

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Roya Hakakian

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I. Coming to America (0:15 – 30:22)

KRISTOL: Hi, welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol. Very pleased to be joined today by Roya Hakakian, a first time guest on Conversations, and I'm very much looking forward to this. Author of a recent book, which I highly recommend, [A Beginner's Guide to America: For the Immigrant and the Curious](#). Author of previous books, which I also recommend, [Journey from the Land of No](#), [Assassins of the Turquoise Palace](#). A poet in Persian, in Farsi I believe. So I would recommend that. I can recommend it anyway, even though I can't obviously read it.

Currently at Yale at Davenport College, Roya teaches writing. [Immigrated in] 1985, I believe, as a teenager, or almost 20 years old, maybe. Interesting. And we're going to talk about America and about immigration, I think. Basically two topics, which are very much related, obviously for everyone, really, not just for you. So Roya, welcome.

HAKAKIAN: Thank you so much. I'm delighted to be with you.

KRISTOL: Good. Well, I look forward to this. So, let's talk a little bit about America first. I mean, you came, and you've written about this in your books. But I mean, you have the great advantage of coming from a very different country and regime, Iran, and then spending I think some time in Europe and then coming here. And so you have the kind of fresh view that those of us who grew up here don't really have. So what struck you when you came? What struck you that doesn't strike us enough? And then we can get to how things have changed, perhaps?

HAKAKIAN: Well, I arrived in 1985, and it was a different America than the one that we're living in today. My most immediate reaction, as soon as the doors at the airport opened, was that, "My God, I've arrived in the land of giants." It wasn't just cars or people. It was also the landscape that seems to have stretched the limits that I had not known before.

And then I remember when we got in the car and we got on the highway, I thought, "My God, the highway isn't the highways I've ever known before." And then I got under some overpass in Queens, New

York, where one layer started crossing over another layer. It was just really a most dizzying experience. And then —

KRISTOL: Yeah, Queens, New York can be — Driving in from JFK or wherever you were coming from, that can be a dizzying experience even for native born Americans, but I can imagine. You'd grown up in Tehran and then you'd been in Europe a little bit. Is that right?

HAKAKIAN: I grew up in Tehran until I graduated high school. And immediately after I graduated, through a series of very dramatic events, my mother and I were able to leave for Europe, where we were refugees for about a year until our asylum applications were processed.

KRISTOL: I see.

HAKAKIAN: So going back to my early days of arrival, I mean, people keep talking about jet lag as something that happens to you because there is the delay between the hours from which you've come and the hours to which you have to adjust. But I think for uprooted people like I was when I arrived, the jet lag can be mental, it can be emotional, it can just be a state of being for many, many months.

HAKAKIAN: And I remember just walking through fog for many, many weeks, and everything struck me as being incomprehensible. Especially my first visit to a supermarket, where I saw lines and lines and lines of varieties of the same food, especially cereal, which I recount in the book. So it took a while after I was able to finally take it all in and begin to rethink who I was, and where I was, and what I was going to do.

KRISTOL: And also, I guess, to rethink America, which you had been educated about, I suppose, in Tehran?

HAKAKIAN: Precisely. Well, first of all, the Revolution took place in Iran in 1979 and I was just 12-years-old. So from 12 onward, all I heard, whether it was in the morning as we lined up in the schoolyard to hear the morning prayers and announcements, or at Friday prayers where the imams gave sermons and speeches out on the streets, this anti-American sentiment was part of the backdrop of every day of my life. And even though I was never a person who was invested in any shape or form in the regime, that said, all that stuff seeps in through the ears and affects us regardless.

HAKAKIAN: So I did come to the United States with a degree of suspicion. I did arrive here uncertain as to would America give me a chance? Because the America that had been painted for me as a teenager was a heartless, cruel nation and government that cared nothing about doing good in the world or caring about its citizens, and the only thing that it valued was money. So you have to realize that the brainwashing didn't have to happen individually. It's what we heard all the time in schools that America didn't care about the world, about individuals, even about its own nation, as long as it amassed wealth in its coffers.

HAKAKIAN: So that's the perspective that I came with when I arrived. And the irony was that that America accepted me, allowed me in to become a resident here. And I had no money when I arrived, I came with a backpack. I had no English, and I thought of myself as a completely down and out and useless person. And so the fact that that America that I had heard about, I had heard so many negative things about, had accepted me, became an early contradiction that I had to contemplate for many, many years until now, and until I ended up writing this book in which I capture that contradiction in a sense of understanding that I try to convey.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's interesting, and you had an excellent op-ed in *The Washington Post* three or so years ago on this point of immigration policy. And people talk about, "let's have skilled immigrants," but you were not a — and obviously, I suppose, you turned out to be skilled immigrant — but you were not an obviously skilled immigrant and you weren't contributing right away to our [inaudible] and computer science or whatever, right? So say a word about that, because I think it's so interesting what you argue there.

HAKAKIAN: Well, I had to think about what happened to me. Because I did come believing that America didn't care for me or for individuals. I did come with the belief that all America cared about was making itself rich. And it had no other value but money. And so I had to think, before I thought about politics or geopolitical situations, I simply wanted to understand how was it that I, somebody like me, began to have a change of opinion, and how I became a real American, a patriotic American.

And I couldn't help but always go back to that very beginning. I think, I should say I'm certain, that had I been skilled, had I brought wealth, had I been the sort of immigrant that we think is the kind of professional that we need in this country, and then been accepted, then I had no reason to think that I had been allowed in because of anything else other than what I was bringing. And therefore I would have entered into a transactional relationship with this country, right? I had brought in these values, whether it was money or skill, and in return I had received, or I had been granted entry.

But it was the fact that I came with nothing. It was the fact that even at the time that I was entering this country in those early first months, I was thinking, "What am I good for?" At a time that I doubted my own value, America opened its doors to me, is really the fundamental, at first emotional, but then intellectual reason why I began to take the journey from the anti-American teenager to the person that I am to today, which believes in American values, and I consider myself a critical patriot.

And I think had it come under any other circumstances, this transformation wouldn't have happened. In other words, I feel like we have a national narrative, and the national narrative, which began in the late 18th century, tells us that we all came to this country with a great deal of hope, and nothing but the belief that we could contribute through work, through thoughtfulness, through effort, to the building of this country. And I believe that it's allowing all of us, myself included, to join in that national narrative, is what makes us a unified people.

Whereas if you strip me or other immigrants of that ability and require that we come in with whatever it is that we place as requirements, then we are separated from that original American narrative, which is we all came, we had nothing, and together we worked and we became who we are. We built something. So I think I was granted a chance to participate in that historical narrative, and here we are today.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I mean, obviously there are skilled immigrants who are very grateful to have the chance to use their skills here and become patriotic. There's something about that American story of coming without much, without any proof that you can contribute, and then contributing, and one's children, and others contributing, and families contributing that really is kind of special, I think, in America.

I was curious. So you came in '85. I came to Washington in 1985, and I wasn't directly working on immigration, but I was working on education with the Education Department. Lots of concerns at the time about America no longer was doing a good job of assimilating, I don't know if that's quite the right word, but integrating immigrants, and that we had lost the ability to do that. There were forces, political forces and social and cultural forces pulling us apart. And the classic American story of people becoming Americans was under threat.

I think probably that was a concern that was maybe a little bit legitimate, but didn't actually pan out. But I'm curious how you lived through that. So tell me about that, how strong is that old American ability to integrate, let's say, newcomers, and what struck you about it one way or the other? In what ways doesn't it work, incidentally?

HAKAKIAN: First of all, you're right. There are several terms that have been struck officially actually by the Biden administration from immigration talk. One is alien, and the other is assimilation. I don't know. I'm glad to see alien go, I suppose, but I'm not certain about assimilation. I don't think assimilation in and of itself is a bad thing.

I think the reason I don't think assimilation in and of itself isn't a bad thing is that I had all the moments after my arrival when I said that I had come from Iran. I became the topic of conversation. Now, I can

understand that I was on the East Coast. It was where all the hip, intellectual people, open-minded people are, and I can understand that rural America wouldn't view someone like me with the same openness. But I have to say that it at least in the urban areas, in places, in the big cities that I travel, mentioning that I had come from Iran often inspired curiosity. And actually, the kind of curiosity that enabled me to then share my own narrative, share my own story with people who immediately asked what had happened, what I had witnessed, and so on and so forth.

So, it was never a source of shame or anxiety. People wanted to know about Iran's politics, but no one ever really discriminated against me as a result of being an Iranian. And I think oftentimes I recognized, even early on, that it is fashionable, it is desirable to be a hyphenated person. That it made you interesting. It didn't make you less American, but it made you more interesting, whether you were in college or at a party or at a dinner event. So I think that's the success of American assimilation. That we have never adhered to a notion of the Puritan American. We don't know what that is, right? Who is that? Is that the people who came early on? Even those people were from many different places. And even the Founding Fathers didn't agree on who those perfect Americans were. Benjamin Franklin thought the Germans were bad and they shouldn't be allowed in. So there wasn't even a consensus about who the people who deserve and should be held up as models of perfect Americans are.

So I think that absence of consensus has served us as a nation, because rather than a perfect breed or a perfect race, we seem to have always looked for the perfect citizen, who is somebody who works hard, who learns the language, who participates in the betterment of the society, whether it's through business or service or any other activities. So I think we had to, by the nature of how this country came together, steer clear of placing a great deal of value on breeding and race, and place greater value on who is doing what.

And therefore, I think assimilation and race and ethnicity became only the spices of the people's character as opposed to defining them, vis-a-vis the society. I always saw in my own interactions with other people that the fact that they had come from somewhere else made them just more interesting to people.

Now, in all fairness, in the last seven, eight years, and in the aftermath of 9/11, a great deal of that has changed. In the time of COVID, being Chinese-American in America has come at a cost. Chinese-Americans have been attacked. So not at every political moment, and we cannot say that throughout all the crises that we have lived through what I argue holds true indiscriminately. But I think by and large, barring for political crises, we have been accepting of immigrants. And we have done not a perfect job, but a much better job than other Western societies at including and accepting our immigrants.

KRISTOL: Yeah. And obviously anti-immigrant sentiment has flared up at many times in American history, and it's been quite powerful at times, probably more in the past than now actually, even despite flare ups now. But I'm curious, I was talking with — So I'm a decade older than you, but I was talking with a friend who's a decade older than I am, who is the son of immigrants. And he grew up in a home where a foreign language was spoken to some degree, but then he went to public schools and he was a good student and it was a wonderful immigrant success story. And he was lamenting that doesn't happen anymore, the educational system caters to every group, but it doesn't teach everyone to be proud Americans and teach English as much.

And I kind of argued with him, and I don't think empirically, it turns out — I mean, people have that sense, I'd say maybe especially conservatives, but it doesn't actually — and some on the left who want the kind of separate identities — I don't know that empirically that's particularly true. My sense is everyone learns English as much as they used to. And there's as much intermarriage among groups as there used to be and so forth, if you want to get to that level of assimilation.

But I'm curious, a), what your sense is. You've been here for over three decades, has that really changed much? And for you personally, so you didn't go to elementary and high school, but what were the key elements of integration, let's say maybe, instead of assimilation? Was it education? Was it just the culture, pop culture? Intellectual things? Business? I'm just interested in what helped you, just looking

back on it, what helped you become more American more quickly and more easily than might otherwise have been the case?

HAKAKIAN: Well, college certainly helped a great deal. And you mentioned that I had written poems in Persian; I showed up at Brooklyn College where I was a student at Allen Ginsberg's door. The great Allen Ginsberg, the poet, taught poetry at Brooklyn College. And I had read some of his work when I was in Iran, so I really, really, really wanted to be a student of his, but he required 30 plus English poems published, or at least ready to be published, in order to allow anyone in his class. And I didn't have that, but I already had a book of poems in Persian that I had published. So I showed up at his door and I said, "Can I be your student?" And he said, "Do you have poetry?" And I gave him my book in Persian and he perused it and he said, "Groovy." And after he said groovy, he said, "You're welcome to come."

And I remember sitting in that class — First of all, my English really wasn't at the level that I could totally absorb what was being said. But that wasn't important. The fact that the Allen Ginsberg had allowed me to be a student and sit in his class certainly signaled to me that it didn't even matter that he couldn't read my poetry in the language that I had written them. It just meant to me at that very young age that if I showed that I was serious, that I really meant business, that I had written and I planned to write more, the doors would open. And it didn't matter where I came from, and it didn't even matter if I spoke the language that he needed me to speak. I just needed to show passion and seriousness.

And I always think of that moment when I sat in Allen's class as a second arrival, or as a third arrival. Because I think your airplane can land, that's the obvious arrival. Then you find a job and you open a bank account and you get your social security, and then that's a second arrival. And then there are deeper, more serious ways of arriving, when you think that beyond those obvious physical spaces, there are other spaces that are opening up to you. And that's precisely what Allen did for me. And I think whether it's the Silicon Valley or whether it's the local supermarket, the fact that we open up our spaces and we require people to put in, I don't know, eight hours of serious diligent work, is the surest way of incorporating people.

And whenever I see these things, people say to me, including my compatriots, there's a lot of discrimination against Iranians. True. There's a lot of discrimination against Iranians *inside Iran*, which is why we have been forced to leave. There's a lot of discrimination against Iranians throughout Europe, which is what drives them sometimes even out of Europe. So comparatively, we're not giving the Nirvana awards to any singular nations, but America has done a better job compared to other Western countries.

And don't take my word for it. When we look at the statistics, at the data of how well the Iranian diaspora have done in Europe and how well they have done in the United States, the numbers don't even match, don't even come close. The Iranian American community, compared to its counterparts in other parts of the world, is doing exorbitantly so much better than anywhere else. And that cannot speak to anything but to the openness and the possibilities that America creates. Is it perfect? No. Can it improve? Yes. But is it the best there is today in the West? Yes.

KRISTOL: That's so interesting. I didn't know about the comparative data. That's interesting.

I mean, I'm moved by your account of Brooklyn College; not because of Allen Ginsberg who I don't think I ever met, and I mean, I'm happy he took you in and he taught you something. It's something amazing about that somehow that an immigrant girl becomes more American because of Allen Ginsberg. It's such a funny, unusual story. But it is a wonderful American story in a way. God knows, I don't know how many generations before Allen Ginsberg his parents had been, one or two, right? I mean, presumably he's — I don't know anything about Allen Ginsburg except a headline level knowledge, but I should look this up, and I assume he's the son of immigrants or certainly grandson of immigrants.

But my mother went to Brooklyn college in the end of the '30s, so 50 years before you really, as the daughter of immigrants, who of course hadn't — Not of course, but who didn't have a college education. And she had gone to school in the US, she grew up born in the US so her English was good. But no, for

her, that was also the path to, in her case, go to graduate school and becoming professional and so forth and everything else.

I mean my friend, my older friend I think would have said, "Well, in the old days, that happened at a place like Brooklyn College, the famous days of the City College, and to some degree Brooklyn College, but now that doesn't happen anymore." But I think your story suggests that the institutions are still there and the forces and the openness is still there to make it possible. And is your sense that that continues? I mean, are you on the alarmist side of, "Gee, we're forgetting how to do this," or on the pretty confident side that it's happening for —

HAKAKIAN: Well, I —

KRISTOL: In 1995 and 2005 and 2015.

HAKAKIAN: I have to say that the fact that college became so possible for me so quickly was a major factor in shaping the future that I had to foresee for myself in the very beginning. So is college still as available and as possible? I'm glad to hear that there are calls for making colleges more affordable, at least community colleges more affordable. Because I remember that my tuition was so low that all of my expenses, all of the financial requirements were immediately fulfilled by the grants and scholarships that I received, and then I would receive some extra pocket money. So it was never an anxiety for me.

And therefore, I didn't even have to think twice whether I wanted to attend college or not. And so I think that immediately allowed me to, again, enter. And when it comes to the lives of immigrants, I think what makes us feel is that a sense that you are not locked behind metaphorical, symbolic doors, that the possibilities are endless and the gates are open as long as we want to participate. And for me, that first gate was the college gates, and the fact that I could immediately attend and not have any anxieties about having to work — I mean, I did work, but whether I could afford or not was not an issue; gave me a sense that here's another way to enter. Here's a second entry.

Since you liked the Allen Ginsberg story, I want to tell you a little more, because that's one of my favorite pieces of that story, which is he gave us homework and the homework required that we write, I think a poem. I don't remember what sort of poem it was. But I wrote something and I gave it to him and he gave it back to me all red marked from top to bottom. And then he came over to me and he said that he was extremely disappointed because all I had given him were cliches. And I was thrilled. I was so thrilled. What he couldn't understand was that I was trying to sound American. I was trying to figure out how to say the cliché so that I would be indistinguishable from other people. And he wanted me to be an original. I didn't want to be an original. And so we had a major disagreement and it took a long time for him to understand that that's precisely what I was trying to do. I was in that class to figure out how to write a cliché so that I could sound like an American.

II: Immigration and the American Idea (30:22 – 1:00:19)

KRISTOL: I'm very charmed by the thought, too, that Allen Ginsberg was a diligent professor who actually marked up his students' work. It seems like this does not comport quite with my image of Allen Ginsberg, but why not, I guess. That's very fun.

You mentioned business in passing, working an eight hour day. And I'm struck by that, that I think especially liberals who don't know that much about businesses and aren't so friendly to them underestimate the integrating force of the work environment. Most people spend a lot of their adult lives at work, and in various workplaces, often beginning at a reasonably low level and with a whole bunch of other employees and with managers. And I think people probably underestimate — The normal immigrant account is so much written by intellectuals, frankly, which is fine, but it's sort of "the education is so important," and other such things. But probably in the real world, just working in various places has a huge effect, don't you think? And therefore our openness to employing is not a trivial thing, just like our openness to educating.

HAKAKIAN: Completely. I mean, again, I have to go back to my metaphor of gates and doors. As an immigrant, you want to feel that as soon as you knock, the door will open, that they are not keeping you outside. And depending on our experiences, whether we, as immigrants, come from autocratic nations or not, some of us, I think especially the ones who come from autocratic places, come with a sense that the possibilities are controlled, if not limited. That I have to jump through hoops and prove myself as a member of this group or that group in order to be granted entry.

And I think what's important is that we immediately realized that as long as we're willing to work and as long as we're willing to work diligently, hard, and honestly, America doesn't discriminate. We don't need to take a membership in a party or belong to some religious group or sect or whatever. We can be employed. And these all create, however we want to call it, a sense of assimilation, a sense of belonging, and, more importantly, a sense of possibility.

We can all argue and say that America doesn't offer the upward mobility that it did 40, 50 years ago, and that is a social problem that we need to address. I think we do. I think somehow the sense of possibility that America offered decades ago no longer exists, or not as readily. I don't think that's an immigrant problem, but I think that's a general American problem which affects all of us and will lessen us if we don't change it. Because the beauty of being here has always been the fact that we think sky's the limit and we don't have to be anything but innovative in order to belong here and in order to achieve.

That sense has been compromised, whether it's for the immigrant or the general population. But I think for immigrants, we — My brother and his wife started in a very tiny store. They started out as clerks, and ended up, shortly thereafter, saving some money and then starting their own small store, and then it began, and it became a prosperous big business. I think that's not a unique story. It's the sort of story that draws all immigrants to America.

However, I think what we have failed to do in recent years, especially in the light of the presence of undocumented immigrants among us, we have created an underclass that cannot, even with its best efforts and with however much it tries to do the right thing, it cannot lift itself up. That is not only bad for that community, the undocumented community, but it's certainly poisonous for the quality and health of our democracy, because a democracy is supposed to be a relationship of all equals and the fact that we within our community allow the existence of an underclass is certainly undermining the quality of our own democracy. And that is something that we certainly need to address. And I think the sooner we do it, the healthier our democracy will remain.

KRISTOL: It's an underclass in the sense that they're not documented and that has legal consequences, but I would say what could also make in a way the opposite point or the flip side, which is, I think one thing immigrants contribute is reminding us that mobility is possible. Sometimes when we despair that the new social and economic structures make it so much more difficult — and they probably do make it somewhat more difficult and that can be addressed, hopefully, by policies and so forth — but you see immigrants coming from all kinds of countries, including ones that didn't have the pretty good education that Iran had and so forth, and then you see their statistics 10, 20, 30 years later, and their kids and they're doing quite well.

It's a pretty reassuring thing, in a way, about America. And also a lesson to other Americans that makes it a little harder to just say, "Gee, I think the system is rigged against me, and I grew up in a place where some auto plants closed and there's just no opportunity anymore." And then suddenly people who grew up in much worse places seem to be working pretty hard and doing pretty well. Which I would say, incidentally, the undocumented themselves, are — Don't you find? I mean, I'm sure you have students at Yale who are undocumented, who are dreamers, and it's pretty impressive.

HAKAKIAN: But I think at the end of the day, the notion of not having papers becomes a monster that sits on your shoulders all the time.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I take that point.

HAKAKIAN: But you're right. I think we do allow them to come. We do allow them to participate in the economic process. I have to say that I think in some ways the immigrant has an advantage to the Michigander whose car plants or production plants have shut down, in that the immigrant comes with a built-in narrative, and that's a narrative of success. We come and we think, as long as I make it across the border and make it to America, we can do anything. The immigrant believes that if he or she works hard, learns the language, the immigrant knows the formula, does X, Y, and Z, the immigrant can succeed.

I am not sure that the child of out-of-work factory workers in middle America know what that narrative is. In other words, the formula that I had, or the likes of me who come to the country are handed, it makes it possible for us to know what we're supposed to stick to. I am not sure that in places where there's no longer employment available, or at least not the sort of employments that the parents and the grandparents had, is available, then the new generation that is clearly failing knows exactly what the narrative is and what the formula is. So in some ways I think they are at a disadvantage because figuring out what the possibilities are requires a different kind of thinking that this current generation hasn't done.

KRISTOL: That's so interesting. I mean, that's a failure on the country's part obviously, but I think it is true that nations probably are susceptible to narratives of decline and "we can't do anymore what we once did, and let's talk about the Roman Empire, or let's talk about any other decadence and let's talk about this or that." And of course it's not always false, but whereas in a way the immigrant experience, it seems to me, cuts so much against that. And the fact that it continues to be an upward and reasonably successful experience to the degree it does, cuts so much against that, that in that respect, immigrants are really contributing something to America. It's not just that America is helping immigrants.

The last several years I've really become so much more convinced of that, that the contribution is both ways, and that the lesson — both the actual contribution of in terms of hard work and economic contribution and so forth — but also the cultural, or almost, spiritual is not the word exactly, but I don't know quite what I'm saying. But the ethos of the nation, it's so important, really, I think.

Because there is probably a tendency to — The founders saw this. I think John Adams has some famous line about this, that "we're fighting for our independence, but our kids will take it for granted and then their kids will become whatever, sculptors and that's very nice, but they won't really understand what's at stake." And that's more of a political statement, but I think it's also a very common narrative: Henry Adams, the decline of the — It's too easy to embrace decline, perhaps if you're [not an] immigrant. To say, "Everything's just not what it once was. I'm going to have a nostalgic view, a false nostalgic view, of some moment in 1953 when everything was allegedly great." And the immigrants really save us from that, I think.

HAKAKIAN: Absolutely. I may not have answered you as affirmatively if Trump hadn't come to power. Because in 2016, when I started hearing him say, "Immigrants come to rob and rape." Or, "Let's not allow the ones who don't speak English in or don't have skills." For me, all of that became deeply personal. But in addition to becoming personal — At first I was angry, but then anger really quickly subsided and I had a different feeling. I felt like every American feels that there is a call to action. Some of us go serve in wars. And this is my moment. And this is when I have to contribute for all the years that I've been here. This is my call to service.

Honestly, the reason I sat down to write the book that you talked about early in the beginning of the hour, was my answer to that call to service. It was my act of service, because I thought I need to tell Americans why this democracy was important, not just for America and Americans, but for everybody else around the world who dreams of creating a democracy, who dreams of a free future. That looking at America, looking at the possibilities that this nation created, is a giant inspiration to others who are striving for the same thing in other places in the world.

I thought it was for me, who had not been born and raised here, who didn't take the small pleasures of the free life for granted, or something as small as the ability for me to appear in public in my own clothing however I wish that clothing to be. Which to those who have been born and raised here, it seems entirely

trivial, but I came from a place where my dress code could not be determined by me, was determined by the government and imposed upon me, and that had become a daily prison.

I thought it was for me, in 2016, to remind Americans of the small gifts of their democracy, which I think so many of you guys who've been born and raised here think that it manifests in a four year election. It comes around every four years. You go, you do your democratic participation, and you can go home and you're done.

But for me, I can find the American democracy on a daily basis in the smallest ways that may be invisible to other people. I see the manifestation of the American democracy in the fact that all of us agree to stop at a red light. And red lights mean the same thing everywhere in the world, including in Iran, but nobody stops at it because people have not signed on to the social contract. So even though the same laws exist there, the same traffic rules apply, the same stop sign, the same green light, everything, it doesn't work in those countries because people don't believe in the justness of the social contract, in the justness of the constitution and the laws, and therefore they don't abide by them. So the fact that we all stop at a red light in America, to me, is in some ways the manifestation of our democratic life and so on and so forth. I can name 100 others for you. But I wrote this book to make these small everyday democratic gifts visible to others.

KRISTOL: Some social observers, social scientists, have worried, not for bad motives, I wouldn't say, that all these immigrants coming from non-rule-of-law, non-law-abiding countries, countries where there isn't a trust in the social fabric that if you behave appropriately you'll be treated appropriately and so forth, that that would corrupt America, so to speak. I heard that a lot.

And again, there are some people who said this in a mean-spirited and with bad motives, if I can put it in bad faith. But there were people who genuinely just worried that trust is a hard thing and it gets built up over generations and over centuries, and just letting in all these people from societies that aren't characterized by basic norms of trust and law-abiding this and so forth, is going to damage us.

I've got to say, I think it's more the opposite. That it's precisely the immigrants who understand the importance of this and appreciate it more. But I don't know what your experience is or has been on that. Has it changed over the 30 years?

HAKAKIAN: Well, I can tell you, when I first came, I did what we all do, every citizen under an autocracy does. We lie. We lie all the time. We lie to everyone. We lie when it's necessary and we lie when it's unnecessary. But we lie because we have to, because if you don't lie, you get into trouble. So learning to tell the truth was a real education for me. It required psychological awareness. It required political and social awareness. It was probably one of the most important things I have ever done to improve myself.

But that said, I think all of us come to this country, all of us come into this world, with kinks we have to work out. And I think choosing the sort of kinks that immigrants come with, once they get over it, then the fog lifts, the clouds lift. You begin to see, as I did, though there is no guarantee, some of us may never end up seeing, but oftentimes we do end up recognizing, the great gift that we have received by being granted entry into this country. Hopefully, we become defenders and protectors of this beautiful land as opposed to distractors of it.

KRISTOL: I think that's been the case more often than not.

I would say on another issue — we were talking about this before we began the show actually — excellence, which is always a questionable thing in a democracy, you might say. Always at risk to a kind of both egalitarianism that maybe doesn't like excellence so much, but also just, I think, to a kind of complacency: It's a wealthy country and everything's chugging along.

I do think there are, too, immigrants, for whatever reason, maybe we could say they feel they have to work so hard and strive to make it. There's more of a sense, I just see this looking around me, frankly, with their kids. A sense of it's not enough to just go along and get along. That somehow I really need to

go the extra mile, whether it's in whatever, school or music or business or all kinds of other things. As I also feel that to the degree that the whole point of a liberal democracy is to somehow combine equality of rights and basic respect without foreclosing the pursuit of excellence. I don't know. Does that make sense? Have you seen that? Again, has it changed over decades? Or are you fairly optimistic that the pursuit part —?

HAKAKIAN: I am fairly optimistic, but I do think that there are alarming signs that tell all of us, especially the immigrant, that America's possibilities are dwindling and the openness is less. I think, the way I look at it, is that this isn't something we need to do in order to make the immigrant more comfortable. I think these are the corrections we need to make in order to keep the integrity of this society and keep sort of the foundations, better them, and make them healthier, for the sake of keeping us who we are.

I think serving the immigrant, making sure the immigrant can do what the immigrant expects to be able to do in this country, isn't just important for the immigrant. It's also important for us to remain exactly that vision of possibility that the founding fathers foresaw and continue to have.

Now, we can say that the founding fathers were discriminated against this group or that group. They did. I kind of look at the early democracy that was invented in this country like the telephone that Alexander Graham Bell invented. It isn't the cell phone that we have in our pockets today. It has certainly improved by a great deal. But I think every invention, as this democracy was, comes out clunky and maybe with some glitches and flaws and over the years, it gets perfected. We can perfect it, we can make it better, but we all also need to agree that the foundations and the original values are why we are who we are today, why we continue to be a place of hope.

I know this because I hear from activists inside Iran, that they care whether the American administration hears their plight, mentions them in their statements. This means that they still hold this expectation, this hope that America is a place of democracy, and this place stands by them in our plight or in their plight for equality, for egalitarian values that they are striving for.

KRISTOL: I think that's so important and neglected so much today. I mean, the relation of our internal policies to our external ability to shape things around the world, or to inspire people, at least, around the world and in ways that are both good for them, what everyone hopes and trusts, but also good for us, frankly, in terms of having more nations and regimes that are more sympathetic to us. I mean, Lincoln really saw this, I think, that the Know Nothings, who were an anti-immigrant group one should remember, we're really a threat to American democracy. Not quite at the level of slavery was, but he associated the two very much, though it's not, they didn't always go together. Some of the Know Nothings were anti-slavery. But once you have this spirit, so to speak, of Know Nothing-ism and of nativism, I would call it probably, abroad in the land the whole, then it can permeate, it spills over to other groups, including groups that aren't immigrants, of course, the black slaves who were there. Then, also to our attitude towards our ability to be something for the world and for other nations, not just for ourselves. I mean, it's interesting how much Lincoln tied all that together, I think.

I think, I was also very struck while watching this. I was in the White House actually in 1989, and the students at Tiananmen Square famously had the statue, replica you might say, of the Statue of Liberty. The Statue of Liberty is not a founding document of the United States and it's just a statue that was put up somewhat accidentally, really, because of a gift by the French government. I don't know the whole history there. Then, Emma Lazarus wrote the poem, but it wasn't really supposed to be for the Statue of Liberty, but then it gets on the Statue of Liberty and all that. But it obviously, when you think about it, the immigrant side of the American experience of equality and opportunity, and I would say excellence really, has always meant a lot to people. It meant a lot about what America meant to people around the world. Don't you think? I mean —

HAKAKIAN: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, look, the Iranian elections are coming up and a group of activists have put together a statement to share their hopes and expectations about the election and their expectations from the world. It's addressed to the American administration. It wasn't sent to the Chinese

administration. It wasn't sent to the Brazilian administration, to Indian administration, Russian administration, or the French or the Germans for that matter. But it's sent to us.

Now, I'm sure many people would laugh and say, "When has America cared about any activist anywhere in the world?" Furthermore, people constantly say, "Look, when we intervene anywhere, we always botch it." Fine. We make mistakes. We make grave mistakes. I get it. But the point is that at the same time, I think, this position of offering hope, offering inspiration to the rest of the world, is pretty much the only thing that we have left as Americans that distinguish us from other rising powers.

China is matching us in their economic capacity. Russia is raising other hell, outdoing us in the area of intelligence and cyber attacks and everything else. But what we still have, which is uniquely American, which is the unique possibility of us still offering the world something that no other nation does is this possibility of hope, democracy and freedom. Now, have we done it well? Have we been able to export it, to give it to other nations? Not so much. But that said, even with that shortcoming, we still remain uniquely in this position to continue to be that to the rest of the world, which places us above and beyond any other nation in the world at the moment. I think that is a huge, huge thing to hang on to, and to continue to perform for the rest of the world.

KRISTOL: And I think helps us live up to our principles too. The fact that we claim to be a model for the rest of the world —and Hamilton sort of says, this is in Federalist One — puts a more of a responsibility on us and allows us to sometimes, not always, overcome our own problems because "we can't tolerate this." This was pretty true in the civil rights movement. We can't defend segregation here. I mean, because we claim to be a model and we're fighting the Soviet Union and for hearts and minds and so forth, and maybe that's not the highest reason to get rid of discrimination and segregation, but it was a powerful one and it can be a high one, I think, an important one. Otherwise, the country can just say, "Look, this is the way we do it. These are our native traditions. This is our heritage, and it's fine. We're just going to do it this way and other countries will do it their way." The degree to which we are seeking to serve as a model for the world can affect, I think, in a healthy way, our domestic arrangements is, I think, underestimated.

HAKAKIAN: I completely agree. There's a beautiful video clip of an Iranian woman confronting a harasser, maybe a guard member of the Revolutionary Guards who sees that her scarf has fallen. He goes up to her and says, "The law in this country is for you to cover your head." Then, the girl in the video turns to him and says, "There are bad laws in the world that we have to fight against. Slavery was also law in America. But look what Americans did? They did away with it." That! To think that in 2021, a 20-year old girl in a subway in Tehran is confronting her harassers, citing the fact that Americans did away with slavery, is an astounding thing.

I think for all the people in America who are trying to figure out, what do we do? We are no longer the supreme nation, we have lost our powers. Look, there is one way in which we are the only game in town and that is, and continues to be, the way in which we remain the only hope for everyone else around the world. Does it mean that we haven't made mistakes? No. But we can continue to be that, and that gives us a very unique place in this hierarchy, in this global hierarchy. I think if we do it right, it can be a very, very vital and coveted spot.

KRISTOL: I think that's true. That's a good note on which to end, I think. Not just an upbeat one, but a true one. Roya Hakakian, thank you so much for joining me today.

And thanks to all of you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]