

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

JAMES CARVILLE CONVERSATION

Taped: September 13, 2023

BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I am Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined again today by James Carville, who needs no introduction, obviously, a great campaign manager, a political strategist, a lifelong Democrat, but very fine commentator and fair commentator about American politics in general. We've done two conversations with James, which both stand up well from early 2021, and then just the beginning of this year, January, 2023, which you can look back at as well. But James, thanks for joining me again.

JAMES CARVILLE:

I always love to do this, do the podcast, Bill. Thank you.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, it's great to have you. Okay, so here we are, it's an election. It's past Labor Day. The election campaign has officially... shows how old I am that I think that Labor Day means something about the beginning of the election campaign, but still it is sort of the beginning, right? The year before and then the year of.

So past Labor Day 2023, how do we stand? Let's begin with Trump. You were sort of hopeful, I guess, I look back at the January 2023 conversation that he might face some real opposition, people might be getting tired of him on the Republican side. Not so much, huh?

JAMES CARVILLE:

No, not yet, and that's an important qualifier. But I'll make one factual point. If this election was this November, okay, I know it's not, but assume that it was the candidates were Joe Biden, Democrat, Donald Trump, the Republican, Joe Manchin, Larry Hogan, No Labels, and Cornel West, Biden would be betting underdog. That's just a fact. There's nobody that would dispute that at all. And that would be a catastrophic result for the country. I think we can easily say that. So there's a lot of banana peels out there. I'll leave it at that, that people can slip on. But that's where we are right now, September 13th, the year before the election.

BILL KRISTOL:

That assumes a Trump-Biden race. Well, let's just go through it, what are the banana... so what could happen to derail Trump on the Republican side? You're always imaginative about these things. Is this-

JAMES CARVILLE:

So there's a sense that if something doesn't happen in the next three weeks, it's impossible. That's not true. Okay. I know zero time. Clinton announced October the 10th of 1991. Lyndon Johnson was running for President March 1st, 1968. So we're going to have Elaine Kamarck on our podcast a week from tomorrow. And literally, she's the authority. She's the fourth edition of the delegate selection. So if something happened in... we have a nominee. Okay, there's a

thing. But there's not a deadline that you pass that you can't have one. It would be difficult, it would be all of these things. But something can happen.

Trump, and I know his numbers hold up, they got strong, but there's some evidence, I don't want to jump on it too far, that they're beginning to weaken a little bit, particularly in Iowa. And you know Bill, there's a tipping point in all of this. And it's like, what did Lenin say? History can go decades with nothing happening, and then it can go weeks with decades happening. I mean, it's not a linear-

BILL KRISTOL:

I love that comment. One of the few things Lenin said that I really like.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Yeah. Well, he did call left wing an infantile disorder. I gave that book to Bill Maher. I said, "Lenin couldn't take them. How can you and I expect to take them?"

I think the dictate wasn't him, but I think the dictatorship of the proletariat is the best slogan in the history of politics.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I guess so. That's one pro admiring another there. That's good.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Right, right, right.

BILL KRISTOL:

So he's fading...yeah, I agree. He seems to have topped out, at least in the Republican polls for a while and a little weaker in Iowa. Do you buy the argument? Well, two things I guess. What about all the indictments and trials, does that stuff make a difference, A? And B, do you buy the argument that our friend Mike Murphy is sort of sticking with that like in the old days, what happens in Iowa, the actual vote in Iowa, matters a ton for what happens in the subsequent states, Iowa and New Hampshire, and then Iowa tends to move kind of late. So, we can't look at a national poll today and say the Republican race is over.

JAMES CARVILLE:

If you're a Trump person, highly likely all you know are other Trump people, therefore you have a hard time digesting the election result. How could we lose? It was a famous Pauline Kael quote, "How could McGovern have lost? Everybody I knew was for him." Or the woman at the Dallas Country Club, "I don't understand how Goldwater could have lost everybody at the club was for him." We all live in our own information bubble, if you will.

Now what happens is other voter's weigh in. So, if he doesn't do that well in Iowa, it's not Bill Kristol or James Carville or the New York Times or corporate media saying something. This is other people just like them and that has a lot more credibility. Well, what do these people in Iowa that they look like me, they act like me, they go to church like I do, what did they see? So that's an important tipping point.

The other thing is, everybody says the same thing. People have enormous faith in juries. You can say it's a Washington DC jury or it's a this jury, but jurors are kind all the same. A Washington DC jury, if they decide something that's going to affect public opinion much more than an editorial or a talking head. And he's got some of that to go through. And they will sense there's something serious here.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's probably a little more of a general election problem because the trials don't begin, it looks like, until March or so. But maybe not. What if he's convicted in May?

James Carville ([00:06:46](#)):

Maybe not. Yeah, you don't know. Suppose that the Chesebro is convicted in October or November and people start pleading? There's so much football left to play here. Is it likely that he guts this out, he rallies them and he becomes a nominee? Maybe likely, but not much more than that, I don't think.

BILL KRISTOL:

Okay. Well that's fair. I think that's helpful and it's a good caution against everyone wants to call race... You and I've been through this so many times. People want to call races 14 months early, based on four polls.

JAMES CARVILLE:

President Giuliani.

BILL KRISTOL:

Exactly, right. Hillary in 2008, 2007, 2008.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Right. How about 2016?

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, that's... Yeah.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Yeah. Okay.

BILL KRISTOL

Let's not even think about that. But I want to say for the record, you and I, I think we did a speech probably together somewhere in October 2016...I don't know if you remember this... And you were worried. You were worried about Hillary and you were worried about their campaign strategy and the fact that Hillary hadn't set foot in Wisconsin and was giving up on small town voters and so forth. So I always give you credit for that. You weren't drinking the Kool-Aid.

JAMES CARVILLE:

I think a lot, and my mind wanders a lot. And I think, suppose I was like a German soldier in World War I, born in 1898. And it's 1937, I have an apartment in Berlin and the motorcade is coming. And I've got pretty good shot and I got him. I could squeeze the trigger and I said, "Well, maybe the industrials in Berlin, the younger general staff will control him and I'll probably miss and it'll make him stronger. And there's a 12 knot cross wind and I'm a little rusty." You don't pull the trigger. Alright?

And in September of 2016, I knew, as did other people knew that this thing wasn't going very well, that the messaging was kind of screwed up. And every time you'd call them, they'd say, "Well, analytics says yes." Well, I don't know how you argue. I know how to argue with Jeff

Garrett. I know how to argue with Jim Gerstein or John Angeloni. I do not know how to argue with analytics because it's some creation, it's so authoritative.

And people would say, "Well look, you go talk," and, "I'm not going there." And I'd say, "Well, if I do, it's probably not going to work. There's going to be this massive pushback. 'The white boys are trying to take over again.'" I'm in the sixth tier of influence, and my kids can go to the White House Christmas party, if I'm lucky, and I don't want to take it on. It's too much trouble. And it probably wouldn't work anyway.

But if we would've... It would've caused wholesale disruption. I don't think they were looking for that. And again, it probably wouldn't have worked. But I still wonder if I should have tried. You just look. I can't tell you that I stay up late at night and have nightmares about it, but I think about it. And I'm still guy that didn't squeeze the trigger, said, yeah, maybe I should have.

BILL KRISTOL:

I think you made your views known privately to some degree, and you're about 1/1000th as culpable as all the Republican elites obviously who haven't squeezed the trigger for eight years and many other people. You were basically right. And I had the impression you and some of your colleagues made that case privately.

But anyway, to get back to 2023, let's just talk that about. I mean, you said that you thought if the election were held now or this November, Biden is a slight underdog. I mean, what about the Democrats? So what about the Biden question?

JAMES CARVILLE:

It's obviously a relevant question. And so when I taught, I used to tell my students, "You got to understand this. It doesn't matter what I think. It only matters that you think."

And so you and I, experienced at this. We actually, unlike most people, have a fair idea of what the job entails. And we also have unfortunately, a fair idea of what old age entails. Like it or not, maybe... So let's forget about what we think. That's not the question here. We know what the public thinks and the public does not like this. Not by a little bit, by like three quarters. And what this democracy could do, and you hear these... at the Cosmos Club, and they mumble shit like rule of law and institutions and guardrails and the democracy. Well, you got to give people a choice for a democracy to succeed, people got to get a choice that at least half the people, like. Right now, three quarters of the country does not like the choice that they're being presented with.

Could it change? Yeah. So at The White House, there you just...I hear it a thousand times a day. Reagan was 42 in August of 1983. Clinton was in the toilet in August of 1995. Obama was down. And it takes a while, James, for these recoveries to take hold and people are going to see this. And it's The Almighty versus The Alternative. Well, I don't know about you, but "The Alternative" is not the most inspired campaign message I've ever heard in my life. But okay, I'm not going to be critical.

But suppose it doesn't get better. All right? That's a possibility. And the really...if you can give me two minutes here.

BILL KRISTOL:

Please.

JAMES CARVILLE:

This is an important point. The Democratic numbers, Biden's numbers among the two constituencies that the Democrats have to do well, not carry him, but what I think about is share of vote. All right? So the turnout among Blacks since Biden has been elected has been

abysmal. And it's been abysmal everywhere. It's the most underreported story in American politics today.

And I keep screaming about it and I think people think it's racist to say we have low Black turnout. It's just the opposite. We're not connecting with the most important constituency in the Democratic party.

Young people are decidedly unenthusiastic. That Harvard poll was good. I want to get that guy on the podcast. As soon as somebody says Harvard and politics, I have this immediate like, "Nah." That guy, they're good.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's a healthy reaction [inaudible]

JAMES CARVILLE:

But that guy Della Volpe, their stuff is good. I mean, I've started out highly skeptical and looked through it and I've talked to other people. And young people are not enthusiastic at all. So we were talking share, the Black share population, Black share should be 12. I think that's right. I could be slightly off, but it should be 12. The under-30 share should be 17.

So if the Black share is 11 and the under 30 share is 15, you say, "Well, you lost three points on constituencies that you're going to get, probably two thirds of one and 93% of the other." Aaah! Wrong answer. It costs you a lot more than that. Because remember on election day it has to add up to a hundred.

So if my Black share is down and my youth share is down, another share has to go up. It's always a hundred on election day. And unfortunately, the share that is likely to go up are non-college whites over 60.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's interesting.

JAMES CARVILLE:

So maybe they should be 30% of the share. Now don't hold me to that. I have to go back and look. But if they come in at 32, that's a lot.

BILL KRISTOL:

So you lose two thirds, in a sense, on both sides, on each of the two and three percents.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Exactly. It is the most fundamental law of politics that is hard to grasp. It has to add up to a hundred. It's not going to be 47 to 46 on election day. It can't.

Equally true is the third parties are going to be a pretty decent drain on Biden. And don't forget Cornel West. I've watched him on TV, and he's got a shtick and it's not bad. And he's very, "Oh, my brother Carville, people have to have an alternative. And we've been caught in the same doom loop." And his chief backer is Jill Stein, who got more votes than Hillary, lost by in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, who was a complete creature of the Kremlin. Please Google "Jill Stein, Vladimir Putin, General Flynn photograph" and the Kremlin's going to be all over this. That's hardly a secret.

And the No Labels people, they might take some...but it's going to be mostly Republicans who can't stand Trump that just can't pull themselves to vote for a Democrat, but would probably get most of them that voted without No Labels. And so, that's all a danger. That's real danger. That's not made up, Beltway, Democratic... [inaudible] is a friend of mine, said, "I think

Democrats need to quit bedwetting." I said, "My wife has me on rubber sheets right now." I don't know if I'm a bed wetter or not, but I sleep with a life preserver.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. You see national polls that are 46-46, 43-43, several reputable polls. Then you see two thirds of the country doesn't want Biden and Trump and two thirds of Democrats think Trump is too old. I don't think it's bedwetting at that point, you know?

JAMES CARVILLE:

Remember, and people will say the CNN poll had too many Republicans. Okay, I've thought... But every other poll's the same. They don't change. And this has been going on since May. I think I looked at a ABC poll. Of course, just having seen so many polls, I try to look at things more optimistically than, say the average person in politics, and every time I tried to find something to be optimistic about, it was catastrophic.

I say, "Well, maybe our enthusiasm's down." No. "Maybe Trump's very unfavorable is higher than Biden's very unfavorable." Not really. Every little data point you try to eke out to say there's a pair...the only thing that the Biden high command would say is, "Right now we're getting 15% of the voters who say we have a bad job approval," or something. But remember you got to add up to a hundred on election day.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. So the two counter arguments that we've both heard so often and they're not ridiculous is "too risky" and "too late". The primary would be a mess, who knows who'd be nominated. Biden Beat Trump. You're just willing to roll the dice. That's just too... It's riskier than the risk of running an 82-year-old. That's the kind of comparative risk analysis if you want. So too risky. Then we can get to, maybe it's too late now. This was a good argument when you made it back in January.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Right. Let me point out a very important number in ... I guess it was a CNN poll. Everything, trial heats 48-40, whatever. There's one number that sticks out. If it was Nikki Haley and Biden, Biden's at 43. I don't know if I've ever seen an incumbent at 43.

So if it's Biden-Trump, it's 48, I don't know, which every other poll has. But as soon as you interject something different, six points. And that's one poll, it might be an outlier, but you're going to see more than that. You would like to see validation before you jumped on that. But I thought that was a really significant number. And you could see somebody coming up and the lack of enthusiasm.

Now, the only people that are enthusiastic are the Trump people. That's it. The Democrats are not enthusiastic, the non-Trump Republicans are depressed, and there's a lot of stuff out there to worry about. You don't have to be an overly hand-wringing Washington insider to see this.

BILL KRISTOL:

So the risk, so let's just talk about what, if Biden took your advice, and I guess my advice, and more importantly the American public's, the Democratic voters' advice, Democratic Party voters' advice, and said, "Okay, I'm going to do my best to be really, really good one-term president, finish all the work, as much as the work I can do on the economy and make sure Ukraine wins, but I'm not going to run for reelection," he announced that in a month. What would it look like? What would you expect the primary process to look like, the candidates, et cetera?

JAMES CARVILLE:

The first thing that would happen, his approval would go up three to five points immediately.

BILL KRISTOL:

I agree.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Immediately.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah.

JAMES CARVILLE:

And he has very skilled people around him, but they all work for him. One of the things that people say is, "Biden really doesn't have any peers." He's got ... Mike Donilon is an old friend of mine, is one of the more skilled people day in and day out in this business. I know that Anita Dunn is highly experienced, highly skilled, Ricchetti's a really good guy, he's a smart guy, but they work for him. There's no one can come in and say, "Sir, this thing is just not what we need it to be, quite frankly." I don't think that exists in Biden world. But let's just assume that he decided ... that he didn't.

"I'm going to sit here, I promise to do this job. I'm going to stay on the job right to the end. I'm going to help my friend President Zelensky in Ukraine. I'm going to forge our better ties with South Korea, Japan, Vietnam," which I think is really smart and good, "and we're going to keep pushing this economy forward. We've made great progress and we're making progress, and I want to sit on as long as my watch."

I think that, and then a bunch of people would announce. I think you would see crowds of 10, 15,000 people in Iowa and New Hampshire, South Carolina. I think it would be just enormous. Do I know that? No. Can I prove that? No. But do I honestly think that? Yes. And let them all run.

The thing that I really deeply disagree with is when people say, "Well, if it's not Biden, the only alternative we have is Harris." Oh no, please. There is more... The most skilled presidential field of our lifetime, I think it was clearly the 1980 Republicans. But they were skilled in a different way. If you took the accumulated government experience of that field, it was pretty remarkable.

I think the potential Democratic 2024 skill field could even be better, not that they had the same kind of experience... but the skill. Josh Shapiro is such a skilled politician, it's like ridiculous. The same thing with [inaudible]. He wouldn't be presidential... Andy Beshear is so freaking skilled, Wes Moore, Warnock, Gina Raimondo, I hate to start naming names because somebody will call and say, "Well, you didn't mention me." Newsom. Harris starts out as a... She's got her problems, but she's Vice President, prosecutor, Attorney General.

My point is, don't worry. There's plenty of people to pick up the ball. And de Gaulle, they went to him and he told his staff he was not going to run for reelection. And people said, "Well, monsieur, what's France going to do without you?" How can France live without de Gaulle since the late '30s? He said, "The graveyards are full of indispensable people." You want to see people that the country can't do without? Go by any graveyard in Washington. All that.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's it.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Franklin Roosevelt died. You know what the country did? Survived. Come on.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, no, very fair, a fair point. I would say, incidentally, you mentioned Shapiro and Whitmer, and again, that's not, yeah, I agree with you, we don't need to go through the... Buttigieg, everyone's talking about Klobuchar. It'll be... Who knows? But those two in particular, they won in swing states that Biden had won by a point or two, by I guess ten points in Whitmer's case, 15 points in Shapiro. Discounted a little because Shapiro in particular had a crazy opponent. Whitmer actually had a normal Trumpy kind of Republican opponent.

Let's just say, let's stipulate winning a governor's race isn't the same as winning a presidential race and Trump is a different kind of opponent, but I feel like people who say only Biden can win, it's like, didn't Whitmer and Shapiro literally win several percentage points of Trump voters in 2022? By definition, they couldn't have won by that margin if they didn't get people who had voted for Trump in 2020. So they have at least some track record, Warnock in Georgia too-

JAMES CARVILLE:

Sure, Warnock, Warnock is unbelievably skilled.

BILL KRISTOL:

Getting voters who voted for Kemp. You know what I mean? So Biden's not the only Democrat who has a track record of winning over Republicans or ex Republicans or independents. Now, presidential level is different, and I understand that. So I feel like there's yes, the Washington conventional wisdom that, oh my God, what a horrible risk to have any of those people... Well, you went through this in '91, '92 with Clinton, of course. You can't have some untested governor from Arkansas against George H.W. Bush who was winning the Cold War and the Gulf War.

And I don't know if I ever told you this, I remember this, I'll just take two seconds. This meeting in the White House, I think it was in the White House, maybe it was outside the White House because it was about politics. Maybe it was the Haight Adams or something. Very late '91, but Sununu was still chief of staff and it was when... So that was December, I think when Cuomo didn't fly to New Hampshire-

JAMES CARVILLE:

It was December.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right, decided not to run. And huge sighs of relief from the Bush high command, both in the White House and in the campaign. Bob Teeter was a wonderful guy included in this, but especially Sununu, just, "Oh my God, can you imagine, they're going to end up probably nominating Clinton? Oh, boy. We're lucky to avoid Cuomo." And I foolishly sort of said, "I don't know. Maybe it's tougher to run against the guy who wins in Arkansas, who seems like a skilled pol." And I knew Clinton a little bit when I worked at the Education Department and Hillary was on an advisory committee and stuff. I met him a few times, a skilled politician from Arkansas then to run against the New York liberal governor.

And "Oh, no Bill, you don't understand how politics works. And we have all these governors in the Midwest who are going to hold those states for us against Clinton." I don't know. So people are surprisingly, are often wrong about who the strongest opponents would be, especially if they're in Washington and swept up in the incumbent president's strong or the governor of New York is strong. And who are these other governors some people don't have, don't know at this point?

JAMES CARVILLE:

You know Bill, that's like when I told my then-girlfriend that I was going to work for Bill Clinton, she literally threw up. And she said, "That guy could beat us." [inaudible], people knew. I mean, maybe-

BILL KRISTOL:

No, I remember talking to her. Yeah. Mary at the time was one of the few people who saw what was happening.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Right. And said, "This guy's dangerous." If you let this horse get out the barn and prance around the pasture a little bit, it's not going to be good. And I was a very hot property, and so I'd interviewed Hawkin and Bob Carey and whoever was running, and as soon as you talk to Clinton, it was like, "Holy shit."

BILL KRISTOL:

Is that right? You had won the big Pennsylvania special senate race.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Won the big Pennsylvania race and Paul Begala and I were the hot commodities and all the campaigns then were calling us.

BILL KRISTOL:

And did you not have much of a prior relationship with Clinton?

JAMES CARVILLE:

Not much at all. When I was doing the Frank Lautenberg campaign, he spoke at the J-J dinner and it was actually Zell Miller, the Democratic Governor of Georgia at the time, and he told then Governor Clinton, "You got to talk to James and Paul. These guys really good."

So I didn't go in with much of a relationship, but I was able to interview and all of them talk to me. And it was just evident there was the whole other level of politics that you were dealing with.

One of the things that people say that I find, let's say mildly annoying is like, "The Democrats thought that Reagan would be the best." Or, "All the Republicans said..." Who are "the Democrats?" When somebody says, "the Democrats wanted...", would you describe to me, because I think I know a lot of Democrats, and I don't think you can find... If you find five Democrats, you find six opinions. Or people say, "The Republicans want that." Well, actually, who are, tell me who... Is Matt Gaetz and Mitt Romney, are they the same people? It's nothing significant. I just find it irritating-

BILL KRISTOL:

No, no, I agree with that.

JAMES CARVILLE:

...when people just ascribe "the Democrats" or "the Republicans". It's a shorthand, but it's meaningless.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, or they think there's a Democratic Party that can make X or Y happen... Why isn't the party going to Biden and tell... Who is the party? A lot of people who work for Biden, a lot of people who depend on Biden to do fundraisers for them and get along with the White House and get favors, not favors, but get genuine things done for their constituents and so forth. And so why won't those people go to Biden? Because Biden's the President of the United States, right?

JAMES CARVILLE:

Every day I get stopped. Every day I'm traveling. I get stopped in the airport. And people, and it's good, I've a kind of cultivated image. People come up to me and just, "James, why don't you go to the DNC and tell them to do that?" I say, "Well, first of all, I don't think they'd listen to me. Second, if they tried to do it, they couldn't do it anyway."

The idea that I can make, like my children, "What do you mean we can't get in this restaurant? Of course we can. Get daddy to call." People think I have powers that I have no way of near having. I just pick up the phone. You pick up the phone and you call Joe Biden and you tell him, say, "Here, you take the phone. I got my cell. You go and tell him." But it is funny how people think or the Democratic Party or the DNC, they don't know whether... The DNC's never known whether to wind its butt or scratch its watch. They're still trying to figure it out.

BILL KRISTOL:

It's just disillusioning to me that you don't have this power, that I've always assumed you did when I was-

JAMES CARVILLE:

The RNC used to have power. When I first started-

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, the Republicans are a little different. There is a little more.

JAMES CARVILLE:

When I started dating Mary, I used to go over to the RNC. And Clayton Yeutter was the RNC Chairman, fine gentleman, nice guy, was like from Nebraska, was like an ag guy. And he was the first Republican chairman to refer to as the Democratic Party and not the "Democrat Party". And they asked him why. And he said, "Well, the political party has a right to be called what it wants to be called." Which is okay. Kind of makes sense if you think about it.

BILL KRISTOL:

It was a different... Short-lived. He was a nice man.

JAMES CARVILLE:

But they had power. The RNC in 1991, they could raise money, they could do things, they were organized. DNC, Ron Brown was the best party chair we ever had.

BILL KRISTOL:

Is that right? Yeah, that's interesting. Yeah. Yeah. So I'd say, I was having this conversation with someone in Washington. Said, "Yeah, you're right, Bill, probably better on the whole, the risks of Biden running at 82 are greater than the risks of the contentious primary." Instead, just one more footnote on another contentious primary before I get to the next point I want to make about whether someone should challenge Biden, people also are crazy about that. It's like it's going to be bitter. It's going to be mean. There's no correlation. A, yes sort of. B, it's

not going to be that bitter. They're all going to be kind of pro-Biden, honestly, when they run. And C people, it happens, it ends, there's a convention, everyone gets together. And with very rare exceptions, it doesn't affect anything in the general. The 2016 was Karl Rove said on Fox News at the height of the Obama-Clinton, 2008, I'm sorry, thing which was going on forever and Hillary wouldn't give up. And they were primaries where Hillary was beating Obama late in key big states, Pennsylvania and stuff. And Karl Rove, "This is dooming the Democrats. This is really going to damage them." And I remember saying, "I don't think so." All the Obama voters would vote for Clinton and all the Clinton voters would vote for Obama with one or two exceptions, obviously. And there's not much evidence. The Republicans had a pretty nasty set of primaries in 2015, '16. It wasn't like Trump had a... A lot of people denounced Trump much more fervently than they have since, of course. And Trump won. And then once he's the nominee, he's the nominee. And unfortunately, he won. So I feel like this whole contentious primary bitterness, "it's going to be a zoo." I don't know, do you agree? That's so overdone, I think.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Right. Not only is it overdone... so I'll do an experiment with you. Ask Sarah Longwell, your friend, who's very confident, has done a lot of focus groups, does a lot of posts. And ask Sarah, "When you go to pick anything, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and ask people, 'When you think of the Democratic Party, what do you think of?'" They're going to say, "Urban,"; "very into minorities,"; "old."; "They don't really see me." They're not really part of the equation. And they think of Pelosi, and Biden... And this is your idea of what the Democratic Party is. So you turn on the TV and there's a debate. And they got Whitmer, and Warnock, and J.B. Pritzker, and five other... Gavin Newsom. And they have five people there. They got a lot of energy, that can really string a sentence together, that have, "Well, I kind of like that idea." Right?

But right now, if you've ask Sarah, I know what she's going to tell you, they think it's an urban, old, very political, into constituency groups. You can't blame people for having... But the point, when people see, "Holy shit, these people actually have thought of this."

I think it would change sea level, I really do. And you think, the reason I have such a soft spot for Whitmer is because she so destroyed the Michigan Republican Party, it had a fist fight at the state convention.

If somebody in a swing state can get the opposition party to start throwing knuckle sandwiches at each other at the state convention, that's pretty good. And the Michigan Republican Party was a powerful entity at one time. Really powerful. It's now babbling in the corner, doesn't know which way to go. Even like Betsy DeVos has had enough of them. And you can think Whitmer for a large part of that.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, and they won the down-ballot races, and they won the legislature.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Yeah, yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, no, Shapiro, Pennsylvania too was a very tough state. And he-

JAMES CARVILLE:

And by the way, Shapiro had something to do. That was the big thing about the Democrats getting involved in these Republican primaries. I was totally supportive of it.

And they gave [inaudible] a good shove in the right direction. And it turned out to be pretty damn good politics because they were able to... The other thing, Bill, I'd point out, the Democrats have literally not lost an election since Dobbs. IN everyone, even if they did, they've outperformed 10, 15 points. And not only are they winning, they're winning by a lot more than they should.

Now whether you can say, it's not going to continue, I can't tell you that. But I can't tell you there's been a bunch of elections in different parts of the country that were supposed to be close, they're not even close.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, and that's also, I think Whitmer used that effectively. And it's probably better for a governor who's in a state with actual abortion legislation having been debated and so forth, to raise that issue than Biden, it's a little, he's where the party is on it. He's fine, but it's not quite his-

JAMES CAVILLE:

You ask Charlie Sykes if he ever thought a political party could win an election in Wisconsin by 12 points and they'd say, "no, it's impossible."

BILL KRISTOL:

And now the Republicans are trying to prevent her from being a judge. So let's get to the tougher case though. So you and I are certainly in the same place on Biden stepping aside, and have been for quite a while.

Is it crazy? Would it be crazy for someone who probably wouldn't be one of the really famous governors, but maybe a back bench member of Congress or something, to say, "Look, the country deserves a choice. I have the highest regard for President Biden, but I'm going to throw my hat in the ring, just so there is a lead," try to break the ice, try to rip the band aid off? Or is that a bad idea?

JAMES CARVILLE:

So this has never happened. Be clear, there's nothing specific. But let's say I was in the Washington area, and a Democratic politician of some stature said, "James, I'd like to have lunch with you." And he said, "Look..." Or *she*, said, "It's not a secret. I'm in politics because I'm ambitious." Thank you. I like that. Very, very approving of that. "And I want to run for President one day. And I'm going to wait till 2028."

And I would say to them, generic pick any five credible people, I'd say, I'm going to give you my honest answer- your view of the world is, I'm not going to challenge Biden because it would disrupt the party. Clyburn would be mad at me. Whatever, donors... And people genuinely like Joe Biden in the Democratic Party, for good reason. Okay?

Guys, if you want to be President, 2028 is the worst possible year you can run as a Democrat. The Democratic field in 2028 is going to be stunningly good, because then you're going to have the Shapiros, and the Whitmers, and people like that coming online, they're probably a cycle away.

So if you want to be President, and you're a Democrat, your best chance is to run right now. You have a much better chance. You're telling me that you're an ambitious person. All right, you're telling me that this is something you want to do. You think you can do the job. And I'm telling you, with as much certainty as a human being can have, your chances in 2024 are significantly better than they'd be in 2028. The primary would be incredibly hard. The general would be incredibly hard. Just look forward. Because theory is, is Biden will win. And no, no, I would be very comfortable in giving any Democrat that piece of advice.

BILL KRISTOL:

And do you think... I've played this argument once or twice to... Democrats don't even, they're so nervous about it, they don't even raise it directly. But it's always like a hypothetical if someone were to possibly think of doing this. I think it's also the case that if someone, Mr. and Mrs. X announced against, announce in a month in a respectful way, I just feel like people deserve a choice.

Let's say Biden beats that person, which he could well do, obviously, if it's not a well known person, and if other people don't jump in. And Biden wins South Carolina, 60-35, or 60, 55-35 with Kennedy and Williamson getting some votes. And then he wins the subsequent races and so forth.

Isn't Biden stronger as a result of that, not weaker? Wouldn't it be a little invigorating for Biden to knock aside some challengers, as opposed to the notion that all it can do is weaken Biden? I don't really quite buy that.

JAMES CARVILLE:

I have heard this argument again and again, and it makes sense. I don't know of any politician that wants to do a primary.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, I understand that.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Okay, you don't understand this, but this is going to be good for you.

BILL KRISTOL:

They don't want it, but I'm just saying-

JAMES CARVILLE:

I understand. I agree-

BILL KRISTOL:

... Empirically, it's- Everyone's into 1980, "Oh, Kennedy destroyed Carter." I went back and looked at that. If Kennedy had not run... Can I just make this point? In 1980, Jimmy Carter would've lost to Ronald Reagan.

JAMES CARVILLE:

He would have lost anyway.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, absolutely. It's a silly-

JAMES CARVILLE:

The moment-

BILL KRISTOL:

Kennedy ran a tough campaign and didn't really concede very gracefully. And mobilized the whole wing of the party. This wouldn't be like that. This would be a respectful campaign. Time to move... time to do the generational transfer that you promised, sir. I really feel like people are overdoing how much damage it would do.

JAMES CARVILLE:

When people want a change, you're not going to talk them out of it. 1980, 1992, [inaudible] a new generation, they wanted new leadership that had 12 years. And I'm saying this because I get credit for something that was going to happen anyway. I think we can get some credit for the primaries.

2008 was the same thing. But John McCain could have stood on his head eating cornflakes and recited the Iliad. It wouldn't have mattered. They weren't going to vote for him. It was just in the mood for something else. I don't know, I think the country is just hungry, just hungry for something different. And I'm very confident in that assessment. And you look at, it's not that... I think this, I'm going to be 79. I've certainly been around the presidency and been inside of it. You're an older guy, you've worked in a White House. You have some idea of what the job entails. But it doesn't matter, no one is sitting here waiting, "Well, I got to wait and see what Bill and James think and then I'll know what I think." That's just not the fucking way people-

BILL KRISTOL:

Unfortunately, that's not happening.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Yeah, if they would just listen to us. But we do know what the public thinks. That we do. This is not a secret. And we do know what they think over an accumulated number of polls. And some say 75 don't like the choice, some say 72, some say 77. It's all the same number. And it just is. There's just no denying that.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. And people, my friends in the White House, who sort of stopped talking to me the last two, three weeks, but until recently it was, "Bill, you have this fantasy about a younger candidate and so forth, but we're going to do a better job of messaging. And Biden deserves credit for all the good things he's done."

And I agree he deserves more credit than he's getting. But at some point you also have to accept... This is kind of your point, I think. Another way of saying it, accept what the data is showing you. And I was there at that Bush White House in '91, '92. George H.W. Bush was a pretty good president.

JAMES CARVILLE:

He was.

BILL KRISTOL:

History has been kind to him, and will be kind to him. And the country wanted change after 12 years. And I remember going out and making the case for Bush, when I was Quail's VP Chief of Staff, the Vice President, Quail's Chief of Staff. And just at some point, I kind of realized, it sort of doesn't matter. And suddenly, if they couldn't vote for Clinton, they were going to vote for Perot, right?

JAMES CARVILLE:

Right.

BILL KRISTOL:

And so Bush went, I always think this is telling, Bush went from 54%, I think it was in 1988, to 38% in '92. Think about that. A third of Bush's voters deserted him. Had he been that bad? But it's just people wanted change. And I kind of feel like we're a little bit in that. Obviously,

Biden's only been President for four years. It hasn't been 12 straight years of Democratic governance and so forth. But I don't know, I think at some point the Biden people are trying to argue with something that it's pretty hard to argue your way out of.

JAMES CARVILLE:

So also, look at Churchill. I mean in '48. I mean, the guy could make any kind of argument you wanted to make, and people wanted a change. It's one of these things where, I once, right at the time, I had a job, I went over and told the person I was working for, said I was going to leave. And I was polite, nice about it. Then that person called me ungrateful, and blah, blah, blah. I said, "Look sir, if everything that you say is right, it might be, and everything that I say is wrong, and I consider that to be the possibility, it don't make a shit. I'm still quitting. I'm really not here to argue about it. All right?"

So sometimes in politics, and this happens more often than we think, everything that the other people say is absolutely true. Manufacturing has been... George H.W. Bush, we stopped an invasion, but minimal costs. We made real progress to the balance of budget. We did the Clean Water, ADA Act. You go back and you say, "Gee, it was a more..." People go back and look at the Carter Presidency, and say, "Well, it was more accomplished than we thought."

It didn't matter. They weren't open to judging on that. And when they say Biden is too old, what I can't do legitimately is say, "Let's pivot to the real issues. Let's talk about infrastructure, let's talk about education, let's talk about the alliances around the world." No, it's a real issue. I can't say this is something that they're making up on Fox.

BILL KRISTOL:

Age.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Age, it's an issue. And everybody has experience with it. Everybody knows what it is. And you can't... In the press, most people I talk to in the press, actually the White House screams at them, they think they're actually, if anything, under-covering the issue.

But you can't say it's just some made up Glenn Beck Overton Window bullshit that they come up with. It's actually an issue.

BILL KRISTOL:

You can't say that it's going to be less of an issue a year from now.

JAMES CARVILLE:

It doesn't. You and I know, it's an elevator that only goes down. The best you can do is stop at a floor for some period of time, but it's not going to go back up.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. I'm struck, when we talk about the Democratic Party, asking about the Democratic Party for a minute more broadly, when we talked in April, I think it was in 2021, I think you were worried about the left wing streak in the party. And you made a comment that got a lot of pickup, about they should stop listening so much to people from the Amherst, I think it was, faculty lounge, and listen to real voters, and not worry about LatinX and stuff.

When we spoke at the beginning of 2023, January '23, you were somewhat more optimistic that that had receded some, and the moderates were getting the upper hand. Biden obviously part of that, but also Shapiro, Whitmer, and others, some of the younger members of congress... AOC doesn't seem to be quite representative of the younger members of Congress. Maybe Spanberger, and Slotkin, and Mikie Sherrill, and Seth Moulton, and Dean Phillips, and

people like that. And we're representative. And where are you now on the internal balance of power, as it were, and dynamics of the Democratic Party?

JAMES CARVILLE:

So I don't... Allow me to take a few minutes here. The word woke first appeared by a Black jazz musician who was born in Caddo Parish, in Shreveport. Died in a Houston jail, named Led Belly, Ledbetter.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

JAMES CARVILLE:

And it was used in a context that Black people in Louisiana and Texas, in the 1920s, should be woke in their interactions with the police, which seems to me pretty sound advice. Okay? I wasn't a Black person in Houston in 1928, but yeah, I guess they tell you in the military, situational awareness would be a good idea. And of course, overeducated, the Amherst humanities faculty got ahold of the word, and then came up with "woke". Because overeducated white people screw everything up for everybody.

I do think that my side has won the argument. Now they're going to come up and say, "We were naive, and we were trying to apply 22nd Century terminology to the present time, which was probably an over reach." They're never going to say that. But they're kind of letting it go.

So what's really become the extreme is the anti-woke. Everything is woke. Woke corporations, woke military, woke highway signs, woke anything you can think of. When it reached its zenith... This week, I read a column in the New York Times. It says, "James Bond has gone woke." I went, "Oh, Jesus Christ." Now James Bond is like, transgender, multiracial. The evidence is, he was dating a... The new James Bond book, he's dating an immigration lawyer. Jesus. Son comes home and says, "I'm dating an immigration lawyer." Great. We need 'em. Or that Viktor Orban, who was the villain in the book. Actually, he's a pretty bad guy.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, right. Pretty good villain.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Yeah, but he's a villain. So it's become to the extent that the anti-woke... The woke people are not going to sit. They're not going to mess with me, or Bill Maher, or anybody else. But whoa, if you are the assistant instructor of art history at some overpriced, under-attended college, they'll hang you up in a town square. They would thrive on people that couldn't defend themselves against this, what I consider excessive and sometimes ridiculous language. But the big thing is, the public never picked it up. They were using words.

I'm not a linguistic guy at all, but for a word to have some power, people have to start picking it up and using it. And the things that, everybody knew. If I could un-ring a bell, I'm very pleased with what I said about it. But I think that anti-woke people have now become the true villains in this. But understand this, and you know this. The Western Left, I'm not talking about liberals like me, I'm talking about the Left, are colossally stupid throughout history. And I point to the German Communists in 1937, '38, were marching and saying the worse the better. After Hitler, us. Really? And where did you all end up?

And so, that was just the kind of thing in the American Left that was very quite pleased that Trump won. And their theory is, is that there's all these inactive cells of the proletariat stationed strategically around the country that are ready to be activated at the touch of a button. And if we actually got all, we had a high voter turnout and people turn out, we would

win every election. Actually, people that researched this say if anything, there's more dormant potentially right-wing voters than there are left-wing. And actually, to the extent that there's any research on it. But that's their belief, that the worst it gets. And I first encountered these people in Austin in 1984. I'd never heard of that. That you lose with honor, you feel better about yourself. You didn't get there and start compromising and dealing with these people who historically supported inequities in society. It's such a weird thing to a guy like me. But they exist, and there are more of them than you think. And you're going to find a lot of them on Cornel West's campaign. They will be happy if they elect, reelect, Trump, because that accelerates... You have these racists talk, they call themselves "Accelerationists", that there's a race war that's coming and we just as soon get it over with and get it done right now. But the left has its accelerationists too, that inevitably there's going... that workers are going to rise up and seize control with the means of production, and you just wait. I'm right, and the worse it gets the more likely this is going to happen. I promise you that's a phenomena.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. It's not going away, and it's going to be a part of any left party, liberal party. But I do feel like, as you say, the Democrats, if you look empirically at Shapiro, and Whitmer, and Polis, and Pritzker, they have their slight differences of gradation. But that does not look like a super left, super woke party. And if you look at Schumer, and Jeffries, and Clark, and Biden of course, and Tony Blinken and Janet Yellen.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Not remotely. But look at the Republicans.

BILL KRISTOL:

Let's talk about the Republicans, because I feel like that's... Everyone there thought, "where is the Republican establishment finally going to come back and assert itself?" And in fact, the Republicans are the ones who've gone, I think as you said about anti-woke, who've gone where they've been unable to defeat, or contain, or keep in check the radical elements, to say the least.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Look at McCarthy, try not to, and this impeachment inquiry. So it reminds me of the first LSU president, a minor historical figure by the name of W.T. Sherman, marches into Atlanta. And he's informed that John Bell Hood has taken the Confederate Army north. And he said, "Great, I'll send him rations if he wants it." The first encounter they had was at Franklin. It didn't end well. It really didn't end well. And Kevin McCarthy is marching the Republican army right into Franklin, Tennessee. And you're going to have the same result, because what's going to happen, Bill?

First of all, James Comer is not a very bright man. Let's just be frank about it. Is this some kind of arrogance against Western Kentucky? Actually, no, but he's just not. I don't care where he's from. Jim Jordan has got issues. Let me tell you, Dan Goldman, Plaskitt, the Virgin Islands delegate person, Jamie Raskett, they're smart. They're good lawyers. They're going to eat these people alive. They're just literally, McCarthy and Matt Gates, and they are marching their army right into the Union Center at Franklin.

BILL KRISTOL:

Do you think they're really marching them, or is it a fake? I think McCarthy's just trying to keep... Could McCarthy be trying to keep his base happy, but he's not really launching an impeachment inquiry. He's just telling the committees to keep doing what they're doing. Or do you think the momentum now is there to have-

JAMES CARVILLE:

But in the public's mind-

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, fair.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Everybody's going to start covering it.

BILL KRISTOL:

Fair point.

JAMES CARVILLE:

They're going to start covering it. And the Democrats are going to say, "you've got to bring these witnesses here." Again, this is a winning issue. He looks... I was talking to a friend of mine, and I said he was a tragic figure, and he corrected me, because, I think you're schooled in classics more than I am. But tragic is something bad that happens and the person knows it's happening to him.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's interesting.

JAMES CARVILLE:

A pathetic character is, something this bad has happened to him and they don't even know it. Alright? I think McCarthy in that classical definition is more pathetic. But his goal is to be in power tomorrow. We'll worry about a year from now. If he thinks that by doing this he's going to get their votes on a budget to not shut the government down, he's not tragic, he's pathetic.

BILL KRISTOL:

Maybe we should close with this. One thing that we were talking about at the very beginning about unexpected things that could happen and whatever. I mean, there can be pretty big fights about a bunch of things on Capitol Hill. Those don't always affect the presidential race much. They come and go, and it's like a storm that happens, then everyone forgets about it. But I don't know if they really try to shut down funding for Ukraine, if they really shut the government down, if they really do the impeachment inquiry, I guess that could affect the overall political climate going forward, right?

JAMES CARVILLE:

It certainly is not going to help them. My view of the Battle of Franklin might be, but it's not going to help them. But the real problem they have, the real problem is the Supreme Court. People don't like Dobbs, they don't like the gun stuff. They really don't like the gun stuff. And the ethics stuff is taking hold. And some Democrat is going to be smart enough to say, I'm going to propose legislation to Supreme Court that's subjected to the same rules that every federal district judge in the United States it's subjected to. Who disagrees with that? "Oh, well, Article Three is established." Okay, please argue that. So you're telling me that "Judge Such-and-such" has to file all of this, but "Justice So-and-so" doesn't? What's American about that? Talk of the Article Three 'til you drop, you're not going to win that argument.

And then, what this arrogance has led to is taking away a 50-year right. What it's led to is kowtowing to the gun industry. What it's led to is a few billionaire daughters having all the act... And people are talking, that's totally believable. That's not even a leap for people to

take. I'm just waiting until somebody figures out in a national sense how to get this issue front and center. And it's working. Like I said, we don't lose. I was the only national Democrat that actually went to Kansas to campaign for the No vote. I had a feeling, it was a kind of strategic move on my part. A, I was one of the few national Democrats that they would let in. I had a feeling this thing was going to work out. I didn't think it was going to work out to the extent that it did. But people just don't, they don't like being... Liberals have learned this whole period of time. Once you tell people they can't do something, it just makes them want to do it more.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. Yeah. It does feel like it's a moment of great worry and alarm for some of us. Biden looks not a very strong, as you say, he would probably lose if the election were tomorrow against Trump. It might well. On the other hand, it's kind of a moment of opportunity for Democrats, and for moderate, if I can put it this way, FDR, Hubert Humphrey, Bill Clinton Democrats. Because you're right. I mean the issue, a lot of the issues line up pretty well for them, and it doesn't look like the Republicans are going to liberate themselves from their Trumpist extreme very soon. Maybe if Trump loses in '24, but even then, it's pretty deeply baked in it feels like.

JAMES CARVILLE:

Yeah, just ask your friends [inaudible]. Look at what people say about the party, and then take the people that you know that are out there to witness the Shapiros, the Warnocks, the whoever they are. They would totally introduce the most influential part of the Democratic Party... are actually Blacks. Older Blacks are very conservative. Jim Clyburn famously says, "The most conservative person I ever knew was my daddy." And they don't like shiny new objects. They're not into that. They're into... It's the whole thing. They don't want someone that talks the talk. They want someone that's walked the walk. And they like Biden, because Biden has walked. I'll say, there's many wonderful things to say about Joe Biden, not just as a human being but as a president. But timing is everything.

BILL KRISTOL:

He could go down in history as a very successful president. I think he will actually at this moment. If he keeps it to four years, I think he has a very good chance of it. Running for reelection, that's another question, right? It's hard to separate for people in Washington, the notion that you can be a successful president and you might not be the best candidate. But of course that's empirically, they are different things, right?

JAMES CARVILLE:

Yeah, they are very different things. Like I say, if he decided not to run, I think it's a proof for... I would bet go up four and a half points.

BILL KRISTOL:

Interesting.

JAMES CARVILLE:

That's just a guess. Anybody can make any guess they want. We may never know the answer.

BILL KRISTOL:

I think your point about the focus groups, about Sarah is also that to the degree that people have a perception of the party that's here, and reality's here. Reality can break through if there's an actual...

JAMES CARVILLE:

There are... Of the Democrats, and I'm saying any number of polling, it comes in somewhere between probably nine and 13 or 14%, describe themselves as progressive liberal. That's the entire party. So you talk about the "wokes," are very much a minority part of the Democratic Party. The MAGA are a majority of the Republican Party. And so when people say, well James, we got our crazies, but admit that you have your crazies too. That's fine, but that's not the same thing. 10% is not the same thing. It's 63%. It's two different numbers. By the way, the woke people are just kind of naive and goofy. So if your daughter, I don't know. You know if there's somebody who's marrying a "wokey", I probably disagree with them, but they're not fundamentally bad people. The people that stormed the Capitol are fundamentally rotten fricking people. Okay, they're bad people, they're criminals. One is goofy and kind of out of touch, and doesn't really understand the country or other people. The other people are genuinely bad people. It's a difference.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. That's interesting. A non-old, non-woke Democratic Party could be an impressive party, I think. That part is so under-covered, just to close with that, the degree to which you have in effect a much more traditional, a Democratic Party that's shrugged off a lot of the pacifism and utopianism about foreign policy. I think it's shrugged off some of the big government stuff to some degree, and has been responsible mostly on economic policy, not entirely. Some denial there on inflation and so forth. But anyway, it is what it is, right?

JAMES CARVILLE:

It is. Always enjoy doing the podcast.

BILL KRISTOL:

James, this has been great, and thank you for doing it.

JAMES CARVILLE:

All right. You bet.

BILL KRISTOL:

And we'll do it again. And after Biden takes your... I'm going to have you on the day after President Biden, six weeks from now, announces that he's not running. He's listened to James Carville. Carville placed a private call to him late at night on his cell phone and he convinced him. And we're going to have a vigorous and exciting Democratic primary and defeat Trump in '24. And after that, we'll do a version of that. We'll do the show, we'll do the next conversation the next day after that.

JAMES CARVILLE:

And we'll both be 65 again and be happy. Thank you, man.

BILL KRISTOL:

That would be great. Thank you, James. Thank you all for joining us on conversations.