

Conversations with Bill Kristol

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I. Polarization and Disinformation (0:15 – 33:00)

KRISTOL: I am Bill Kristol. Welcome to CONVERSATIONS, and I'm very pleased to be joined today by Jonathan Rauch, a longtime friend and someone I've admired a lot and very much looking forward to hearing from. Author of an excellent new book. I should hold this up here, that's what you're supposed to do, [The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth](#), published by the Brookings Institution where he's a senior fellow. In a way this book, John, I think is a follow-up to a book you wrote, God, it's hard to believe almost three decades ago, *Kindly Inquisitors: Attacks on Free Thought*, which I remember well reading at the time. So, John, thanks for joining me today.

RAUCH: It's a special pleasure. I love the podcast and your father helped me with the *Kindly Inquisitors* at AEI all those years ago. So this, in that way, closes the circle.

KRISTOL: Oh, that's great. I didn't know that, so that's good. That's good to hear. You also wrote an excellent piece last year, I thought — I might just begin with that for a couple of minutes before getting into the things you particularly focus on in the book — in *National Affairs*, I think was about a year ago, two years ago, I guess, on polarization and partisanship. And it does seem to me that that was more about the political moment, but it seems to lay the groundwork for what you talk about in the book. So say a few words about sort of how we got to be so polarized and partisan.

RAUCH: Well, they relate to each other. The way we're used to thinking about polarization is as people divided ideologically over issues: taxes up, taxes down; abortion, yes, abortion, no. What we've seen emerge in the last 10, 15 years is something different. It's what people call “affective polarization” and “negative partisanship.” And that's where it's not so much about issues, it's about not liking the other side. It's actually hating and fearing them. And the interesting thing about that is it doesn't necessarily correlate

with people liking their own party. It's that they like the other party even less, it's called the lesser of two evils identity defense, which is when I don't really like my team, but I defend my membership in the team by really hating the other team.

And that leads to this weird dynamic where the worse my team behaves, the worse I have to think about the other team, and that leads to these downward spirals we're seeing. And that's part of what led me to write this book, which is, okay, where is this coming from? And my realization, one of the things it's coming from is a deliberate campaign to divide polarized Americans.

KRISTOL: Yeah. No, but I think a lot of the political scientists who've debated how much partisanship there is — not just among the elites or politicians, but among the country, the population as a whole, the public as a whole — and I think that debates, whatever the truth was 10 or 20 years ago, it does seem like it's permeated down to the public now and tribalism and so forth. It does seem like that laid the groundwork, I mean, for Donald Trump, obviously, but also for people on the left to do certain things. It does seem so resonant that the notion of this affective polarization, which isn't so much about issues — god knows Trump was less conservative. And in fact, some people welcomed that almost in 2015, 2016, less ideological, I guess you'd say than the normal way we think about polarization or partisanship.

But I guess there are a million political and cultural and social reasons for the polarization and the partisanship, but into that world of tribalism — another word that you use, and others use, to characterize this moment — comes Donald Trump. So say a word about, I mean, I don't want to dwell on Trump too much on this talk, there's so much more to talk about, but we should begin with him, as it is important, right?

RAUCH: Yeah, we should. And actually a point you made on the way to the question about Trump is very important, which is I did a deep dive in this new book on disinformation and how it works. These are very old and very powerful psychological techniques that exploit cognitive vulnerabilities. But what they're ultimately out to do is weaken the target population by dividing them. And it turns out there's a kind of cycle that goes on here. So a divided population, one that is polarized, is much more receptive to disinformation because people are more willing to believe conspiracy theories about the other side; and they're more willing to believe disinformation that helps them defend their point of view. And then the disinformation itself is aimed at further polarizing the public.

That's what Vladimir Putin was up to in 2016 when they used disinformation tactics to spur simultaneous demonstrations on both sides of an issue across the street from each other. What they're trying to do is weaken society by polarizing it. So polarization and propaganda are two sides of the same coin. They feed each other. That's the spiral we're in now.

So we were headed down that road well before 2016; but a game changer happened in 2016 and that's Donald Trump. What I'm about to say will sound partisan. I don't think it is. I understand why people will say it is, but I'm of the center, right? Very much like where you are, Bill. I have voted for and supported many Republicans and I wish I could do so today.

But Donald Trump is a game-changer, not ideologically, but because he had made a career manipulating information in the media environment. He knew how to do it. We knew that because he told us in interviews. This was someone who in the 2016 campaign did something Americans were completely unprepared for. He used a technique called the fire hose of falsehood. This is a technique that the Russians are especially fond of. And that's where you just pour out so many lies, half-truths and conspiracy theories that the media can't keep up, the public can't keep up. By the time they refuted one or tried to refute it, all they've done is amplified and meanwhile, you've issued 10 more.

By the end of the 2016 campaign, PolitiFact, which is rating Clinton and Trump, clocks Hillary Clinton at 25% of what she says is either mostly or entirely false, and that's bad. We don't praise that. But the equivalent figure for Donald Trump is 70%. What's coming out of his mouth is more likely to be false than true. So what he's doing is what his advisor, Steve Bannon, calls "flooding the zone with shit." And this is a powerful disinformation tactic that's designed to disorient people, to confuse them, to give up on trusting anyone so they become cynical and they become open to say dictatorship or cult of personality.

And Trump, I believe is a kind of genius. I believe people dismiss him and they say, "Well, the guy's a buffoon, thank goodness, or our democracy wouldn't survive." He is not a buffoon in the realm of information warfare. He is the most talented innovator since the 1930s because he figured out how to adapt Russian-style disinformation to US politics. And this is a naive population, we had never faced that before. No one, no politician of either party, had ever dreamed of trying this.

And then it got much worse last year. "Stop the Steal" is easily the most audacious and sweeping and effective disinformation campaign that anyone, domestic or foreign, has ever run against the United States. And the result is what we see now: heightened polarization, belief of 70% of the Republican Party that the election was stolen. And if we don't figure out what's going on and rally against it, it gets worse, not better.

KRISTOL: Yeah, it's so interesting. I mean, I myself always thought people underestimated the extent to which Trump was a conman, and that you could learn a fair amount by reading about the history of different conmen and their marks. And one of the reasons people stuck with Trump is that marks don't like to admit that they've been conned and so forth. But you're going beyond that, I think. That's, I think, very important what you're saying that it's not just, you've got a fake story or a financial conman and you make up the returns that your investors are going to get and then you manage to stay a few steps ahead of the truth by continuing to make up new stories. But it's more systematic, the kind of disorientation that Trump is purposely engaging in.

RAUCH: Yeah. And he's using a whole suite of these tactics and again, they're well known, they're well studied. One of them is what we call trolling, but this was perfected by Hitler and Goebbels who said, "We don't care if they laugh at us. We don't care if they say things about us. The point is we want them to think about us all the time."

So when Trump issues daily multiple outrages, offending norms, trolling people, accusing a former Congressman of murdering an aide, ludicrous stuff like this, we might think, what is he doing? Is he a crazy person? But he understands that with outrage, you can hijack attention because another cognitive vulnerability of people is we rush to the defense of our tribe or our sacred values. We can't really help it. We can't let these things stand, so he's able to hijack attention. That's what trolling is doing and he does that systematically.

There's another tactic, "conspiracy bootstrapping." That's where you seed a conspiracy or you pick one up and then you say, "Well, a lot of people are saying this." And then you demand an investigation, or you say that the media is covering it up, and then you do this 10 times in a row and then you spread these conspiracies. He's very good at that. He's constantly saying, "Well, I'm not sure, but some people are saying that Joe Scarborough murdered his wife. People should look into that." And so he's merchandising this stuff. So these are all age old techniques and they're very effective and he's very good at them. And now they've been adopted by the Republican party, not just Trump. The recount, the so-called audit in Maricopa County in Arizona is an example of that.

KRISTOL: No, I think that's good. Well, I think it was Scarborough's aide, not his wife.

RAUCH: His aide.

KRISTOL: Yeah. The outrages are not there for like a Trumpian excess that you'd be better off without. I think that's one of your key insights and points. I mean, when you really thought through this, the kind of demagoguery Trump is engaged in.

And Harvey Mansell said this right up to the election in a conversation we had, that demagogues like being outrageous. It sort of fits into the success of the demagoguery. They're not successful *despite* saying things that are over the line, right? They're successful because somehow they say things that are over the line and acclimate people, not quite to believing them. I'm explaining that a little more. What do they acclimate people to? Just not believing anything?

It's a little hard to get your head around it if you're kind of used to operating in normal democratic politics. Well, as you said, we're naive. I feel that myself. You're used to operating in normal democratic, sometimes demagogic, sometimes hyper-ideological — I'm embarrassed by some things I've said in the past. But still, it's different in kind somehow and quality from what Trump has engaged in.

RAUCH: Yeah. This requires transposing our brains to a space where Americans are just not used to thinking about. So the way I think about what these tactics have in common, because different ones exploit different vulnerabilities, and that's before we get to cancel culture, which is also a form of information warfare. But information warfare, or as I call it, epistemic warfare is the art of organizing and manipulating the social and media environment in order to dominate, divide, disorient and ultimately demoralize the target population.

So you can dominate the debate, that's what trolling is doing. You can divide the other side, heighten polarization, that's what Trump did every day with, for example, "liberate Michigan," turning masks into a divisive issue and doing that on purpose. He knows what he's doing.

Disorienting, that's the fire hose of falsehood. That's "flood the zone with shit," that's make people cynical and confused because they hear so much that's coming from so many sources that's so outrageous that they no longer know what to believe.

A good example of that was Senator John Neely Kennedy saying during the Ukraine scandal, "Well, we don't know whether Russia hacked Democratic servers or whether Ukraine did. We never will know." Well, that's not true. We do know, it was Russia. It was not Ukraine. But the condition, the mental condition that this campaign is seeking to induce is one of confusion, disorientation, "we'll never know, I don't know who to trust, I'm cynical, so Donald Trump, tell me the truth."

And the ultimate goal of all of these things is to demoralize the target population, make them feel like they don't know who to trust, they can't control the debate. Demoralization is demobilization, and that makes them politically passive and much easier to demagogue. And that's what we've seen in the US.

KRISTOL: But the target population, just to be clear, what's I think so interesting about your formulation, the target population is your own potential supporters, not the opponents. We usually think of targets as the other side, but you're saying that he's both demoralizing them, but then he's kind of motivating them, right? An awful lot of them voted for him, he's got energized supporters. So how does that fit together?

RAUCH: You want to do both, and you can do both. Putin is very happy if he can convince Americans that the 2016 election was stolen or whatever, but he's also happy with a subsidiary goal, which is just to confuse people so that they think they don't know who's telling the truth. He's happy with either one and he can do both. And the answer is, it turns out you do do both.

So studies that look at this find that you can convince a solid minority of people, like say a lot of Republicans of a conspiracy theory and they'll believe that the falsehood is true. But then there's another group which is two to three times larger, which can get you to over a majority of the American public that say, "Well, I just don't know who's telling the truth anymore." And so you want to do both and Trump has done both.

He's convinced a substantial share of the public, most Republicans, the election was stolen and he's convinced many other people, "Well, we don't really know for sure. We have all these doubts about the outcome of the election." It's a win either way. And it's also a win if you just get people talking about it, right? If you get people repeating the claim even to refute it.

KRISTOL: No, that's good. I mean, I've quoted Havel many times. All of us have different versions of what he said about the demoralization, the confusion, the uncertainty about truth plays into a dictator's hands, an autocrat's hands in let's say Eastern Europe and the Central Eastern Europe in the seventies and eighties.

But this is a little more complicated, which is both — they just wanted a passive population. They didn't really care if there weren't that many enthusiastic supporters of whatever second or third rate hack, communist dictator was now in power atop that bureaucratic party infrastructure. The trick with Trump and what's sort of impressive in a terrible way is the combination of huge enthusiasm of almost cult-like devotion from some chunk of followers, and then the confusion of the others, so they just go along with it because they dislike the other side more.

So it does get back certainly to the negative partisanship side of it is very, very important, right? That you need that as the ground for the acquiescence to the demagogue on your side, I guess.

RAUCH: Yeah. These things are building each other. If you're a propagandist, the condition you want to induce is that propaganda is a participatory sport, it's not a spectator sport. So what you're going to do is scour the environment for a conspiracy theory or a lie or whatever, or even a half-truth that's sort of taking off out there, maybe it's anti-vaxxers. And then you can latch onto it and you can amplify it and then you can get the people out there to continue building it. So you and the population, your support population, kind of collaborate in this process of going down these epistemic rabbit holes, you amplify each other.

We saw this all the time with Trump in his rallies. That's kind of what he's doing. He's trying these themes, he's seeing what resonates, he's picking up on what comes back, he's amplifying that. And the ultimate goal, what you're doing with all of this stuff is dividing and polarizing the target population, which makes them even more vulnerable.

And that's why these tactics are so dangerous when applied to a naive population like America, where it never occurred to us, Bill, that we would see a president of the United States in a major political party applying Russian style, Eastern European style disinformation to our own population. A domestic attack seems so unthinkable that even now the standard story is more like, well, there are lots of social forces and they're causing polarization. There's the decline of organized religion and there's the stagnation of middle-class, white working class incomes and there's social media and whatnot.

And yeah, I'm happy to have those conversations. There's truth in all of that, but let's not neglect what's there in front of our nose, which is the United States has been targeted by a massive, systematic and very sophisticated information warfare attack for a period of years now.

KRISTOL: Yeah. And we're not doing terribly well, or at least half of us aren't doing very well resisting it. We'll get to the other half because there's problems on the left as you detailed in the book and as you...

Actually in a way, the first book, 30 years ago, almost 30 years ago was even more about that side of things, I think.

But one thing you said very early on just in passing in the context of affective polarization was that people become unhappy even with their own side, but then somehow the spiral intensifies. I've always had the hunch, but I never thought about it until now, that Trump's attacks on his Republican predecessors as nominees and as presidents, McCain and Romney and the Bushes and so forth, the conventional view, and I think I probably shared it was, well, that kind of hurt him in a Republican primary. It's a little crazy. I mean, whatever people think of their presidencies or those people as political leaders, by definition, lots of Republicans voted for them at least once, right? So it's kind of odd to sort of go out of your way to attack them.

But I think what you're saying is that in a way that was also part of the, not a bug, but a feature, right? The kind of discrediting almost of prior leaders on your own side and taking advantage of people's disappointment that they didn't win, or disappointment that some of the policies didn't work out and so forth. The attack on McCain as he "prefers people who weren't captured," maybe that didn't hurt him. I remember —

RAUCH: We thought it was over that day. I still remember, okay, that's the end of Donald Trump.

KRISTOL: Right. So say a word about that. I was struck by that, I guess because people in this kind of environment get unhappy even with their own side of the partisan and polarized environment, right? And he somehow was able to exploit that as well.

RAUCH: He's a very sophisticated guy. We know this because he's been using these tactics basically throughout his professional career. He's very good at them and he understands a couple of things. First is if you want to build a cult of personality and you want to be a demagogue, you want to demolish the institutions and establishments that stand in your way, the professionals and the people like John McCain. You don't want that. They're going to try to block you if they can. They don't want the Republican Party to become the fiefdom of a single person.

KRISTOL: Or at least limit you when you're in office and so forth. I mean, I do think the collapse of the Republican establishment after he became president, which is so striking, we should talk about for a minute, he understood in a way almost ahead of time that he wanted to start undermining that as well, don't you think?

RAUCH: Yeah. And the demolition of all institutions of trust is again, it's what disinformation is out to do.

And then he also intuitively I think understood the second thing, which is what you just said, that he's not out there to stimulate more affection for the Republican Party, because the Republican Party isn't him. It's that if he can twist these loyalties in such a way as to behave badly, but then convince people that the Democrats are even worse, "American carnage" and "corrupt Hillary" and all the rest of it, he can create one of these disinformation spirals.

And so he's doing both of those things in 2016 and people like you and me are thinking, this man must be out of his mind. You can't function that way in American politics, he's going to lose, he's going to self marginalize. Well, he was way ahead of us.

KRISTOL: Yeah. He wants to demonize the Democratic party and the liberals and the left of course, but he wants to weaken the Republican party too. And in the past —

RAUCH: Yeah, understanding that his followers will then demonize the Democrats, all the more.

KRISTOL: And it will weaken Republicans chances of limiting in certain ways, either as a candidate or as president. Let's just say, it's quite —

RAUCH: And this is familiar stuff. You see this in the '30s, this is what the, I'm not making a substantive comparison between Republicans and Nazis, please, I'm definitely not doing that. But just in terms of the mechanics of information warfare, this is what Hitler was doing. This is what Putin does. These are standard techniques. There's nothing here that's really surprising to people who know that world.

KRISTOL: What about the conspiracy side of it? That I think has been very striking. I mean, we've always had conspiracies and Richard Hofstadter wrote about it in *The Paranoid Style* and so forth, and the Birchers and “conspiracy so vast,” Joe McCarthy. But somehow, again, Trump's use of that seems, I don't know. They had conspiracy theories and then they got sort of falsified. Or at least people decided to, “Come on that's not quite how it's working, even if I don't like some of what these people on the other side are doing.” And the conspiracies kind of faded away, you might as well say, I think, or were rebutted eventually. Trump's use of conspiracies seems a little different somehow.

RAUCH: Yeah. Well, it's much different because he's weaponized them. He figured out that conspiracy theories go viral, that they disorient the other side, that they confuse supporters and that they're participatory and fun. QAnon supporters, they're having the time of their life, a lot of them, because they're finding these communities online and they're developing these narratives of which they're the heroes.

And it's very participatory. Someone will say, well, what about this? What about that? And other people will pick it up so you feel included. And he can harness that dynamic to set loose all these epistemic fires, which the rest of us don't know how to put out. Because if you refute a conspiracy theory, you actually amplify it. It turns out the more often you repeat something, even if it's false, the more it kind of installs itself in people's brains. But if you don't refute them, then they run wild.

This is a very difficult situation. The real answer to this, the only real defense against conspiracism as a political weapon is not to use it in the first place. And that's what we did for a long time. Most politicians, most of the time, of both parties could be relied on to squelch a conspiracy theory. Oh, wasn't it, John McCain famously in 2008, when someone said, what was it? “Obama, wasn't born here. Or Obama's not a good American,” or something of that sort, told the person to their face, “I disagree with you. That is not right.”

And that was considered part of a politician's job, was just dis-amplifying this stuff. Some people are going to believe it, but it makes a world of difference, a continent, an order of magnitude of difference. If you have the president of the United States and his party weaponizing and amplifying those —

In conjunction with, we haven't talked about conservative media yet, you know more about that than I do. But a lot of conservative media is in the business of, instead of disconfirming stuff that's false, transmitting it, because it's very popular with the viewership. And if they don't, they lose viewership to someone else. Fox loses viewership to OAN if it calls the Arizona election.

So you also get conservative media, which is not a barrier to conspiracy theories and is in fact amplifying them. Sean Hannity for a month is on Fox news talking about Hillary Clinton and the Democrats and the murder of Seth Rich. That's not what news is supposed to be doing, right? It's supposed to be dis-amplifying stuff that's false, not amplifying it.

So you get this dance between Trump and the Republicans, conservative media, who are seeking ratings, and this sector of the public, which wants to feel empowered by these narratives in which they're

the hero, and it's "an apocalyptic moment and only Trump can save us. And we are the insiders with the knowledge." When you add those things up, you get these spirals that we're now in.

KRISTOL: Yeah, no, it's interesting. I think the normal account, let's just say on the right, Bill Buckley policed the boundaries, expelled or disavowed the John Birch society, and it's often presented as sort of preventing real extremists from taking over or from flourishing.

But the more I think about it, I think the conspiracy thing is key, because the truth is, you could have, quote, extreme ideologues. People who believe that I don't know, the federal government should spend 4% of GDP and that should be privatized. Everything should be private. Let's just say a very orthodox or dogmatic libertarian, or the same on social conservatives. Actually, no one ever really thought that's a big problem. I mean, it's fine if someone wants to make that kind of argument and has read his Von Mises and Murray Rothbard and thinks that whatever. It's the conspiracism that really is dangerous, right? In a way, more than the extremism. Of course, they go together. And Trump's embrace of conspiracism is really distinctive, for a national party candidate, but for a president of the United States.

RAUCH: Now I'd add the party. Because Trump is off Twitter, he's off Facebook. He's not the figure he once was. But now we see the Republican party embracing these tactics. And we see that, as I mentioned, in the Arizona, the so-called audit, which is now, that's basically propaganda theater to cast doubt on the election results and implant conspiracy theories and inspire copycats around the country, which is what it's now doing. And that's being led by Republicans in state and local governments. Trump is aiding and abetting it, but now we see this as now a Republican pattern and yeah, you're exactly right.

What you said just now, Bill, is so important, especially for conservatives to understand, but liberals and everyone, which is the, methods that we're talking about, information warfare, epistemic warfare, propaganda, disinformation, conspiracism, whatever you call it. It's not ideological. It's a toolkit for exploiting social and cognitive vulnerabilities for political gains, and anyone can use it. And it's dangerous no matter how you use it. But it's not about whether taxes are too high or low, or Obamacare, or socialism, or guns or any of those things. It's a separate layer.

KRISTOL: In this respect, it's very, very different from let's say, Goldwater or, there was a kind of extremism at times and recklessness, you might say, and things he said and same with his heirs. But again, there wasn't that much of the kind of the conspiracy stuff is really what is striking.

And I do think that fits in with another point you made in passing, which maybe you could elaborate on a bit, which is, I remember saying four or five years ago, Trump is exploiting anxieties and unhappiness and bitterness among people because of the country's changing in ways they don't like or understand, or they don't think they were consulted about, or their economic standing isn't what they hoped. And the kids aren't doing as well as they hope, whatever. And people would say, "But you make it sound like they were all bitter and unhappy, but when you go to a Trump rally, people are kind of enjoying it."

There's some truth to this when you look at, it's a weird — There's some hatred there and anger, no question; but there's also a lot of, "this is a fun time at this rally and we are all together are sticking it to the establishment of our own party, as well as the other party and stuff." And I suppose that fits into, I mean, the kind of, as you say, it's a participatory endeavor. It's not just, and people enjoy it, I guess.

RAUCH: Oh yeah, it's way fun. Finding truth, staying truthful, this is boring, it's expensive. It's very limiting. It's not even what really we're wired for as human beings. We're wired to register and seek out viewpoints that enhance our status or our position in the group, or our identity, or they tell us stories that we want to hear about ourselves.

And this is nothing new. Plato said this, right. That's why we needed the philosopher king to steer us away from all these errors down here in our cave. And the purpose of the Madisonian political system, and what I call in my book, the "constitution of knowledge," which is the Madisonian epistemic system, very similar, is to steer us away from those impulses by forcing us to channel these impulses toward tribalism and toward absolutism, and believing weird stuff, into situations where we have to negotiate with other people, who disagree with us, either to make law or to make knowledge.

And that's the disciplinary process that basically keeps society in touch with reality in a civil war. But it's not fun, particularly. I mean, if you think about when you were the editor of *The Weekly Standard*, all the apparatus that's going into editing and fact checking, and making sure things are on the level. Or the world of science and academia or law, all the many checks and balances that are there to make sure that people aren't just making stuff up and playing these exciting conspiratorial games. All of that is expensive and it's difficult and it's not fun.

And it requires a lot of maintenance and care and feeding and civic virtues and all of that stuff that you've written that thought so much about. And yeah, it's just way more fun to shortcut all that and go straight to whatever your religious view is, or your apocalyptic political conspiracy, or whatever it is. That's only human. The amazing thing is that we ever *don't* do that.

KRISTOL: Right. Well, most of us have probably done versions of that for most of history, which is why the liberal Madisonian regimes have been quite a great accomplishment. No, but I think you're right. Both personally, this has been studied a lot, of course, from before Plato on. I mean, it's not — we would like to think that the truth is both attractive and sets you free and therefore one wants to always get closer to the truth. Maybe a few people do, but an awful lot of the time, of course — one knows this in one's own life — but discovering the truth isn't pleasant. "Oh my God, I've been wrong about something for X number of months or years. And I have to now sort of correct things I've said, or correct attachments I've made and so forth." So it's not as if people, the more natural thing is to be happy in one's tribe, one's group.

RAUCH: Yeah, there are studies finding people would rather have a root canal than be exposed to political views that they expect they won't like. And Socrates, he gets what happens to him, right?

KRISTOL: No, and the great liberal breakthrough is, in a way, I mean, to stop trying to hope that you can persuade people to be more reasonable. Not entirely, there's some of that, or more open to the truth, I'm wildly oversimplifying. But to set up a structure of institutions and checks and a separation of powers and checks and balances, and skepticism sort of embodied in institutions that takes human nature as it is, and then says, but we're going to manage to tamp down a lot of the fanaticism and tribalism and channel it and limit it and check it and so forth.

And as you said, it's kind of complicated. I think one great virtue of your book is that it's not just a political arrangement. It's not just *Federalist 10* and *51*, and Congress and the Courts and so forth. It's a social arrangement, a cultural arrangement, an epistemic arrangement, if you want to, which I think is very important, but maybe let's come to that in a minute.

But let me just talk — Let's not do it injustice, and leave aside entirely cancel culture, and that side of the kind of hostility also to this kind of liberal, if I can use that term in the broadest sense, arrangements. Say a — that was where your original focus was, back in '93. And to say a word about that, has it gotten worse? Is it really as bad as people say? What's happening on the left?

II: Cancel Culture and Illiberalism (33:00 – 1:21:25)

RAUCH: Yeah. It's gotten worse and it's as bad as people say. Bill, when I wrote *The Constitution of Knowledge*, I basically finished it before the election. I had some opportunity to revise it after November.

But when I wrote this book, there's actually more in it about canceling which we'll get into in a second. It's also a form of information warfare. It's a different form, but it's got the same general goal. I had more about that because what I thought was likely to happen, was Biden would probably win the election. My thought, two to one odds, and then Trump would go away and the Republican party would go back to something more like sanity, and the whole chapter about Trump's disinformation would be obsolete. People would say, why do I have to read about this? The problem is solved.

I had no idea that the post election would turn out the way it has and that the problem would ramp up. So in the book, a lot of the material is about a different kind of disinformation. And that's where you use social coercion in order to silence, intimidate, isolate people who you don't want the public to hear from.

And also, you use these tactics in a more subtle way, which is you do, what I call "consensus spoofing," which means it turns out if you can make people feel isolated, that no one agrees with them, because no one is saying what they're saying, that not only chills their speech, which of course is a good thing if you're trying to dominate and manipulate the information environment, it also instills doubt and shame in them. They think, "Well, I must be wrong about this. People are telling me I'm terrible if I believe it, no one else believes it." And in the community, like say an academic community or a social community online, if you can instill this kind of shame and doubt, you can manipulate the environment so that people will think that actually a view held by a small group of a faction, say anti-vaxxers, for example, is actually held by a very large group because you've silenced and chilled the people who are on the other side, who would normally be speaking out.

And this too can become self-fulfilling because — it's called the "spiral of silence, is what sociologists call this — because the more you're silenced, the more I think no one agrees with me, the more I'm silenced, we're all kind of walking consensus detectors. We're very attuned to what we think other people around us believe. And we try to harmonize with that.

So you can spoof consensus with these tactics, that chill debate, conversation. So how do we know this is happening? Surveys find that 60% of the American public, and about two thirds, a little bit more than that of the student population, are now afraid to give their true views on politics for fear of giving offense and running into social trouble.

A third of Americans are afraid of talking about politics because they fear that they might lose their job or lose career opportunities as a result. What's especially interesting about this, and this I think is new and important, is that the chilling is not limited to conservatives. In these polls, liberals, including very liberals, are just as likely to say that they're worried about losing a job or career opportunities if they're candid about their politics, than very conservatives are. So why is that happening?

Remember, this is information warfare. This is not about surgically targeting a viewpoint so that people know that talking about everything else is safe. This is about creating kind of a landmine environment where no one knows what you can talk about anymore because every day someone gets dragged and bombed on Twitter, loses a job, loses their friends, loses their reputation for saying something that yesterday seemed completely safe.

That's manipulating the environment so that people over censor; they will overchill. They will again become isolated, divided, demoralized, same kinds of things begin to go on. And that's how you get these situations in universities, where professors are saying, "I'm a liberal, I'm a progressive, but I'm afraid of my students. There are whole subjects I won't go anywhere near just for fear of that I might get

investigated.” And now we're seeing that replicated increasingly in newsrooms and in the general population.

And what I try to emphasize to people is the same thing I've been emphasizing about Trump. This is not just happening coincidentally. This is a sophisticated form of information warfare designed to manipulate the social and media environments for political advantage. And that's how we should be treating it.

KRISTOL: And so what you're saying, let me just bring this home. In the halls of Ivy league institutions and C-suites and corporations, the sort of cancel culture, which is mostly from the left, is as powerful or similar in the way in which it threatens free speech, free thought, and free exchange of ideas as in a small town somewhere where the Trump people are busy getting rid of anyone on the local council who doesn't agree with them about, I don't know, something, the election being stolen or something like that. But it's somewhat different, I suppose, in its character not? Maybe that's the question.

RAUCH: All of these tactics are different in their character. A version of canceling that was running the Soviet Union was a cruder version where they just throw you in the Gulag, right? They send you up to Siberia and you're not heard from for 20 years or forever. And that's another way of causing chilling. But Tocqueville comes to America in the 1830s. We can't have an episode of *Conversations* without mentioning Tocqueville.

KRISTOL: Absolutely. That's good that you're on top of that.

RAUCH: Tocqueville comes to America in the 1830s. And he says, the biggest threat to liberty in America is what we now call cancel culture. He calls it “tyranny of the majority.” He does not realize minorities can play this game just as effectively by being organized and strategically targeting. But he says, the problem is that in America, if you get on the wrong side of approved opinion, you're livelihood could be wiped out. People won't talk to you anymore. And so you'll just hunker down and stay silent.

And he's very worried about this. He's describing what we now call cancel culture. And he's pointing out that the enforcement of this, he says America is more free on paper than any other Republic in the world, but in practice, socially, it's not. And this is why. So that tells us that these tactics are nothing new, but they're much easier to apply in an age where, literally at the push of a like button on Twitter, you can organize a mob against Bill Kristol for saying something bad or saying nothing in particular.

KRISTOL: Let's not give people ideas, but I think they didn't need you to say that to have that idea though. But you mentioned, so that's social media, I suppose. How much has — You wrote the first book in '93, pre social media, basically, pre-internet almost, how much has that changed things? How much does it worsened the situation? Or is it more that the character of the universities and of our intellectual class has changed some and the kind of old fashioned liberalism has been replaced by various fashionable forms of post liberalism, which legitimates this in some ways? I mean, it's just —

RAUCH: Would it be cheating to answer that question, yes?

KRISTOL: Yeah. It all goes together, right?

RAUCH: It is all of those things. It would be much harder to run a cancel campaign without Twitter or its equivalent because you'd actually have to go out and find people to sign letters and petitions and do physical organization. And that's really hard. So that was a barrier that people don't have anymore, but you don't need those technologies to make canceling work.

We know that because of Tocqueville. We know because actually JS Mill in 1859, people forget this, but in *On Liberty*, he says the biggest threat to freedom in Britain is not government censorship. It's the

quashing of individuality and what he calls eccentricities, by which he means individuals with dissenting views.

So you don't need social media, but it sure does help. I mean, it really helps because you can organize a campaign against someone on campus, literally within minutes, but you don't absolutely need that. People who study this stuff say that it's still the case, despite social media, that the bigger, the more important forms of disinformation—fake news, viral conspiracy—is still media and above all politicians.

KRISTOL: So, Trump being president really matters.

RAUCH: Oh, you cannot overstate. The biggest change here is not social media on the left, though that's a big change. And obviously Trump uses it on the right in a big way. Never before have a major party and the White House been in the hands of a world-class propagandist. And one just cannot overstate what a dramatic change that is and how hard it's going to be to undo, now that everyone has seen the effects of these tactics on the left and on the right. The demonstration has been provided.

So, now the question is, can we adapt and live with these disinformation and propaganda tactics? Can we adjust to them? Can we get some immunity to them? And that's what we're all struggling with right now.

KRISTOL: How much on the left do you think there's a bit of a healthy backlash against cancel culture, a reassertion of a kind of John Stuart Mill or liberalism, let's just say? Because I do think, don't you think in the universities, it was made easier to go down this road by the kind of, there are a million ways you could describe it, but post-liberal and Foucault, whatever, post-modern, the whole kind of "who's to say what's true anyway." And then, people's feelings get hurt. And then, in the old days you would've said, "Well, too bad. We're pursuing the truth here. The truth does hurt one's feelings sometimes." As we were saying earlier. But now, there's no truth. So, feelings get priority. I don't know. Say a little bit about what your sense of the state of things is in universities, and let's just say in the left intellectual world, mostly left intellectual world.

RAUCH: Can I say green shoots? People say my book is optimistic and it kind of is because it's not fatalistic. But it really is hopeful. And I think there are actually a lot of hopeful signs.

And one of those hopeful signs relates to a point we talked about earlier, which is progressives have started to figure out that what's going on in cancel culture and on those authoritarian precincts of the left, really has nothing to do with progressive values, like being against racism, or the rights of women or other minorities. That this is a separate layer of information warfare. And that it's being used against progressives.

So, I think we're beginning to see resistance and an awakening form on the liberal left, liberal small "L". The pluralist left saying, "Wait a minute. We can't function on a campus where we're afraid of our own students and can't conduct classes. That's not what we had in mind. That's not what we want."

And we also see some counter organization from lots and lots of groups. Counter mobilization is key here because there's only so much an isolated individual do by standing up. If they're either up against a juggernaut sort of university administration and investigation, or if they perceive themselves to be up against a juggernaut. You need counter mobilization. And we're seeing that too. We're seeing a lot of new groups, the Alliance, the Academic Freedom Alliance, Princetonians for Free Speech, the Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism, Counterweight Support, which is empowering employees who were being forced through indoctrination campaigns at work at the Jewish Institute for Liberal Values. Just appeared out of nowhere.

KRISTOL: Mm-hmm.

RAUCH: Like that happened within the last couple of months. There are lots of people now saying, "Wait a minute, what's going on here isn't just progressivism. It's an attack on the fundamentals of liberal democracy. And we care about that too."

So, I think that's going to make a difference if it continues. I think actually it makes a big difference because the reason canceling authoritarian leftism has spread so fast so far is it was basically unopposed. Right? Because no one wanted to be against racism. Once people figure out, "Wait a minute, being against racism is very different from being against pluralism." I think maybe then we're in a different world.

KRISTOL: Do you think race was kind of a key to this, the playing that card on the cancel culture left? Obviously, God knows there's plenty of legitimate things to worry about in terms of race and racism in America still. But that seems like that was their most powerful way of shutting everyone up. Other things seemed like they were more contestable, but no one wants to be, and for good reason, accused of being a racist. And somehow that, when they were able to do that, align the difference between being bigoted, which some people are. And I suppose Trump helped them in that respect, right, by being actually somewhat racist and the kinds of things he said and his supporters have now said. I don't know. I'm just curious how much you think this is race specific? Not race specific, but —

RAUCH: Yeah. That's an interesting question to think about. I don't think it's race specific in the sense that the tactics we're seeing have anything to do with the issues around race per se.

KRISTOL: Right. Right.

RAUCH: They are manipulative tactics that are, I think, exploiting the very high emotional valences around the racism issue. But they would also work if there were some other issue that had so much pull on Americans, if it were guns or abortion. And sometimes it is those things. You can apply the same dynamics to those things. And we actually see that. We see there are precincts in which, if you're pro-choice, you can't be a pro-choice progressive, I'm sorry. You can't be a pro-life progressive.

KRISTOL: Right.

RAUCH: Rewind. You can't be a pro-life progressive. You're drummed out. You're the enemy. So, the tactics are not exclusive to race, but they glom onto race because race has so much of this power and no one wants to be on the wrong side of it, understandably, justifiably.

KRISTOL: And then, the right sees an opportunity and decides to make critical race theory like the main topic in American politics.

RAUCH: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And then, people like us, who I think are probably not fans to the degree that I'm not sure of how much you've read. I've read a little bit of it. The main authors who push that and the curriculum that I've seen that try to embody that point of view, not what I would prefer in schools and so forth. But then, the right just goes crazy trying to pass legislation that would ban you from this, or at least discouraged discussing slavery or something. And it just seems like that's a terrible cycle of cancel culture on the left and a demagogic exploitation of this.

RAUCH: Yeah. They help each other.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

RAUCH: And that's easier to understand when you realize that what they have in common, although their ideological goals may be different and their parties may be different, is that they're both running propaganda machines in order to demolish trust in institutions and in order to silence and demoralize and divide the target populations. And, from their point of view, anyone who's doing that is, in an institutional sense, an ally.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

RAUCH: So, in that sense, Lennon helps Hitler, right? Or Stalin helps Hitler.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

RAUCH: I don't mean to liken today's actors to Stalin and Hitler, but I am saying that people who use these tactics have similar large social goals, which is to make it harder for people like you and me, and all the institutions that we spent two centuries building up, to do the role that we think ought to be done, which is keeping society in touch with reality and forcing ideas to go through a process of rigorous debate, and making it very difficult for any one faction to manipulate and dominate the whole conversation.

KRISTOL: It was kind of a cliché of the old liberalism of, I guess, the '50s and '60s. And I remember encountering this a little in college, I guess, in the early '70s. That the left and right come together, I guess, is now called Horseshoe Theory sometimes. And the extremes of left and right come together in a way that the Hitler, Stalin pact was a real thing in real history with its own incentives and the consequences, but also a kind of — what's the right word for this? — synecdoche of a kind of way in which the totalitarianism of the right and the left were together. And I mean, in Hannah Arendt's book it explicitly says they have more in common than not, and the liberals understood that.

And I remember at the time that became almost a cliché and it was sort of simple. It seemed to some, I remember this in college grad school, sort of simple-minded to us, but there was a lot of truth to that I think. Right? I mean, the older liberalism was more sound than people like me — I mean, I was quite sympathetic to it in a fundamental way in terms of our institutions and American liberal democracy. But somehow it was onto more, I think, in its opposition to the extremism and conspiracism, and quasi totalitarianism or real totalitarianism with left and right. And maybe one took for granted those insights rather than —

RAUCH: Yeah. Yeah. Well, you've always had authoritarian, anti-pluralist factions of both the right and left. And I think they've always been to one extent or another frenemies for just that reason.

But you've always also had non authoritarian elements of the left and right, even the extreme left and right. And I think that's where hope lies. And all of those people out there who are progressives, for example, who are starting to feel bullied, these are the people in newsrooms in some of these mainstream media organizations where you've got factions now that are ruling entire conversations off-limits or making them treacherous. And there are a lot of people in these environments and situations who are tired of feeling pushed around and bullied and silenced, and who hold progressive values, or for that matter conservative values, while feeling no sympathy for authoritarian tactics. And that's where hope lies, helping people understand that the tactics and the ideology are, can we say orthogonal? Whatever that means.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

RAUCH: They're different. They're different.

KRISTOL: No. I think that's important. And I was struck by that. I taught a little on zoom, a study group at the Harvard Institute of Politics this spring. And in talking to the students together, but especially alone in office hours, which were virtual, the degree to which the students are worried about that and these are liberal students mostly, at least they made claim when they were talking to me, welcomed me over as they saw it to their side more politically. And some of this is student on student too. I think people have been focused on the teachers, the faculty.

RAUCH: Mostly.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

RAUCH: It's mostly —

KRISTOL: If they make a comment or ask a question in a discussion in class or in the dorm that's an honest question or a comment just speculating out loud about something in history, or literature, or anything, and suddenly it can get distorted, ripped out of context, put on social media. And 12 hours later, you wake up and you're sort of being pilloried and —

RAUCH: On campuses and also in newsrooms, yeah. That's exactly right. And the survey evidence strongly supports it. That, in fact, many liberal students, progressive students feel that they're being bullied in these environments, by other students. It's primarily peer pressure. It's socially enforced. There are problems with speech codes and administrators and universities. That's no secret. But those are smaller problems now than exactly the kind of peer pressure that Tocqueville and Mill described, which is harder to deal with.

And it's a change since I wrote *Kindly Inquisitors*, because that was a book about, what was 30 years ago, kind of a sharp, pointed ideological attack from professors on free speech. And they were publishing doctrines and they were fomenting speech codes. And it was Catharine MacKinnon and people like that.

This is very different. It's much less ideological in that sense. And it's just more kind of about brute force domination by one faction of the intellectual environment, because they're sure they're right, or just because they can. And that is different.

KRISTOL: Yeah. What's in your book and something you focus on is — three or four years ago I did a little project with Bill Galston, a friend of ours who has also been on these conversations, on "Are you center in certain policy areas? Could you have reasonable centrist policies?" This was in 2017. And I certainly had the instinct—Bill's been laboring in these vineyards much longer—but it was just important to show that there could be policy agreement by people mostly on the left and mostly on the right on a bunch of things. It would be healthy for the country just in a way to show that, yeah, there are reasonable policies, not climate change, that are kind of market friendly, but also do address the problem and the same in other areas, a kind of more centrist compromise.

And, at the time even, I thought, "Well, that's good. It's limited though." And I'm more struck talking to you that what you're talking about isn't a kind of new center exactly. It's a new liberalism or whatever the right word is. But the problem isn't so much getting the two sides to compromise. That's kind of a problem when you have ideologues on both sides and can you have a policy that's in between the two ideologies that take some of the best from both ideologies or whatever. Markets and welfare state, whatever. That's kind of what traditional, you might say, compromise politics of the last 70 years.

You're really talking about something different when you talk about defending a Madisonian system of politics and of thought or, I guess, speech and discourse against the illiberalism of left and right.

RAUCH: Yeah. Yeah. That's exactly right. And part of what's happened, Bill, is that our side, and by our side I'm going to say those of us who support the constitution of knowledge, the U.S. Constitution, the rule of law, adherence to facts, belief in facts, and all of the disciplines and civic virtues and values that go along with those things. I'm just going to call those "us" and I'm going to call "them" the pluralists, maybe the liberals. But first of all, we were taken by surprise by all this stuff. It never occurred to us that a Russian style disinformation figure would rise in American politics. It never occurred to us that we would, the development of social media and the almost instant harnessing of that to run socially coercive mob campaigns. We're just like, "What?"

So, it takes a long time to get organized, even in the best of circumstances. But also I think a lot of liberals became demoralized and lost confidence because we were repeatedly told, "Well, it's our fault. We failed. Our institutions have failed. People are angry at us. They should be. And it's our fault."

Well, I think certainly institutions have made big mistakes. No one denies it. But, if one more person tells me this is all happening because of the Vietnam War, or inflation, or 9/11, or 2008, I'll start pulling my hair out, because I ask people, "Which country's or era's institutions would you prefer to the ones we have in America right now?" I mean, which country's courts, which country's media? Do you want the yellow journalism of the 19th century? Do you want the police—there are problems now—do you want the police forces of a hundred years ago?

And the answer is, well, they can't really come up with specifics. But I think too much, we ourselves have bought into the notion that this is our fault. And we're not recognizing that, in fact, from a bunch of sources, there have been prolific, and organized, and targeted, and effective attacks on trust in America and on institutions in America, opportunistically for profit and for power. And that these things are effective. And that we need to rally behind the values and systems we hold dear. They're not self-maintaining. And that begins with understanding that we're targeted and that we need to fight back. And I think we're starting to see that happen. And I can give you chapter and verse on that, but that's really the key element.

I mentioned earlier, to round out this thought, that all of this disinformation, warfare propaganda has, as the ultimate goal, to demoralize the other side, because demoralization is demobilization. If you think you're isolated, or helpless, or ashamed, or you can't keep up with the flood of mistruth, and you don't know what to do about the conspiracy theories, you throw up your hands and you say, "My God, everything is terrible. I don't know what to do." Well, that's the condition that they broadly speaking are trying to induce. That's the whole ballgame. That's what Putin is doing with his information war campaigns against America. And the beginning of the solution to that is to understand that we're being demoralized on purpose and to begin to get our act together.

KRISTOL: And don't you think that it's easier to get one's act together in a way on the political front with something we kind of know what the institutions are that we should be defending, and rule of law, and the separation of powers, and checks and balances, and all the things that have been set up to try to check tribalism from spilling over into real authoritarianism and effective authoritarianism?

And I would say I've had the debate endless times, it seems to me, on the "liberal world order" or whatever, which is what you were saying. Everyone says how terrible and all the bad aspects of it. And but can we actually look back at the last 70 years and agree that they were better than the proceeding 50? And has free trade been that bad for people's lives around the world? And the U.S.-led global order and so forth.

So, I think one challenge though is in the area you're talking about. Let's call it knowledge, information. It's a little less obvious. And so, I think in their case too, I would say, we need NATO. We need to alliances in democracies. We need the U.S. forward presence. We need mostly free trade. There are sort of obvious things one defends, and then other people criticize them and you have a semi policy debate at least.

It seems to me, in the area of information, it's a little less obvious what the institutional structure is, the organizational structure or the infrastructure that defends what we're talking about. So, say what you've thought about that also.

RAUCH: Yeah. I'm actually more hopeful on the epistemic front than the political front, because in the political front, you have to pass laws. You're going to have to agree on what a reform bill is going to look like and get it through Congress. And that's very difficult.

On the epistemic front, what we're talking about is first understanding the nature of the situation we're in, which is what we've been talking about. But then, most of the institutions and practices that need to be strengthened and defended are in the private realm. And they're actually in the realm that people very often can influence in their own community or on their own campus.

And that's everything from the president of the University of Chicago creating and adopting, as many other universities now have, The Chicago Statement where, for example, a faculty member in Chicago made a very controversial tweet, something about affirmative action. And the usual gang of 200 or 300 people signed an online petition to get him investigated. And President Zimmer of the university put out basically a short one paragraph statement saying, "We at Chicago believe in free speech. That has been exercised here. There's nothing to investigate." And guess what all the petitioners, all these righteous did? They went away. So, that's one small example, but we're seeing there's tons of fronts.

A hard thing about this book is that it's not just the three bullet points. It's going to be an all of society reaction, many institutions, many levels, no two quite alike. But it's going to be everything from platform redesign of places like Facebook and Twitter. We're already seeing that on Twitter. Now, if you try to retweet a link without reading it, you'll be interrupted. It'll say, "Are you sure you want to do that?" Facebook's new oversight board is doing — it's how we dealt with these problems in the past actually.

These are not new problems entirely. Which is you build institutions that begin to create guidelines and norms. And then, if they work, they begin to spread. Others begin adopting them. T

hat's how we got out of the yellow journalism and fake news of the 19th century. American Society of Newspaper Editors was formed in the early 20th century. It promulgates norms and ethics. Others adopt them. Journalism schools open. They teach them. The profession begins to become a profession. Prizes begin to be given to good journalism, changing incentives.

It's that, at many levels. It's individuals organizing to push back against these small factions that are dominating debate.

It's getting smart about propaganda in the media. We already had a big step forward. In 2020, the mainstream media did a much better job of resisting disinformation than they did in 2016.

And it's partly just the population, the target population needs to wise up, which is kind of what my book is about. It's still possible to manipulate a population that's conscious that it's being manipulated. These are powerful tactics. They're hard to resist. But it's harder. You can create some level of immunity just by helping people understand that they are being manipulated. It's lots of stuff like that. And it doesn't rely on any one or two things, one bottleneck like Congress to get it right.

KRISTOL: Yeah, of course that cuts both ways in terms of being hopeful because I could argue, and I'm curious about your response. I mean, in some ways I could see getting to voting rights legislation in Congress that would strengthen protections to vote and beat back some of these efforts at the state level and so forth, but also do some reasonable voter ID so it's not entirely one-sided, whatever. That, in a way, it's difficult. But one can say, couldn't one, that that's more manageable perhaps, in theory. One could figure out how you might get X number of Republicans and Democrats on a bill. And the Biden administration could do this and that.

Whereas you look at the universities, you look at sort of parts of the corporate world, you look at parts of the culture, and you think, how do you even get your arms around that? I'm sort of more optimistic about the 100 senators maybe, or at least I could argue this, than about the 100 top universities. And as you says, it's good that they're private, or dispersed, or state level. There's not one place, there's not one bottleneck, but on the other hand, there's not one lever to kind of strengthen institutions either. It really is a kind of bottom-up thing, I suppose, right?

RAUCH: Yeah. Bottom-up, top-down also in the sense that you're going to have to have institutional leadership. Yeah. I could argue it either way. I don't think we know the answer yet. But I'll sort of make a kind of meta point, gain a little bit more altitude, and say that even if it's true that the problem is harder in the epistemic realm than the political realm, and even if it's true that the problem is just wicked hard, we have to act as if it's not. We have to remember at all times that the goal of the illiberal side is to demoralize us so that we will throw up our hands and say, nothing can be done. That's the product, that's the end game for them.

And when we start acting as if that's not true, just by doing that, we make life a bit harder for them. So the despair that I hear in the quarters of small L liberalism, pluralism, "how will we ever cope with social media? And look at Trump's and MAGA's complete domination of the Republican party," and so forth. Well, that's not the right attitude to start with. The right attitude to start with is there's a whole lot that can be done here. And a lot of it actually isn't that difficult, but it begins with self-confidence and counter mobilizing.

KRISTOL: And I guess winning in one place can have a big ripple effect, right? Beating back the mob a few times can, if mob victories are demoralizing to believers in pluralism, or liberalism, or free speech and so forth, a defeat for the mob can be re-moralizing.

RAUCH: Yeah. This is why the Russians worked so hard to stifle voices like Sakharov and Amalrik and Solzhenitsyn. And there's an experiment here, a classic experiment. It'll take a minute and a half to explain —

KRISTOL: Oh please. This is interesting.

RAUCH: — if you'll indulge me.

KRISTOL: Totally. Yeah. Yeah.

RAUCH: So 1951, a guy named Solomon Asch puts eight people in a room and tells them they're being given a vision test. And they're asked which of three lines, just plain black lines, is the same length as a fourth line. And he makes it obvious anyone with two eyes knows that the correct answer is B. It's not even close. But then —

KRISTOL: This is in the US? I mean, this is —

RAUCH: This is in the US. Yeah. However, seven out of the eight people in that room are confederates of the experimenter. And they've all been told to say that the right answer is C, not B. What does the eighth person in the room do when confronted with seven other people giving an obviously blatantly wrong answer. A third of the time, the eighth person conforms. And 75% of individuals conformed in at least one trial. And that's either because they're lying, but want to go along with the group, or it's because they doubt themselves. "Well, maybe it's an optical illusion, and they're getting something that I'm not." And this is a classic experiment. It's been replicated many times in many variations. And it goes to how cancel culture works, which is if you manipulate the environment so it sounds like everyone believes the same thing, then you begin to doubt yourself. You begin to shame yourself.

There's a variant of this experiment. So same experiment, one experimental subject, but now the other seven people in the room, six of them give the wrong answer, one of them gives the right answer. So the experimental subject now has one, call it, reality partner. Just one. In that situation, the percentage conforming drops from about a third to about 5%, just because one other person in that room is saying, "You know, the obvious right answer is B." So this is a point Robert George has made at Princeton. You don't need 500 members of the faculty to begin to change the climate. You can do it with five. So one mustn't feel hopeless in these situations.

KRISTOL: Yeah. That's why authoritarians are always, correctly I think, worried about dissidents who from a sort of objective point of view, you might say, power point of view, of power politics, I mean, what influence do they have? Leave them alone. They're just lonely people shouting into the wind in a sense. But they've always had the sense, smart authoritarians, that you can't let that begin because it can get out of hand. Havel writes very well about this, I think.

RAUCH: Yes. Spirals of silence can collapse very quickly as they have in the Soviet Union and other places.

KRISTOL: And so this is a good thing to conclude on. So you're somewhat hopeful, I would say on the academy and on fighting back against the cancel culture of the left, and the kind of possible strength of a revived liberalism or pluralism. Do you have a preference in terms of terms there? I've become sort of —

RAUCH: I just call it the constitution of knowledge. Because I think institutionally, that's what we're fighting for. The real work my book does, the reason it will be read at in 1,000 years when Plato is long forgotten —

KRISTOL: There you go. [Laughter].

RAUCH: — is that the real work —

KRISTOL: I think you're not allowed to say that on CONVERSATIONS, but that's okay. That's okay.

RAUCH: Well, when Tocqueville's been forgotten.

KRISTOL: It's a free country. You're allowed to say this. That's pluralism, right? Yeah. You can pretend that Tocqueville's —

RAUCH: In all seriousness, the real work of this book is not the applications which we've been discussing. It's the effort to map out in very specific ways what is the constitution of knowledge? How does it work? What are the Madisonian elements that keep it going? Checks and balances, the dispersion of power. What are the rules that people are required to follow? What are the institutions? There are four really big sectors of: science and research, journalism, government, law. And there are

others and it maps all of that. So that's what I think we're defending. It's not just vague liberal principles. It's a concrete defined system of organizations and institutions and rules.

And they're not self-sustaining. They worked so well in the past that we thought they were self-sustaining. All you need is free speech. And then you have a marketplace of ideas and truth automatically emerges. Well, that's not true. You need all of that stuff in the middle. All of those institutions, norms, all of that Madisonian stuff structure has got to be there.

And the key is you've got to understand that stuff and defend it, and not taking for granted. But frankly, Bill, I think if the constitution of knowledge and its partisans get our act together, I think actually we squash the other side like a bug in the long run because we have two big advantages.

One is that they're completely parasitic. They cannot make knowledge. They cannot put a vaccine in your arm. All they can do is tear down. We can promise a better life for actual people. We can show them if you're tired of these constant wars on campus with people who are trying to dominate you and intimidate you, if you're tired of that, you can change it. There is a better way.

And then we have a second big advantage, and that's reality itself. One of the things that's been established very interesting by scholars of propaganda is that propagandists go down their own rabbit holes. We see that in the Republican party right now. It's not like they can sit there and have a ledger somewhere, this is true, this is false. This is the true stuff we know. This is the false lies we're spreading. They get it mixed up themselves. They kind of have to in order to be persuasive.

No one even knows what Trump believes at this point and what he's lying about. And that's become increasingly true of the Republican party. But in the long term, that's a terrible disadvantage because they lose touch with reality and those systems collapse for that reason too.

So I'm not preaching that the good guys inevitably win. I'm just saying we have a ton to work with. And if we rally, if we defend, if we understand our strengths, and if we make our case and build institutional safeguards on many levels, yeah. I think we win.

KRISTOL: Yeah. No, I usually think so, but I occasionally — The vaccines is a good example. I mean, I think one point we didn't emphasize enough in this conversation, but I'll just mention it now, and you can elaborate a bit if you want as we close, is there are institutions.

I mean, there are medical schools, there's science. I mean, it's not like the propagandists have the upper hand. There's an awful lot of people who remain employed by, committed to, operating in, making advances in these reality-based efforts in various aspects of our society and economy and science and so forth that people do see the results of. So I think that's a good point to make. I mean, people look at the universities and they go, oh my God, cancel culture is going to swamp everything, postmodernism, post-truth, but it's not that easy when you can look around and there really are real results of certain things, right?

RAUCH: Yeah, yeah. The results —

KRISTOL: On the other hand, the vaccines, shouldn't the vaccines have had more effect. I mean, do you want an actual case study of why science, knowledge, empiricism of a kind, pluralism because you want a lot of different people competing to develop them, pretty good case study of why, let's call it, the modern scientific effort, what's the word I'm looking for, project, deserves some defense and some respect.

But here we are. Half the country has ignored —I don't know. Not half the country. But it seems like that should have been more of a teachable moment, as they say, and a learning moment for the country. And people seem to be chugging right along.

RAUCH: A lot of people are, and a lot of people always will. The reality-based community is a huge global network, but mostly professionals. It's very hard to become a lawyer, a scientist, even a journalist. You don't do that just sitting on your sofa making stuff up. You got to learn a lot of norms and usually be attached to an institution. So there's always going to be a substantial chunk of any population, which is not really part of that community and isn't directly involved in it.

And often that doesn't matter. It's not a big deal if some people have strange religious beliefs of whatever kind. It does become an issue when you've got a pandemic and you've got a virus. Then it's really quite important that people understand what are trustworthy and reliable sources.

And yeah, the point I'm making is a hard line to walk. Because you want people to be alarmed, but not fatalistic. And hopeful, but not complacent. And we need to remember when we look at, what, 40% of Americans who are vaccine hesitant, there are all kinds of reasons for that. But one of them, again, is that they have been systematically targeted for a period of years now by anti-vaxxers who've been running a very sophisticated online operation of consensus spoofing. Making it appear as if lots and lots of scientists think vaccines are harmful, when actually essentially none do. They pioneered a lot of the tactics that were subsequently picked up by other parts of the disinformation network. And so that has a result too.

So this is what we're up against, Bill. And I guess the thought that I'm trying to instill us all in is this is not an easy road that we're on. We're up against new technologies, like social media and new actors like Donald Trump and the Republican party. And some people who are very fervently illiberal in ways that we are just not accustomed to in America. So it's going to be touch and go.

And I'm not telling people we squash them like a bug by doing nothing. I'm telling them, we start. If we start, if we get our act together, yeah, I think this winds up looking like a number of other past information disruptions that came out okay. But it might not come out okay.

KRISTOL: Or a lot of damage could be done before it comes out okay.

RAUCH: A lot of damage, and is already being done.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Now that's the question, how much?

RAUCH: The short and medium run. Yeah. If the only way out is through them we've got some problems.

KRISTOL: You mentioned my father earlier. In reality, it reminds me, he famously quipped that, "a neoconservative is a liberal who was mugged by reality." And I always thought that was a good line and it captures a lot. It was a little unjust almost to himself and to the intellectual effort.

And actually a young colleague of his who died very young, Mike Scully, I don't know if you knew him at all, was commenting in the '80s as plenty of people were able to avoid coming to grips with the implications of reality. And his line was that some other people were "liberals who had been mugged by reality, but refused to press charges." I think that's a very good line. You need to have a successful system, both the recognition of reality, but what you're calling for here, the pressing of charges, if I can put it that way. The sort of making the case and explaining and discrediting the people who are spending all their time quite consciously undermining the existence of reality. It can't just be a passive —

RAUCH: Yeah. That's exactly right. You know, your father never could resist a quip. And one of the ones that I think about most often, I'm not sure if he said this in print or to me, but he said, "There's nothing wrong with this country that a nice little depression wouldn't solve."

KRISTOL: Yeah. Yeah. I know. A recession. I thought —

RAUCH: Was it recession?

KRISTOL: The soft version was recession. I think it was a line of someone else decades ago, maybe from Pater, "Recessions are the discipline of the middle-class." In the sense that you get these bubbles, and people get up wildly optimistic about things and make foolish investments and so forth. And then there's kind of a reality wake up call.

RAUCH: I took him to be making a different point, which is too many Americans have too much time to obsess about culture war things, and stuff —

KRISTOL: No, that's true too.

RAUCH: — that isn't fundamentally important. And maybe a hard slap of reality.

KRISTOL: No, no, that's fair enough.

RAUCH: But mostly, he was just being Irving.

KRISTOL: No, no. I think it's a fair point too. And this is where the pandemic came in. And has both been a bit of a wakeup call, but also the degree to which, on both sides, in the halls of academe on the one hand and the electoral, I don't know, the rallies, or the Republican party on the other, there's a lot of resistance.

But this is what your book has pointed out so well. Why there's that resistance. And also that it's not just natural, but it's been purposely fostered and stimulated.

I think that's a very important point because so much of the discussion, just to close with your original point, and I've been in a million of these conversations as you have, we've been in some of them together on Zoom in the last year, and social media, and the great sorting, and Red America and Blue America, and all these things are important, but they do make it seem as if this just sort of happened as a result of forces beyond our control. Or forces of 30 or 50 years ago that got launched, and then kind of got out of control. But the degree of the purposefulness of the misinformation and disinformation, the propaganda and the damage that's done, I think that's a key point you make.

RAUCH: Yes. In my Irving K mode, the way I put it, which is a wild exaggeration, but it does make the point, is that the death of trust in American institutions is not fundamentally death by natural causes, and it's not fundamentally suicide. It's an assassination.

KRISTOL: No, that's a good line and an important one. John Rauch, thank you for joining me today on Conversations.

RAUCH: Thank you, Bill.

KRISTOL: It's a pleasure. And thank you all for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]