

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Taped November 27, 2023

BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined for the second time by Jonathan Karl, ABC News Chief Washington Correspondent. We had an earlier conversation, right at the beginning of 2022, focusing on John's previous book on *Donald Trump, Betrayal: The Final Act of the Trump Show*. Really an excellent account of January 6th and its implications. And I think that was a very helpful conversation for people, and so I'm very glad that John has joined me again to now talk about what's happened since that book and where we now stand with Donald Trump.

The author of a new book, *Tired of Winning: Donald Trump and the End of the Grand Old Party*. John, you encountered Trump, I think, a little bit when you were a New York Post reporter in the nineties, and did you expect to end up writing not even two but three books, right? Because the first one was the *Front Row at the Trump Show*, while he was still in the White House, three books on Donald Trump. Was this your dream when you were a young cub reporter?

JONATHAN KARL:

As I was a young reporter in my twenties for the *New York Post*, I had a great source named Donald Trump, but it was never about anything remotely to do with politics. If you had asked me what do you think? You'll be a White House reporter, you'll be the president of the White House Correspondence Association, and that dude you're with at Trump Tower is going to be the president. Fantasy land.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. But unfortunately, if I might editorialize, not, right? It's all too true, all too real. One reason I so respect John's reporting is that he does real reporting, granular reporting, but also sees the forest as well as the trees, which isn't always the case, I would say. And also, I think you've been willing to be surprised by events and not stick to your first impression of something if it turns out that he's changed, or we've changed or the country's changed. And so, you've really been an excellent chronicler of the Trump years and I think now, this new book, a very important chronicler of the current moment, as we speak in, what is it? The end of November. November 27th, 2023. So, John, thanks for joining me again.

JONATHAN KARL:

Great, Bill. Thanks for having me.

BILL KRISTOL:

And let's just dive right in. Where do we stand with Donald Trump? He's the front running candidate obviously for Republican nomination in 2024. When we were talking about this before the show, I had said how should we begin? There's so much to talk about. We can talk about your views of how he's changed, the way your views might've changed a little bit over the seven, eight years since 2015. And you said why don't we just jump in with where he is now and what he's saying now and what he might do as president, so begin with that.

JONATHAN KARL:

Well, first of all, I think that there's the question of where he is politically right now, and there's almost this perception, this conventional wisdom that he is the inevitable Republican nominee, that he's almost like the incumbent president. And there's no way that any of these that are challenging him will get any traction, and the polls seem to bear that out. I think, and we can get to this later, Bill, but I believe that the Republican primary actually isn't over yet. In fact, I might point out that nobody's actually voted yet, but that the same people who were saying that he's inevitably going to be the Republican nominee were many of the same people that would say he had no chance of winning in 2016. It's just a mirror image of this sense of inevitability.

I think he is a far more volatile figure than he was even in 2016 or as president. I think that there's been very little attention paid, it's one of the main reasons I wrote this book, as to what has happened to him since he left the White House, who the people are around him, what potentially a second Trump term could look like. I think there's been very little discussion of this. It's hard to make the case that Trump is under-covered, but in this case, I think he is under-covered.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's such an important point. I very much agree with that. He's over-covered in some ways, the ridiculousness, the buffoonishness, the nitty outrages of the hour of the day, but not as potentially the next president of the United States. So yeah, begin with that. I think that's really so important. What do we now know about, let's bracket the question of whether he is the nominee. I think he's likely to be, but certainly, as you say, very volatile times, and so nothing's inevitable. But what would Trump 2.0 look like, based on what he's saying and the people around him? And then we can maybe go backwards also a little bit, how different it is and away from 2015 but...

JONATHAN KARL:

The first time around it was something, as unconventional as the campaign, there were some rather conventional messages. He cast himself as the business mastermind that was going to hire all the best negotiators and the best people and get the best deals for America because we had been sold down the river, and that he was the guy that could make it happen. He had very few campaign specifics, but they were understandable. He was going to be tougher on immigration. He was going to build the wall, he was going to have China pay for it. He was going to be tough on trade. A few broad brushstrokes, kind of a conventional isolationist, protectionist version of the Republican Party.

Actually hearkening back to "America First", which was a phrase he's trotted out in 2016, even though I don't think he necessarily understood the historic significance of that phrase. Now the campaign is based on grievance and revenge. I think that the signature phrase of this campaign was one he trotted out earlier this year, "I am your retribution. In 2016 I said I am your voice. Now I say I am your retribution." And by, "your retribution," he means his retribution. He wants to go out and get revenge and make those who have gone after him pay for it. That includes certainly the prosecutors, the justice system, but it also includes all of those Republicans who tried to push him out yet again after January 6th.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's so interesting. I hadn't really thought about that formula that Trump himself, in a way, understands that it's different, right?

JONATHAN KARL:

Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

In 2016 it was, "I am your voice." He, himself, I guess, says, "In 2016 I said, I am your voice. Now I'm saying I am your retribution."

JONATHAN KARL:

Yeah. He quotes himself and now he says, "I'm doing something else."

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. In 2016, it was, "I alone can fix it," which is a little demagogic and slightly, you might say, dictatorial feeling. But it's not that different from a president just saying, "I'm the guy who can take care of this," right?

JONATHAN KARL:

Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

And now it's really different, partly because of the people around him and partly because of his experiences as president. What's key to the difference, do you think?

JONATHAN KARL:

I think first of all, that this campaign, in a very real sense, is a campaign for his own survival. This is no longer just a campaign to become president of the United States. In some ways, I think he sees it as a campaign to stay out of jail. So, there's that.

But also, the people around him, it's entirely different. And I spent a fair amount of time in the book going through the people who served him at very senior roles. I interviewed some of them, who were candidly, for the first time, some of them did it previously, some are doing it now for the first time, talking about him in eviscerating terms. Just that he's a danger to the Republic, wouldn't be able to accomplish any of the goals he sets out. And these are people that he put in very high positions in his own administration, secretary of defense, chief of staff, White House Counsel's Office, who have been very clear about what they think of Trump and what he think he would be in a second term.

So a lot of those people in the Trump White House and the Trump cabinet served as a restraining influence on him. Not always very effectively, he wasn't an easy guy to restrain. But they undermined him in many different ways, some publicly, some directly, some behind the scenes and trying to make sure he didn't notice. But those people are gone now. The people around him, and it's a very, very small circle now, this is even smaller than the campaign in 2016, certainly smaller than what he had in his White House, the people around him are there to follow orders. They are there to be, first and foremost, unquestionably loyal to Donald Trump because he wants anybody who is not out and gone.

BILL KRISTOL:

The loyalty, but also loyalty to a certain vision of what he would do as president, I suppose, in a second term, which would be to do all the things that he sort of had the instinct he might want to do, but was stopped from doing in the first term. I guess I'm struck that he does seem to have loyalty plus ideology now. And I don't know if ideology is quite the right word, but a certain kind of real proto-dictatorial impulse that wasn't quite there in nearly as extreme a form, I don't think, in going into the first term or even during much of the first term.

JONATHAN KARL:

It is a dictatorial impulse at the very least. And some of his people who are influential at this point, Steve Bannon, I think, is newly back in a way, maybe in a much more important role than he was even when he was brought into the White House as chief strategist, he was brought in as part of a three-headed monster of Reince Priebus. So you had a little bit of the quasi-Republican establishment, and then you had Jared, his son-in-law, who was more maybe liberal Democrat in his impulses, but all about the family. And Bannon, and Bannon had to struggle for influence in that.

Now, I think Bannon's ideas, which is very much this idea of retribution and rooting out the so-called Deep State, basically just destroying what is there in our federal government and rebuilding anew. This is a Bannon idea, and he no longer has, there's no longer conflicting influences. That is the purpose of this campaign.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's so interesting. I hadn't really thought of it that way. Bannon was, as you say, maybe one third of the influence on Trump in 2017, and now he's, in terms of the conception of the Trump presidency, I think the dominant one, wouldn't you say? Probably.

JONATHAN KARL:

I think he's absolutely the dominant one. And it is interesting that Jared Kushner and Ivanka have both kind of sworn off this campaign. I think it was often overstated, whenever Trump did something really outrageous, there would be stories. "Well, Ivanka really tried to move her father in the right direction." I think that was overstated often, but there was something to it. There was something to that.

And they're gone, but so are, and he's not going to bring in a guy like John Kelly again, or Jim Mattis, Don McGahn, his first White House counsel, Pat Cipollone, his final White House counsel, Bill Barr, Jeff Sessions, all of whom were, to varying degrees, loyal to the Trump agenda such as it is, but also felt it needed to be within the confines of the law and the Constitution. Those people are now not only no longer around Trump, they are pariahs in Trump land. And the goal is to bring in a team that will not repeat what those people did, which was basically try to make sure Trump didn't break the law or violate the Constitution.

BILL KRISTOL:

And I suppose it's not an accident that, I think you say this in the book, that one of the red lines now for loyal... It's personal loyalty to Trump, but also not being anti-January 6th, if that's the right way to put it, right?

JONATHAN KARL:

Yes. Certainly the obsession over the election, which Trump has not wavered from that from a moment since November of 2020. You need to be a true believer, or at least sound like a true believer that the election was stolen. But it's how you perceive January 6th, which Trump has...

I interviewed him at Mar-a-Lago just about six or seven weeks after he left the White House, and he was already, at that point, describing January 6th as one of the greatest days ever. He said it was the biggest crowd he had ever spoken before. It was a wonderful day. It got marred a little later on, but it was a wonderful day.

And he told me in that interview, this is interesting, Bill, because in preparing this book, I went over everything. When I wrote *Betrayal*, it was the immediate aftermath of January 6th, and I was getting on the record, I felt it was my duty to get the historic record. Talked to the people closest to Trump about what went down, what led to that day. And I had two interviews with Trump that were rather illuminating. One of them is, as you may remember, he was justifying

the people who were chanting for Mike Pence's execution, "Hang Mike Pence." He was telling me, "Well, they were angry. How can you pass on a fraudulent vote?"

So I, in preparing for this book, went back and looked at all of that again, and I found some stuff that, frankly, I hadn't really seen as significant, but now I see in a whole new light. In that interview I did in March of 2021, he tells me that he did want to go to the Capitol after his speech on the January 6th. I didn't believe it, so I kind of bracketed it, ignored it. Then I heard, obviously Cassidy Hutchinson's testimony and the testimony of several others about how he fought with the Secret Service and really wanted to go up.

But he said something else in the very next sentence, which I also didn't see the significance of at the time. He said, "And I wanted to go back later, during the problem. And let me tell you this, if I had gone, I would've been very well received. I would've been very well received, I can tell you that." So, he's saying that he would've been very well received during the problem, during the assault on the Capitol, which is just sick in and of itself, but it's also a significant concession and admission that he had total influence over those people. He could have called them off.

BILL KRISTOL:

And they were his people and he-

JONATHAN KARL:

And they were his people.

BILL KRISTOL:

And he ends up now not just sort of-

JONATHAN KARL:

FBI informants.

BILL KRISTOL:

What's that?

JONATHAN KARL:

They weren't FBI informants.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, yeah. No, they kind of abandoned that argument. They were Antifa, whatever. But yeah, they went from what they did wasn't so bad, you've got to be understanding of their motives, to simply defending them and defending the whole effort on January 6th, that's what's I think...

In your first book...In the second book, I guess, the book, *Betrayal*, you saw that coming, as it were. You saw the beginning of that move by Trump. But to have thought that it would accelerate or intensify over the subsequent two years since you wrote the book and that he'd be the front-runner for the nomination, which means that presumably the Republican Party, one of our two major parties, is basically going to run as a pro-January 6th party in 2024, that's pretty stunning, right?

JONATHAN KARL:

It certainly is. And I think that there's been not enough attention on this because it's interesting. If you look at what Trump has done since he has announced he is running for president, the one thing that he has done very little of is actual campaigning. So there's not

much to cover. He does a rally every once in a while, he'll say a few outrageous things. They'll be noted or they'll be ignored. But he has spent most of his time at Mar-a-Lago or his other properties up in Bedminster, around a very small group of political aides and his lawyers, because so much attention is focused on his legal cases.

So I really tried to do reporting on what he is up to because we're not seeing as much of him or hearing as much about him. And I think this is some of the most illuminating stuff in the book. He is in a very dark place. He has very little outside influence of a mainstream variety. He's surrounded by enablers, and he is plotting a comeback for the purposes of destroying his enemies as he perceives them. And when he's not doing that, he's doing things like...I mean, and some of the stuff we see, a lot of it was public, but like, selling his NFTs, dining with Kanye West or Nick Fuentes, hosting a fundraiser for a prominent QAnon figure. He is not surrounded by the kind of people that he brought into his administration in 2017.

BILL KRISTOL:

I guess maybe one way to say it is, it's not just that the guardrails are weaker than they were, but that he wants to just ride roughshod over them. Is that unfair? I mean, I was very struck in the book, doesn't Johnny McEntee tell us... I mean, as a guy who's both very close to Trump now and would be very important to Trump's second term and was important I guess at the end of the Trump first term, but say a word about him because he's not someone people have heard of.

JONATHAN KARL:

Massively important and really important to understanding what Trump 2.0 would look like. Johnny McEntee, who interestingly was the first guy I met on the Trump campaign in 2015, because he was about one of the first 10 employees. So, outside of Hope Hicks, who was his chief advisor on everything way back then, McEntee was a guy who was in his 20s, he was a quarterback at UConn, graduated, went to work for Fox, it was a very junior job in the newsroom. And then quit Fox to go volunteer at the Trump campaign right after Trump announced.

So he came into the White House basically as Trump's body guy, which means you carry the bags, carry the president's bags. You often see him carrying those boxes, by the way, if you look at old footage of Trump going back and forth from Marine One. Many of those boxes that would become famous were carried in and out of the helicopter by John McEntee. He had his desk right outside the Oval Office in a little area called the Outer Oval, and he was eventually fired by John Kelly. Issues came up on his background check.

Once Kelly was fired, he was brought back in and this was 2020. I think his first day on the job was literally Valentine's Day of 2020. So just as COVID is starting to hit, but before so much is shut down, McEntee is brought in as the head of presidential personnel, which is amazing because he had never hired anybody in his life or fired anybody, and now he was in charge of effectively the most important HR department in the federal government.

BILL KRISTOL:

And that's a job in the past that's been typically held by sort of seniorish aides who know how to balance all the constituencies, but also hire competent people for some of these important political appointments. It's not 30 year old or whatever who-

JONATHAN KARL:

4,000 political appointments from cabinet secretaries on down all go through the presidential personnel office. So Johnny goes in there, sweeps out everybody who was there before, and brings in a bunch of his buddies, some of his college buddies, some Instagram influencers, young women that he liked. And it's literally almost entirely people in their twenties. Some of

them had not graduated from college yet. And they begin by saying that they want to go through and do basically loyalty tests throughout the Trump administration to root out the rhinos, to root out those that aren't truly loyal to the President. And they start scheduling these interviews with ... There were a couple of cases, it was cabinet secretaries, but certainly deputy secretaries in these top positions throughout the federal government.

So that's Johnny McEntee, and he orchestrates at the end, the decapitation of the entire leadership at the Pentagon after the election. Esper fired, three other top political appointees in the Defense Department are fired. Kash Patel and other people who seemed as truly loyal to Trump were put in raising alarm bells. Pompeo's calling up Bill Barr, I found out, saying, "We gotta be worried about what's happening over at the Pentagon. I don't know where this is going." That's Johnny McEntee.

Now he's working on Project 2025, which is designed to create the policies and the personnel for the next Republican administration. And their whole approach is not just the 4,000 political appointees, but they want to go through and fire the civil servants and ensure that loyalists are in government from the top to the bottom.

And again, it might literally be Johnny McEntee again. If it's not Johnny McEntee, it'll be somebody like him. But it reminds me, it's a little bit like the Red Guards in Maoist China. We want to go through and get rid of the intellectual class. Anybody who's not fully on board with The Man, we want out.

And there was a story, Bill, I don't know if you saw that, but Axios broke a story just recently about how as they come up with their personnel lists, they're using AI so they can really screen through everything in somebody's background to see if there's any hint of possible disloyalty. One of the people who worked with McEntee said, "Look, the point is, loyalty is more important than policy because you can teach policy, but you can't teach loyalty." That's the first and foremost criteria for another Trump administration is who will carry out the orders?

BILL KRISTOL:

The Red Guards thing may seem like an extreme example, but it's actually a suggestive one in the sense that the Red Guards and communists in China, they couldn't have done what they had done unless the Communist Party, which was a massive organization, basically felt it had to go along or chose to go along because Mao wanted them to go along. And I do feel like, and you mentioned this point in the book, I mean, if there weren't a big conservative establishment out there that was saying to McEntee, "Okay, happy to be part of that project and we're at the Heritage Foundation or at other places and sign us up and I'll help provide some of the work," and actually probably there some of those people are a little more experienced and can sort of actually do that work of competently in terms of how do we change the civil service rules to let us fire so many more people and so forth?

So, it's a weird combination of impulsive, flaky, unqualified people frankly, but with enough behind them that they could actually, I think, not be ineffectual in trying to do the pretty astonishing things they want to do. I mean, do you agree with that? It just feels like he's sort of stumbled into this combination that's very dangerous, which is sort of pure loyalty as you say, but backed up by people whose ideology has in the last seven or eight years been so radicalized that they're happy to be part of this enterprise.

JONATHAN KARL:

I mean, he was in some ways comically inept in the White House, especially in those first few days. Remember the ill thought through travel ban that seemed like it was crafted on the back of a napkin that created chaos in airports all around the world but was quickly thrown out because it just couldn't pass muster. To the very end where it was McEntee, I describe in the book, who had issued this executive order, McEntee, executive order calling for the

immediate withdrawal actually by January 15th, 2021 of all US troops in Afghanistan, the withdrawal of all troops out of Iraq and Syria, the withdrawal of all American troops out of Germany, and then they added a fourth provision of US troops out of Somalia. This was all done.

And I go through in detail how McEntee literally got on Google to see how a executive order could be drafted. He had Colonel Douglas Macgregor, best known for various Fox appearances during the non-prime time hours for the most part, telling him to go to the cabinet and get out an old executive order and follow the template. And he got Trump to sign it, sent it to the Pentagon, but it didn't go through the staff secretary, it didn't go through legal review. And the whole thing ended up going nowhere, causing a little bit of chaos, but going nowhere. So they were incompetent.

But I do think that he's been through that now and there'll still be a lot of incompetence, I have no doubt. But there will also be a sense of... they've got a little bit more of a sense of how to do this stuff and they have fewer people around who are trying to stop it. In that case, you had Mark Milley and you had Robert O'Brien, you had Pat Cipollone, you had some people who when they got word of this massive movement of US forces just being ordered in this thing just signed by the president, that they had to go to Trump and say, "Look sir, this is not going to work." But those people won't be around. Will there still be a lot of incompetence? No doubt, but they may actually do some of this stuff this time around.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I think that's... both those people won't be around. That's I think a very important point. The Cipollones and the National Security advisors who were at least somewhat constrained and wanted to constrain Trump a little bit and so forth.

But the other thing is, as you say, they'll be replaced by people, some of whom are incompetent, I suppose, but some of whom will be true believers, but they'll know how to write... They will be able to fulfill the job as staff secretary or White House counsel and know how to do some of these things. They may not do them quite as elegantly as a really great White House counsel from the old days would've done. But the notion that... I do feel like the apparatchiks will be there helping the McEntees of the world make those and helping Trump make those things happen. And Trump's not going to accept quite ... What do you think? I mean, you've been following so closely, people telling him, "Well sir, you can't do that." I mean, that one worked in the first term. I don't see how that works in the second term.

JONATHAN KARL:

Well, I mean, I think that we'll have constitutional crisis from day one if he comes back. I mean, let me give you just one example. It took Trump until, I think it was June of 2017 to get his cabinet fully confirmed, but he did. They all went through Senate confirmation. And then as various cabinet secretaries left, there were a few that went through confirmation again, but I mean, it was an administration of acting secretaries for the most part. And I remember Trump famously saying, "I like acting. It's kind of nice. You point your person, you don't have to deal with the Senate and then you can fire them whenever you want. It's real easy. It's fantastic."

But they did work through the Vacancies Act, which has certain restrictions. You can't put anybody in charge, you've got to get people that had held equivalent level in the federal government that had gone through a previous Senate confirmation, et cetera. So it was a smaller group that he could choose from for his... Ric Grinnell becomes the head of National Intelligence on an acting basis because he was the ambassador to Germany. I mean, they stretch the limits of the Vacancies Act, but they operated for the most part within its bounds. Are they going to do that next time around? I mean, is Trump going to wait around for Congress for the Senate to confirm an Attorney General or is he going to put somebody over

there and say, "Okay, now what?" And then who's going to enforce that? They're going to go to the courts and challenge it, and then who's going to enforce? I mean, I think the impulse here is truly lawless.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, well, that's chilling. But I very much agree with that and I don't think people have come to grips for that. They still sort of assume, hey, this is America. There's the rule of law. Obviously, you can stretch things. You can go into the gray areas as presidents do sometimes with executive orders that are based on ambiguous laws. The courts strike it down sometimes. When the courts strike it down, you do obey it. You complain a little bit, but then you change your student loan forgiveness program or whatever Biden did. And Trump himself too, even with the-

JONATHAN KARL:

Yeah, the travel ban got modified...

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, the travel ban. I agree. And he won't have people necessarily in the Justice Department or the White House Counsel's office telling him, "Sir, we really have to obey this." Rather, they'll be telling him what Eastman told him in January 6th context. I mean, that's the model for the second term, no?

JONATHAN KARL:

It's the model for the second term. When you have people saying that the vice president can unilaterally toss out electoral votes, I mean, I think you can come up with a rationale for doing just about anything at that point.

BILL KRISTOL:

I was struck that it was reported that he personally, or at least people around him, don't like the Federalist Society anymore.

JONATHAN KARL:

Oh, no. No, no. He told me that on the record. He told me that on the record. He's outraged at the Federalist Society because they steered him the wrong way because he put these three justices on the Supreme Court and they did nothing to stop Joe Biden from stealing the election. I mean, he thought that those were his justices. When they ruled to not even take up some of these absurd electoral challenges like the Texas case, the Texas Attorney General case, I mean, Trump was outraged. Absolutely outraged.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. I mean, I think the Federalist Society, they were very ideological and a lot of people don't agree with a lot of things the Federalist Society appointees did or said, in the government or as judges obviously, but it's still a different world from some of what we saw in those last few months. Some of those judges who were appointed right near the end.

And again, the kinds of people who wanted to do what Trump wanted to do with justice. I think that's so revealing that the internal Department of Justice fight, where you have the Federalist Society people who are very conservative, unitary executive, all that stuff, say, "No, that's too much." But what's his name? What's his name?

JONATHAN KARL:

Jeffrey Clark. Jeffrey Clark.

BILL KRISTOL:

Jeffrey Clark. It was Clark and Rosen confused. That's bad. Jeffrey Clark says, "Yep, I'm there."

JONATHAN KARL:

Hey!

BILL KRISTOL:

And I remember at the time when that all came out, when you reported it, and then when the January 6th committee [inaudible] and everyone's like, "Well, he's finished, Jeffrey Clark." Jeffrey Clark is, if I'm not mistaken, reasonably close to Trump and to Trump world, and he might not be able to make him Attorney General, because he couldn't be confirmed though, as you say, does that matter anymore? But are we certain he's not going to be in the White House formally or informally telling Trump what he can and should do?

JONATHAN KARL:

And I think that whole episode, first of all, I don't know if we've really... can just establish the absurdity of it. This all happened in the beginning of January when he was trying to engineer the coup at the Justice Department. I mean, he has two weeks, less than three weeks left on his presidency, and he's trying to oust the acting Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen, who is refusing to do as he orders and to install the one guy that he can find in the Justice Department who would do it. And so just the absurdity of even at that moment, he's lost all the legal challenges. It's become clear he is not going to have the votes to toss out electoral votes on January 6th, that his vice president's not going to go along with the crazy demand that he'd unilaterally do it. So he tries to engineer this change at the Justice Department, and every single political appointee at that upper level associate attorney general level says that they will resign if Trump makes this guy, Jeffrey Clark, the acting attorney general.

Again, this gets to the point there were good people, maybe very conservative people that many don't agree with or whatever, but believed in the rule of law and they stopped a crisis that could have been much greater. The goal of a second Trump term from the start would be to ensure that no people like that are back in those positions of authority.

BILL KRISTOL:

You've discussed at times the pardon power and how Trump was frustrated that... he did pardon a lot of people incidentally, and people got away with things therefore, which set up precedent for what could happen in the future. But it seems like he really came to understand how powerful that power could be late in his presidency. And I think now... don't you think he really understands what government could look like if all the political appointees, if they go too far and break the law in doing what Trump wants are going to be pardoned by him?

JONATHAN KARL:

He was kind of selfish with the pardon power at the end. I mean, he had people like Matt Gates and others who were coming in looking for kind of preemptive pardons, and he didn't help them out. He did pardon Bannon on the last day in office. I think it was the second to last pardon before Jeanine Pirro's husband. But the point is he understood the power of pardoning, and if somebody breaks the law on his behalf as a federal official, that's pretty easy to deal with. Just pardon. It's a get-out-of-jail-free card.

BILL KRISTOL:

He wouldn't wait till the last month either. He would do it in real time, so to speak.

JONATHAN KARL:

Oh, you could do it right then.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. That's what's what truly people haven't... I think people haven't really, He did some of that, obviously. He used it to help Manafort, I think, avoid fully testifying and so forth, but...

JONATHAN KARL:

Roger Stone.

BILL KRISTOL:

Roger Stone. But I think the degree to which, again, that becomes something, if you combine it with everything else that, as you say, get- out-of-jail-free card, sitting right there, when the counsel in your department tells you, this happened [inaudible]...

JONATHAN KARL:

"This is illegal."

BILL KRISTOL:

"Sir, you probably really shouldn't do..." I'm not saying Trump just tells the cabinet secretary. That's a risky thing to do. Well, that's okay. I'm going to go tell the president or tell the president's not chief of staff. It will not be like John Kelly or Reince Priebus and he'll say, "Fine, go ahead and do it, and then I'll just get pardoned." Foreign policy too, you discuss your conversation with Tucker Carlson. Again, he was checked on a lot of things he sort of had the instinct of doing. You mentioned already the late January memo that McEntee wrote, or executive order he wrote, but then earlier on getting out of NATO and all kinds of things. It feels to me like again, his most radical instincts in that area too could be just followed through on by the kinds of people he is likely to have around him.

JONATHAN KARL:

Yeah. His instincts were to... He had nothing but contempt for NATO. I remember the interview he did with the Washington Post editorial board in the 2016 campaign seemed to not even necessarily have a good grasp on Article V and what all that meant. But as he came to understand it, his main objective as far as NATO was concerned was to get more out of our allies, which, by the way, is the idea of having our allies shoulder more of their self-defense is something that's been a priority of presidents in both parties and all that.

But Trump was actively and continually bringing up the idea of bringing our troops home from South Korea, bringing our troops home from Germany. And the Tucker Carlson conversation, I had learned that Trump was having, at first I was told it was near-daily conversations with Trump. So I called Tucker. I mean you and I both, he worked for you at one point, so back in those days, I've known him maybe even longer than you have. We've both known him for a long, long, long time. And I called him up just to see if this was true, and he acknowledged, "Yeah, we do talk regularly." He said it wasn't really every day, it was more like maybe once or twice a week. And I said, "The person that told me this thought he was kind of lonely. That's why he was talking to you." He said, well, I don't know if it was really that. It was because it was, most of these conversations, according to Tucker Carlson, were about foreign policy and specifically about Ukraine. He said the calls became much more regular after the invasion of Ukraine.

He said, "Trump agrees with me far more than he lets on in public. He's far more radical on this than he lets on in public. As a matter of fact, he's basically the only person," classic kind of Tucker Carlson exaggeration perhaps, "but not necessarily substantively wrong here, that nobody is more in sync with where he is on Russia and Ukraine than Donald Trump." And you know Tucker Carlson's position on Ukraine, which is basically that Ukraine's the aggressor and... He basically echoes what you see on Russian State television. And that's where Trump is, according to Tucker Carlson.

BILL KRISTOL:

We wouldn't have just a constitutional crisis at home. It would have a pretty big foreign policy crisis the moment he takes office, really the moment he's elected, I'd say, because it's not like foreign governments won't see what's coming and...

JONATHAN KARL:

He would end the war on Ukraine in 24 hours, and we can imagine how he might do that, which is basically just to side with Russia.

BILL KRISTOL:

And the implications for other countries' judgments in that point about whether they can count on the US, and whether they have to take care of themselves, or what deals they have to cut with Russia, or for that matter, China and other countries. We dodged a lot of bullets in the first term, is the way I think of it, and people therefore haven't kind of come to grips with what a second term might look like in foreign policy as well as in what you've been discussing so well on domestic policy. It's pretty... Yeah. And the Republican Party, would that stop him, do you think, in the second term?

I suppose Democrats might control one or both Houses of Congress, so they might try to stop him some to some degree, but you do need, at some point, to have both party... Well, we'll put it this way. In the first two books, there's some Republican pushback behind the scenes that slows down some of the things he's trying to do, though they most... Most of the story is the conquest of the Republican Party by Trump. But did you find it, in writing this book or in your just current reporting, any sense that, "Okay, we might have to push back again during the campaign or during a Trump presidency if there is one"?

JONATHAN KARL:

There still is that pushback. You still hear the same things when people are just talking to you and they're not publicly taking issue with him. But it's very much become his party, and it's on autopilot. You look at the mess in the House over the speakership. He was not a factor in either the 15 rounds it took for McCarthy to get elected in the first place, or in McCarthy's ouster, but it was all Trump acolytes that were provoking, causing, the crisis and the impasse. They weren't acting on Trump's orders, because Trump first wasn't paying much attention. And then once he was, they didn't care what he had to say, actually. They were just moving in their own direction. Look at the people who won't be there. Mitt Romney is gone. Cassidy will be gone. Those who voted to impeach him, those who voted to convict him, will almost all entirely be gone. A few of them will be left. There's still two House members left who voted to impeach him, but the people that really were willing publicly to stand up for Trump are not really there anymore.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I thought Trump's lack of involvement in the speaker race in a funny way showed how powerful he is, because he doesn't need to be involved.

JONATHAN KARL:

He doesn't need to be involved.

BILL KRISTOL:

And indeed, who became Speaker of the House? The most radical, but ideological MAGA true believer person you could've had. He's not going to object to much that Trump does, I don't think Mike Johnson...

JONATHAN KARL:

Which is why Trumpism lasts beyond Trump. There's still a struggle for the control of the party, but it's not much of one anymore.

BILL KRISTOL:

If Mike Johnson is speaker when Trump is president, and Mitch McConnell, I'm not sure he'd still be leader. I don't know that he could survive politically a Trump victory, and there'd be such a mood of, "Okay, the old guard needs to go." And so again, we think Paul Ryan and Mitch McConnell, what everyone thinks of them, 2017, '18, when Republicans controlled both branches, it's kind of different from what it would be with Mike Johnson and whoever would succeed McConnell in the context of a Trump reelection. I think people, again, as we've stressed throughout this conversation, underrate-

JONATHAN KARL

I mean whatever you want to say about Paul Ryan and Mitch McConnell, Ryan already out of power by the time January 6th happens. But both of them were crystal clear about the integrity of the election, and both of them were crystal clear in saying that Congress had no constitutional right to overthrow duly certified electoral votes from any state. And both of them were absolutely crystal clear in condemning what happened on January 6th and laying the blame at Donald Trump, and Ryan is long gone, obviously, but I agree with you. If McConnell is around, I don't... Obviously he's got his own issues, health issues and everything else, but that's not going to be Mitch McConnell's Republican minority or majority. And in that case, it probably will be a majority, Republican majority.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. The other person who was very clear was Mike Pence, and he's not going to be a vice president. I don't think Trump will not pick a vice president with any independent standing, right? Like Pence.

JONATHAN KARL:

No.

BILL KRISTOL:

Do you have a view on who, given his current mood and temper, what type of person he would take? Would he want a firebrand,

JONATHAN KARL:

He's going to want-

BILL KRISTOL:

... or would he just want someone who's totally loyal and won't cause any trouble and might help him in the election a little bit?

JONATHAN KARL:

He's going to want somebody that looks good standing next to him. That'll probably be the first thing. And who won't talk much, and certainly won't take any independent positions, obviously. Thoroughly and totally loyal. And how it looks on the sign will probably matter a lot too, how the name rolls. So I don't know. Christie Noem has been campaigning for that job for a long time, Governor of South Dakota. Seems pretty unquestionably loyal. He probably likes how she looks next to him. There was talk of Tim Scott, if he wanted to continue making Republicans making inroads among black voters. I don't think there's going to be a Tim Scott. I don't see any of the current field actually being in that. You know, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, there you go, if you want to, again, make a play for that suburban woman vote, I don't know that she gets you that vote, but she is a woman. I don't know. Those would be some of the possibilities.

BILL KRISTOL:

But loyal. Loyalty above all.

JONATHAN KARL:

Loyalty.

BILL KRISTOL:

And no separate power base, obviously.

JONATHAN KARL:

Yes, yes, yes. And Sarah Sanders owes her entire political career to him. I know her father was obviously governor of Arkansas, but she was a very junior staffer in Republican communications when she got the deputy job at the Trump White House.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Or Elise Stefanik I guess, maybe, who also owes her career to switching sides, as it were, within the party and going with him. Let me ask you one thing. I think one thing that's you've emphasized Trump that—

JONATHAN KARL:

Trump-Stefanik. Trump-Stefanik. Yeah. That might look good on a sticker. And she's in New York, but he's a Florida resident now, so you don't have the two-state issue. Yeah, that might work.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Well, it's happy to get [inaudible]—

JONATHAN KARL:

You know, she endorsed his 2024 campaign, issued the endorsement before he actually announced he was running again, which I thought was interesting.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right [inaudible].

JONATHAN KARL:

Yeah. Almost nobody did, yet in the beginning, Republicans were... It was just after 2022, people were standing back, and she issued a full-throated endorsement the day before he announced he was running.

BILL KRISTOL:

Let me ask you this. It doesn't exactly cut against what we've been saying, but I think it complements it. But I really want your judge around this is, because you're so close to it. I feel like it's been a pretty competent campaign by Trump. The proof's in the pudding or in the eating. He's doing fine. He beat back the DeSantis challenge there in the early months of 2023, which wasn't insubstantial. DeSantis had won a massive reelection victory in Florida. Looked like it could be very serious. It seems like they're doing most of the mechanics pretty well. It's hard to tell at this stage at the end of 2023. Trump's Trump, so there's a lot of wackiness and craziness, but also a kind of purposefulness on the things he thinks matters. Some people out in my world think it's terrible when he says people are vermin and has contempt for every part of the Justice Department and the rule of law and so forth. But he thinks none of that hurts him, and he may be right, and in fact, it motivates some of his voters.

He thinks the thing that could hurt him would be looking too extreme on abortion rights, and on that, he's been pretty disciplined in a way and walking away from the most extreme, or I'll just say, or that's not fair to call it extreme, just the most pro-life position to a much more muddled kind of maybe leave-it-up-to-the-states position. So there's a kind of weird both cunning politically and somewhat disciplined, almost, by the campaign, competence by some of the campaign advisors in the mechanics that combines with all the lawless plans for the second term. Am I exaggerating that, or is that true? Or talk a little bit about that. You talked to some of those campaign aides, I'm sure.

JONATHAN KARL:

It's an interesting theory. I'll give you this. There's none of the drama of the infighting, which you had constantly in 2016 and 2020. The firing of campaign managers, the battles between Lewandowski and Manafort and Jared, and I mean, there's none of that kind of drama where the people around him were throwing, attacking each other and trying to gain influence at the other's expense, which was not just the campaigns, but also the Trump White House. There really is none of that. But I think the reason why there's none of that is there's almost nobody working for him. I mean, there is no campaign. There's literally no campaign headquarters. So these folks are working virtually. There's a handful of people. There's Chris LaCivita, who is new to Trump world. We remember him back from the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth campaign in 2004, the independent expenditure effort that turned Silver Star Vietnam War hero John Kerry into effectively a deserter or whatever they were. It was really quite a campaign, and that was lost...

BILL KRISTOL:

But effective, right?

JONATHAN KARL:

And he's a a master of the dark arts, and he's effective, and he's an interesting guy. I think that he's there with Susie Wiles, who has experience as a Florida operative, at one point with DeSantis until DeSantis fired her or her... And then you've got Jason Miller who couldn't get a job in the Trump White House because of some stuff going on in his personal life, but was a very effective communicator, probably the most effective communicator he had on that campaign, and then again in the 2020 campaign. So it's a small band. They don't fight with each other. They've done some things that have been very effective. I think LaCivita in particular has gone through and looked at the rules for selecting delegates in all the states,

and they've tried to make as many states as possible winner-take-all, which they believe will be an advantage to Trump because he could win with 30 or 40% of the vote, all a hundred percent of the delegates. So yes, so that's where I say, "Yes, there is something where this does look like a fairly effective campaign." But there is no campaign.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's a good point.

JONATHAN KARL:

Andy, he's not doing any campaign events. He does a rally here or a rally there, but he's doing almost no campaign events, compare his schedule to the schedule of any of the others. He's not quite Biden working out of the basement, but it's not far from that. He plays a hell of a lot of golf, and he spent more time in the month of October in a New York courtroom than he did in any form of campaigning. I think it was a total of eight days on the civil case, not even on the criminal cases. He didn't have to be there, but he was. I think that's helped him actually, because again, it means less focus on what he's actually campaigning about and what exactly a second Trump term would look like.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, it's like a weird version of a Rose Garden strategy, right?

JONATHAN KARL:

Yes. Right.

BILL KRISTOL:

People know he's got 99.9% name ID. The ones who were for him were all for him. He's got to not scare some of the other swing voters who got a little scared by 2020. Maybe that's the playing the golf. Playing golf is not entirely—

JONATHAN KARL:

No, playing golf is probably the best thing he can do. I outlined the first couple of months of the campaign and it got a chapter called "The Dark Days at Mar-a-Lago," about when he goes there and then he announces the campaign. And there was, I forget, the number's in the book, but it's something like 60 plus days where he did not leave a Trump property except to go to another Trump property to play golf. There's an upside to that.

BILL KRISTOL:

I am struck. So do you think it's a sustainable... The number of normal-ish Republicans I run into who, they don't like him much and they wish he didn't do A, B, or C. They haven't internalized at all what a Trump 2.0 would look like. And they're sort of reassured by a certain way, he is able to be normal in a Trumpy way, in a conman, Borscht Belt shtick way, in a way though that reassures a certain type, I think, of Republican business voters. The rallies look crazy, but when he's on CNN with Kaitlan Collins, let's say at that town hall, he looks a little... He's not a typical politician exactly, but he's not, I don't know. I was struck on people I ran into afterwards who thought he's okay: "I wish he would leave off on this thing a little bit or that thing a little bit, but at the end of the day, he didn't do anything that terrible in the first term, and he did some good policies and it'd be better than the Democrats." I don't know whether this is just good luck on his part or cunning or really thinking it through, but somehow, he's able to balance, for now at least, the appeal to the base and the energizing of the base with a certain reassurance almost of quote, "normal Republican voters," that it's going to be not that much to worry about.

Does he have a sense of that himself? Is that because he's a good demagogue and he himself was a... Well, you covered it back in the nineties... Just a totally, I mean, normal, he's a Trump, but I mean his political views were just whatever the touch of nativism and racism, but basically generic wealthy Republican willing-to-be-a-Democrat-when-that-was-necessary type of voter. He sort of has a feel for those voters, I guess is what I'm saying. Right?

JONATHAN KARL:

He does, and he has a real feel for when he walks in the room. I think there have been stories in the last few days about some of the big Republican bundlers who were like, "We're never going to do that again," are now starting to say, "Well, he can go into a room." He makes you feel like you're the top of the world and he's engaging, he'll tell some old stories, and it can be very easy to forget what he actually stands for, what he did and what he's talking about doing.

BILL KRISTOL:

I guess that's an important point. I think with the donors, I've been struck by the ones I'm still talking to a tiny bit, how much they like. He calls him up, they have access. He returns their calls, he works with phones.

JONATHAN KARL:

Not like DeSantis. Remember DeSantis? Nobody could get through to him, and he'd go there and he didn't want to pose for pictures, didn't want to shake hands. Go there, do what he has to do, collect the money and get the hell out. Trump's much more charming and much more willing to engage those people.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I think that's such an important point that's missed by people who don't, like me, who don't [inaudible], think he's dangerous, but you hate to admit that he has a certain kind of political skill really.

What about abortion? You've covered that a little bit. Am I right that that's the one where he's just decided that's trouble and I'm going to avoid it? And people make fun of him. They go, how can you avoid it? Your judges overturned Roe V. Wade? Well, maybe, but you could be into—

JONATHAN KARL:

That's because we're going to do a deal. We're going to do the best deal ever, and this is going to make everybody happy because the judges, people, everybody's had been trying to overturn Roe V. Wade. Everybody. Democrats, everybody. Hearing him talking, he has no conception of the issue, at all. It's not something he cares about at all. You remember when he was on with Chris Matthews in 2016 and Matthews said, "So what do you do if somebody...Abortion's illegal... DO you punish the woman?" He's like, "Yeah, you punish the woman, because it's illegal." He hasn't thought about it for a second, so he doesn't understand the issue. But what he understands now is that it's an issue that hurts Republicans. So he's trying to do the version of Richard Nixon's secret plan to end the war.

It's like, I got a secret plan. We're going to negotiate this, everybody's going to be happy. It's going to be the best. And that ambiguity, I think he has a sense that he can play up that ambiguity in a general election. Again, he's never strategic really about anything except for a few things, what he has a gut on, and his gut on abortion is a hard lined abortion position is going to kill the Republicans, it's going to make it impossible for him to get elected. But he can't alienate all those evangelicals that got him there in the first place, so he's navigating this, on paper looks like a completely ridiculous position, but it may actually be the one thing where politically it's not nuts.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, not at all. I think he says, "Roe V. Wade, we overturned it" to the evangelicals to oversimplify, and he says to the upper middle class businessmen and their wives, businesswomen also. He says, "That's an issue for the states. National ban, they tell me that can't get through. And so we'll work it out," and basically signals to voters in Michigan and Pennsylvania that if they have, as they do, Democratic governors and legislatures who are not going to pass an abortion ban, he's not going to do anything about it. You don't have to worry that.

There's a limit to how far this goes, but since you say, he's not going to... Well, maybe he would explicitly say no national ban, but he needs to leave it a little murky, which could be a problem. But the degree to which I'm just struck on that one, that as you say, there are a few things that he seems to have thought about politically, and that seems to be one of them. And he doesn't just go with the most radical instinct, he goes to this one, with what's probably better for him politically.

JONATHAN KARL:

Yeah. And by the way, the ambiguity on abortion is exactly what Nikki Haley's doing. She's like, "We're never going to have a national ban, by the way." And she sounds so appealing to those fearful of a strident, anti-abortion position. But then at the same point, yeah, I would sign a six-week ban as governor of South Carolina. So, she's got two very different messages, and that's probably some variation of those positions, is what Republicans will have to do on a national level to walk the line on abortion.

BILL KRISTOL:

It makes me wonder that if it does become Haley, as the alternative to Trump, and Trump beats her presumably in the primaries, but she does better than everyone else. He'll be annoyed at her, he's calling her a "bird brain," whatever. She hasn't been loyal, she should not have run against him since he appointed her to the UN itself. I still wonder whether he'll think to himself, "You know what? If I make her VP, I probably win the presidency and she's not really going to cause any trouble for me." So, I wonder if people are... or does he not have the self-discipline to say that, like Reagan and Bush, or he has to take someone who has never once begun to criticize him? I wonder where he-

JONATHAN KARL:

No I mean, look. First of all, he's shown the ability to embrace people that were totally against him. He actually sometimes, in a way, likes that. As long as you totally admit that you were wrong and he's the greatest. And Haley has in the past shown an ability to do a remarkable set of changes on Trump, but I don't see it happening. I don't.

BILL KRISTOL:

Probably. Christie Noem's the safer version of that as it were.

JONATHAN KARL:

I think so, yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

Final points, what have we not discussed that we should discuss for people to understand this kind of amazing moment we're in? Go back to those. You covered him in the White House, you covered January 6th so well. You covered him out of the White House. I guess I'm a little struck by that. People think he's still the same person he was in 2015. There's a certain, which reassures some people, but also allows other people just to mock him and make fun of him.

He was a goofball then and he's a goofball now, kind of thing. Say a word about just how he's changed since you've dealt with him throughout those eight years as well as before.

JONATHAN KARL:

Yeah, I don't think he is the same guy. There are a lot of things that are the same, for sure, but I think it's a much darker worldview. And I think it's not just that there are fewer restraints around him, although that is a big and important factor, but I think that he has been embittered by the loss and the legal travails. I think it really freaked him out to be in a courtroom the first time. I think he's gotten used to it now. But that first arraignment, even though it was on the most trivial of the cases, the Manhattan DA case, hush money payment case.

I describe in some detail what it was like when he went in that courtroom, and it was the first time where he was not free to leave. He was under arrest. He wasn't literally in handcuffs, but he had to be there when the judge walked in, he had to rise. The judge waited several minutes before walking in. He had to wait. And he said very little. He's full of bravado before and after. While he's there, I think it has really affected him. And then to go through it again with the federal cases, see those two indictments, go through the Georgia case, his mugshot, I think these have been searing experiences on him and have really crystallized this notion that he wants to be president so he can eviscerate his enemies.

BILL KRISTOL:

And make sure he himself isn't punished for anything that he might've done either in business or in government or with classified documents. I hadn't really focused on that. I think that's an interesting point though, right? It means, doesn't it, that all bets are off in terms of recognizing the election results in 2024? 2020 could look like a... He doesn't control the Federal Government, so it's a little different, but the degree to which he will not simply roll out, I guess I lost. I guess all these court cases are just now going to go ahead, that doesn't seem to be his mindset, right?

JONATHAN KARL:

Yeah. He certainly will never acknowledge a loss. I think that one question is what happens if a Nikki Haley, she's probably the one best positioned actually, does pull off an upset victory here? He will destroy her. He's certainly not going to concede, and I think that's an interesting... I talked to Christie on this week, on Sunday, about this because Christie's critical of Nikki Haley obviously for not being forceful enough in condemning Trump.

But part of the calculation here is that whoever wins needs Trump's voters. They're probably not going to get them because he's going to be there, and I don't know if he runs on a third party or what he does if he loses. As I told Christie, it's probably a problem you'd like to have, but it's a very real thing. This is why McCarthy embraced him, because he was concerned that if he didn't have Trump on board, all those Trump voters wouldn't vote for Republican candidates in the midterms. Ronna McDaniel wanted to ensure he didn't leave the party because the party would lose all those Trump voters. That's still a real thing.

BILL KRISTOL:

I think it is a real thing, and they're right to be scared. He could run himself just to destroy, bring it all down. But in the general election point of view, the notion that if Trump's eight points behind Biden, and really is eight points behind, isn't just a little bit of a polling artifact in, I don't know, the beginning of October of 2024, and really is being told, "You're going to lose," the idea that he's going to just, "Okay, I guess I'm just like Bob Dole in 1996. I'll just go down fighting hard and trying hard but as a gentleman, so to speak." I don't feel like that's where his head is either. God knows what kind of mob actions we would see and charges we

would see and incitements to intimidation of election workers and race baiting. Don't you think it could be a pretty—

JONATHAN KARL:

But he doesn't control anything beyond the security personnel at Mar-a-Lago, so that is one critical difference. He can't try to invoke the Insurrection Act.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, he can't overturn. I think he has a much tougher time overturning it afterwards.

JONATHAN KARL:

But he can incite violence.

BILL KRISTOL:

The incitement he could do with the public before. It's pretty scary. Give us a slightly more upbeat note to end on. You end the book on a slightly upbeat note. End this conversation on a slightly upbeat note.

JONATHAN KARL:

I do. I think that I kind of end on a look at the Republicans who stood up and did the right thing after January 6th, after November of 2020. And there were people that were some obvious names that we've talked about, like Pence doing the right thing on January 6th, Liz Cheney standing up the way she did. Mitt Romney. But there were other names that you, people might not be as familiar with and who didn't have a history that would suggest that they would stand up to the most powerful person in their party who did and ultimately did the right thing. I mentioned all of those people in the Justice Department other than Jeffrey Clark. Rusty Bowers, such an inspiring and good guy. As conservative as they come, the Speaker of the House, Republican Speaker of the House in Arizona who was under enormous pressure, just mind-boggling pressure, and didn't buckle.

So I think that there are good people. I point out to you, Bill, that in my book, which I really tried to write in a way that would appeal to Trump supporters, at least would take the time to listen and not be put off. To write for Republicans generally. 95% of the people that I spoke to for this book are Republicans, and many of them, people that were very, very, very close to Donald Trump. Some still are. And I'm more hopeful because of that, and I'm also hopeful because for all the fears, the legitimate fears of the incitement of violence, I've also spent a lot of time over these last years traveling in the country, going to a lot of Trump events.

God knows I can't even count how many Trump events. And most of the people that go to him go to his events and support him. They're not hellbent on violence or overturning the government or any of that. I think there's a variety of reasons that they've supported him, but you've got a lot of good people out there who believe that our system has failed them and failed the country and have embraced Trump for that reason. But these are not bad people. Some of them are, but some in any crowd are bad. But that's my optimistic note. I think that ultimately, we do prevail. By we, I mean the democratic republic that is known as the United States of America.

BILL KRISTOL:

That is a good note and a true note, I think. So, John Karl, thank you so much for joining me for this really interesting and thought-provoking discussion today. I really appreciate it.

JONATHAN KARL:

[muted] Thank you, Bill. Thank you very much.

BILL KRISTOL:

And thank you all for joining us on conversation.