

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

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I. A Strategic Error? (0:15 – 42:17)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm pleased to have back today my good friend, Eric Edelman, a long time foreign service officer culminating in ambassadorships to a couple of countries. One of them Turkey, a complicated tenure, which we discussed I think in an earlier conversation. Eric then served the last three and a half years of the Bush Administration as number three person in the Defense Department, a very senior position where he was involved in all kinds of, every policy matter really. And we've had conversations before, Eric, in which you've done an excellent job, I think, of helping us think about foreign policy broadly and the challenges we face and covering the waterfront.

Today, we're going to focus on one topic, which is very much in the news: Afghanistan, which you've obviously been very involved in that policy too for a couple of decades, and commented on it. So today, just to locate people, is July 8th. And the withdrawal from Afghanistan is near to complete we read this morning. So anyway, Eric, thank you for joining me.

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

KRISTOL: I don't know that it's going to be our most upbeat discussion, but I think it's an important one, and one that hasn't gotten the attention that it deserves. Do you think? It's a pretty momentous decision simply to pull out, and apart from people saying, "Well, it's been a long time and it was going to happen anyway," it hasn't really — I don't know. From my point of view, it's surprising how little coverage it's really gotten. And then people haven't — and this is what we'll do today I think — thought through the implications of what may well happen.

EDELMAN: I know. I very much agree. I would say that in the first six months of the Biden Administration, this is probably the most consequential thing in international affairs that Biden has done. I mean, there are a couple of other candidates in there, but right now this looks like the most important thing.

And I agree with you. I think it hasn't gotten as much attention as it deserves. And I don't think either the administration or the commentary has done a very good job of really thinking through a lot of the second or third order consequences, because much of the punditry and commentary has just been focused on ending endless wars, which is really kind of mindless way to look at this whole problem.

KRISTOL: Yeah. That's a big statement and an interesting one though, that it could be the most consequential decision. Let's hope it all works out, but I worry that it's both consequential and damaging. So let's talk about that.

Why did President Biden make the decision? Give us a little bit of the backdrop of that. Obviously, we all know why we intervened in the first place and the ups and downs of the war to some degree. Vice President Biden came into office as Vice President. President Biden came into office as Vice President in January of 2009 on the heels of some policy — I think you were involved in one of them very directly — on what we should do in Afghanistan. And the Obama Administration ordered a surge of troops in its first year in Afghanistan.

EDELMAN: Yeah, there is a long backstory to this. Obviously this has been America's longest war. We've been at it for 20 years, which is very atypical for Americans. George Marshall famously said that Americans can only fight wars for four years. We've obviously done longer than that in Afghanistan.

I think one thing that's really important to remember as you think about all of this is the degree of difficulty we took on when we intervened in Afghanistan. During the initial operations in 2001 when I was working in the White House for then Vice President Cheney, John Abizaid, who was the Deputy CENTCOM Commander famously said, in a play on words on something that Curtis LeMay had said about Vietnam when he said, "We're going to bomb the Vietnam back in the stone age," John Abizaid said, "We're going to bomb Afghanistan forward into the stone age."

And I think we forget that Afghanistan, when we entered the country in 2001, had been subject to 20 years of war and violence, going back to the Soviet invasion in 1979. People hadn't gone to school for two generations. So the country was almost totally illiterate. The per capita GDP of Afghanistan today is roughly \$500 a year, according to World Bank data. Just to give you a comparative, Haiti, which is the poorest country in our hemisphere, and people are focusing on Haiti because of the assassination of the president the day before, the GDP of Haiti is \$1,200 a year. So Afghanistan is about a third of that.

So this was always going to be a long, complicated story, not to mention the fact that the country itself has got a complicated ethnic makeup divided among ethnic groups. And the geography is very forbidding. So the degree of difficulty, since the Olympics are coming up, if this were Olympic diving, the degree of difficulty here would have been very great.

In 2008, '09, as you mentioned, during the transition from the Bush to the Obama Administrations, there were three reviews that were undertaken about what to do about Afghanistan. One was led by Lieutenant General Doug Luke, who was working at the White House and actually transitioned from the Bush to the Obama Administrations where he continued to serve, and Megan O'Sullivan, who was the Deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan. That was one review.

General David Petraeus, who was then the CENTCOM commander, conducted his own review; and the incoming Obama team under Michele Flournoy and Richard Holbrooke conducted a third review.

And they all came to pretty much the same conclusion, which is that we ought to have a fully resourced counter-insurgency strategy, something akin to what we did in the surge in Iraq in 2007 and '08 — which had been quite successful in reducing the violence and diminishing the threat from Al-Qaeda in Iraq — in Afghanistan.

And President Obama approved that, although then Vice President Biden was a dissenter in that debate. We can come back and talk a little bit about that because I do think it speaks to the decisions he's made

recently. And President Obama did agree to a surge, but I think unfortunately, he time limited it. He said the surge would always be limited to, I think, about 18 months. Then we would draw down and then get out. This sort of played, I think, into the hands of the Taliban who famously always say that, "The West has the watches but we have the time," and allowed them to wait out the United States and its NATO allies who were supporting the Afghan government and the national security forces of Afghanistan.

Then Vice President Biden at the time opposed the counter-insurgency approach and advocated a counter terrorism strategy, which would have had a much lighter footprint, something actually much closer to what the late Donald Rumsfeld had kind of advocated, with an explicitly counter-terrorism mission and would have left to the Afghans dealing with the Taliban insurgency.

KRISTOL: I would just add two things and you can comment on them and take this story forward too is of course Afghanistan was "the good war" from the point of view of the President Obama and the Obama Administration, the necessary war. We had no choice after 9/11. And had gone well for a while, difficult, but not like Iraq, obviously, in terms of the deaths, the commitment of the manpower, our own deaths, civilian deaths, and so forth. And the surge in rockets succeeded pretty well.

For all the people like me were critical, I supported the surge. I remember getting invited to the White House and a bi-partisan reading with the president where we — I think he was a little nervous to see people like me supporting it, and he had his own doubts about it. It wasn't kind of what he wanted to do, but I think, to his credit, he did what he thought was the right thing for the country.

And for all the time limiting of it, which I think was a mistake and the subsequent difficulties, which God knows there've been plenty of, the truth is if you had told us, correct me, if I'm wrong, in 2009, '10, that in 2020, '21, we would have the situation we have in Afghanistan, or we had until let's say six months ago, a messy situation, not great. Taliban hasn't gone away. They don't have perfect control. The government's not free of corruption, et cetera. But basically limited violence, very little engagement on the part of US troops, a pretty successful draw down, people like us might've said maybe too much down, but a pretty successful draw down to a few thousand troops, not mostly thankfully engaged in combat or certainly not taking fatalities, the kind of combat they were engaged. I think we would have said, "You know what? That's not a bad —" This is so contrary and I'm almost scared to say it this, but this was not such a bad decade, right?

I mean, if you step back and say as a matter of foreign policy, you kept a country that had been the seedbed of terror directed against us and others from being such a thing. You had kept reasonable stability in the region when everyone was very worried about Pakistan and other places 10 years ago. We'll come back to that going forward. The way which everyone just regards the war as a ridiculous, hopeless enterprise, they forgot that it was the good war and they forgot that it was not unsuccessful, the things we did there to some degree.

Now, and I guess President Obama's inclination to want to get out, though he never quite did and President Trump's repeated attempts to get out, somehow 10 years of that has just convinced a pretty good chunk of the American people and laid the groundwork, I guess, for incoming President Biden to just say, "Enough."

EDELMAN: Look, this has been a very frustrating 20 year experience for Americans. H.R. McMaster, who served out in Afghanistan, and of course was President Trump's second National Security Advisor has said, and I think there's some merit in this, that it wasn't really a 20 year war. It was 20 one-year wars because we changed approaches, changed commanders, rotated forces.

And there's a lot of lessons that appropriately need to be drawn eventually from this experience. But there were a lot of successes, both in terms of recreating an education system, getting Afghans back to school, particularly girls and women. Great gains for women's rights. The corruption of course has been a persistent problem and very frustrating one for Americans to deal with. We contributed to that because of the flood of international assistance money that came in to Afghanistan, which distorted the economy and it created a lot of perverse incentives.

So it's been a long, frustrating process. But as you, I think, rightly suggest, first President Obama, to his credit, did not carry through on his undertaking to withdraw all U.S. forces before he left. There was persistent pressure from folks in the Pentagon in particular to make withdrawals conditions based.

President Trump came in and wanted to get out again, just as President Obama had wanted to do. And he was, to some degree, thwarted again by the Pentagon, by H.R. McMaster and others who wanted to make sure that we didn't leave with our tail between our legs and that, and that we didn't accept a defeat in Afghanistan.

And we had kind of come to an outcome that wasn't terribly satisfactory from a lot of points of view, but which was tolerable, which was the presence of about 3,000, 3,500 troops, not in combat as you said, mostly providing support and enablement for the Afghan security forces to be able to carry out the military tasks. The Afghans were bearing the brunt of the fighting. U.S. casualties were almost non-existent or very, very low. I think four killed in the year before President Trump started this process of withdrawal.

And I think this is going to be seen, in retrospect, I fear, as a self-inflicted unforced error on the part of the United States. Now to be fair to the Biden Administration, it was President Trump who decided to first negotiate an agreement with the Taliban, and then to not only agree to withdraw by May 1st of this year, but actually to try and accelerate that withdrawal. He was trying to get it done before he left office. And that of course got subsumed in the post-election issues of him trying to stay in office.

KRISTOL: Say a word about that because I have the impression that the Afghanistan issue was more than some of us realize, kind of a key issue in Trump's arguments with the Defense Department and his actions there.

EDELMAN: Yeah, absolutely they were. I mean, as you know, Mark Esper, who was the Secretary of Defense, Trump's last Secretary of Defense — Well, not last because he appointed an acting, but the last confirmed Secretary of Defense, was fired the day after the election. And I have pretty good reason to believe from discussions with him that a big part of his firing, in his mind, had to do with his resisting Trump's effort to accelerate the withdrawal.

And of course, part of the rationale that he and others in the Pentagon used for resisting the withdrawal was that the Taliban wasn't living up to the terms of the agreement. Yes, they weren't attacking US forces, which was part of their agreement, but they weren't negotiating in good faith with the Afghan government. And people were rightly concerned that accelerating the withdrawal would carry all sorts of broader repercussions for the region, for the safety of U.S. forces as we withdrew, et cetera.

So shortly before he was fired, Secretary Esper sent a memo to President Trump outlining six or seven reasons why the withdrawal shouldn't be accelerated and pushed forward. I'm pretty sure that he believes that was one of the major reasons, not the only one, but one of the major reasons for which President Trump fired him.

KRISTOL: So it wouldn't be unfair to call this the Trump-Biden withdrawal. Biden in this respect carried through, maybe in a slightly less Trump-y way in terms of rhetoric and decision-making, but carried through on what President Trump had wanted to do. And to be fair, what Biden himself had said he would do in the campaign of 2020. I mean, we had a campaign which both candidates were committed to withdrawal, so I suppose in some ways, people like us shouldn't be surprised by it.

EDELMAN: That's correct. And the Biden administration, people who've been discussing this on background with press and whatnot, have pointed out repeatedly to the fact that the United States under President Trump was committed to withdraw by May 1st of 2021 under this agreement.

Now, as I just said, they had plenty of reason, had they wanted to stay, to say, "Well, the Taliban is not living up to this agreement, so therefore we're not bound by the withdrawal deadline." In fact, they

postponed the withdrawal past May 1st, obviously. We're now in July, as you noted, and President Biden, when he made his announcement, set the final withdrawal deadline of September 11th this year, and now we're almost 90% or so complete with the withdrawal.

I think we're now down to a very small force of under a thousand troops and some contractors who are maintaining embassy security, and also helping Kabul airport remain open after the United States has withdrawn from Bagram air base.

And some of those folks may end up staying a little bit longer as part of the effort to help the Turks who have volunteered to try and keep the airport open in Kabul, and so some of them may stay on even beyond September 11th, I suspect, as part of that arrangement, although that has yet to be worked out.

So the administration basically is taking a position that we were obligated to do this, because the United States under President Trump had agreed to do this. There's a parallel here of course to Iraq, and it's a parallel that is, I think, unfortunately not one that makes me very hopeful about the future of Afghanistan.

When the Bush administration turned over Iraq to the Obama administration, we had just completed in November of 2008 a status of forces agreement and a strategic framework agreement with the government of Iraq, which said that all US forces would be withdrawn by December 31st, 2011.

Now, the broad understanding — and this is not just me saying this. Ryan Crocker, who was then our ambassador, and Dave Petraeus, who was the commanding general in Iraq at the time that this was negotiated, have all said on the record that there was a broad understanding that although we had reached this agreement, that it would be very difficult for the government of Iraq to actually take responsibility for security by January 1st, 2012, which of course put it right into our election season.

But the Obama administration ultimately — And this was very much driven by President Obama, because I think others in the administration recognized that this agreement had been done to placate the council of representatives in Baghdad, but that the Ministry of Defense and Interior were counting on the United States staying on past the December 31st, 2011 deadline.

In fact, the Minister of Defense came here in the spring of 2009 and got conflicting signals actually from people in the administration. Some people saying, "We're out of there on December 31st, 2011," and others saying, "Well, no. Maybe we can work something out." In the end of the day, they didn't work anything out. The US withdrew, and the consequence was that within three years, you had the crumbling of Iraqi Security Forces, the rise of the Islamic State and the creation of a caliphate in parts of Syria and Iraq, and a requirement for US forces to go back in, in order to help the Iraqis defeat the caliphate in Iraq and Syria, which took an additional three years, was completed in late 2017 under President Trump.

So there's a parallel here, obviously. It's not unknown for administrations to blame their predecessors for unpopular decisions they have to take, or decisions that they might not take otherwise. But this is now being laid at the doorstep of the Trump administration, with some justice, but it doesn't mean that they had to do it. This was a choice to carry out this agreement, given the fact that the Taliban's been violating it.

KRISTOL: President Biden's pretty much embraced the choice. I mean, he campaigned on it, and he's boasting about it. That's not quite fair, but he's not walking away from it at all, and I guess they will say they'll do certain things to stop what happened in the next few years.

And the 2011 withdrawal coincided with our failure to do much after the Arab Spring to help friends in the region; of course the failure to intervene in Syria altogether. A pretty disastrous next three, four, five years in that region, massive refugee flows, migration, destabilization of other parts of Europe, in fact. I mean, slaughter people in Syria, and of course in Iraq itself, the rise of ISIS, the killing of Americans and westerners. I mean, the whole thing. I've always thought 2011 is underrated as a kind of hinge year where things really went bad for the next several years, and we still haven't fully recovered from that.

Anyway, but let's talk about Afghanistan, I guess. Okay. So let's assume President Biden's not going to change his mind. And maybe it's just too late given how many troops are now out. I'm not sure Bagram — Can't just go back in, and so forth. So what happens? Why are people like you and me worried about this? It'll be a mess, and there'll be some nasty things that happen on the ground, but at the end of the day, 20 years was enough, and the world is a difficult place, and let's be realistic, and let's focus on China and the big power threats and all of this. What will happen, in your judgment?

EDELMAN: Well, first, I think the Biden administration is counting on public opinion essentially being with them on this. And obviously, there's a lot of frustration about the war on the part of the public. The likelihood is you've now started to see intelligence assessment suggesting that the regime could actually collapse within six months. I mean, I think people had originally thought it might be longer, and it might be longer. The truth is, we have no idea.

It's extremely worrisome that the Taliban has taken over just in the last few weeks about 10% of the district capitals in Afghanistan, including in a lot of places where traditionally the Taliban hasn't been particularly strong. And the Taliban is a Pashtun-based insurgency that is strongest in the southern part of the country. They've been operating in northern parts of the country with great effect, which is a bit of a surprise to some people.

They've also taken control of an important customs post on the Afghan border with Tajikistan. and I don't think people appreciate enough the degree to which the government of Afghanistan as a going concern relies on customs duties as a huge part of its revenues. I mean, there's very little else that generates revenue in the country, as I said. It's got a per capita income of \$500 a year, so you're not going to get a lot of tax revenue out of that. So it's transit trade and the customs duties associated with it that fund a lot of government services.

So the Taliban taking this over is worrisome on two scores. One, it gives them money to fuel their own operations, and they're taking over. As they've taken over these district capitals, they're getting a lot of US equipment that was left with the Afghan Security Forces, many of whom are fleeing across the border themselves, leaving their equipment behind. But it also starves the Afghan government of being able to operate and provide services, which is a crucial part of their ability to maintain their legitimacy and any support from the populace.

So it's already, I think, a very worrisome circumstance, and certainly I would hope that they can sustain themselves for some period of time, but this could unravel much more rapidly, I fear, than some people think. A lot of people point to the Najibullah government, which lasted for several years after the Soviets withdrew, much to the surprise of our own Central Intelligence Agency, which had a dog in the fight, so to speak, since they had been involved in attempting to remove the Afghan regime. But I think it could happen more quickly than that.

I wouldn't say it's shocking, but one of the things that is surprising, given the fact that the Biden administration has stressed so much that it's bringing back sort of deliberative process to the interagency structures of government — got regular order in their meetings of principals and deputies committees, et cetera — that this decision seems to have been made and announced without a lot of the downstream consequences being factored in.

So for instance, at the time that President Biden announced the decision, the Pentagon said that, "We'll continue to support the Afghans from outside of Afghanistan." But there is no plan yet, and nobody in the Pentagon or in the Biden administration can answer the question of, "Where will US forces be based?" Central Asia's likely to be a problem. We used to have bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. We've pulled out of those bases over the years, but as our relations with Russia have soured since 2014, those countries are very much subject to influence from Vladimir Putin. And it's very unlikely that Putin is going to do us any favors and smile on US forces being in Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan, where they would be nearby.

So we're going to have to operate from much further away, and Frank McKenzie, the commander of CENTCOM, has said that we can fly some of these missions from the Gulf countries where we're based, but those are very long flights. They need refueling. And it's not impossible, as he put it, but it isn't easy either, particularly if you're talking about timely air support.

And withdrawing the contractors from Afghanistan is a particularly large problem, because those contractors are what keep Afghan rotary wing, and to the degree that there's fixed-wing aircraft, in the air, providing air support for the Afghan National Security Forces. So there've been a lot of questions about how all this is going to work that I don't think really have been completely thought through and worked out. I mean, that's kind of one level.

KRISTOL: One senses that they don't — They kind of think, I suppose, "It's going to unravel gradually, or maybe a little more quickly. There'll be problems. There'll be humanitarian disasters and the like, but at the end of the day, we can contain the actual terrorism threat, maybe in a long-range way with drones and all this. And there's a limit to what we can do for the Afghan people. And it's too bad," I suppose they would say, and they'll hope for the best and whatever.

But is it really a fundamental threat to us, to our allies, to geopolitical stability? Or is it just something we have to sort of swallow hard and put up with? That's kind of the sophisticated, I would say, realist view that acknowledges that things aren't going to be great over there, but hopes they're not terrible, but especially hopes the consequences aren't very fundamental, so it just becomes kind of an unpleasant aspect of a consequence of one particular decision.

EDELMAN: I think you're right, and I think this may be a miscalculation. So I mentioned earlier that I thought that the Biden administration is counting on the fact that the public's quite fatigued with being in Afghanistan, that the likely reaction of many Americans, if and when this does unravel, that we start to see scenes of Taliban violence against women and girls and human rights violations and refugee flows, that people will say, "Well, this just shows we shouldn't have been there in the first place. Because after 20 years, if the Afghans can't fight for themselves, why should we be there to fight for them?" In fact, some members of the administration have already articulated this in podcasts and background comments, et cetera.

I think that might be a miscalculation, because while the public's first blush reaction may be that, sober second thought may be something else. In particular, if the terrorist threat starts to recreate itself more rapidly than we anticipate, and if the whole thing unravels very rapidly, it's very possible that the terrorist threat could become greater once again. Now, it may be awhile before it immediately threatens attacks on the homeland, as it did on 9/11, but you could see other phenomena.

So for instance, we talked about what happened in Iraq and Syria between 2011 and 2014. According to Pew data, the most noted foreign policy story for the American public since 9/11 was the beheading of James Foley, the American journalist, by the Islamic State. And it was largely that and a couple of associated acts of terror by the Islamic State that ultimately drove the Obama administration back into Iraq, and back into taking action to get rid of the Islamic State, and ultimately deploy forces very quietly into Syria. So I fear that you might see that happen again, but there are also broader geopolitical ramifications that I think are potentially quite serious that I'm not sure they have completely thought through again.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Well, let's talk about that because I think you wrote a piece about this for *The Bulwark* a few weeks ago. I think that's the one thing I'm so struck by the whole discussion is, it takes place as if there's this isolated country, Afghanistan. You pull out, maybe some bad things happen. Maybe we need to have our guard up on counter terrorism, but it's not connected to anything else in the world. We just get to make this decision, put the forever war behind us, be slightly guilty about what happens on the ground there. Take in — I hope we do, of course — many more Afghan translators and people who work with us. Though, I can't say the administration has been terribly quick on the draw there either. And then it's just kind of this isolated problem. Talk about that because that was what you stressed in your piece for *The Bulwark* —

EDELMAN: Yes. And so, first of all, again, there's a history here. Afghanistan is a very remote country, but that doesn't mean it's an insignificant country or it doesn't have any geopolitical significance. Obviously the Soviet intervention there in 1979, set off a chain of effects, including the Carter Doctrine because of concerns that the Soviets might have designs on Iran, where the revolution was immediately underway. Afghanistan is a neighbor of Iran's, of course. But the notion that because it's remote and far away, it doesn't have all sorts of potential knock on effects, I think is quite wrong.

Well, first of all, there will be reputational consequences for the United States for being seen to have abandoned an ally. And no matter what people say about, "Well, it was 20 years, and we gave it all we wanted." Other allies in Asia will be discomfited, and partners, not just treaty allies.

But take a country like India, for example, which has a lot of concern about what goes on in Afghanistan because of the problems it has with Pakistan and the role that Pakistan plays in Afghanistan, including providing a safe haven for the Taliban and actually allowing this whole Taliban insurgency to make a comeback after 2003, 2004. The Taliban basically was defeated, and dispersed, and gone from Afghanistan. And from 2001 to 2004, we had an election in 2004, there was almost no violence whatsoever in that election. It was after that, that the Taliban insurgency came back. And that was largely a function of the sponsorship of Pakistan, and Pakistan providing a safe haven.

We tend to forget, you talked about the consequences of inaction in Syria and the role that refugees played in de-stabilizing European governments because of migration, uncontrolled migration and giving rise to a lot of populous movements in Central and Eastern Europe and in Germany. Because of the fear of waves of migrants. Now, most of them were coming from Syria, but there was no small number of Afghans as well, seeking shelter.

And if the government does collapse, I think people tend to forget that before Syria, the largest population of refugees we had ever known was 2 million Afghans. Most of them sitting in Pakistan after the Soviet invasion in 1979. And of course those folks became both the Taliban, but also became the petri dish in which Al Qaeda emerged and ultimately struck the United States.

Secretary of Defense, Bob Gates for whom I worked, and I had multiple discussions about this. We walked away from our involvement, our covert involvement in Afghanistan and forcing the Soviets out in 1992 when the Najib government fell. And we just forgot about Afghanistan and treated it as if it was of no consequence. And while we did that, Al Qaeda was brewing in Afghanistan and planning mass casualty attacks that killed 3,000 of our country men on September 11th, 20 years ago.

And it's easy to forget that now, because we're at 20 years removed. That's the same remove between the Pearl Harbor and the inauguration of John Kennedy, if you want to put it in those kinds of terms. It can give you a sense of how far removed we are from it. But it doesn't mean that that kind of thing couldn't happen again.

But the refugee flow into Pakistan is what concerns me most because Pakistan is a persistently fragile and failing state. You've got a prime minister currently Imran Khan, who is basically appears to be encouraging greater Islamicization of the education system after years of people pushing back against that. And Pakistan already is a nuclear weapon state that has a very large nuclear arsenal and is producing enormous amounts of plutonium. So it's going to have a larger arsenal. Its arsenal already is getting close to the UK's arsenal and could easily outstrip the UK's arsenal. It's right now, I think the fifth largest nuclear weapon state in the world, it could easily become the fourth. And the collapse of Pakistan with a lot of nuclear warheads around, and no US forces nearby to try and secure them, should they get loose is something that everybody ought to be worried about in my view.

KRISTOL: Yeah. It's striking. I've been in one or two war games. This was maybe 10, 12 years ago, actually, when people were much more thinking about this because there had been crises in Pakistan and India, and also India versus Pakistan crises. And then we had lot of troops in Afghanistan and people

were talking about all this more. Yeah. One of the scariest war game scenarios is the loose nukes in Pakistan scenario.

And again, you think that just in a common sense way, if you have a few thousand troops in Afghanistan, it borders, Pakistan, Iran, China near to Russia. And if things are okay and it's not contributing, it's not hurting, it's not contributing to any weakening of the US and the region. It's not contributing to further migrant flows. It's not contributing to more radicalization in the region. If you could really make that case, why mess with that? Why risk it? So what? So we can say we've ended a forever war? We pull out our few thousand troops.

I understand the impatience and the sort of wish to wash our hands a little bit. But even if the chances of what we're talking about are 10%, maybe they're more like 20% or 30% or 40%. But even if they're 5%, it's such a high risk. The risk is so great, and the reward is not so great. It seems to me. And so you just said. But people don't want to think about that.

And there are probably other scenarios we could talk about for a minute too that we haven't even focused on with the Pakistan. That's a really frustrating country. But we do not want loose nukes or much more radical irresponsible government, or government losing control of its own territory. And therefore there are coups, and counter coups, and whatever. God knows, right?

EDELMAN: And given the history of Pakistan's, what one scholar has described to me as its addiction to jihadism as a tool, particularly against India. We've had a couple of very serious incidents between Pakistan and India. We had the Mumbai incident in December of 2008 as we were leaving office in the Bush administration. And we haven't had anything quite like that since then, but it doesn't take much imagination to think that as Pakistan's problems accumulate that it might very easily choose to provoke some kind of crisis with India. And that would be something that could lead to bringing these nuclear warheads out of garrison, mating them with weapons and delegating authority down to the brigade level to use them in the conflict with India. And this is precisely the kind of scenario you were talking about in gaming that is the most likely route for something that President Obama said was the most dangerous threat we faced, which was terrorists getting their hands on nuclear weapons.

EDELMAN: And thankfully, as you say, it's not a high probability event, I guess I would say. I don't want to say it's a low probability event because it's possible. And it's conceivable. And I think as long as it's conceivable, we ought to be trying to put ourselves in a position to keep it from happening, not limiting our options, which is one of the consequences of this decision of Afghanistan.

II: Unintended Consequences (42:17 – 1:01:42)

KRISTOL: And the other thing that I think people underrate, and I'm curious what you think about this is, standing by and watching a genocide or maybe genocide or ethnic cleansing, or just kind of slaughter even, in more limited ways happening, especially in a country that we've been involved in so much for 20 years. It has reputational consequences, but also more direct consequences.

I've always thought that the failure in Rwanda, where we had no presence in 1994, so we had nothing comparable in terms of obligation, I think what I could say, to Afghanistan; but the fact that, that just happened has got to have had an influence on Milosevic's confidence that he can get away with things in Europe. And we know that Assad surviving in Syria, that must've emboldened others and Putin. They all look at each other, right? I think Obama's failure to enforce the red line in Syria, I think we have pretty good evidence that this convinced Putin that he could do what he wanted to some degree in Ukraine and get away with it, just less than a year later.

And I just think if you're a dictator thinking of either doing things at home or doing some things in your own near-abroad, you'll be emboldened as we do nothing, assuming we don't do much. And terrible things happen to people we literally worked with in Afghanistan. I just think it does unfortunately embolden the very bad guys and discourage people from taking risks to be on our side, or on the side of fighting for decency and freedom of these different parts of the world.

EDELMAN: Absolutely. I mean, the argument *ad Hitleram* is always suspect, but so I'm going to say this advisedly, but Hitler famously said when in counsel, that his persecution of Jews in Germany might bring down the condemnation of the international community. He said, "Who remembers the Armenians?" And that was only some 20 years earlier. So yes, I mean, I think people do look at this. And they will see the US standing by, it will be pretty awful.

And this decision is sometimes justified in terms of the Middle East in general, but Afghanistan in particular, as a distraction. The real long pole in the tent from a strategic point of view is the competition with China. We need to turn our attention to East Asia, and well, there's of course an element of truth in all of that. 3,500 troops in Afghanistan are not going to give you — First of all, they've not by and large been the kind of forces that you need to deal with Indo-Pacific contingencies, first of all. But second of all the United States abandoning a country that we spent 20 years, trillions of dollars, trying to sustain. However justified, in terms of the frustrating nature of the conflict, the failure to have a decisive outcome, whatever people find troubling about it. It will still raise questions in the minds of allies about our staying power and our willingness to ultimately support them *in extremis*. It will just be corrosive and eat away at our alliances.

And it will probably force the Biden administration to take some actions that they might not otherwise take in order to reassure allies that we will be there for them in the event that they get into trouble and that can have consequences of its own. It may make things in the competition with China even more complicated.

KRISTOL: So let's assume the pull-out happens. And let's just for now assume that two, three months from now, it's not disastrous yet, though it's maybe not great of course in Afghanistan. And let's assume even that we are doing what we should be doing in terms of taking in people who work directly with us. What would you and Tony Blinken, Secretary of State call you up and says, "Okay, Eric, maybe we shouldn't have done it, but the president wanted to do it. He was committed to it. He carried through on his campaign promise." But how reparable? Are there obvious things that could be done three, six, nine months from now to kind of mitigate the situation and repair it? Anything obvious that you would urge the interagency process and the Biden administration now that they've got more staff there they would — Well, Biden individually made the decision, to be working on.

EDELMAN: I think they really need to try and get some forces nearby, figure out whether they can get back into Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan, or Manas in Kyrgyzstan, someplace like that. They've got to be closer. I think already you're seeing signs of how difficult it is to repair these things. It's always more expensive to go back in and fix this than it is to have kept a small, sustainable footprint, which is, I think, where we were kind of headed. We had kind of achieved it, actually. I think it's going to be much harder and more expensive to go back in.

And look at the way we left Bagram, which by the way even putting the best construction on it seems very unseemly. The Afghan commander says that he didn't know the Americans were gone until two hours after they left. And they just turned off the lights. There seems to have been some looting. It's not clear whether the Americans just took a lot of stuff with them or people got in.

This is all obviously being justified on the grounds of operational security because of concerns about the Taliban attacks on US Forces. And by the way, I think the Biden administration has been telegraphing the sensitivity to the Taliban attacking US Forces, which has of course made them even bigger targets, because the Taliban knows if you want to get the Biden administration to pull out, start attacking US Forces because that's a point of neuralgia and sensitivity for the administration.

So, I mean, I hate to say anything is ever irreparable because we can always go back in and we did go back in in Iraq, but I think if you have to go back in, it's always harder, it's more expensive, and it would have been better had you not put yourself in that position.

KRISTOL: And for those of us who supported Biden, just like you and I did, and hoped it would be a moment of revival of traditional, you might say, American foreign policy, where we stand with our allies

and use our forces to help those fighting for liberty around the world, support democracies, et cetera. And there's been some of that, to be fair, from the Biden administration, and some encouraging signs I would say, and some bipartisan signs, a consensus on standing up to China.

This is what I think, in a way, I mean, what worries me the most is really what happens in Afghanistan itself, but what worries me almost as much is, yeah, the way which this could undercut an awful lot of that. It would be sort of like — I mean, Vietnam, I'm not sure the political implications will be that great. I mean, Vietnam was horrible in '75, '76. Cambodia, I mean, real slaughter. And I don't know that Ford and Carter talked much about it in the '76 campaign. Both parties were kind of — I mean, Ford had tried to do the right thing I think in '75, but he was so weak, he couldn't, and Congress stopped him. And neither party really had much stomach for campaigning reversing that. That was after Vietnam, where we had 50,000 American deaths, et cetera.

And I suppose President Obama got reelected in 2012 after pulling out of Iraq. It wasn't obvious yet what the consequences of that would be. So maybe for the next year or two years, it's sort of a Trumpy Republican party is not going to be wildly interventionist either.

Now, in the case of Vietnam, it's interesting. Reagan did run and win in 1980 partly on a foreign policy platform, which didn't exactly re-litigate Vietnam, but I think it didn't hurt him. I think no one would have predicted this five years earlier, that he had been a supporter of the war and a critic of the —

EDELMAN: All the way through.

KRISTOL: Yeah, interesting. I mean, even though — And he didn't approve of the way it was fought and all this, but in a way, the country did in 1980 turn to someone who hadn't been part of the withdrawal that, in retrospect, you could say began in maybe '73 or '75, but went on through obviously until '79, and in a way, the Iranian Revolution in Afghanistan.

So we could have a rough three or four years maybe at the end of it if someone says, "Yeah, that was a bad path to be on."

So final question, I guess how much — That would be important [inaudible] to the Biden administration, if they're serious about the broader foreign policy they've articulated, and they want to make the case that Afghanistan is kind of a one-off unique situation, "forever war," they need to act in a way that that limits the damage there and controls its effects beyond, right? But I don't think they can do that just by turning away or by giving a speech about China or Putin two months from now or something like that.

EDELMAN: Yeah. I mean, if you think about the Vietnam analogy, and of course analogies are always tricky and there's lots of differences, but one of the things that strikes me is we were actually kind of in a better place in 1973 when the US withdrew from Vietnam than we are actually today in Afghanistan. We had actually, it was too late, but we had actually come upon a counter-insurgency strategy that had actually ended the Vietcong insurgency in South Vietnam. And people tend to forget that in '75 when the war ended, it was not the Vietcong that won, it was the North Vietnamese army. It was main force North Vietnamese troops coming south who won the war.

And having talked to Dr. Kissinger about this, I mean, one of the things he was counting on was continued air support for the government of South Vietnam, and that was cut off by the Congress, because the Congress, and I think really there was pretty much bipartisan support for this in the Congress, had had enough of Vietnam. And it goes back to your earlier question. If things really go to smash and we try to go back in, will Congress actually let that happen? I suspect not. I suspect it will be very hard.

So I think the administration will have to try and cauterize the wound and just say, as you just said, "This is a one-off, this was a forever war, but now we're going to do X, Y, and Z." And we did do things after 1975. We reinforced the fleet in the Pacific. We made it clear we were going to stay. We refurbished our relations with Japan and other allies and in East Asia. and ultimately some East Asian leaders like Lee

Kuan Yew ultimately came to see Vietnam in a positive light, which is to say Lee Kuan Yew, the former senior minister in Singapore, basically argued that the US had bought time for the rest of Southeast Asia to become the economic powerhouse that it had by holding off communism for some period of years.

I'm not sure we're going to have quite that positive an outcome here, but certainly there are things that we could do in the Indo-Pacific to reassure allies and in South Asia with India that will show that the United States is going to stay engaged if the administration sees fit to do it. There's a danger that they may be so focused on domestic issues because they've got a big infrastructure package up. They've got lots of spending plans. If they don't want to pick fights over national security, they might just say, "Okay, well, just let it go." And that will have very deleterious consequences in the long run in my view.

KRISTOL: And if you think Afghanistan is a mess, "the forever war," Pakistan is a forever mess and a forever challenge. And morally complicated too, as you're working with people who have done things that are a damage to us and provided safe havens for people killing our troops and so forth.

So I mean, an administration that doesn't have the stomach to handle the Afghanistan issue will have the stomach to really do what you might want to do, might have to do in terms of real diplomatic, plus covert, plus maybe overt military relationships, engagements, threats within Pakistan and at its borders. I mean, the message that, "if it gets messy, we're not quite up to it," is sort of a bad message for a superpower to send, I'm afraid.

EDELMAN: I think that's right. I mean, Pakistan, in some sense, has been a failing state since the Partition in 1947. And it's an interesting thought experiment if you think about Pakistan and the mess that it is, has been and is, and you look at all the progress India has made over the last 30, 40 years, and you wonder what would this whole place look like had you not had the Partition and the creation of Pakistan.

KRISTOL: That's a whole different discussion. We could do our history counterfactual discussion. It is a difficult part of the world.

Well, I'm sorry this hasn't been a more encouraging conversation, but I think it's very important to be honest and candid. And this is your judgment, and I very much share it, about the risks we're now facing. And it's happening in real-time. We're talking here on, what, Thursday, July 8th. The withdrawal has mostly happened and is happening. And as we've tried to say, I think you've tried to say as a responsible former senior official in the State and Defense Departments, there are things you can do to mitigate the damage.

And I do think there, the tone — now just a final thing — the tone of which the Biden administration addresses it is not unimportant. I mean, if the President gives a speech in which, "Look, this was very difficult and I'm proud of what we did do and tried to do. And this does not mean we're turning our back on anything, and we're in fact very engaged in the region. And I'm meeting," I'm making this up obviously, "I'm meeting with the Pakistani Prime Minister the next month. And the Indians —" And that's sort of one —

EDELMAN: "I just met with Ghani. We're going to continue to support him."

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's one sort of message to the world. The other kind is, "It's great we got out of there," and thank God, wash our hands of it. "What were we doing all those years? And I'm very sorry for the sacrifices obviously of the troops, but we didn't do anything. We didn't accomplish anything. We didn't find anything," which is some of the rhetoric of some people about Afghanistan, not to be unfair, I don't think the administration mostly. I think it's pretty important, don't you think, where on that spectrum they end up sort of in terms of the message they're sending.

EDELMAN: Even if you agree and support the idea of the US getting out, as my colleague at Johns Hopkins SAIS and former foreign service colleague, Carter Malkasian does, he has a piece in Politico, I think it was yesterday, about what Americans didn't understand about the war. It's a very thoughtful piece. I don't agree with all of it because Carter ultimately thinks we should get out and I obviously don't.

But he's very good about saying, "Look, there was a lot that was accomplished. This was very complicated." It was, as I said at the outset, the task that we undertook was Herculean to begin with.

And one of the things I think that perhaps — And I don't want to be partisan about this. I think across the board, political leaders on both sides of the aisle have maybe not stressed enough to the public that, look, this is a very, very difficult undertaking. This is one of the poorest countries in the world. To get them on their feet is going to take a long time. But we still have troops in Germany. World War II ended in 1945, we still have troops there. The Korean war ended in 1953, we still have troops in Korea. And there, in my view, is no reason why we couldn't have continued to have, for a number of years, troops in Afghanistan to try and hold the whole thing together to keep it from the kind of worst consequences that we're fearful are going to befall based on this conversation.

KRISTOL: There were international troops for a long time in the Balkans, and maybe there still are. I'm not even sure. It's so low profile, one doesn't even keep track, or I don't, but that was a messy intervention, but you know what? A lot of what you achieve in foreign policy is stopping something really bad from happening, both in terms of the actual effect on people, ethnic cleansing and genocide there, but also in terms of its potential ripple effects. And you don't stop them forever perhaps, but you at least buy time so other things can change.

EDELMAN: I mean, and we have stayed in South Korea. South Korea was a really dirt poor country in 1950 when the war broke out, and certainly after the war in '53, '54. Now it's the 11th largest economy in the world. So, I mean, yes, it takes a long time.

And a lot of what you're doing, as you were saying, in national security policy is not solving problems because a lot of these problems don't really have a solution. What you're doing is trying to manage them in the best possible way that leaves you in the most advantageous position. And that's what I think we're giving up here.

KRISTOL: Well, let's hope despite the giving up that we can recoup and manage as well as we can, and you'll be providing advice to the administration I'm sure, both privately and publicly about how to do that. And let's hope this doesn't go as badly as it might, but it's very important to have clear eyes about unfortunately what could happen.

So Eric, I want to thank you very much for this discouraging, but I think informative and helpful I think to our fellow citizens, discussion about Afghanistan. And thanks for joining me again, Eric.

EDELMAN: Thank you, Bill, and I hope our next conversation is slightly more uplifting.

KRISTOL: Yeah, me too.
And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]