

# CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

## **Fred Kagan on Ukraine: Where Things Stand**

*Filmed September 28, 2023*

**BILL KRISTOL:**

Hi, I am Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*, and welcome back to my friend Fred Kagan, with whom we've had three conversations since the war in Ukraine, the attack against Ukraine began. And this will update us on the state of that war and what might happen and other related topics.

Fred is the Senior Fellow, Director of the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, and supervises, oversees, the Russia team at the Institute for the Study of War, which has done such excellent daily updates on the battlefield situation, which everyone should subscribe to for free. Fred's an expert on many aspects of military history and foreign policy. And I guess studied Russian. And you actually once were, before you got into the Middle East and some of the other things that you studied, you were an actual Russia expert in grad school. Is that right?

**FRED KAGAN:**

In fact, I have a degree in Russian and Soviet military history, which I regarded as a catastrophic failure of American geostrategy that that has become a relevant expertise again.

**BILL KRISTOL:**

You don't think they... Yeah, right. It's one of the things might be good for you in some sense.

**FRED KAGAN:**

It's fine for me, but yeah.

**BILL KRISTOL:**

Yeah, not good for the country or the world. I agree.

**FRED KAGAN:**

No.

**BILL KRISTOL:**

Yes. We would be happy to regard those as artifact of-

**FRED KAGAN:**

Closed subject, yeah.

**BILL KRISTOL:**

Artifacts of the pre-1989 world or something.

FRED KAGAN:

Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Okay, Fred. Our last conversations were very helpful, I think just understanding where we've been in the war and where we are, were at the time and where we might be going. And so, where are we? It's September 28th, what would be 19 months, I think, into the war. Give us a brief sense of just how we got here and then we'll talk in some detail about where we are.

FRED KAGAN:

Well, first of all, thanks for having me on again, Bill. It's always great to spend time with you. Been a friend to me and a friend of the family for as long as I can... Well, as I've been alive, honestly. So thank you.

February 24th, 2022, the Russians re-invaded Ukraine, having originally invaded it, of course, in 2014. And this time it was for all the marbles. Russians intended to take the entire country, depose the Zelensky administration, impose a puppet of their own, and permanently lock Ukraine into Russia's orbit, with the added objective of breaking NATO, which is one of the things that Putin had set out to do with this invasion. The Ukrainians fought back bravely. And the Biden administration, to its credit, immediately began, on the one hand, to rally an international coalition to help Ukraine. And on the other hand, to begin flowing to Ukraine some high end, high impact defensive weapons that made it possible for the Ukrainians to stop the Russian advance on Kyiv, and then drive the Russians all the way back to the border in western Ukraine, whereupon the Russians doubled down on their operations in eastern Ukraine. And they made progress through that area through the summer of 2022, ultimately taking the cities Sieverodonetsk and Lysychansk. Whereupon most of the Russian offensive operation culminated.

BILL KRISTOL:

And then give us a sense, what percentage of the landmass, so to speak, did they end up occupying there?

FRED KAGAN:

We have this so precisely from the ISW team that I don't want to spitball it, but it's... So I don't know. I don't know offhand. 20% something maybe, something along those general lines.

But from that moment, two things happened. One was that the Ukrainians started preparing counteroffensives. And the other was that the Russians began leaning into their attack on the town of Bakhmut. And the first things that succeeded were that the Ukrainians uncorked counteroffensives that liberated most of Kharkiv Oblast, in a lightning counteroffensive that benefited from having taken the Russians by surprise. And then the Ukrainians were able to liberate the Western bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast, in a less rapid, but still impressive operation.

And then, unfortunately, the Ukrainian counteroffensive culminated, in no small part due to the delays and hesitations of the US and its Western partners in getting Ukraine, in advance, the weapons and equipment that the Ukrainians would've needed to continue to conduct a counteroffensive operation. And so, when the Ukrainians, in

November, had succeeded in completing liberation of western Kherson and Kharkiv, and their counteroffensive culminated, the initiative passed back to the Russians.

And on the one hand, the Russians prepared for and launched a large scale winter offensive in Luhansk Oblast in the northeast, trying to regain that territory that they'd lost in Kharkiv. But on the other hand, they really leaned into the fight for Bakhmut, which the Ukrainians, causing some controversy with the US military, decided to defend. And that fight for Bakhmut lasted into May of 2023, when the Ukrainians yielded the last of the city to the Russians, having inflicted horrific casualties on the Russians with significant consequences, one of which was the destruction of the Wagner Group. Because the Ukrainian defense of Bakhmut and the way that that all went down started the series of events that would lead to Prigozhin's abortive mutiny, and then ultimately to his death and the final destruction of the Wagner Group. And all over a town that had a pre-war population of about 75,000. So it was a very interesting thing. The Russian offensive in Luhansk and Kharkiv went nowhere in particular, the Ukrainians stopped it. And then the Ukrainians immediately began counterattacking around Bakhmut. And this also received a fair amount of criticism from the American military, but I'm confident that this was the right decision because the Russians were in disarray and the Ukrainian counteroffensive caused them to start bringing a lot of forces to Bakhmut to hold it because they paid such a terrible price for it.

And as a result, the Ukrainians used Bakhmut to fix Russian forces there to set conditions for what the next phase was, which was the counteroffensive the Ukrainians launched in June of this year in southern Ukraine. And that counteroffensive, as we all know, started not well for various reasons, and has been proceeding slowly. And now we're seeing increasing claims and reports and statements that the war has stalemated and the counteroffensive has failed. And there's nothing that anybody can do about this except I don't know what, negotiate, I guess. We can talk about that.

But the truth is that that isn't true. And this is something that we will presumably get into, but we are in a phase of where the Ukrainians still have the initiative, they're still counterattacking and they're still making gains, even if those gains are slow, through the hardest part of the Russian defenses.

**BILL KRISTOL:**

Yeah. So let's talk about that since that's where we are. That's a very helpful, I think, overview. We might come back to a couple of elements of that, but let's just go right into it. So the Ukrainians, one reads, they penetrated some of the Russian defenses, but it's hard going. But maybe they can envelop them or something like that, or some of the defenses might break at some point. And what's happening and what's-

**FRED KAGAN:**

The Ukrainian counteroffensive was delayed to begin, in part because Ukrainians were waiting for Western equipment to arrive. So this has been a constant leitmotif of this story, that delays in the provision of essential Western material have slowed down Ukrainian preparations for counteroffensive operations. And in this case, the Russians actually made good use of the time that they were given, and they made very extensive defensive preparations in the South.

They laid mines like almost nobody's ever seen minefields before, many kilometers deep. They dug all kinds of trench positions, they established all kinds of anti-tank obstacles. They trained and rehearsed their forces for how they were going to fight, including their attack helicopter pilots and their manned fighter aircraft and their artillerymen. And they really got ready, and they were ready when the Ukrainians came.

BILL KRISTOL:

So the Russians did learn some lessons from their failures in those first few months, and in a way did a better job of just preparing the defense a year into the war?

FRED KAGAN:

Yeah. And I have to confess that the Russians outperformed my expectations for them. I did not think that they would be able to learn and adapt as well as they did in the South. The thing that's important is it's not just that they laid a whole lot of mines and dug a whole lot of trenches. It's that they actually trained the forces there. Which to be fair, those forces had the leisure to train because there wasn't really much going on in that sector for many months. So they trained those forces in a sound tactical defensive doctrine, which they executed for quite some time under the pressure of Ukrainian attacks. So the Russians do deserve credit in the military technical sense for having thought this through and prepared good positions and prepared their forces and were ready to receive the Ukrainians when they attacked.

The Ukrainians, we've talked about before the- problems with the training that the Ukrainians had received and what their expectations for what this war was going to look like. And we talked previously about the excessive expectations that people had have for this counteroffensive. But the fact remains that in the initial attacks and the initial Ukrainian counterattacks, the Ukrainian forces underperformed and the Russian forces overperformed, which led to a significant challenge.

The Ukrainians then adapted. And their adaptation involved largely abandoning the effort to fight the sort of large scale mechanized maneuver, combined arms operations that we had been teaching them how to conduct, but that were really not appropriate to the circumstances of this conflict. And they went back to and then innovated on tactics that they knew how to execute, which have involved heavily relying on foot mobile infantry, making advances and gains, and bringing vehicles behind that, in a battlefield that has become, and this is something we talk about more later, a fascinating glimpse, I think, into the future of tactical activities along these lines.

And just as a teaser, and I will come back to this later, I'm beginning to think that this war is, to the next major peer on peer war, as the Spanish Civil War was to the second World War, in the sense that we're getting glimpses of what that war will look like, that we would all do well to internalize properly and think about how to include. So we've seen innovation, continuing innovation on both sides.

But the bottom line is that with the expenditure of a lot of time, manpower, and material, the Ukrainians have penetrated the Russian minefields. And this is in Western Zaporizhzhia Oblast, on a line generally toward east-ish of the city of Melitopol. And the critical Russian ground line of communication, which is a road and rail line that runs along the northern Sea of Azov coast, from the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don to the northern tip of the Crimean Peninsula.

And so, the Ukrainians have penetrated through the minefields in this area, and they have actually, in some locations, broken through what the Russians called the "Surovikin Line", after the theater commander, now disgraced, who was responsible for constructing it. And this was a line of coherent, almost continuous anti-tank obstacles. There's an anti-tank ditch, and then there's a row of what are called dragon's teeth, which are sort of cement anti-tank obstacles. And then behind that, there's a more or less continuous trench line. And that was meant, along with the minefields, to prevent Ukrainians from getting armored vehicles forward. The Ukrainians have, in fact, penetrated through all three of those layers of the Surovikin line near a village called

Verbove, on this axis. And they have gotten some vehicles and men across that position.

But there are a lot of Russian defensive positions behind that. And one of the features of this conflict that is making this so grindingly slow is that, although if you look at a satellite map of this area, it is flat, it is agricultural land, it is nothing but fields, but every field is surrounded by tree lines, which function as windbreaks. And what the Russians have done is to dig into almost every single tree line. And so, it is a field by field advance that the Ukrainians have to make because every field they get to, there are Russians holding trenches in a tree line, and then the Ukrainians have to defeat that, and then they get to move to the next field, which is one of the reasons why it is now moving slowly.

So on the one hand, the bad news is that it's moving slowly. The drone war here is brutal. And the Ukrainians and the Russians both have a very hard time keeping vehicles alive long enough to conduct maneuver warfare in this phase, or mechanized maneuver warfare anyway. And so, it is continuing to move very slowly.

The good news, from the Ukrainian perspective and our perspective, is that the Russians have not shown the ability actually to stop the Ukrainians from making the advances. And this is very important because as we talk about is this stalemate or not, it's not stalemate until the Russians can actually demonstrate that they can prevent the Ukrainians from continuing to gain ground. And they have not been able to demonstrate that because the Ukrainians have continued to gain ground here.

One final observation, as we think about looking forward: The Russians, we know, that the Russians do not have enough combat power, that is to say man and equipment, to man the entire depth of all of the prepared defensive positions they've dug. So there are a lot of trenches and defensive positions behind the current lines that are not manned. They're just defensive positions that the Russians could either fall back to or in theory bring reinforcements to. But they do not have and have not had enough manpower to fill out the entire defensive line that they have prepared.

What they've done has been to commit very heavily, pretty much all of the forces that they have available, to stopping the Ukrainians from making any gains. And that tactic has been successful, as we said, in turning this into a very, very slow grinding advance. But it is grinding down the Russian forces here. The Russian defenders that were originally responsible for the sector held, defended until they were pretty much not able to defend anymore. Then the Russians had to bring in reinforcements from other parts of the front in order to continue the defense. Those reinforcements are now being ground down. And we don't think that the Russians have significant additional reserves that they're likely to be able to bring here rapidly without potentially compromising other sectors at the front, which they could conceivably do, but that would open up different opportunities for the Ukrainians.

And so, this is one of the things that we're continuing to watch for, is we know that the Russians don't have some big defensive reserve waiting in the wings for the Ukrainians to get there. They have been fighting for every meter. They're grinding down their own forces, and the Ukrainians are continuing to advance. And so, there remains a possibility and a very real possibility that some point in here, the Ukrainians will be able to make a breakthrough that they can exploit and begin to make more rapid gains. And that's, of course, what we're hoping to see, but that's what we're watching for.

**BILL KRISTOL:**

So certainly, the Ukrainian counteroffensive is not culminated.

FRED KAGAN:

Absolutely.

BILL KRISTOL:

And will go for a while, it sounds like you're saying.

FRED KAGAN:

It's hard for us because we don't collect on the Ukrainian situation, we don't try to understand, but from everything that I'm seeing, I do not see... First of all, the attack has not culminated. The Ukrainians are continuing to attack and to lean into the attack. So it has not culminated, has not stopped. And it is continuing to make gains on a regular basis. And I don't see any reason to assess that it is likely to culminate soon. So there was every reason to think that the Ukrainian counter offensive will continue and that the possibility of significant gains remains.

BILL KRISTOL:

And that's a possibility, but not, obviously a-

FRED KAGAN:

Nothing is certain in war and the enemy gets a vote.

BILL KRISTOL:

But not as impossible maybe as some of the commentary makes it sound, as if it's just grinding and maybe they pick up a meter or two, but nothing could ever really happen in a big way. That's not your view, is what I'm sort of sensing.

FRED KAGAN:

No, that's-

BILL KRISTOL:

Not your view necessarily. It could be that, I mean, but-

FRED KAGAN:

No, it's not my view. Look, there's a general tendency among humans, but there's a tendency in war, in particular, to take straight line forecasts of anything. So if it's this way now, it will be this way forever. It's been this way for months, it'll be this way forever. But war is nonlinear, and if the Ukrainians can mass enough forces or otherwise manage to make a wide enough penetration, if the Russian defenders break, if the Russians don't have sufficient reserves, if the Ukrainians can find a way to turn this into some kind of foot race, then you could find that this will suddenly start to move in a very non-linear fashion.

It may not happen. There's no way of knowing in advance whether that will happen or not. But there's also no reason to suppose that just because this has been like this for the past few months, this is the way. And there's reason to say, we know for a fact that the Ukrainians have been fighting through the hardest, best prepared, most difficult parts of the Russian defenses. And we are pretty confident that what lies behind this is less well-prepared, less well defended, less ready. At times space and relationships matter here a lot. If this is actually going to continue to be meter by meter for many months, then the Russians will have time to prepare defensive lines behind it that might be as

formidable. But if the Ukrainians can make a meaningful breakthrough and exploit it sometime in the coming weeks, then it's unlikely to be the case that the Russians will have been able to do that.

BILL KRISTOL:

You mentioned Crimea in passing earlier, that's been a focus for a lot of people's interest. And could they possibly get enough of a breakthrough to endanger the Russian hold on Crimea, which they seized in 2014, of course, or make it more tenuous and difficult to sustain. And then there are these dramatic attacks that some of which I guess are Crimea related and Black Sea related in terms of... So say a work about- what's all that about?

FRED KAGAN:

So I don't want to steal too much of our own thunder because our plan is to publish a special edition this coming Sunday on the Ukrainian operations against Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's okay, you can still... You can-

FRED KAGAN:

I know I will. It's okay. I'm just-

BILL KRISTOL:

... this will help-

FRED KAGAN:

It's just a way of advertising it. I know. I know.

BILL KRISTOL:

... drive more readers to that...

FRED KAGAN:

Oh, that hadn't occurred to me. Yeah. Look, the first thing to understand about Crimea is that it's not really a peninsula, it's actually an island. You can't get on or off Crimea without going over a bridge. And it is connected to the Ukrainian mainland by about three major road bridges and I think two rail bridges. And then of course it's connected illegally to Russia by the Kerch Strait Bridge. So it is an island that the Russians have been using as, what in the old days we would call a place d'armes, a base of operations, a supply depot, a place for concentrating forces, a rear area that is supporting Russian operations in Southern Ukraine. And the Ukrainians have been attacking this Russian place d'armes in Crimea with increasing success.

So what has been most noteworthy is that the Ukrainians destroyed two Russian S-400 batteries on Crimea with a combination of drones and missiles. That's not supposed to be possible. The S-400 system is supposed to be able to defend itself against those kinds of attacks, including missile attacks. It's very noteworthy therefore that the Ukrainians found a technique to destroy not one, but two of these.

BILL KRISTOL:

What are the S-400?

FRED KAGAN:

The S-400 is a very long range, that is to say, out to 200 or so mile anti-aircraft system that consists of the launchers that actually fire the missiles. But more importantly, in many respects, a very sophisticated set of radar and control vehicles that actually provide general situational awareness of the airspace, not just to the missile firers of the S-400 battery proper, but to the entire air defense, all Russian air defenses in the region. And so there would be other shorter range air defense missiles that also are using the S-400 radars and so forth.

BILL KRISTOL:

An important part of their-

FRED KAGAN:

It's really, really pivotal to the Russian air defenses. And the range of this means that it's also, when Ukrainians destroyed one of these at the northern tip of the Crimean Peninsula, that also weakened Russian air defenses in southern Ukraine, not just in Crimea. So the Ukrainians have killed two of these systems now, which is remarkable. And I think that in part, their damage to those systems is what has allowed them to conduct a couple of remarkably effective strikes.

The first, killing a ship and a submarine that were in dry dock in Crimea, parenthetically also taking the dry dock out of commission, which is a big deal. But then most recently destroying the headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet and reportedly the Ukrainians claim that they killed the commander of the Black Sea Fleet, the Russians have put out a few videos that are not particularly convincing that he isn't dead, but certainly killing and injuring a lot of personnel of the Russian Black Sea Fleet command, which is all part of a larger effort that the Ukrainians have been engaged in, where they've also been targeting Russian supply depots in Crimea. And some of those have exploded very satisfactorily with lots of fireworks and secondary explosions. They've hit fuel depots, they've hit airfields. So it's a general campaign to degrade this Russian place d'armes, this Russian base of operations in Crimea.

And I think here I would just end by saying it's important to understand what the Black Sea Fleet actually is now because the Black Sea fleet is not just the ships, the Black Sea fleet is what in the US military we would call a joint headquarters that commands both... It commands the maritime elements, it commands the ships, but it also commands a naval infantry brigade that has been fighting in Southern Ukraine from the start of the war, so land, ground forces, and it commands aircraft. So it's a fully joint command, and as the Ukrainians were attacking, therefore the Black Sea Fleet headquarters, that they're not just hitting the Russian Navy, they're hitting, they're weakening the entire Russian defensive effort throughout southern Ukraine and generating systemic effects.

We can get into a conversation about have we seen the impact of this? When will we see the impact of this on the frontline? And that's harder to say because Crimea is so much of a deep rear base that the kinds of effects you see from hitting bases like that can take a long time and can be distributed along the front in a way that it's not immediately obvious, for example, in the immediate counteroffensive sector, what the impact of this is. But the net effect on the Russian defensive effort I think is probably very significant.



BILL KRISTOL:

So this isn't just spectacular explosions, as you say, fireworks going off that we can watch on Twitter or online, this is important.

FRED KAGAN:

It's very important.

BILL KRISTOL:

And it's impressive that they can do it. I mean-

FRED KAGAN:

It's very impressive that they can do it. The Russian air defenses are supposed to be able to prevent this kind of thing where they're supposed to be able to prevent missile attacks, they're supposed to be able to prevent drone attacks and they've not been able to do that.

Getting to the larger question, of course, that everyone is thinking about is, can the Ukrainians use this to run the Russians off the peninsula? The answer is actually sort of, maybe. The fundamental bifurcation is, can the Russians reestablish reliable air defense and anti-missile defense over the peninsula? If they can, then probably not, then probably they will keep their forces there. But there is a limit, I think, to how enthusiastic the Russians are going to continue to be about putting very expensive ships that they cannot replace in locations where the Ukrainians can just destroy them. And we've already seen them, the Russians, start to move some of their ships away from Sevastopol, and they've taken some landing ships, I think into the Sea of Azov and I think they've redeployed some other things to the actual Russian port in the Black Sea, Novorossiysk.

If this trend continues, it could have some interesting long-term consequences because if the Russians actually have to think about abandoning Sevastopol as the actual base for the Black Sea Fleet, well, when you strip away all of the Putin nonsense about how Crimea is inherently more Russian than any other part of Ukraine, which is not true, the geostrategic reason why it's so important to Putin is because Sevastopol is the base of the Black Sea Fleet and because Crimea is an excellent unsinkable aircraft carrier from which the Russians can conduct operations elsewhere. To the extent that the Ukrainians can demonstrate to the Russians that those are not true, then the actual long-term geostrategic value of Crimea to Russia begins to fall.

And then there is the additional point that, coming back to Crimea is an island, to the extent that the Ukrainians demonstrate that they can almost at will disrupt Russian ability to move around or onto or off of that island, I think you were going to find increasing numbers of Russians not being interested in being on that island and risking being trapped there. So I don't want to prognosticate here because there's a lot of hypotheticals and a lot of things have to go right for this to happen, but I also want to say it is not inconceivable that the Ukrainians could in fact use these series of activities as a part of their effort to, as they would say, de-occupy Crimea.

BILL KRISTOL:

Which was occupied in 2014, obviously, and controlled pretty peacefully or unproblematically you might say by Russia for the subsequent what, seven, eight years-

FRED KAGAN:

Well, the Ukrainians didn't fight there. I mean, the Russians were actually pretty brutal in controlling [inaudible]-

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, yeah, no, I'm sure-

FRED KAGAN:

But yeah. But no, there was no fighting there. There was no fighting there.

BILL KRISTOL:

So, for Putin, wouldn't it just be a little different from withdrawing from territory that he has seized in 2022 and lose some of it back in 2014?

FRED KAGAN:

Absolutely, absolutely.

BILL KRISTOL:

It would be a pretty big moment.

FRED KAGAN:

It would be devastating because I mean, the thing is actually Ukraine allowed Russia to lease the Black Sea Fleet headquarters even after independence. So the Russian Black Sea fleet has been headquartered at Sevastopol continuously since the fall of the Soviet Union, initially based on a leasing agreement, and then after 2014, based on an illegal occupation. So it would be for Russia, a world-shaking event to lose Crimea, lose Sevastopol as the base of the Black Sea fleet and a whole bunch of other things.

The point is, if the Ukrainians can generate the effect of basically forcing the Russians for military reasons to give up on Sevastopol as the base of the Black Sea Fleet, then we get into an increasingly symbolic discussion. And at that point, it is a somewhat different conversation. So I think what we're seeing in a certain sense is there is a sort of hard, if I want to put it this way, there's a really hard steel strategic reason why Crimea is very important to Russia, and then there's a whole bunch of soft ideology and other kinds of reasons why it's important to Putin. And the Ukrainians I think are working on chipping away and eroding and breaking that hard steel strategic reason. And then we'll find out how solid is that much softer in my judgment, ideological and other commitment that Putin has to this compared to the risks and price that he would have to pay for retaining it under certain circumstances.

BILL KRISTOL:

There are two things that seems to me that those of us who are friends of Ukraine would sort of worry about, and apart from just all the worries that war brings with it, but particularly, is the... One I'd say is the possible demoralization of Ukrainians, and second would be just the materiel. Do they have what they need and will they continue to get what they need from allies? And so maybe just go through both of those.

I mean, I know you were in Kyiv just a couple of weeks ago, I think, two or three weeks ago, and I haven't been, but I mean I've talked to an awful lot of Ukrainians and it's a brutal war. I mean, everyone I've talked to has lost friends or relatives. I mean, I ask this now, I'll try to ask obviously in a very nice way and sort of with sympathy, but it's just everyone's mobilized and everyone's fighting and they're taking a lot of

casualties, and it's grinding and they hear a lot of... They have the usual domestic problems that every country fighting a war for 18 months like this would have, plus some sniping from some of their allies and so forth, or a lack of confidence in the allies.

So I'm just curious what you think of the... Morale is important in war. Many people have said that, so we don't quite know, I guess, as much maybe about Russian morale, though feel free to talk about that too. But say a word about the Ukrainians. It was so impressive at first, well, it still is impressive, but so impressive that first year or so, and now you get the sense, are they being ground down or not really?

FRED KAGAN:

So this was my first opportunity to go back to Kyiv since the war began. I had been there in 2019. And I was struck on the one hand by how similar Kyiv now feels to the way that it did feel in 2019. And this is a good thing, this is a testament to the wisdom and skill of the current Ukrainian government, that Kyiv feels like the capital of a country at war, but it doesn't feel like a city that is at war. So it doesn't feel like Baghdad. It doesn't feel like Kabul. The traffic is heinous, which is good because you have a lot of Ukrainians who are living their lives as much as one can under the risk of air raids and so forth. And that's important.

Now, this has led to a number of, in my judgment, extremely inexcusably inappropriate comparisons between pictures of Kyiv and pictures of Maui that are just totally inappropriate because the equivalent pictures in Ukraine would be of Bakhmut, would be of the other frontline cities that have been devastated, would be of Kherson, which is still constantly bombed and rocketed. Whereas one could take pictures of Honolulu and Honolulu looks great. So I think this is important. Some organizations have been taking some very particular snapshots of things to make very particular partisan points that really distort realities here in important ways.

But Kyiv feels like the capital of a country at war where people are in general terms living their lives. But morale is not good. Exactly, as you say. The war has taken a terrible toll. Remember that the war has separated millions of Ukrainian families, since at the start of the war and throughout the war, we've seen a lot of Ukrainian women and children being sent to the West, going to the West. There are husbands, brothers, fathers, sons staying to fight because it's still universal mobilization. Those traumas are real and the casualties are terrible and it's very long and grinding and the Ukrainians are very frustrated themselves with the pace of the counteroffensive and the price that they're paying for it. And I also have a sense of increasing demoralization and worry because of the political discussion that we have going on here in the US even more so frankly than in Europe, and questions about whether the US is actually going to continue to stand by them. Understandably, very deeply worrisome and demoralizing to Ukrainians. But the thing that I did not detect was any weakening in their will to continue to fight.

And on the one hand, I have all praise and credit to the Ukrainian people, and I don't want to take anything away from them, inherently. On the other hand, look, when you're on the receiving end of a genocidal war of aggression, it takes a lot to persuade you that it would be a good idea to stop fighting. Especially when, almost every day, Russian media, Russian officials reiterate their determination to pursue a genocidal campaign.

So, I don't see any likelihood that the Ukrainians are going to lose their will to continue to fight anytime soon. But the morale is not good, and the way that we are increasingly talking about Ukraine is not helping, to put it mildly, and I think that's an unfortunate consequence of the nature of our discourse at this point.

BILL KRISTOL:

But they're not breaking.

FRED KAGAN:

No, the Ukrainian will is not breaking, and I don't think that it is going to break. Look, Russian will isn't breaking either, and I don't especially see Russian will breaking either. Certainly Putin's will, I think, will never break. And as my friend and colleague at ISW, Nataliya Bugayova, has repeatedly pointed out, we should assume that one will never break Putin's will. What we have to do is deprive Putin of the capability to continue to fight. That's what we have to do here.

I think it's unlikely that the Russian army's will to fight will break at scale. It's not inconceivable that Russian, individual Russian units, or even sectors of the front might collapse depending on how things went, but you never forecast that. It's possible, but you never assume that that's going to happen.

BILL KRISTOL:

Okay, so the more likely scenarios, yes, that both armies...

FRED KAGAN:

Will continue to fight and then it'll come down to whether... So we get to the next part of your question, which is...

BILL KRISTOL:

So let's talk about...

FRED KAGAN:

Ukraine have what it needs?

BILL KRISTOL:

And I was struck that you mentioned a couple of times that didn't have... They had, on the one hand, a lot from us, and from others, and some from themselves. I guess they did, but not at times what they maybe could have had.

Where on the scale of well, how much are we providing? Can we continue to provide just in terms of military industrial capability? And also do we appear to be more willing than we were, and also our allies more willing than they were to provide what Ukraine will need? Where on the spectrum of really falling short to being fully armed in a World War, US-in-1944 and World War II sort of way. Where in the spectrum are they on that?

FRED KAGAN:

Look, I think it's always important to start off by giving the Biden administration a lot of credit for leaning in rapidly. Obviously, initially they got it wrong and thought the Ukrainians were going to collapse, offered Zelensky a ride, gave him the opportunity to give us the first indication of Ukrainian swagger when he said, "I need ammo, not a ride." That kind of set the tone for the way that he's led his country, which was important.

But the Biden administration turned around very quickly and I think it's important not to take anything away from them. The US has provided a huge amount of equipment

and support, has been a leader, has led the alliance, and states that are not part of any alliance to support Ukraine. And the Ukrainians recognize this and we need to recognize this, and so we just have to start by acknowledging the important good things that Biden administration has done.

The pattern that I'm unfortunately continuing to see is that the Biden administration keeps needing to be dragged, many months after the requirement, to provide additional capabilities to Ukraine has become clear. They have a long, drawn out debate about providing those capabilities and they start to provide them many, many months later than they should have. And so we're seeing that.

We saw that with the debate over the M1 tank. The first M1s have reportedly arrived in Ukraine. That's great. I think there are 10 of them. It is now September 28th. The counteroffensive began on June 4th. The time for the M1s to be there was when the counteroffensive began, it was visible in mid 2022 that the Ukrainians were going to need more tanks. So although on the one hand I'm thrilled that the M1s are finally showing up, on the other hand, they should have been there before the counter offensive began in June.

BILL KRISTOL:

We have a lot of them.

FRED KAGAN:

We have a lot of M1s.

BILL KRISTOL:

We're not short of... They're not being used, if I could put it that way.

FRED KAGAN:

Well, no, that's right. There's another point here that I want to make. I'm hoping to make this soon in an op-ed, but I'll steal my own thunder here for that purpose as well and say we spend too much time talking about platforms and not enough time talking about capabilities. Let me just expand on that for a second.

BILL KRISTOL:

Explain that. That's good.

FRED KAGAN:

Here's what happens. It becomes apparent that the Ukrainians need a certain capability, and a capability is like the ability to conduct armored warfare. In order to conduct armored warfare, you need armor, and so you need tanks and armored personnel carriers. And it's relatively straightforward to count up the number of tanks the Ukrainians had, and then look at what the requirements would be, and say "They need more tanks." That comes in as a requirement.

Then, our military and the other militaries that are supporting Ukraine, we look around at each other and we say, "Okay, well who has tanks and who has how many of what kind of tanks?" And then we settle on what the best system is to provide, to meet a particular capability. And the answer to that question is generally not about what magic bullet weapon can we give, but simply about, "They need tanks. What tanks do we have to give them?"

So the Biden administration did not want to give them M1 tanks in the worst way, did not want to give them M1 tanks, and I don't even fully understand why, and I don't want to get into it. So our European allies actually got out ahead of us and they started providing, the British started providing Challenger tanks, the Germans started providing Leopard 2 tanks, which are fine tanks. The problem is that, I believe, I don't want to do the British down, but I believe that I heard that there are a grand total of 60 Challenger tanks in the active British army right now. And I don't know how many Leopard 2s there are running around, but there aren't all that many.

Whereas as you say, there are hundreds of M1s that are in storage in various locations, including M1s that are in storage in Europe in preparation for a war with Russia that might come someday.

BILL KRISTOL:

And I find that part the most, if I can interrupt as a total layman here, the most insane. We spent decades, literally decades, building up a military in case we have to fight. We probably won't have to do this ever, but in case we have to fight the Russians in Europe, we need to have all these tanks, and all this stuff, which everyone made fun of for a long time, right? Because we've doing this old school and now there's the biggest ground war in Europe for 80 years. Maybe we are fighting against an extremely evil dictator who's invaded a neighboring country, which we are allied with, maybe we should use some percentage of them. And I guess we have a lot of them. Again, we're not...

FRED KAGAN:

No, we have a lot of them and we have more than we're going to need in any contingency other than a full scale war with Russia, which the Ukrainians are fighting for us. So the point is, it's not that the M1 is a magical system, it's that it is a tank, and we have a lot of them, and it's the only tank the Western Alliance has a lot of, and that's the reason to give M1s. The same conversation applies to the F-16. The F-16 is not a magical aircraft. It is a fourth-generation fighter, by which we mean it is not a stealth fighter. It has performance characteristics on a general par with the F-15, and the F-18, and with the SU-27, and the SU-30, and all that stuff.

They're all fourth-generation aircraft, they all have pluses and minuses, none of which matters. What matters is that it is important that Ukraine have the capability to conduct air operations, and in order to do that, you need airplanes. And there are lots of F-16s. So that's how we ended up settling on the F-16, in the same way that we were settling on the kinds of tanks. So the issue is we've got to stop getting hyper-focused on, "Is this system optimal? The good things about this..." That's not the issue. Does the system provide Ukraine with capabilities that are essential to what it is trying to do? Yes, no. Is it suitable for export and various traps you need to run there? Yes, no.

Good. Then we should be providing it to the Ukrainians. And unfortunately, the F-16 we have delayed, and now Ukrainians are training on the F-16, but that isn't going to turn up until at least six months after the counter offense had began. Again, that's something that makes no sense. And then we're talking about ATACMS. Now, Biden administration is apparently finally committed to giving Ukrainians the long-range, precision missiles that they can fire out of the HIMARS launchers that they have. I think, I'm not sure if that's technically true. And we're talking about what specific submunition they'll be armed with. Look, this is the capability that the Ukrainians have needed for many, many, many, many months. And here's the problem, the fact that the administration continues to delay and slow roll the provision of these capabilities, not

systems, is protracting the conflict. And it is not in our interest for the conflict to protract. It's not in anybody's interest for the conflict to protract. And, by the way, one of the given reasons why the administration continues to want to hold these things back is because it's afraid of escalation, which is a whole other conversation. But as I've said before, I think to you, the biggest single factor that increases the risk of escalation is the protraction of this conflict.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's very well said. That's a very good point. And do we have enough of these weapons? Can we make enough of these weapons? Can our allies make enough of these weapons?

FRED KAGAN:

Can we fill the different capabilities that Ukraine needs filled? Yes. Can we do it with specific, very specific particular weapon systems? Not necessarily, but could we put together a package using all of the various systems at our disposal, that we could share? I believe that we can.

BILL KRISTOL:

And in general, you think the US and NATO, whatever separate arguments we should have about, we should build up our military industrial base and we should make much more of this and that for the future... We have enough. This is not a case where we're running out of X or Y and therefore what can we do? We can't give you great things we don't have.

FRED KAGAN:

Well, we're not running out of M1 tanks and we're not running out of F-16s, and there's lots of things we're not running out of that we can give the Ukrainians. The long-range ATACMS with the cluster munitions, apparently we have a lot of those, I hear. The other kinds of rounds are... Okay, so fine. So give them the ones that we have a lot of. The Ukrainians have become accustomed to taking things that are not quite what they want and figuring out how to use them in ways that work for them, and we can do that. But look, the issue of our defense industrial base deserves a conversation, but right now, it deserves a very important point to make. We have not given Ukraine 40 billion dollars. We have given Ukraine 40 billion dollars, or whatever the number is, equivalent of military hardware. The 40 billion dollars has gone to Americans. This has gotten completely just shut down.

BILL KRISTOL:

[inaudible]

FRED KAGAN:

Because we're giving the Ukrainians stuff. We're not giving them cash in this military aid, which is the overwhelming portion of the aid that we're giving them. We're giving them stuff. And then the US government is making orders to US defense contractors who, by the way, are bound to buy American provisions to ensure that those dollars stay in the US and create US jobs. And in fact, I just saw a Market Watch article the other day talking about what the US economy looks like if you subtract the Ukraine war contributions, and there's a macroeconomic effect that's being generated here by the money that is going to Americans.

And that is also doing good things for the defense industrial base, because this has been a problem that you and I and others have been worried about for decades, that we've hollowed out our defense industrial base. The war is allowing us, our support to Ukraine, is actually allowing us to build back up our defense industrial base, which we need to do for our own interests, including for other conflicts that we might have to fight.

So what is being presented, falsely, as a straightforward trade-off between benefit to Ukraine or benefit to the United States, is in fact a win-win situation. Unless your position is that the only bad spending that exists in the entire federal budget is the spending on helping Ukraine fight this war, which is the position that some American politicians seem to be taking.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. No, that's interesting. And in terms of the Biden administration, you think still a little too hesitant and still...

FRED KAGAN:

Yeah. We're still a day late in the weapons system short. We have been the whole war, and I hope that that will change, because the protraction of this conflict is not in our interest.

BILL KRISTOL:

Now, that's different from the other problem, in a way, that we've created, which is our political debate here in which the leader of one of our two major parties, the leading candidate, is basically for getting out of the war or- who knows what he's basically for...

FRED KAGAN:

We're not in the war.

BILL KRISTOL:

He's for not helping our allies much, or helping them at all. And so the Trump/DeSantis/Ramaswamy wing of the Republican Party, which right now has three quarters almost probably, of the voters behind them, is not, let's say, a reliable supporter and ally of Ukraine. And that's a big problem.

So it's a problem, obviously, depending on what happens in November '24. But without speculating about that, talk a little bit about isn't it a problem right now? I was struck when I've been in Europe a little bit earlier this year, how much, they're a little... The people who want to help Ukraine want to help Ukraine. And then they say, "But are you guys still going to be there on November '24? Because after that, if you're not, we're going to get undercut here. And so we're sticking our necks out to make unpopular arguments in some countries, in Germany or whatever, that we have to do X, Y, or Z, that we're not otherwise might not be inclined to do, and then you guys pull the rug out from under us..."

So I think the ripple effects of our domestic, and it's not, we're entitled to have a debate and people are entitled to say their views. So it's not... That's part of life, I guess, in a democracy, but I think it's having a little more effect over there than people here think. Am I right about that?



FRED KAGAN:

Yeah, I think it's one of the principal things that's contributing to demoralization in Ukraine, is this fear that the US is pulling away.

Look, I want to say straightforwardly and without any reservation: we're talking about a lot of money, we're talking about American involvement in a conflict, even though no Americans are fighting there, we're talking about our involvement in a conflict, these are very serious matters, and they deserve the full debate and full discussion among the American people, including our elected representatives. And I don't want in any way to suggest that that should be shortchanged, and nor do I want to say that anybody who doesn't take the position that I take is *ipso facto* and *a priori* wrong, and to be cast into the outer darkness.

I think we can have reasonable arguments about these things. I think it's important that we do, but I think we do need to understand the consequences that those arguments have and the consequences that having those arguments in particular ways can have. And in this respect, in particular, you asked about Russian morale. Look, the Ukrainians are bummed, but the Ukrainians are going to keep fighting. My larger concern is that we are creating a discourse in the United States that is encouraging Putin to do everything he can to protract this conflict.

He can't win it on his own terms at this point, but he could win it if our will broke in such a way that we just abandoned Ukraine and the whole coalition collapsed and Ukraine found itself facing Russia by itself. Now, by the way, I think that's an extraordinarily unlikely scenario regardless of who wins the White House. And I think that a big problem that we have is that the Russians and Europeans and Ukrainians are taking American presidential candidates and other people too much of their word about what they will actually do if they're sitting in the White House either again or for the first time. And I don't regard any of that as certain, and I actually think American willingness to continue to support Ukraine is going to be more solid than a lot of people think, or a lot of people say. But the way that this issue is being discussed now and the increasing partisanization of this issue is encouraging Putin to think that if he waits long enough, our will ultimately will break and he will be able to retrieve his losses. And that is unfortunate.

Again, I think it is almost inevitable consequence of the debate that a healthy democracy has. I think there are ways of offsetting it though, and I think that we would do well as a society to think about the ways of offsetting that. I think the opponents of giving more aid to Ukraine, I think there are more responsible arguments to make along those lines and less responsible arguments. I think that there are more responsible ways to say that and less responsible ways to say that. I think that those who support continuing to support Ukraine also need to engage in a civil discussion with those who disagree with them.

And I think that we all need to focus on trying to bound this discussion a little bit, both in terms of the heat and the vitriol and some of the bloody shirt waving on both sides that's going on here, and just try to bound it into a, look, no one is actually proposing an all or nothing proposition in terms of we should just go all in and support Ukraine. No one is saying we should send the 82nd airborne division into fight at this point. There are people who are saying we should stop supporting Ukraine entirely. That's an absolutist position. I don't know how many people are actually there. But I think to the degree that we can bound this into a civil, sensible, rational discussion with limits, we would limit the damage that the way that the discussion is proceeding is actually doing in Ukraine and in Russia.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, that's very well said. And that would be nice if that were... Well, some of that should be doable, but-

FRED KAGAN:

I know. I want a pony too. I know.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, exactly. How much is Russian propaganda making that harder? I'm struck when I see some of the politicians. It's one thing to say, "Look, as a matter of prudence, I don't think we should do X, or the escalation risks are too high, or we have other interests apart from Ukraine in the world and maybe this is drawing away from those." All these arguments, I don't mostly agree with them, but they're not ridiculous arguments, and they're arguments. But when they just started attacking Ukraine for manifestly false claims on what Zelensky's done, and he's anti-Christian and this sort of thing, that's a little different. And I'm a little personally struck how much of that is penetrated into our political system.

FRED KAGAN:

Yeah. Unfortunately, the Russians are very good, and so are the Chinese by the way, at getting baseline misinformation into the general discourse and having people not realize when they are actually repeating Russian information operations and Russian talking points. I do find myself far too often coining Gary Kasparov's excellent line, "That doesn't sound better in the original Russian." But I know what the original Russian is in all of these cases and most people don't. And I do want to make it very clear, I'm not accusing most people who do this of knowingly repeating Russian information lines. I just think that this is a general problem stepping away even from Ukraine, because this is going on with China too.

Our adversaries take advantage of the openness of our society to flood us with messages from seemingly independent sources and outlets, which are usually simply sources and outlets that nobody knows what they actually are and people don't interrogate it very carefully, with information lines that suit them. And then we find ourselves repeating those information lines. So the classic assertions about Crimea are a case in point. The assertions that Zelensky is somehow the first Jewish president of a Nazi regime who's amusingly just appointed a Muslim defense minister, also characteristic of Nazi regimes. This is a nonsensical argument in the sense of being absolutely false to fact, but it has been a Russian information line for a long, long time, and it's penetrated. The notion that Crimea belongs to Russia because of something that Nikita Khrushchev did in 1954. It's absolutely a nonsensical line, but it has permeated. And we're seeing this continue.

Now, what's the current line? The current Russian line is that the Ukrainian counteroffensive has failed and Putin is going all in on this line. And this is, by the way, one of the reasons why I think the Russians are honestly, I'm pretty sure, pretending that the Black Sea fleet commander wasn't actually badly injured or killed in the Ukrainian strike. They've twice produced a couple of videos claiming to be proof of life, which really did not actually seem to pass the sniff test. So I'm thinking he's probably not well if he's still alive. Why would you conceal that? Well, because Putin's line is the counteroffensive has failed and that was his line from very early in the counteroffensive, and it's been consistent.

The counteroffensive has not failed. Could it fail? Sure, absolutely. Any military undertaking can fail and this is a very difficult one. Has it failed? No. Is the war stalemated? No. Is everyone who says that the Ukrainian counteroffensive has failed or will fail or is stalemated a Russian agent? Absolutely not. But that is a Russian information line and is a Russian information operation. And so as we have this conversation, we do need to be, I think, more thoughtful than we have been about understanding what the Russian information operations actually are. And then everyone who is going to opine on these things should reflect on what are the current information operations? What do I actually think is going on? Just because it's an information operation doesn't mean it's not true. And just because I say it doesn't mean I'm trying to advance a Good Kremlin narrative. But we all need to be more cognizant of this.

And again, I cannot emphasize enough if we don't get this right now, when we go to start having conversations about Taiwan for real, it's going to be very bad because the Chinese have already set a lot of informational conditions and gotten into a lot of people's minds a bunch of things that are untrue about the situation, that if we are not a lot more reflective about how we engage with foreign state actor information operations, we're going to find ourselves in a lot of trouble.

**BILL KRISTOL:**

That's worrisome. And let me close with two things, I guess, to ask you in general. Are there things we should know that we haven't actually covered? And any prognostications you want to make, but also I'll just throw them together and you choose what you want to address. I feel personally, I guess I'd put it this way, there's so much that's depressing about American politics today, and about our society and liberal democracies maybe in general. I feel like Ukraine has been a remarkable counterargument, counterexample. A liberal democracy that has just risen to the occasion somewhat like Britain in 1940, really an inspiration and a real lesson. I think if they can do it, why can't we all do it? And maintain civil liberties and have in their case a rather young democracy and somewhat flawed, quite flawed a few years ago, and maybe still somewhat flawed, obviously, that's doing very well and admirably in many ways.

And then I would say honestly here in the US, I think we've done better than I expected, because at the end of the day, the Biden administration should have done more and been quicker. And it's unfortunate that we've got one of the two parties, part of which is not really on board, and whatever 80 or 90 Republicans are voting in the House to cut off the aid, but it's 80 or 90 out of 200. And in the Senate, it's better. And generally, I think the general sense of, despite the difficulties of the last 20 years and despite the post-Cold War world where we're not supposed to do this kind of stuff, people haven't really balked at doing what we are asked to do now. We haven't been asked to send soldiers. But also haven't, not just haven't balked but have been quite moved by the example of Ukraine and quite a lot of civil society sorts of activities to help them, volunteer activities, and charitable, obviously, efforts too to help wounded and humanitarian efforts.

So, I don't know, am I wrong to be... So I guess on that point, just any thoughts you have, since you've also been worried about... are we what we should be as a country and our allies what they should be? I'm curious about that. And then any particular things we should be looking for over the next weeks and months, I suppose?

**FRED KAGAN:**

Look, I always want us to be perfect and I always want our heroes and our allies to be perfect, but then I live in the real world and that's not a reasonable expectation. I agree with you. I think that, to begin with, America and Americans have performed above what one would have reasonably expected, especially having imbibed all the gloom and doom discussions of the years leading up to this invasion. It is remarkable how long American support for the war and for the Ukrainians lasted as a fully bipartisan matter. That is surprising in such a polarized environment when very few things are ever bipartisan, let alone lasting bipartisan. It was a year or something before there was even any serious opposition, and I think that that was remarkable. And I think that the fact that in coming into an election cycle, the opposition party is doing what opposition parties always do, which is to instinctively oppose the policies of the party in power. This is not abnormal. There are certain abnormalities about the way that this is going down, but this is not abnormal.

So yeah, in general terms, I think America has behaved and performed better than one would have expected given all of the gloom in advance of this. The Biden administration has absolutely outperformed a lot of people's expectations here, and continues to outperform them and is continuing to be stalwart in an increasingly difficult political environment and a challenging military environment, and is continuing to generally try to do the right thing. And I can quibble about exactly how they're doing. I can be unhappy about this and that, but as you say, the main course and thrust of what they're trying to do is right and it's getting harder and they're still trying to do the right thing. And that's important and encouraging.

Ukraine is of course flawed. Being a country composed of humans, it has flaws. And as I say, I wish our heroes were perfect. The fact that they're not perfect doesn't mean that they're not heroes. And we are seeing an incredible amount of heroism by individual Ukrainians and by the Ukrainian people in the face of an absolutely horrific genocidal war. And the fact that as bad as morale might be, as tough as the situation is, as painful as the whole thing is, that the Ukrainians are still fighting determinately, skillfully, adaptively, creatively, thoughtfully, that Ukrainian society is still backing its military in this way, that there are no signs of breaks or any real opposition. You could compare that to lots of other historical examples and say Ukraine is, it really is, a model to aspire to, even with its flaws and its limitations. And so all of that is very encouraging.

And lastly, I think the thing that we don't give enough praise for and gratitude for is so much of the collective West remains so solidly behind Ukraine here. And in fact, the centripetal pole of Ukraine, it seems to be increasing, particularly among our Asian allies. The Japanese, South Koreans, and the Taiwanese are among the most interested parties in this conflict for various self-interested reasons, but that's fine. And yes, we're seeing tensions with the Poles and we're seeing other tensions in Europe, but in general terms, the collective West is holding together almost infinitely better than anyone would've expected it to in the face of a very real threat by a country that has hurt it economically, has threatened it militarily, and can hurt it even more. And that's very impressive too.

So I think we're in agreement, Bill. It is far too soon to write the epitaph for the West, for free peoples, for liberal democracy. I don't see that here at all. I see that increasingly the world is being presented with a fairly stark choice between the brutal viciousness of uncontrolled and uncontained aggressive dictators who believe that whatever they can do, it is right for them to do, and whatever they desire to do, they should be able to do, and a collective of free peoples in Asia, Europe, around the globe, the United States who say, "No, that's not right." And we are prepared to make some sacrifices and we are prepared to support those who make enormous sacrifices against that principle. I think that the free peoples will win. If you want my basic prognostication here, I think

that the free peoples will win and I think that the autocrats will lose. And for all of all the aggravation and pessimism that we're dealing with, I'm reinforced in that belief by what I'm seeing and I'm not shaken at all.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, that's great. That's a great note to end on and we'll come back in five, six months and see how the actual war's going and hope to have a slightly more even conviction in that belief, which I shared too. But Fred Kagan, thank you very much for joining me today, really.

FRED KAGAN:

Thanks so much, Bill.

BILL KRISTOL:

And thank you all for joining us on Conversations.