a tough guy." And Biden's going to have that, "we need a nuanced bilateral relationship, and Trump, you fooled it up because of president chop suey. You did this and president..." Out in voter land, all I know is my hardware store is going out of business because of coronavirus, and the economy's screwed up.

In the polling, the only thing Trump has had so far since the virus hit, he's seen as incompetent on the virus, he's not trustworthy, he's an asshole. All the numbers except in his chunk, which I guarantee you he's going to win Alabama, but his numbers in Wisconsin and Michigan are horrible, and Pennsylvania. Wisconsin's a little better than the other two, but nothing looks good. Florida, where everybody thought he had a lock, that has slipped. But the only thing he has, the sky hook to hang from, is he is perceived to be seven, eight points better on managing the economy than Joe Biden. And so, if the virus economic pain increases, as it is likely to, you don't want to have Trump be perceived as a better guy than your candidate on the economy.

So the Biden people have to break Trump on "economic manager," because then he's kneecapped. He's got nothing left. And they're doing it. The new video they've got, he screwed up coronavirus, now he's screwing up the economy, is exactly where they ought to go. They just need to put shoulder and muscle behind it and they don't have any money. Hopefully the IEs will amplify it and they start making progress. But I'd much rather be, if I were Biden, be spending 80% of my time breaking his most important leg than trying to break even on a sidebar issue with China.

Now, if you show me voter data where America, the voters we care about, which are basically this whole lecture will come down to the suburbs. The Dems took it away from the Rs, and if Trump can get the suburbs back by scaring them about Biden, that's his chance to win. But right now I think suburban voters are much more worried about virus competence, when their kids can go back to school, and their middle-class prosperous lives that are now threatened by this virus. So if Biden can be all over that and break Trump there.

And remember one of the great things about negative campaigning is once you convince voters that somebody's bad on one thing, it's fairly easy to convince them that, not only that, he's bad on this too. To move them sideways from where they already are. So I'm not telling the Biden guys to abandon China, but it's the Bulgarian front in their war.

The other thing they got to do, I have a friend who's a big movie director, billions of dollars worldwide box office, and he had it succinctly from the Hollywood point of view. People know Biden as an old politician and kind of a nice guy and Obama's sidekick, but he's never had his own first act. Who is he? So they've got to fill that in a little bit. They can't assume that everybody knows and loves Joe. They need to do a little work on that because you know Trump is going to. And they can't leave that open to Trump. So I'd be doing 75% Trump is going to destroy your economic future with his incompetence and self-dealing, and 25% who is Joe Biden and what does he care about every day? And I would be doing that through –

KRISTOL: I think that last 25%, I really agree with you. I'm struck when I run into it. The insiders all have known him forever and think that people know that he's a compassionate, decent, empathetic guy. They know the biography, the story about – his own challenges as a young man, that terrible car accident that killed his wife and I think one of the children, and then obviously is the son, Beau, who died in 2015, I think it was. But I think you're right, you go out into voter land, and I've had this experience a bit, and people don't actually know all this.

MURPHY: They don't.

KRISTOL: And telling that story and clips of him telling that story and others telling the story, and others telling true stories about that he is a genuinely empathetic and decent person. They probably underrate that in Biden land. Maybe when they watch this Conversation they'll do a little more on that. I think on the economy –

MURPHY: I'm sure they're glued to it.

KRISTOL: Totally. Or listen to it. I'm so used to having the conversations on video I forget they we're just on audio here.

MURPHY: Just very quickly, the other thing they've got to fill in is Democrats under 28, when you say Biden, a lot of them say “corporate Democrat”. They define him as that. He's a big cigar and motorcar guy from Washington, that's trouble. And it's not a matter of having him in a fish tee-shirt talking about his love of rock and roll or something. It is policy. And he's got to be careful because, again, you don't want to give Trump a reason to scare the suburbs back into Republican order. But he's got to find a connection I think through policy into that world. They're all inclined to vote against Trump. I don't think it's a momentous problem, but he's got to do something there to not just be this mono-dimensional corporate Democrat because that's trouble.

KRISTOL: Yeah. That's interesting. I do think, on the economy, I think what was effective about, I think one of the recent maybe the video you're talking about, is it linked the health problem with – that Trump's failure to deal adequately with the public health challenge is what's causing the depth and severity and length of the economic crisis. Because Trump had – I think it was totally demagogic – but had, from his own point of view, had positioned himself, not entirely unintelligently I think, as “I'm fighting the establishment, trying to open it back up.”

I was amazed how many people then and still now buy into this narrative, which is juvenile in a certain way, because obviously if you don't fix the public health problem, you're not going to open anything up. But when it became that simple minded “open it up or keep everyone locked up in their houses for six months,” that's probably not so bad for Trump. And I think, Biden, he needs to really hammer home that, “No. The reason the economic situation is so bad and may last so long,” don't you think, “is the failure on public health?”

MURPHY: Absolutely. Absolutely. But, also, he can't be always the pointy-headed scientist, because even though that's correct, the politics of the pandemic are partially geographic. I think this is something people have missed. And Biden's got to say, "Look, just because it's not bad where you are now, it's coming, because this thing is everywhere."

Here's a little bit of data that I think illustrates this. And again, in all the howling on cable TV, this kind of stuff and the politics of it are mixed because right now the cable TV storyline, and put Fox aside, is pretty much "Trump yahoos desperate to reopen country. Sophisticated, thoughtful people don't." But out in Trump's coalition, there are about 3,100 counties in the US, and Trump won 2,626 of them. Hillary won only 487. She got the huge bulk of her vote from only 160 counties out of 3,100. So Hillary America is big counties, a lot of population, a lot of Democrats, overwhelmingly Democratic, and they tend to be places, San Francisco, New York, Northern Jersey, Boston, LA County, where there's been more pain. Little less here in LA County. We've been lucky. And I got to tip my hat to our communist governor, did a good job.

KRISTOL: But even in the swing states, I guess the Democratic counties, the Milwaukeees, the Philadelphias, Detroites have been hit much harder.

MURPHY: Right, right. It's a really different world in Detroit than it is in Bay County, Michigan. So, in those places, they're feeling the economic pain. They're not really feeling the virus pain. But not yet. The second wave is going to be a lot about those places, which are kind of virgin territory for the virus if people don't socially distance. So the virus biological pain thing is asymmetrically in Democratic-based counties, so anecdotal politics are not feeling it in central Iowa yet. That's why this reopen thing has legs there.

And so Biden's got to understand that as part of it. And he only has to understand it in about five or six states because what they think in California, other than the donor class, doesn't matter to the outcome of the presidential race. What matters is what they think in Michigan, Wisconsin, Florida, Pennsylvania, Arizona, and North Carolina. And in those places you do have exurban counties that have not been hit that hard yet biologically, but they've certainly been hit economically. And Biden's got to address those fears because otherwise he's given Trump something to work with.

KRISTOL: Yeah. And it doesn't sound like you think that just, I mean, God knows what happens and let's all hope it's less bad, both in terms of health and the economy, but if you end up with the median scenario going forward of not the absolute worst predictions, let's hope, but also everything's not going to get suddenly solved overnight and a vaccine will show up in September and so forth. You think that that situation's bad for Trump, but not necessarily decisively bad in the sense that he could still demonize Biden enough, perhaps show, get lucky a little bit on a couple things going better, that he can say it could have been much worse, could have been two million dead and stuff? So you can't just count on events winning it for you.

So you have to show, this was your earlier point that I just want you to elaborate on, you have to show a certain kind of competence. I very much agree with that. And how do you show that though over the next three months? That seems like that's what he could do in the summer. Once we get in the fall, the debates will be crucial, obviously. But that would seem very important in the summer, that he knocked down the loopy old man kind of narrative.

MURPHY: Yeah. Yeah, totally. And then, when the second wave comes, there's a good chance it's going to be in more Trump-friendly places, which will be terrible for Trump. There's this cruel irony that if Trump succeeds in pushing Republican governors to open a little early in places, later they're going to really get hit right at the time Trump needs them politically.

I would look at the Biden thing like this. Trump is drowning politically. So Trump's either got to learn how to swim, which we have seen for three-and-a-half years is unlikely in terms of competent, smart political strategy, not having Brad Parscale and Corey Lewandowski screaming at each other in the oval about who has more Ferraris from ripping off the campaign. Just a level of professionalism, which seems elusive to them because of all the dregs around Trump by his own nature.

So if Trump can't swim and he's drowning, then somebody has got to throw Trump a life preserver. And Biden's job is not to do that. And so, Biden, one, has to knock down the loopy thing by performing. And there's some danger in that because Biden has appeared at times, he's 77, to be a little loopy. It was the talk of the Democratic primary among the funders. So, Biden's got to be in sharpness school right now in his basement so when he emerges he can kill that over the summer and be really good, and he needs a great debate.

Second, he can't give Trump a tool to make the race about him. And this is what I'm most worried about. Make the race about Biden. The VP pick. Normally massively overrated, normally chosen appropriately based on governance, but the wrong signal could give Trump something to work with in the suburbs, which are the swing vote.

So the Democrats have to make this huge decision. Are they going to play inside or outside baseball? Outside baseball is go pick a Gretchen Whitmer or an Amy Klobuchar to try to hold that suburban thing. Because Trump has to change the world here to win. So get the suburbs back. Well, Biden wants to be defensive about that and not take risk, pick somebody safe who can maybe have some resonance there and won't get in the way of the story.

Or turn internal and say, "Boy, our big problem is African American enthusiasm." We need Stacey Abrams or Kamala Harris. I worry that Biden will make the internal route. And I just say – and all angry mail should be sent to the Bill Kristol at The Bulwark, not me – that this idea that Biden's problem is the African American vote is just crazy. None of the African American candidates could even come close to beating him in the primary. His problem is going to be younger voters, the corporate Democrat thing. And his mission is to hold the suburbs, which he has right now by filling himself in and keeping the onus on Trump. So don't pick a VP that gives Trump something to work with in those places.

KRISTOL: And you don't think you need to go left to get the younger voters either, particularly.

MURPHY: No, you can get them with policy. The first rule that everybody ignores – and when in doubt, go to the book of Clinton if you want to win an election as a Democrat. What did Clinton do for VP? Did he pick somebody different from himself so the whole campaign is about differences? No, he picked a worst version of himself, Al Gore, young, moderate Democrat, Southern white Protestant, because that was the pitch of the big change, the new generation, reasonable, could run in the south, all those things.

So, Biden needs a younger, non-scary, somewhat boring, low-risk candidate. Now, for government, I wish he'd picked Gina Raimondo, the best Democratic governor in the country, in Rhode Island. But politically, she doesn't do anything for him. Now, I'd make her Treasury Secretary or something, and I'd announce it quickly to calm the Republican business world who are looking at the economy and looking at the trillions of dollars of necessary-but-expensive fiscal stimulus going on and wondering how the hell we're going to square the books next year. Because nobody thinks Biden is any wizard at domestic policy. But vice-presidential wise, I'd be looking to Whitmer and Klobuchar. I'm sure, in the vetting, there's a challenge somewhere for each. With Amy, it's going to be the flying scissors that the staff will talk about. You hear it all the time. But politically –

KRISTOL: That's what staff are for. You know?

MURPHY: Yeah. No, believe me, there's no – Look, I don't know the details, I do know there are no shortage of politicians who are tough on staff in either party.

KRISTOL: Do you think the Biden campaign, or how much of the Biden campaign, shares your view about the VP pick? And I'll just say a word. It's '92, I was there in the Bush White House, obviously, and it was – I should say, these VP picks are all overrated – but it was not unimportant actually that he took Gore. We think of Gore, of course, as this militant on the environment and stuff. At the time, the most significant thing about him is that he had agonized and then voted for the first Gulf War in January of '91, and therefore was not a McGovern/Dukakis Democrat. That was really the key signal that Clinton sent.

And it actually is somewhat similar to Biden in the sense that he himself was good, he had good support among African Americans. He was younger, that was an advantage he had that Biden doesn't have, so he could also use that against us. But, yeah, the dynamics were sort of similar in the sense that an incumbent Republican president, we were going to lose if nothing changed, and the Gore pick didn't change anything, and in fact reinforced the Clinton message.

MURPHY: That was it, reinforcement. It was one pitch. If it's Kamala Harris, and I'll even say Stacey Abrams I think is a better candidate. Harris's campaign was a disaster. So really, we found out, like you're casting the Ice Capades, she has fallen down on the ice 20 times, do you beam her up? It's an inside move.

The last thing, and people think I'm a Kamala hater. I'm really not. She's had a stellar career rising through politics in California, but it's a Democratic state. She's never been near a general election. She has no idea what a Michigan or Wisconsin electorate is like. And those are just not good instincts to have. Same for Elizabeth Warren. Abrams is the better campaigner. She's actually almost won in a lean R state. That's a hell of an accomplishment. I think she's a better campaigner than Harris. But again, don't give Trump race. It's just not worth it. Don't scare the suburbs. So get a moderate and get somebody with very little daylight with you.

And the other problem is the really ambitious candidates, and that's not a curse, they're all ambitious, but you know what the VP job is like. You've been chief of staff to one. You go out and take bullets for the team. And Elizabeth Warren is not going to go take bullets on a non-progressive policy she doesn't believe in for the president. She'll more likely to write a book and quit. Kamala has a career of her own to work with. So you got to find a loyal soldier too for governing. And Biden is just not as progressive as some of these people. So why have the shotgun marriage of discomfort?

KRISTOL: On the policy side, you said he can get progressives by being, I guess reasonably progressive on some policies. Any ones that you particularly worry about, or think are good candidates to emphasize? I guess the conventional view is healthcare is a good issue for Democrats. And since Biden is not a "Medicare for All" person, he can be better than the Republicans on healthcare without – he is associated with Obamacare – without the downside of Medicare for All, does that make sense?

MURPHY: Well, yeah. In our Trumpian, Republican wisdom right now, we're putting the party all behind, blowing up Obamacare in the court so we take away everybody's preexisting condition coverage. Exactly what you want to go into an election with. Ask everybody who was around 2018. That was the number one topic of Democratic ads when they murdered us in the House. We're about to bungle it politically.

So all Biden's got to say is, "I'm going to stop that horrible Republican plan. I'm going to improve Obamacare, which I co-wrote. Next topic. Trump's destroyed the economy."

The other thing Biden needs is the A1 surrogate economic team. People say, "Announce the cabinet." Now I think that's a mistake because then all you get is the *Washington Post* uncovering your person for Secretary of Labor strangled a kitten in 1978. And then the campaign is about that forever. The Trump kitten killer signs show up.

What you do though is, we did this with Schwarzenegger, because we had a big recession in California, when I ran the recall thing, we surrounded him with Warren Buffett's and smart policy people. So Arnold clearly had the A team ready to go to work. Well, Biden needs A team on the economy that can get visible quick, so people have confidence. It's the opposite of Trump. Trump's running around in clown shoes, throwing furniture at people and screaming for meatloaf. Biden's going to bring the pros from Dover in including an R, or two. And he's going to give us the economic comeback to get us back where we want to be. No more incompetence.

But the problem for Biden, if he tries to do it alone, without a surrogate team of credibility that he can borrow, it's all on how competent is Biden if he has another stammer. And he has a bad week where he's reinforcing the loopy thing. So you got to surround Biden with a forest of strong oaks. And that's the kind

of stuff they could be doing now. But I don't know. I think my guess is they're a little bit conventional about all this stuff.

And I do worry a lot in the vice presidential thing to do the right thing if you believe the outside, hold the suburbs argument, rather than the inside build the base argument. And you can argue the build the base thing. It's not a crazy idea. I'm on the other side of that argument. But to do that, you're going to have to internally, in the party, make people uncomfortable. And I'm sure they're terrified of the press they're going to get if they don't pick one of these progressives. Because then the media will write the stupid, but loud story about, "Oh, we split the party. It's the end. All these liberals are going to stay home rather than vote against Trump, because Biden didn't pick Karl Marx." Which is crazy, but they will live through weeks of pain.

And right now the campaign is being pummeled so much in the neurotic echo chamber of the Democratic Party. I don't know if they have the stomach for more pummeling and they might do the easy thing, which is go pick Kamala Harris. Easy thing internally. But then, I guarantee your Trump will have fun. I think Trump probably still loses, but you'd give him a weapon.

KRISTOL: Yeah. So I think I take two things from this, both of which are very interestingly. One, the VP pick itself, and two, this focus on the economy that I think is Biden's instinct. And I think it's perfectly reasonable substantively is to defend Fauci and defend the public health experts against Trump's totally irresponsible – and the Republican party now has signed on to basically, anti-science, anti-responsibility agenda almost. But it does sound like from what you're saying, that having the business leaders, including progressive business leaders and governors who've done a good job with the economy and so forth, and some Republicans even saying, "Look, Biden has a reasonable economic plan." You think that helps him as much, or more actually than wrapping himself around these physicians and public health experts?

MURPHY: Yeah. Yeah. I think he already has done that. He's got that for free. And if he has the sober economic people around him, that sends the subtext message of, "oh, he is going to have sober public health people too." Not knowing vetting, what I would pitch him, if I were there, is let's announce Gina Raimondo as the next Treasury Secretary who fiscally has a tremendous reputation in those worlds. Which will defund Trump in the business world too, because there's now just somebody they trust who's also [inaudible]. Now the unions don't like her, but it's a great dog whistle to moderate Republican world.

And I'd say, "Here's our team. Let's get Buffet. Let's get a bunch of other brand names." And they're working on a plan and Biden's the CEO, the chairman of it, and go fill out a news hole with that. Because you can do it with some virtual stuff, et cetera. So that would be the high campaign to engage in the economy.

The low campaign is I would call Hollywood and I would have a gorilla squad designed to drive Trump crazy. And you guys have done some of this at Rule of Law, but there could be money and muscle behind it. There should have been a Robin Leach "Lifestyle of the Rich and Famous" viral video out on the campaign manager's Ferrari collection. Now that's an old reference. No young voter will get it, but Trump will get it. And he'll fire the guy and bring in crazy Corey who's even dumber than Parscale.

And I would, every time Trump has a press conference virally, I would do a Mystery Science 3000 with three or four comedians heckling them. And it would go viral everywhere to the younger people. And all of a sudden the Biden campaign is hip and edgy and driving Trump who will overreact to all of this. Trump has a screen door in his head. He's easy to provoke. You grab him by the nose and pull him around here, the whole body will follow. So I would be doing a lot of that stuff virally.

And then finally, and I pitched this on Hacks on Tap, the world's greatest political podcast, plug, plug, plug, with David Axelrod. All right, Bill, the second greatest after Conversations –

KRISTOL: David Axelrod, the supporting cast for Mike Murphy.

MURPHY: No, no, no. I have to use the jaws of life to get a word in edgewise.

KRISTOL: Axe watches these conversations. So I just say that to provoke him.

MURPHY: No. We've been friends in real life, close friends for many, many years. So we just do the same conversations we have on the phone, except now people have to listen to it and chomp Tylenol.

But anyway, here's an idea pitched on there, which sounds old, but would work. Biden's problem is when Biden's in his basement talking to a camera, he's just not that good. It's not his core skill. Very few pols are. Trump can't do it either, really, other than an angry rant. Remember Jerry Ford? You were probably in your mid-fifties in that era.

KRISTOL: Thank you.

MURPHY: So Ford had the same problem. Ford was way behind Carter. People forget that the Ford campaign was about a day away from winning. They had gone straight up against Carter. They got Joe Garagiola, beloved former baseball. I think it was a catcher.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Player and then announcer. Yeah, absolutely.

MURPHY: Yeah, everybody loved him. And they did these conversations that they'd televise, with Ford. And that let Ford lighten up and be human. It was a huge hit. So get somebody five feet apart from Biden and start having these conversations like a fireside thing twice a week, launch them virally. The media will cover them like crazy. So people get a little more of a feeling for Joe than reading the tractor production report into a prompter. Easy to do, viral, let's Joe let his hair down.

So I would have a creative department designed to do new stuff like that that leverages the ability of the internet, to send a lot of message out there for free quickly. And at the top I'd have the world's greatest economic team getting ready.

And the whole thing, at the top would be sober, smart. Let's go back to grownups, because the stakes are high. Because you're wondering how you're going to pay your mortgage next year. If you don't go back to work, you're depleting your savings.

And then tactically, I'd be driving Trump crazy and let him run around in his underwear on the roof of the White House screaming, which is where you can get him if you just keep that heat on. Because cable TV will cover it all the time. And Trump gets his information from cable TV. He's the easiest guy to – children don't listen – mind fuck, in the history of politics. So, that's something they're not exploiting. You've got independent actors fooling around, Weaver's guys and a few others. Go ahead and do it, but put some campaign shoulder behind it and it'll really drive him nuts. You got to have a department of fighting Trump at Trump's level and Biden doesn't have to be any part of that, but that doesn't mean you don't have it.

KRISTOL: Yeah, no, I agree with that. And we've done some of that and obviously Lincoln Group, a lot of others have. And I was a little surprised the Democrats – I mean we've done it with, reasonable resources but not lavish at all. And I think maybe, I don't know because we're Republicans, we have a little better idea of how to get into Trump's head than some of the Democratic groups do.

MURPHY: We're driven by hate. [Laughter]

KRISTOL: Well that helps. That helps.

MURPHY: Yeah. Yeah.

KRISTOL: And the Democrats can't – they have to litigate 18 issues at once. Right? They have to also prove that "we need to have a progressive agenda to fix capitalism. And furthermore, on this thing, the

Republicans have been wrong for 20 years." And they can't just do a simple, the Robin Williams type thing you described.

MURPHY: We're dumb, but we know how to fight. I was teasing Shrum. Bob Shrum runs the Center for the Political Future at USC and I'm the co-director. So he's a friend of mine and we do a lot of stuff. We argue about politics. But he always responds with a very sharp – And he was a good campaign consultant. So he knows all this stuff. Very good one, but kind of a legalistic thing. The Dems always love an approving editorial in *The New York Times*, "Well argued case." While Republicans just want to stab you in both eyes and then cut your head off to make sure you're dead.

And so a little of that mentality in the gorilla department would serve the Biden world well. Or even some of the IEs if they could all ever coordinate and get their stuff together other than fighting over donor money.

II. A Campaign Like No Other (0:15 – 1:09:10)

KRISTOL: No, that's good. Okay. So let's look, so we have the conventions. They may not happen, but there'll be something that at least virtually looks like, or is called a convention I suppose. It legally has to be, I guess, to nominate these candidates. So let's talk about them. Maybe we could stick with the Democrats for a minute and then let's pivot to the Republicans and also use that as a chance to come back one last time in a way to what Trump might do over the next few months.

So the Democrats. I guess they'll have a virtual convention the week before the Republicans in mid-August it looks like.

MURPHY: Yeah.

KRISTOL: What do you think? Any clever advice?

MURPHY: Well, I don't know if it's clever. I know they're talking now, the people who have produced some of these music shows. Where you have people in different things and they'll probably have kind of a feel good moment. They'll probably produce it. We're talking Milwaukee, August 17th, there will have to be a Biden thing in it. And I'm worried about that, just talking to a camera is a stilted thing. There should be a great biofilm. They should have had somebody working on that last week. Time is everything in production and there's a lot of talent they could get if they reach out a little, but time's a wasting.

The only idea I have, or not idea, just prediction, is there might be a way to put 2000 people in a room with Biden. There's two kinds of testing in this COVID thing. There's a DNA test to see, that's where you drill a bit up your nose, or increasingly spit testing. But it's a tricky DNA test to find out if you have it. And we need a lot more of those. That's the big testing debate.

But there's also a blood test, serontology, which is very old school, very simple. It's a finger prick of blood, to know if you have the antibodies in your body. Well, the odds are, we will be able to have, by August, enough people who've had the disease and test positive for the antibodies who are involved Democrats, that you could probably put a COVID-protected crowd together for television. And have something with some drama and people in a room for that. And then hang the virtual stuff around it. Because as the herd immunity increases, particularly with younger people, you would be able to test people who would be safe to get in a room, or a set or something. So I think there might be a little of that so it's not all Zoom boxes, God help us, at a convention.

Now the Dems are going to have a public health central convention. And they ought to make a thing out of that. Again, how many cops and workers are going to wind up on ventilators because Donald Trump's ego needs a huge crowd? I think they can go on offense on this more than they have, because Trump is going to demand, even if it's remote from an underground cavern in Mississippi, somewhere, he's got to have a cheering crowd. It's heroin. And so the Republicans then are going to have this as a metaphor. It could be a real disaster, metaphor: "We can go back, see?"

And then the second wave hits two months later and they're going to look so culpable. So there's a trap here, driven by Trump's ego for the Democrats that they're shrewd about.

KRISTOL: I think even right now, Trump's traveling somewhere. I think maybe it's tomorrow, and he has of course last week. And Pence was out there in Iowa not wearing the mask, even though his press secretary seems to have actually unfortunately tested positive that same morning. I just think attacking that, not in some generic, "Oh, the public health experts say this is unwise", but you are putting secret service agents –

MURPHY: Exactly.

KRISTOL: – advance teams and local cops and local people who were working in the buildings you're going to at risk. And even if you did wear a mask, which they're not incidentally, and even if everyone were super careful, it's imposing a risk that's utterly unnecessary. I think that's the way to put the point.

It's one thing for people, God knows, to go to work when they have to, to assume some risk, because they're doing something important, or they're keeping their families alive. And no one begrudges them that. And then one hopes and urges them to be careful. But this is totally gratuitous, totally for Trump's ego. And the idea that we're risking other – I think Biden could do much more of that now, actually.

MURPHY: Look, the department of ungentlemanly welfare. I'd have the spot up from wherever he's going, Arizona. Kid: "My daddy's a policeman." Cut. "I don't want him to get sick." Cut. You can imagine where the ad would go, because it's all about Trump's ego at the expense of other people. And just let Trump go explain that.

KRISTOL: And Biden could say, if he ends up speaking virtually on his boombox at the convention, he can say, "Look guys, more than most politicians, I love mixing and mingling with people, but I am doing the responsible thing here. And maybe I'm not going to be great at speaking into this a camera as some other people, but I'm doing what's responsible and I'm not – " There's a way you could turn it to at least maybe a mild advantage, or at least take away the edge.

MURPHY: Oh, totally. Just going off then so Trump has to explain why he's killing people for his ego. And especially cops and first responders. I would just go for his throat on it right now.

Two things. Biden has to show the neurotic, bedwetting, Democratic, echo chamber finance world, which has some appropriate worries that he's got some fight in him. So a little fight like that, where he cuts Trump's ears off would be great for Biden, because it would reassure everybody.

The other thing they ought to do is put their aviators on him and let him go walk the German shepherds down his old neighborhood in Delaware. And just two cops, six feet away and a bullhorn and do it socially distanced. People across the street waving, "Hey Joe", it would be a viral hit. And I think the country needs to know the guys got a pair of German shepherds. They're going to like that.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I've been surprised that they haven't done a little more of that. There are ways you can do the going out for a stroll and waving and chatting with people even, that are totally legit, socially distanced responsible.

MURPHY: I'm sure his staff loves him, and they've got medical people saying, "You're 77, stay in your damn house." But, it's a tough one. Because the basement thing, they've had a few weeks to use that to get ready, to be great, to kill "loopy" later when he emerges. But Biden's got to give the network some pictures here, got to find a way.

And then much rougher surrogate stuff like we were talking about on the first responders guarding Trump, the comedians, doing the Mystery Science 3000 heckleathon. All that, just get into Trump.

KRISTOL: You mentioned Bloomberg earlier, you were pretty close to the Bloomberg operation. And I think you thought, and I think this was not unreasonable to think, that if Biden faltered a little more than he turned out to – didn't quite have that loyalty from African-Americans he turned out to have – that Bloomberg might end up as the alternative to Sanders. They had a competent operation. It turned out not to quite work with their long shot strategy this time. But what do you think about them? Do you have the sense they're going to be very active?

MURPHY: Well, they're good friends of mine.

KRISTOL: And what's their comparative advantage when it comes to August, September, October?

MURPHY: Well, they could, if the mayor decides to, they could invest in those Great Lakes states and Florida. And they'd run a highly competent digital and data – I didn't work on the Bloomberg campaign. I would have voted for him. But I've worked on IEs. There used to be Republicans that Bloomberg was comfortable supporting: Pat Toomey, because of his courage on the background check issue. And others, Bob Dole in Illinois, a few more. And I did those IEs with them. And they know what they're doing. And I think they would bring some practical focus to the thing should they decide to and be very helpful.

Look, again, Arizona and North Carolina are interesting, but Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Florida. One of the biggest canards of the conventional wisdom, which is often wrong is that Florida is a Trump fortress. That's bullshit. I've done a lot of statewide down there. Trump is there to be wounded. And so a four state focus on those places with an interest in Arizona where there's a real opportunity. And maybe some other states, everybody always talks about widening the map. The Dems dream of Georgia, the Republicans in Minnesota.

But Bloomberg has a lot to bring to the table if the mayor decides to. And in defense, they've already given 16 million bucks to the DNC. Nobody else has done that.

So I think part of it is, and I'm not speaking for them, of course, just as an observer, they deserve a little more credit. He tried and he lost, and "ha ha, yeah he got a delegate out of American Samoa for a lot of money." He pitched who he was. They weren't buying it. Biden stayed alive.

I've been to that movie before: Jeb. We spent a lot of money, they didn't want Jeb, so they said no. We got out of the race. Nobody worked for Jeb ever has to regret a thing about what he stood for, as opposed to what Trump believes in.

Bloomberg made a decision to put 16 million into the DNC in a moment they really needed it. And I've never heard anybody really say thank you. But I don't know. I think, I think they still have a role to play. We'll see what happens. I have no idea what they're going to do. I'm not predicting anything. I know they're competent. And I know the mayor is concerned about another Trump term as we all are for the good of the country.

KRISTOL: Yeah, no, that'll be interesting to watch. So let me ask one question about the Democratic left and then close on Trump and what he might do, because personally I think people are underestimating just how the kinds of grenades he might lob, maybe over the summer, especially those last two months. And maybe it's worth having a bit of a conversation about that.

But what about the left of the Democratic Party, especially if he goes your way on the VP pick? How much trouble could they cause? How much of a weapon are they for Trump?

I found with donors when AOC and Ilhan Omar and those people showed up in Washington a year ago, basically, little over a year ago. And remember Trump was weak a little bit after the 2018 election. The Trump people were pretty good at making what people I would have thought to have been reasonably intelligent observers of politics, big donors in New York and out in LA and elsewhere, think that the Democratic Party was controlled by these four freshmen members of Congress. And so they're not bad at wrapping around the neck of the Democrats, the most extreme Democrat.

And so do you think A) that those people will play into it? Do you think the Biden people know how to manage that? How worried are you about half the country thinking that Trump's running against some combination of AOC and Ilhan Omar in October?

MURPHY: Well, it's part of what the Biden people have to manage. I think the media will always over cover and make a mountain out of a molehill of disaffected Sanders voters. Trump is a great focusing energy for most anybody who voted in the Democratic Primary, 99% of them are ready to throw a lever against Trump. So the Biden people shouldn't overreact.

In fact, if I were Biden – this is the kind of thing that they won't do – and I'm going to mangle her name, but on the East side of Detroit, one of The Squad is up for reelection. And the president of the Detroit city council almost beat her before, an African American woman is running against her in the primary. Maybe Biden endorses her to send a signal. She is a more authentic Detroit candidate. And I grew up in that district, believe it or not. Well, I think it's been redistricted now. I was in the suburbs at the far side, but we had a chunk of it in the 13th.

But anyway, my point being, I think he needs a little distance from that group and that group's political power on the ground is massively overrated. The AOC group that she's aligned with, endorsed I think 43 democrats in the House primaries and they all lost. Challengers.

KRISTOL: In 2018, right, when all these moderate Democrats won.

MURPHY: Right, right, right. Exactly. So one of the problems I think we have in politics now is this obsession with the base. We hear it all the time. "Oh, the base." The base is the vote you're going to get anyway. The base will vote for a bag of horseshoes with an R or a D on it. So you put the base in a little pain to get what you need to win.

And there's this presumption sometimes that when a voter walks into the booth – and I'll use an ancient example here, because it's more visual – and throws the lever on the old chute voting machine, if that voter is ecstatically happy, or just like, "Well, I guess I got to do this," somehow the happy vote counts more. No! A vote's a vote. So stressing the base is often the key to winning.

And we have a media culture that's so base-focused. They act like the base will "stay home." The base in the history of presidential elections really doesn't stay home. Hillary underperformed with some African Americans in the Midwest. You can find examples, but the base staying home for ideological pouting, as opposed to staying home because it was an uninspiring campaign, or you had other negatives, is massively overrated. So if I were Joe, I would not have a neurotic overreaction to that.

Now, my guess is they *will* have a neurotic overreaction to that. Because in the campaign echo chamber, you've got a thousand people yelling at you, "Don't you understand? Everybody's going to stay home." And somehow they have the authority to say that, and it's believed. But if you look at the data, it's an extremely rare occurrence.

You don't directly antagonize the "base", but don't count it out. Stress it a little to get the votes that get you to winning in places you need to win. I don't care how mad they are in Oakland, California, if you don't pick Kamala Harris. Biden's going to win California. I don't care if he wins it by six votes, or 20. The question is, how's he going to do in Mount Clemens, Michigan? How's he going to do in Lucerne County, Pennsylvania? How's he going to do in Pasco County, Florida? That is the whole ball game. And those are not base Democratic counties.

KRISTOL: Yeah. That's interesting. Trump, this maybe is for our next conversation on Labor Day of what he could do in the last two months in terms of inviting foreign interference, his own disinformation, making it hard for Democrats to vote in November, by –

MURPHY: He'll do all of it. Yeah.

KRISTOL: – resisting funding. How much do we – I don't mean “we,” you and me – but “we” our world, is still thinking Trump is a normal incumbent. And let's look at what happened to our other incumbents who got challenged, Ford, Bush, et cetera. And not thinking about all the things he could do that really are things we're used to reading about from Eastern Europe, or Latin America, that don't happen in an American election.

MURPHY: Yeah. Biden needs a Red Shirt team to think the unthinkable with Trump. And I don't think it's tanks in front of polling places, but he'll say anything, including corrosive things. He'll lie, cheat and steal. Unless the Murdochs wake up for the good of the country after Labor Day, it'll get amplified on Fox. And they should not expect normalcy from Trump in rhetoric, or anything.

I'm on some Trump fundraising email list where I get these incredibly – Madoff would be ashamed of some of the direct mail appeals. There's such grift. But sometimes – somebody writes it for him – there's Trump copy. And it was like an ad hominine on Joe being senile, I got yesterday in the mail. And that's the President of the United States talking, the head of state. So assume the worst and assume an attempted foreign interference. Absolutely.

In fact, I think it will be a competition now. If I'm the director of the PRC intelligence – “Don't let the Russians have all the glory, let me show you what we can do.” So yeah, I think there's going to be all that.

KRISTOL: And the government itself? Which I think two years ago, we would've said, “There'll be enough resistance. It'll be hard for Trump to suppress a report that there's serious Russian, or other country interference. So it'd be hard for Trump to really use the Justice Department” – whatever one thinks of Jeff Sessions, he resisted some of this –

MURPHY: He did. He did.

KRISTOL: – “to reward friends and go after enemies and create a narrative that's totally bogus.” That worries me. We have major parts of the government, the whole White House, of course, one can tell that are just – What he was impeached about, because he was let off by the Senate, no one will be surprised if he does everything that he did then again, right? Or is doing it as we speak.

MURPHY: Oh totally. Yeah, or he'll try. I have this romantic notion that's probably wrong, but I think you might see some October resignations, or even a blue flu where some of the professional staff just check out, to send a big signal from the professionals in government that this guy is unacceptable. We will see, but I think that would be unprecedented too.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's interesting. And I do think we might get, I may be wrong though, do we get some of those people who served him in the first two years coming forth and saying, “I'm proud of some of the things we did. And I think I did the right thing for the country in trying to serve, but honestly, this man should not be President for the next four years. Do we get that from the –

MURPHY: I'm hoping there's some honor left. We asked our grandparents' generation to leave government to land on Anzio beach. All these guys have to do is tell the fucking truth, but we're seeing – I think there might be a few. I'm waiting for Anonymous to come out. Come on, Anonymous. You promised, and a whole bunch more of them.

KRISTOL: Yeah. And maybe someone like George W. Bush to say, “Look, I stayed out of politics pretty religiously here, but it'd be bad for the country to have Trump for another four years.” I do think, I mean, for all that “he's yesterday” and “he's a Bush Republican” and blah, blah, blah, and you of course, I don't know, or Jeff for that matter. I think it would make some difference. There are some –

MURPHY: I do too. I'm all for it. And I think Obama's going to get sucked into this. He already has a little, whether he wants to be or not. So, yeah. But I just assume the unexpected. The rule book of norm behavior doesn't exist with Trump and there's got to be some thinking about that.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I think the notion of having what, I guess they call it a red team in sort of military planning and stuff, intelligence, they really need to think that through. And I know, I've been in groups that have done some speculating about what could happen and how would one respond and who gets Rupert Murdoch on the phone to say, "Hey, if Fox amplifies this you're really going down a path that's even worse than the one you've been on." But I don't know that – that probably should be plugged in more with the Biden campaign.

MURPHY: It would be a hard sell, but boy, if they can announce, some classy nonpartisan organization announce on September 15th that President Obama and President Bush are heading an election foreign interference blow the whistle project, where they use their stature when things started happening to be a countervailing force because they could make tremendous news and criticize something. It would have a tremendous deterrent effect, I think.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's good. I think people have thought about that in terms of election night and sort of not letting Trump de-legitimize results by saying there's been massive fraud in someplace, or claiming victory before the mail-in vote is counted.

MURPHY: But given the election integrity job, and it's not Trump specific, it's Russians, it's everything else, but we know who they're going to be rooting for. So, but kind of raising that lantern in September with those two brands, police it a little, could have a chilling effect on bad actors.

KRISTOL: Yeah. It helps the people in government who might want to say the right thing, even if Trump won't –

MURPHY: Right, give them cover.

KRISTOL: – won't like it. That's good.

MURPHY: Because you know how government people are, they like to travel in a herd. It's safer, so some cover would be a good idea.

KRISTOL: Yeah, no, I think that's really a good suggestion. We'll get that to the right people and they'll ignore us as always, but no, no. Maybe they – I think people are talking about that, but it's always the kind of first mover problem and little bit of Alphonse and Gaston. "Why don't you go ahead and do that?" Or, "someone else should do that," or –

MURPHY: Then it winds up being the day after the election they put out a –

KRISTOL: Exactly. "Well, gee, we should have done that."

What about the debates? You mentioned earlier, and I was struck by this. I think you and I probably would share the view that, if you look back, the debates for all the incredible attention they get, have not probably changed the results in most elections or changed the dynamic even. But you mentioned the debates a couple of times, that's quite important this time. So talk a little about that.

MURPHY: Well, you can find examples. I mean, Reagan saved himself at the second one where he had just come back. But they're important for Biden because they crush the "loopy" thing if Biden handles it well; and if he doesn't he'll be in real trouble.

KRISTOL: Do you think there'll be debates? Are you – And what will they look like?

MURPHY: Yeah, I do. I mean, who knows. Trump's insane, but I think Trump will do this Frank Sinatra thing. "I won't debate. I'm too big for debates." Then the Biden people are crafty about it. They'll keep nailing him on it, and last minute Trump will agree. And Tara Reed will be sitting in the front row, and Trump will make it a circus. If Biden is well-prepared I think he will be able to handle Trump, but he's got to be well-prepared, which I just don't know how much inside Biden world, there's Biden and Biden's sister's hubris that gets in the way of proper prep or not. And Jen O'Malley Dillon, the new campaign manager, is quite capable, but I don't know who's in charge there, and campaigns need a general.

KRISTOL: Yeah. And I do think Trump will say things directly. He did this a little with Hillary Clinton, obviously in 2016, but he wasn't President. I mean, he will say things directly to Biden about Biden's son and about what Biden's done in the past. And I mean, there will be – people will gasp, but he'll do it. And if Biden isn't ready, it could help him, help Trump I suppose. Right?

MURPHY: I mean, yeah. I mean, Biden's just got to be ready. He is not going to be winning it by being Adlai Stevenson here. I mean, Biden can be a brawler. You got to be prepared to brawl well, and let them brawl. Let them brawl. And that's what the country wants. He'll be ready to win a brawl. And if Trump, like all bullies, can fold and wince a little bit, the race will end right there and Biden will be present.

KRISTOL: So that'll be a September, October thing. And I think they probably will argue about debates and maybe end up with only one or two instead of three. And they'll run later because Trump will have some drama and all this. So finally on just – we'll get back together around Labor Day, hopefully in person. But if not, we'll do it this way, on audio and from our separate locations, but anything else?

MURPHY: We're talking about the Justin Amash surge.

KRISTOL: Oh, gosh. Yeah. Tell me about that.

MURPHY: Well, who knows. One argument is you split the anti-Trump vote and you help Trump. The other argument is you give some Rs a place to go other than Trump, which would hurt Trump. I don't know any of that. Normally I'm of the view of the latter. You split the anti-Trump vote, but I'll tell you, in one congressional district in West Michigan you'll hurt Trump.

KRISTOL: He gets his own voters.

MURPHY: Yeah, yeah. His own voters like him there. He was a good ideological conservative, but principled Congressman, so they're really two congressional districts in West Michigan where if he pulls 25,000 votes out of Trump, he'll tilt the state, and tilting Michigan's no small deal. So it just, at that level might not be so bad.

KRISTOL: When people come back in three months, I mean just Labor Day, anything special to look for so you can look back and say, "Well, this summer really – "

MURPHY: Are we debating Biden or are we debating Trump?

KRISTOL: That's a good –

MURPHY: That'll tell you. Everyday wake up: what's the campaign about? Which one of them? In a way that makes sense to people who actually don't live this stuff every minute.

KRISTOL: That's a good thing. Good note to end on it. Very helpful. I think guidance for people. Go ahead, Mike. One last point.

MURPHY: Can I do my plugs here really quick?

KRISTOL: Oh, God. Okay. Well yeah.

MURPHY: @ MurphyMike on Twitter. Check out our website at the university of Southern California Center for the Political Future. We do a ton of Zoom stuff where we fight about politics and do fascinating panels with the experts now. It's all online. You can find it there, again, the Center for the Political Future at USC. Check out, Hacks On Tap with me and Axelrod every week, yakking and yakking about all this stuff. And, Bill, always a pleasure to be here with you.

KRISTOL: I'm a fan of Hacks On Tap, and you should check it out. That gives you the day-to-day stuff. This gives you, we hope, the sort of three month perspective, and together you'll be better informed than anyone else if you listened to both of those as we move forward. Mike Murphy, thank you for taking the time to join me today.

MURPHY: Always fun, Bill.

KRISTOL: And thank you all for joining us on this audio version of CONVERSATIONS.

[END]