

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Eric Edelman on the New World Disorder

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BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I am Bill Kristol, welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined today by my old friend, Eric Edelman, with whom we've had several excellent conversations. I think the most recent was about 15, 16 months ago, the summer of 2022, about the world situation, which I don't think has gotten any more stable or reassuring or predictable in this last year and a half.

So, if we need an update on how to think about it, Eric has a long and distinguished career in government. Also, he's a scholar and historian, but more relevant perhaps for this, served as an ambassador in both Europe and the Middle East, and also at very senior levels of the State Department, the Defense Department, and the White House. So very unusual capacity to help us, I think, get a bigger picture of what's going on today. So, Eric, thanks for joining me.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Bill, it's always great to be with you. I'm looking forward to our conversation.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, I am too because it's such an unusual moment, I think. I don't know if you agree with that, that maybe since the Cold War, the most startling, unpredictable, worrisome in some ways, maybe some opportunities too, but moment in our foreign policy. So where do we stand? If the President called you in and said, "Look, I've got all these experts on the details of Israel/ Palestine and Gaza, and Russia/Ukraine, and other parts of the world, but I want to step back and think about this moment here at the end of October 2023," how would you help him think about it?

ERIC EDELMAN:

Well, I think I would start by saying that Mr. President, you got it right to some degree, some considerable degree in your Oval Office speech when you said that we are at an inflection point. But I'm not sure that you have made the picture as stark as you need to make it for the American people. And I have in mind actually some past vignettes from history. And I think for instance of, I think, what everybody would agree was an inflection point in 1947, the beginning of the Cold War, when President Truman made his Truman Doctrine speech to support aid to Greece and Turkey. And Senator Vandenberg told him, "Mr. President, you need to go out and scare hell out of the American people." And Dean Acheson said to him he had to speak in a way that would be clearer than truth.

Now, I'm not suggesting that the President needs to exaggerate or engage in hyperbole, but I think we are standing potentially on the cusp of a global conflict. And we talk about World War III, and people immediately think nuclear wars. There's a young Finnish academic, international security expert, Minna Ålander, whom I know, and whom I hold in very high regard. And she actually had a very interesting Tweet thread

or X thread, whatever it is called, the other day, which she said, "We're standing on the cusp of a world war," and she had it in lowercase. "Not World War III the way we've conceived of it before, but sort of interconnected regional wars that are essentially global in nature."

And although she didn't spell it out, I mean, I will spell it out for you as I see it. We're sitting here today where Russia is, in order to get resupplied for its war in Ukraine, getting long trains of ammunition from North Korea that are traversing Siberia and coming to Russia to enable it to continue its war, as well as drone supplies from Iran, which is also of course, the main sponsor of Hamas, which launched its terror attacks on Israel on October 7th with Iranian weaponry. I mean, the IDF, the Israeli Defense Forces, have recovered Iranian weaponry. We can go into a little bit more detail. There's a whole debate about how much did Iran know and when did they know it about the 10/7 attacks on Israel.

I'll just say from a professional point of view, and I don't have any intelligence because I don't have access to it anymore, I can't provide evidence to support this, but this was a very complex combined arms attack coming from air, land, and sea conducted by Hamas. It kind of beggars the imagination that they could have done this without some kind of training and assistance from the Iranian IRGC Quds Force.

And all of this is being enabled of course by the fact that the People's Republic of China is buying Russian and Iranian oil at knockdown prices, which of course is a big benefit to the Chinese economy. And they're providing both Iran and Russia with dual use materials that are sustaining both Iranian and Russian defense production in the face of really quite severe economic sanctions that both Russia and Iran have been subjected to. At the same time that the Chinese Coast Guard and Maritime Militia are ramming Filipino ships on Second Thomas Shoal in the South Pacific— Philippines, of course being a treaty ally of the United States.

So we sit here today, and I think everybody is a bit on tenterhooks to see whether Tehran and Hezbollah in Lebanon are going to make a decision to escalate the conflict, as Israel now looks like it's beginning to cut off Gaza City as part of its ground operations in Gaza, and that we would face the prospect of a region-wide war. But given the fact that we already have the largest war in Europe since the end of World War II, the prospect of a region-wide war in the Middle East, why wouldn't we also think that we might have some opportunistic aggression in the Indo-Pacific as well? I think we are clearly at an incredibly dangerous moment, perhaps as my former boss Bob Gates has said, the most complex and dangerous moment in international security since the end of the Second World War.

BILL KRISTOL:

So Gates actually said since the end of the Second World War, not just since the end of the Cold War, which is really a striking thing because Bob is not given to casual overstatement. And yeah, I mean, I think one thing it would be good to have you discuss a bit is how much more dangerous things get when there are more players and more unstable actors, many of them unstable, including ones on our side, this isn't just a matter... So to speak, our side. I mean, it's not like the Netanyahu government is very well respected right now in Israel, and it's not like it, unfortunately, was well prepared for what happened on October 7th. And there are huge issues there, and one can make the case, we'll get to our government, that's another question. Big one, I think.

But so you have somewhat unstable governments with their own incentives, dictators like Putin having to prove that they were right, perhaps, in going into Ukraine. Other dictators like Xi having to prove whatever, he's not to be blamed for the economic

slowdown. Who knows what's going on in Iran? Elderly, old leadership there, which has had real challenges domestically and has its own, therefore, constraint incentives. And I mean, I just feel that people don't, I feel this myself, you sort of tend to compartmentalize these things, and then tend to want to assume they'll play out sort of the way some of these things have played out in the past. And of course that's quite possible, probably even likely. But the more uncertainties there are, the more likelihood that at least one or two of them come to pass, and that then one uncertainty can lead to another. The knock-on effects could be really dramatic. The miscalculations, the unanticipated effects.

I just think that I feel like maybe really for the first time since the end of the Cold War, at least, that we really have no idea what the world looks like two months from now. Milosevic, there were terrible challenges, Iraq and Afghanistan, God knows, it didn't go the way you and I hoped in some ways. But I don't think one ever quite felt then that things could just spin out of control. And now there's so many billiard balls going in every which direction and unpredictable people, I don't know, intervening in the billiard game that, I don't know, I'm sort of just alarmed in a way I haven't been. But am I overthinking it, overdoing it? Anyway, elaborate.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Well, no, because you're 100% right, because decisions to go to war or to escalate conflicts can be made deliberately. So Japan deliberately decided it was going to attack the United States at Pearl Harbor. And then in one of the greatest miscalculations of history, Adolf Hitler decided to declare war on the United States, making Franklin Roosevelt's job a whole lot easier, getting the United States into a European war that many American politicians wanted to avoid, and perhaps at that point, maybe a sizable part of the American public as well.

But wars can also break out by inadvertent escalation. I could make an argument that as Tehran and Hezbollah consider their options and consider whether they want to see this escalate or not, there's some pretty powerful arguments for them to not want to see this expand. In the case of Hezbollah, they kidnapped two Israeli soldiers and started a war in 2006, and the consequences were enormous. I mean, after an initial kind of a bungled Israeli effort on the ground, the 36 days of war took an enormous toll on Hezbollah. It took them almost a decade to recover. The Israelis killed an enormous number of Hezbollah frontline fighters.

And I believe it's the case that Nasrallah was asked at one point later on if he'd known that this would've been the consequence, would he have approved of the kidnapping? He said, "No, I wouldn't have." So, there's a powerful argument for Hezbollah not to want this to escalate. And for Tehran, the interest of Tehran and Hezbollah are aligned, they're not identical. For Iran, Hezbollah is largely a pawn, right? It's a deterrent because it possesses something like 140,000, 150,000 rockets and missiles that could at least for a period of time overwhelm Israel's Iron Dome air and missile defense system and inflict quite a bit of damage on Israel and kill a lot of Israelis.

The problem, of course, is once you shoot that bolt, you've lost it. And for the Iranians, this is a major deterrent against Israel launching an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities and Iranian other military facilities in Iran. Israel is already and has been and already has been attacking various facilities and transshipment points in Syria, for instance, having hit multiple times the airports in Aleppo and Damascus. So there's a question of, how can I put it, advertent escalation as opposed to inadvertent escalation.

But we also know from history that things can escalate when people don't really intend them to. And of course, the classic point at issue was the First World War where the

assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in July of 1914 led to a whole concatenation of events which weren't by themselves intended to launch a war, but for variety of reasons, because Russia mobilized its military, because it had very rigid train schedules, and to mobilize its military required using railroads. And because Germans, very inadvisedly, told the Austrians to do what they wanted to the Serbs who were held responsible, whose secret services were held responsible for the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. And then a German military plan that didn't take into account the relationship between Britain and France and how Britain would respond to a violation of the neutrality of the Low Countries.

All of this launched what was, up until that time, the most destructive war in history. Hugely destructive war. That's a pretty good, it's not a perfect analogy obviously to what's happening today, but it does remind you that the more actors you have, the more potential for different kinds of issues to come up that nobody anticipated, and you're off to the races.

Interestingly, as I think you know very well, Bill, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, President Kennedy had recently read Barbara Tuchman's popular history of the onset of World War I, *The Guns of August*, and was quite determined to not have that happen during the Cuban Missile Crisis. And so, if you read the transcripts of the deliberations he had with his National Security Council, or the executive committee of the National Security Council as it was constituted in 1962, he's very reticent to take actions that might lead to this unforeseen concatenation of events. Almost alone among his cabinet, all of whom are very hairy chested men, it was all men at that time, who were very anxious, in many cases, somewhat anxious, to escalate the conflict. He was very careful not to do that.

Now, we now know that there were two sides to this then, it was a little bit less complicated in some sense, if more dangerous than the current moment, because it was the US and the Soviet Union. It was Kennedy and Khrushchev. But we now know post facto that Fidel Castro, on whose territory these nuclear weapons had been deployed, was much less cautious than either Kennedy or Khrushchev, and was prepared to go down in a sort of nuclear holocaust of revolutionary fervor. Luckily, cooler heads prevailed. But as you say, the more actors who were involved, the more chance for miscalculation, the more chance for mistake, the more chance for accident, the more chance that a whole series of events will get unleashed that lead to a larger conventional war. And I want to stress, I think right now, when I'm talking about global conflict, I think it'd be largely conventional. But once these things get going, who knows where they end up.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. And it's not as if, and what the implications are two, three, four, five years from now is a whole different question as well. And things could die down. But lessons learned, just to mention the nuclear thing for a minute, it could be, gee, it's a good idea to have nuclear weapons, for example, if we don't turn out to be a reliable ally in places like Ukraine, or for that matter... Yeah. The other thing is restraint, of course, can be itself provocative, I mean. And people can misread it. And of course, Khrushchev misread Kennedy I think we now know, don't we? Because he was not very strong in Vienna a year earlier. But anyway, without getting too much into the history, I do think it's very useful—

ERIC EDELMAN:

Or when the Berlin Wall was built.

BILL KRISTOL:

That was when the Berlin Wall... Especially, I guess. So these things do have knock-on effects and people we do tend, I think all of us, and I'm very guilty of this too, to look at the particular crisis, the particular moment it began on a certain date, it ends in a certain date. But that's not really the way, of course, life works or the world works. And I do feel at this time, if you had asked me if two months ago, I would have said said February 24th, 2022 could well be an inflection point actually. And there'll be a post Russia-Ukraine world with all kinds of implications for the Asia, for China and so forth. Our policy to China, China's policy, depending on how it turns out to have two events, February 24th, 2022, and then October 7th, 2023, both dates that we're not going to forget for quite some time, I think.

Both in a way, both marking possible inflection points or one after another. It does just increase, I think, the uncertainty of what's to happen. So the president says to you, okay, well, that's very nice. Everything's uncertain and everything's, who knows? The president could also point out to you, and I'm sure you'd agree, that we're more involved in the American public realizes. I mean, we've shot down some missiles. We've got a ton of military assets over there in the Middle East. We're obviously a huge support for Ukraine and with NATO as well, and NATO borders on that conflict. And as you say, treaty relationship with the Philippines, to say nothing of Japan and Taiwan and-

ERIC EDELMAN:

Korea.

BILL KRISTOL:

... Korea. I mean, I do think there the American people who don't quite appreciate how close we are to all this. Now, maybe there's no need to frankly tell them every moment. And if there's nothing to do right now and we don't want to be more involved in some of these, we hope things die down. But I guess, that would be my question, you mentioned sort of awakening, speaking to the American people, but also is the US government actually in your judgment sort of well-equipped to deal with this moment? Has the Biden administration sort of internalized the world we're in? Let's begin with that and then get to the broader US government with Congress and the Republican Party?

ERIC EDELMAN:

Yeah, well, so I think the answer is partially, which is to say the Biden administration I think is very concerned about escalation. They have been extremely at pains to send messages, both verbal messages and nonverbal messages to Tehran and Hezbollah, for example, not to escalate this. And I know Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi has been in town in Washington. I'm sure they're sharing messages like that with him as well. And they've sent two carrier strike groups out to the eastern Med. One is now transiting on its way to the Persian Gulf area, all of which is I think important. I've lost track of the number of days now, but we have had pretty continuously for I think the last 9 or 10 days, ongoing attacks by Iranian proxies against US forces in Iraq and Syria. We've had about 20 plus, almost 30 maybe minor injuries as a result of that. Thank God no one is at least yet that we know of as a fatality. And the USS Carney was engaged in a nine-hour engagement with the Houthis in Yemen who were firing ballistic and cruise missiles and drones at Israel. And that is a pretty serious engagement for nine hours.

They've been involved in a civil war in Yemen. They are a proxy, a force for the Iranians. And so, there's all sorts of potential here for American casualties and-

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, and Americans are held hostage.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Americans are held. They got-

BILL KRISTOL:

1979 was kind of a big moment, part being held hostage.

ERIC EDELMAN:

13 Americans apparently roughly speaking are being held hostage. You'll recall in 2000, the USS coal offshore of Yemen got hole blown it by Al-Qaeda terrorists. So look, there's a lot of potential for something bad to happen, which could lead again, to all sorts of unforeseen consequences. So I think that the administration is very aware of the dangers of escalation. When you say, "Are we very well-equipped or organized to do it?", I will tell you that I have an enormous amount of sympathy for my colleagues in the Biden administration because in my experience in the government, it's very hard for an administration to do... I used to joke that it's hard enough for us to do more than one and a half things at a time. There's a bandwidth issue how much people can divide their time and attention among crises and following them.

And people are working, I'm sure, very hard, very long hours. And one of the things that you worry about in a circumstance like this is that academic social science has not proven many non-trivial propositions about international affairs. But one that has been proven, I think pretty conclusively is tired people frequently will make bad decisions. So it's something that I think people have to watch out for. It's a difficult and it's a dangerous time. I worry a little bit about some of the deterrent messaging. I mean, I certainly approve of, I think the president's done better, I think, than some of his subordinates. I think there's been almost a kind of imploring tone among some of the subordinates about, "Please don't escalate this."

Biden has been a little bit more direct and just said, "Don't." But I think the message needs to be a little bit more direct, particularly directed at Tehran, which is that when you're doing this kind of deterrent messaging, you're trying to create doubts in the mind of an adversary that using force or escalating is going to get them what they want. And I think the message to Tehran, both subliminally and maybe liminally, needs to be, if you go down this road, the potential that this is the end of your regime is pretty high.

BILL KRISTOL:

And this road would be both escalating against us, but also escalating against Israel.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Yes, absolutely. If you unleash Hezbollah on Israel, I think it's what the late Thomas Schelling, Nobel laureate called, "The risk that leaves something to chance." You are going down a road, the end of which you cannot foresee, and you are sitting on a powder keg, a tinderbox of popular discontent that has been for more than a year, roiling the streets of your cities after the murder of Mahsa Amini, the young Iranian girl who was killed by the religious police. There's been another young woman who has

died at the hands of the authorities in recent weeks. And the message needs to be to Tehran, there's no knowing where this ends up, but where it might end up is all of you people swinging from lampposts. And they need to have that suggested to them both kind of directly and indirectly, rather than imploring not to escalate, which I think conveys a sense that perhaps these threats actually provide leverage for Iran.

BILL KRISTOL:

What about, we focused, I guess, naturally sort of not drifted back. We come back to the Middle East, to Iran in particular, but also obviously Gaza, and that's been there. I don't know. It's a fast-moving situation and people analyzing that a lot, I'm not sure. The president would need that much additional help from you on that though. If you have some, that's great. But what about other things either in the Middle East and then let's just go quickly region by region, the Russia-Ukraine front, the China- either South China Sea or Philippines front and then elsewhere. I mean, it's possible none of these things blows up, the Russia-Ukraine War looks the way it does two months from now as the way it does today. China is harassing the Philippines and Taiwan, but nothing fundamental. Gaza is whatever it'll be, but again, others don't...okay. But in each of those regions, I guess, the three big ones, it seemed to me, but maybe there are others I haven't thought, of course. What would you sort of warn the president to keep an eye on or his team? What are the things out there that aren't quite obvious right now, but that could happen, that lessons people could... Putin and Xi and these people get to play, our allies get to do things too, incidentally. The World War I example also suggests our allies could miscalculate. I don't think it's likely in these cases perhaps, and do something a little rash or send the wrong signal. But anyways, so talk a little bit about just-

ERIC EDELMAN:

All alliances operate between the Scylla and Charybdis of abandonment and entrapment. Everybody is always worried that your allies are either going to get you into a war you don't want to be in or that they're going to walk away from you. So that's just a persistent challenge of alliance management for the administration. And by and large, I think this administration gets pretty high marks, I think, on questions of alliance management, both in the European theater and context with NATO. But I would say also in the Indo-Pacific, where I think they have done a reasonably good job of enhancing our various arrangements with allies or countries with whom we have some shared interests. I'm thinking of the quad in East Asia, US, Japan, Australia, and India, or-

BILL KRISTOL:

How worried should we be? Should the President be about the Indo-Pacific? Could he sort of just check in occasionally and make sure nothing terrible is happening, or is it a little more alarming in terms of trying to take advantage of, or just spillover effects of what's happening elsewhere right now?

ERIC EDELMAN:

Look, I think it's something that people really have to keep an eye on. The US has got operations out around Second Thomas Shoal, and I think that's because it's a reflection of people understanding this is a dangerous moment. I think President Xi has told the PLA to be ready to take Taiwan by force if necessary by 2027. I don't think right now that it's likely he's going to try and accelerate that schedule, but you have to worry that

things look like they're getting out of hand and we can't manage it that he decides this is the time to go. So that would be something that I think people are going to be watching very, very closely what the PRC is up to, what the PLA Navy is up to, etc. I think we've covered the Middle East pretty well, obviously.

BILL KRISTOL:

What about Putin? I mean, having Hamas to Moscow, isn't that pretty startling? I mean, he goes out of his way to sort of just rub our faces in Israel, which has been placating Putin more than some of us would've liked.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Yeah, I hope that our friends in Israel are drawing the proper conclusions from this. You hear a lot of Israelis and Israel supporters in the United States saying, well, after February 24th, 2022, when Putin invaded Ukraine, and Israel took a very sort of equidistant stance and was unwilling to provide some kinds of military assistance to Ukraine. I mean, one of the reasons they didn't do it was they said, "We need some of this stuff for ourselves," which I think has been borne out by events. And so, there's some argument there, but a lot of it was based on Vladimir Putin is the most philosemitic leader Russia's ever had. He's been very good to Israel. He is very solicitous about Russian Jews living in Israel, many of whom are dual nationals. By the way, he had a not trivial political motive there because many of them vote in Russian elections. So that was a constituency he was cultivating.

But I think at the end of the day, as you point out, is they had Hamas to Moscow twice before the 7th of October. And now there's a Hamas delegation there now. And there was I think a fairly churlish refusal to allow Zelenskyy to come to Israel to show solidarity after the 7th of October. I hope people are drawing the right conclusion. And I would also say that it's not just about Hamas. I mean, it's broader. If you look at the incredible sewer of invective that has been open and sluicing through Russian television every night, a lot of it is full of vile antisemitic tropes. We shouldn't forget that Russia is the home of one of the founding documents of modern antisemitism, which is the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and letting this loose has consequences. Words have consequences. Ideas have consequences.

And what happened, for instance in Makhachkala yesterday, this sort of lynch mob of folks in Dagestan who broke into the airport looking for Jews flying in on a flight from Israel is I fear just a harbinger of some of what we're going to see. I think the potential for pogroms in various parts of Russia is very real, and whether the regime will be able to control what it has let loose, I think remains to be seen. And we were talking in the green room before we started this conversation, and I don't want to go down that rabbit hole necessarily, but there has been a global upsurge of antisemitism that I think has been shocking to many, including here in the United States. But a lot of it is connected to all of this other stuff. I mean, it's connected to what we're hearing from Russia. It's connected to the information operations of Iran. And so, there it is.

BILL KRISTOL:

I mean, doesn't Putin have an incentive to... insofar as he's not been doing great in Ukraine, but he wants distractions for the US, including just practical ones like delaying the Ukraine arms say, which is happening as we speak on the hill, and let's just do Israel first and so forth. It just feels to me like Putin doesn't have a heck of a lot of interest in having this war end early or easily or with not many casualties. And he probably has some interest— I mean, there may be some ways in which that helps him,

but a lot of obvious ways, which helps him to have this go on a long time with a lot of negative public opinion about Israel and the US and in the Middle East in Russia itself and parts of the Global South.

I worry about that, that people are underestimating that Putin just in direct and indirect ways, providing arms, providing diplomatic support and paying people money, encouraging them... We, again, tend to think of this war as it's Israel and Gaza, and then we're sort of there trying to partly help Israel and partly restrain them occasionally. And then there's obviously neighboring countries, but it's not like Putin doesn't have his own interests here. And Soviet Union at the end of the day in '73 really wasn't interested in ultimately escalating, though that was a little dicey there for a while. But Putin may not quite have the same constraints, especially when he would do it less directly, presumably.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Well, you and I have talked about this a couple of times. James Forrestal, who was President Truman's secretary of the Navy, and then the first Secretary of Defense in a conversation with the Secretary of State, George Marshall in 1947, at the time of the Truman Doctrine roughly, speech, is said to Marshall, the leading export of the Soviet Union is chaos. And I think that still rings true today. I think both Russia and Iran, their leading export is chaos and I think they benefit from that and that is one of the sort of more worrisome aspects of what's going on in Gaza. They would love to see Israel tied up in a very long bloody-

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, and it also helps them... Europe will be less tolerant of some of what Israel may feel it has to do than we would be presumably. And it starts to split the alliance, which the unity of the alliance has been a problem for Putin and it's been a good thing with respect to Ukraine. Again, I think he has an awful lot of incentives not to be helpful in this situation.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Yes. I mean, and the other element here is that we are having this domestic fight that you've just adverted to about whether aid to Ukraine and Israel will be voted on separately or together as part of a package. I personally think that what the president has proposed and what Senate minority leader McConnell has endorsed is correct, which is to have a very big package for both because I think this is going to be our last bite at the apple before we enter an election season where it's very hard to get anything done and not to get this will be a huge victory for Putin and a huge setback for the United States.

You asked me a while back what I would tell the president and one of the things I would tell him, just admiring the problem and saying, Mr. President, everything is really bad and very, very, very dangerous. It's a little bit like what Curtis LeMay told Jack Kennedy in one of the early meetings on the Cuban Missile Crisis is, "You've got a big damn problem, Mr. President," which Kennedy was not amused and not happy, and most presidents, at least that I've worked with, don't really want you to come in and say, this is a really big problem, boss, over to you.

But one of the things I think the president can and has to do is he started the discussion, but now I think he has to finish the job, which is he has talked about the United States being able to chew gum and walk at the same time and being the arsenal of democracy. And I very much identify with that and support that, but we are at a very perilous

moment. Our defense industrial base has shrunk enormously since the end of the Cold War. As a result, that along with changes in manufacturing in the world globally where people now rely on sort of just in time delivery of inputs in order to manufacture things has left us in a position where it is very difficult to surge production of munitions. And we have been drawing down on munitions stocks very deeply in order to supply Ukraine.

For the moment, the overlap between what Ukraine needs, what Israel needs is not very great. Israel needs replenished Iron Dome, Tamir Iron Dome interceptors, which we're providing them, and it needs small diameter bombs, high precision munitions that they're using in the air campaign in Gaza, which is extremely intense. Israel has dropped now well over 8,000 bombs and missiles, which in terms of frame of reference at the height of... We're about three weeks in to this in Israel in the most intense month of our campaign against Isil and Mosul and Raqqa, we used about 4,000 precision munitions in a month. And so the Israelis have dropped well over twice that amount in three quarters of the time. So that's what they need for the moment. But if this escalates and you get a Northern front with Shia militias in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon, then Israel's going to be relying a lot more on artillery and 155 rounds, which have been very important for Ukraine. It will start to be very important for Israel as well.

Even though Bill LaPlante, the undersecretary of defense for acquisition has been working very, very hard and with some success at getting industry to increase its production— monthly production munitions. Right now, it's going to take a while until we can get to the point of producing a hundred thousand rounds a month. It'll be sort of the end of 2024 or early 2025 before we get there. This month or last month, Ukraine for the first time was firing more artillery rounds per day than Russia, about 6,000 a day. That's 180,000 a month and we're only going to get to production of a hundred thousand roughly a year from now. So that gives you I think a sense of-

BILL KRISTOL:

Really a challenge to build up our own.

ERIC EDELMAN:

And this is a problem. Everyone says, “well, don't just throw money at the problem.” Well, this is a problem we just have to throw money at. And so that's why the Supplemental is absolutely essential to be passed. And by the way, that's a down payment. It's not the end of the story. I think we're going to need to I think invest a lot more in defense and there are going to be a lot of Democrats and Republicans who are not going to be happy about that. And so I think this is going to be a big challenge for President Biden. And of course I think there is still a kind of residual Reagan-ite element of the Republican Party. It's shrinking, sadly, but that element I think understands this problem. But how long that element will stand up to the forces of Trump as he becomes more and more the de facto and then eventually de jure nominee of the Republican Party I think is anybody's guess, which is one reason why we have to get the supplemental passed now.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I think people don't appreciate the significance in foreign policy of even the hesitation that we're going through now on the Supplemental and especially the Ukraine part of it, but even the Israel war hasn't moved that fast. And it's just, I think if you're looking elsewhere around the world, whether you're a friend of ours or an adversary of ours, you think, “ah, they can't really get their act together there, and it doesn't take that

much to deter them from doing more.” And you've got to think Putin's thinking hard about how to increase resistance on the hill to the Ukraine part of the Supplemental. And I don't feel that maybe that's the case where the advocates of it haven't done enough to sort of explain what it would look like to the world if suddenly we don't do it or even if we cut it in half or delay it or just look like we're super reluctant to do it.

I feel, again, we don't quite understand how much our reliability is so important to deterring all kinds of things. Also, don't you think Putin has every incentive, just to get back to Putin for a minute, I mean, this might be true of Xi too, to make Biden's policies look like they're failing so he gives Trump an edge going into '24, which again doesn't mean that Putin has much incentive that I can see to have this... And he has every incentive to maybe funnel some war arms or encourage Iran to funnel war arms or do some other things that will whip up forever elsewhere in the Arab world to cause troubles for Biden.

And I think again, people sort of assume that he's just focused on Ukraine. He's not like, we can't mess around in other places. Final point, and you can talk about any aspect of this you wish, it feels to me like maybe we should be doing a little more, whether it's in some of the arms to Ukraine, the attackers and stuff, maybe in Iran policy to kind of, as you said, not just be sort of hoping or pleading with these adversaries not to escalate or pleading – that's unfair – but also telling them don't escalate. But also we have some cards to play against them, don't we?

ERIC EDELMAN:

Yeah. I mean, I've been for a long time with [inaudible] at the accounts on foreign relations have advocated that the United States do more to support the popular uprising against the regime in Tehran. And there are things that can be done, increasing the amount of broadcasting, providing the kind of assistance we did to solidarity in Poland during the Cold War. I mean, there are all sorts of things that could be done. Look, I agree. I think Putin, part of his strategy is hoping that Trump is reelected President, just in speaking to the Republican Jewish Coalition. And this didn't seem to elicit any cries of horror there, which I find amazing. But he recounted conversations with European leaders where they said, we're worried you won't defend us. And he said, yes, that's right, I won't defend you. I mean, this is going to lead to the unraveling of US alliances. We know that he wants to take the United States out of NATO.

And this will not just end in Europe. I mean, it will have huge effects in the Indo-Pacific. Whatever people who want to prioritize the Indo-Pacific rather than Europe think, it's going to unravel our alliances in the Indo-Pacific region as well as in Europe and in the Middle East for that matter as well. I think the consequences of a second Trump presidency would be extremely dire, not just for sort of conservative internationalist foreign policy, but for the world. I think in every conversation I have with former European colleagues, they raise this and are extremely concerned about it. And in terms of our own dysfunction at home, my former boss, Bob Gates, has written in the current issue of foreign affairs an article called The Dysfunctional Superpower, which makes the case very powerfully that one of the biggest challenges to our policy is us. To paraphrase the old Walt Kelly Pogo cartoon, we've met the enemy and it is us.

This is the fact that it took us three weeks plus to get a speaker of the House of Representatives. The fact that the new speaker is, from where I sit, looks pretty seriously over-matched for the job. It's a very difficult job. I got to know speaker Ryan a little bit both before and while he was speaker, and he was someone, as you know from your association with him, someone with a formidable intellect and a lot of experience in government. And I don't think speaker Johnson has any of that, and nor

do I think he's really up to this task. I mean, he's already picking a fight with the president and the Senate on the question of the supplemental aid package.

BILL KRISTOL:

Someone made a point to me just this idiocy of Senator Tuberville holding up all the military promotions, which we can work around for quite a while, I suppose, or have been for eight, nine months. But it is a long time by now. It just looks to the rest of the world like we're just not at all serious. And we're not serious incidentally. And the fact that the US Senate, which has a hundred members, not one, and can overrule this one member in all kinds of ways, and these rules could be changed, not rules really, customs almost allowing these individual holds on individual military promotions. And they are talking about changing it now, but the Republicans don't want to go along, maybe. I got a call this morning from someone, kind of wants to put together a little committee to really try to work on this intensively, I mean, over the next week or two of people on the outside.

It just made me think it was actually sort of random. I haven't been particularly involved in the Tuberville thing except for being disgusted by it. But I mean these kinds of things do add up and I do think the dysfunction, the part of the high polarization, but it's particularly of course the Republicans' willingness to play all these games. And then Tuberville doesn't say on October 8th, "Okay, look, I've made my point, I'm not happy about the Biden administration's policy on paying for--"

ERIC EDELMAN:

Abortions.

BILL KRISTOL:

Travel, to have abortions or-

ERIC EDELMAN:

Reproductive care, yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

Reproductive care for women in the military. But nonetheless, this is an emergency and I'm going to yield, I'll revisit this in a year. The fact that he doesn't do it, the fact that he isn't told he has to do this by other senators, or they'll really stop treating him as he would like to be treated on a whole bunch of other issues that he cares about. It's all just a big... I don't know. The system, we don't look as serious as we should, and particularly when all these parts are moving in such uncertain and risky ways, it's a particularly important time, isn't it, for us to look pretty serious.

ERIC EDELMAN:

No, absolutely. And the whole hold business by Tuberville was totally shameful. And there's a human side to this. I mean, I was held when I was nominated to be under Secretary of Defense for Policy for nine months plus. And it was by the Democrats, by the way, it was by the late Senator Carl Levin. And it had nothing to do with me. It had to do with some documents that he wanted to get ahold of, and I was just a hostage as it were. And this kind of legislative hostage taking, because that's what it is, it's bad for the national security because people can't get into the jobs that they're supposed to go to, but there's a human cost here and it's only 300 people he likes to say. It's actually way more than that because it's the families of those people. It's the families of the

people who are meant to succeed them who are also held up. There's a huge ripple effect here. Kids in school, whether they're going to be in school in one place or another.

I mean, there's a human toll here that nobody seems to care about. He certainly doesn't seem to care about it. And as you say, the policy side of it. And he says, well, there are people who are acting in those jobs. Well, I got appointed on a recess appointment before I was ultimately confirmed by the Senate, and it's actually worth recounting how that happened because there's I think a heuristic value in that, there's a lesson to be learned there, which is I was acting. And so every day you're in these jobs, you're making decisions, and you know that every decision you make there are people on both sides of the issue who are below you or lateral to you, and you've made some people happy and you've made some people angry by the decision you made.

And that ends up being very debilitating after a while because you know some people are going to go talk to the hill and say, do you know that he did this or did that? He did this to my pet rock issue was whatever, whether it's counter-narcotics or whether it's defense trade controls or whatever you've done, it's: you've made someone happy, someone unhappy, someone who may go talk to The Hill and complain, and then you've got to worry, am I going to have more votes against me when I finally come to a vote if I come to a vote? In my case, after nine months, the Senate majority leader, Bill Frist, finally had enough, and he took me to the floor and said to Carl Levin, "Okay, if you can get 40 senators to vote against Ambassador Edelman, you can continue to hold him, but otherwise we're going to have a vote." And Levin went to the floor and said, "I have nothing against Ambassador Edelman." I got confirmed by unanimous consent. So that's sort of what Schumer did with CQ Brown, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Finally though, he gets two or three people through.

ERIC EDELMAN:

Yeah, right. He got two or three people through. But my view is make them keep coming in and voting, make them vote over weekends.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. I mean, this is part of a broader not being quite serious about the moment, right? Let's have the normal schedule of Tuesday morning to Thursday night, and let's not violate senatorial courtesy and protocols and so forth. Yeah, and let's not be alarmed enough about what all the incentives people have to make our life as the US and our allies frankly miserable over the next year to mess up our politics even more. And instead we're saying, "Okay, for the next year, we're really going to try."

And the administration could do a little more probably to reach out to Republicans too, but it's mostly on the Republican side, obviously, and no real sense of this is the moment to pull together. And that doesn't mean not criticizing the administration and not saying, as you've said, on Iran they should be tougher, and maybe just really ditch even any hopes for the nuclear deal and criticize Biden for not doing them enough on Ukraine or make other arguments.

ERIC EDELMAN:

We need to be more long-range strike for the Ukrainians. They ought to be getting... They've been getting now the cluster version of ATACM, which has about 165

kilometer range as opposed to the unitary warhead that has a 300 kilometer range. Which the Ukrainians would like to have, but we only gave them 20 of them. We have I think 1,000 of these things which we're never going to use, because their dud rate is way above the threshold of 3% failure that was set back by policy in 2008, so we're never going to use them. It's going to cost us more to demilitarize them. Why don't we let the Ukrainians demilitarize them by using them on Russian military capability which we can then diminish, which is a good investment for the American taxpayer?

One of the arguments that I think is being lost here by the administration and by the Republicans who support this is that number one, this is a great deal. For the cost of three or 4% of our defense budget, we have already destroyed more than half of Russian military capability as the British Chief of Defense testified to his House of Commons Oversight Committee. It's a great bargain honestly, with no American boots on the ground or lives lost.

Moreover, this larger investment that you and I have been talking about, Bill, whether it's the \$40 billion in the Supplemental or the money either that's being used to replenish stocks that have been drawn down under the Presidential Drawdown Authority, or the money that's been appropriated by the Congress so far under the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative. All of that is going to American factories producing munitions in the United States, either for our military or for the Ukrainian military that are creating high skilled, high paying jobs in the United States.

So for all these people who are saying, "We got to take care of the United States first," we're actually doing well by doing good here in the international community. And I think that's an argument that when you make it to the American people by polling, they're very responsive to that.

BILL KRISTOL:

That does require going out and doing a little bit of what [inaudible] and then others called for in four days, and really bringing it home and being a little more direct in some of the arguments someone is making in some states or congressional districts about, look, do you want these jobs or not? Not just a matter of helping the brave Ukrainians who God knows deserve the help, but... I'm struck maybe bringing this to an end in this conversation, maybe I'm just talking myself into this. But as I'd say in the past I've been very worried about things, but I've had a five-year, 10-year horizon on my worries. The kind of nuclear proliferation that could happen in the world if we aren't a reliable ally and partner and don't take some responsibility for the global world order. That's very, very dangerous.

But I haven't really thought, especially frankly since Trump lost the Presidency, that we were looking at a months, or one year long... That something could happen in the next very short term that really destabilizes and really unleashes things that are incredibly hard to get back, so to speak, in the box. And I think the administration has done pretty well actually personally since October 7th, and pretty well in Ukraine too. But I still worry with the dysfunction here, and just the momentum of some of these events abroad and the bad incentives of some of these players abroad and the irresponsibility here at home.

I feel as if it could spin out of control faster than we would like. And the degree to which then foreign assets, allies and adversaries make their own calculations about how to defend themselves, or who to make deals with and that kind of thing. It's been somewhat stable for quite a while. For all the instability, I just think we're in a whole different world in the last 18, 19, 20 months that we've been in for most of the last 30 years, 40 years maybe.

ERIC EDELMAN:

As you know well, James Q. Wilson had a theory about urban crime, which was that... well, I think it was George Kelling who he co-wrote it with, which said if you don't fix broken windows in urban neighborhoods, it creates a sense of disorder. And what happens if you don't fix one broken window? You start getting other broken windows, and pretty soon the crime rate is going up. Because people get the sense that there's no order, and therefore they can take advantage of that to commit crime. I think we're seeing that-

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, just on that analogy. And then everyone hires their own private security force. You have to do that if you're a business and you're in a very dangerous... And then suddenly, but at least in the US, those private security forces probably aren't going around looking for trouble. But God knows what that's like in the... If you think of the real world equivalent of that, what does that look like?

ERIC EDELMAN:

And that's the point I was just going to make. Putting aside all the things you and I have talked about, there's still the war in Yemen that's going on. There is what's gone on in Nagorno-Karabakh, and which could go further because the interests that the Azeris may have in creating a land corridor to Nakhchivan in Armenia. There is continuing threat of the unraveling of Serb-Kosovar relations, and could get conflict there. Venezuela and Guiana have an issue over some carbon rich areas.

So this is a point that... Political scientists a number of years back started writing that territorial disputes don't really create much conflict in international affairs anymore. People have realized that territorial conflict really doesn't buy you much in a globalized world where everything is geoeconomics and trade. And yet what we're seeing is this rise of revanchism. I have to give credit to my son Robert here, who just actually wrote a substack on this morning that there's a whole list of these places. And to me, this is the outcome of broken window theory.

We have let the global order decay so much that we're getting very close, I think, to "Katie, bar the door." Where this really spins out of control, and then it's so... Everybody is going to be looking to deal with their own problem on their own, whether that means if you have the ability to develop nuclear weapons to help yourself, you'll do that. Or if it's just seizing one of your neighbor's oil rich provinces, or bauxite rich provinces or whatever, and it's going to be a very Hobbesian world out there.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's kind of a tough message to give to the Americans. A, we don't like to hear that message and some of its implications. And B, I do think that we've just gotten used to not living in as Hobbesian a world as the world has sometimes been. I said that right, over the last 30 years or so. We were living in a less Hobbesian world, and everyone would like that to continue. But it's hard to tell people, "Look, unless we step it up so to speak, step up our game, get much more serious, this could be what's happening."

And still, there are very tough decisions to make. It doesn't mean it's obvious what to do in some of these cases, with Israel or Gaza and so forth. But the beginning is understanding I think how things could spin out of control and how dangerous it can get.

ERIC EDELMAN:

From a people point, again, political scientists, international relations, theorists in the post Cold War era drew attention to the fact that there was this idea of the so-called nuclear peace as well as the democratic peace, and that since World War Two interstate violence had declined. Although intrastate violence, there were plenty of civil wars, ethnic conflicts, up and to including genocides, as was the case in Rwanda. But that war between states had really declined, and that doesn't seem to be the case right now. It seems like we're getting more and more interstate violence. And again, I think this is a function of the breakdown of the system and the lack of a policy to fix broken windows.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, and a lot of these states themselves are unstable, so that's the... You can have intra- and interstate violence, right?

ERIC EDELMAN:

You're getting the worst of both worlds.

BILL KRISTOL:

This war, the longer this goes on with Gaza, what happens in some of these other countries, and Jordan and Egypt. We again take for granted that we may not like some of those regimes much, but that they've got things under control. But I don't know for how long. So again, it's one reason why ending these crises as quickly as possible and as decisively, if we could use that word, as possible.

There, I think just final point. We'll get back, we discussed Ukraine a year ago. The arguments of people who said ending the Ukraine war as fast as possible is important, and they would give them a lot once they resisted the initial Russian assault. Defeat Russia quickly, and give Putin every incentive just to get out and end it even if we don't depose Putin. I think that was under... Even I, who was pretty hawkish Ukraine, I underestimated that. How you let this go on, and then everyone else has an incentive to take advantage of a world in which there's already a massive war going on in Europe. And anyway, I feel like I...

ERIC EDELMAN:

There's a point in Churchill's early, I think it's maybe in the preface to Churchill's first volume of his six volume memoir of World War Two. In which he talks about in the interwar years, the democracies never wanting to be provocative, always wanting to preserve the peace, and therefore engaging in half measures rather than full measures to resolve imminent or incipient conflicts or crises. I'm paraphrasing now, but his essential message was the road to hell is paved with good intentions and half measures.

You can think about it in terms of... The argument people made is if you give Ukraine a lot of weapons, it's only going to prolong this and create more suffering, and killing, and death and et cetera. It was a similar argument by the way in the Obama administration on the Syrian Civil War. If we arm the moderate opposition, it's just going to prolong the violence and increase the suffering, and there's no point in that because there's no military solution, there's only a political solution.

Which turned out not to be the case, because ultimately when Vladimir Putin decided in the summer of 2015 in cahoots with the late, unlamented Qasem Soleimani, that Iran and Russia would both intervene in Syria in September of 2015 and impose more or less a military solution. So the United States did half measures, and didn't provide as much assistance as, in my view, we should have. And the result was also more death,

more destruction and more suffering. It's not always the case that inaction creates a better reality than action does when... In other words, there are perils to both, too much action and too little.

BILL KRISTOL:

People who write the history of this period, I think they'll look back, I hope it's the conversation we'll have. But 2014, 2015, the failure to really make Putin pay the price for Crimea, for the first attack on Ukraine.

ERIC EDELMAN:

And Syria.

BILL KRISTOL:

And then to pay a price for Syria, or for Assad or Putin to pay a price for Syria. That combination is really... I think it lurked, you might say, there a little bit in the Trump years. I don't know, whatever people might've been so startled by Trump they didn't quite take advantage of it as much as they might have. But it was out there as an example. And yeah, I worry we're paying a price. You closed with Churchill. Since we're both such Churchill fans, I'll mention a Churchill thing too. I'm sure we could be ridiculed for our excessive Churchillian references here in this conversation.

I never read his volumes on the First World War, *The World Crisis*. But I looked at the first volume, I was just curious what was going on in 1914,. As you say the Guns of August, people make that analogy. But I've totally forgotten if I ever knew that his first volume is called... the whole book I think it's called *The World Crisis*, but the first volume is also *The World Crisis*. And it's the world crisis, 1911 to 1914.

And I think the point of it based on my 15 minutes of skimming is that this is something that happened over three years, and of course even had antecedence before then. He doesn't begin the narrative in August of 1914, and I kind of worry that we're in the 1911, '12, '13 period of something here. And let's hope not, let's hope not. And sometimes of course one gets lucky as well, it's unlucky. And sometimes countries behave well, and rationally and reasonably. And the bad guys lose, not the good guys and so forth. But that's my Churchill example. So we have World War One and World War Two analogies, neither of them terribly heartening.

ERIC EDELMAN:

I think it was Bismarck who said, "God watches out for drunks, small children and the United States of America." I'm with you that hopefully we will navigate this period without any of these dire consequences happening. In which case, everyone will be free to attack me as hopeless hysteric. But I do think we are in a very, very dangerous moment, and I try not to be hysterical or hyperbolic about it. But there are some very, very serious threats out there, and dangers. And I think my impression is from the reporting I've seen and from some conversations that senior folks in the Biden administration appreciate that and know that.

BILL KRISTOL:

Good. Well, that's a good note, maybe even somber note to end on. But it's important really, that people... And it's a democracy, what everyone thinks matters and what different kinds of influential people and the American public as a whole, how willing they are to come to grips with the real world, the realities we face. I think that's always such an important aspect of how we deal with these problems. Eric Edelman, thank you

very much for this conversation, we'll do it again. Maybe we'll have better news in six months if we can do it.

ERIC EDELMAN:

I hope so.

BILL KRISTOL:

I really do hope so, yeah. And I know we all hope so. So thank you all. Thank you, Eric, for joining me today, and thank you all for joining us on *Conversations*.