

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Doug Sosnik Conversation

Filmed: February 14, 2024

BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I am Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined again today by Doug Sosnik, the veteran democratic strategist, political director in the Clinton White House from, I think six years of the Clinton presidency, 1994 to 2000. Advised on dozens of Democratic campaigns over the years, often very successfully. Really widely regarded and respected in Washington as not just a political strategist who knows the ins and outs of campaign tactics, but a real thinker about American politics, the two parties, where we've been, where we're going... People look forward to his monthly memos, which lay out some of his thinking on this. A very good piece in the New York Times earlier this week, we're speaking on what? The 14th of February on Biden and Trump. Anyway, we had a conversation about what, six, seven months ago, and that stands up well, too. So Doug, thanks for joining me again.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Thanks, great to be here, Bill.

BILL KRISTOL:

Okay, so Doug, well let's just, maybe we'll talk about where we are in the election, Biden and Trump, and then a little bit more broadly since you're so good at that too, at the, not just where's the election, but where's the country and what things might happen that might surprise us, but where's the race? I mean, you've been through so many of these. Give us the briefing.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, I think if you think about where we are today compared to the last time we spoke in early June, I would say two things that are kind of cross currents. One is in one way the race hasn't really changed in the senses that both Biden and Trump have obviously solidified their positions as the likely nominees. And I think there was probably a fair amount of skepticism back last June about whether these two guys would actually emerge out of this process and be the nominees. And it appears they are, and I think for different reasons, by the way.

I think Trump is going to be nominee largely because of his support with the base of the party. And despite the fact there are a lot of Republicans who don't really want to support him, they feel forced to because they fear the political retribution of Republicans at the base level. And in the case of Biden, his ability to go through a primary without a serious opponent is largely due not to the base, but to the political

elites in the party who decided that it's less of a risk to have Biden running again against Trump than it would be to have an open primary. And so for completely different reasons. I think they're obviously in a much stronger position within their own parties now than they were back in June.

What's different, and it is different, is the race, I would say from the beginning of last year until around the middle to end of October, was pretty static. And it had Biden ahead of Trump, both nationally and in the battleground states. It was consistent. It wasn't an overwhelming lead, but it was a lead of 2, 3, 4 points pretty much consistently. The polls never changed.

Over the last three and a half, four months, the race has changed. And it started, I would say around the end of October with a series of polls that came out. There was a six-state battleground *New York Times* poll, which had Trump ahead in all six battleground states. And pretty significantly, the NBC poll that came out in early November had Trump ahead for the first time in their polling. And their *Wall Street Journal* poll came out in November, which not only showed the same Trump advantage, but they asked a series of questions which haven't changed in the last three and a half months, which compared voters' views of what life was like when Trump was president compared to what life is like with Biden as president. And the Trump presidency across almost every single issue was overwhelmingly remembered to be much more positive than the Biden presidency.

And so if you fast-forward from the end of October till now, that has been the pattern. It's been a consistent pattern. Now, I would say Trump's support has not really increased in that time, but Biden's support has gone down and they're probably combination of factors. I do believe that the October 7th events and what happened following up in Israel and Gaza, I think has hurt Biden with his base. And I do think there's a general sense that Biden is really not on top of his presidency. His job approval was now in the upper thirties, which is really, really, it's the worst that we've had since Jimmy Carter was president.

So, we're now in a phase now going on several months where Trump is a clear, I would say advantage and maybe favorite. We haven't really seen a lot of polling that's come out in the last week since the special council's report. So we'll have to see if Biden's numbers will go down even further. My hunch is because we're in a divided country politically, Trump is still, despite his advantages, he's still at the upper end of his ceiling of around 46 or 47%. He never once had a 50% job approval one time as president. So I think he's pretty much at his high end, and I think Biden is probably at the low end of the range, but he really does need to pick up to get to at least the low to mid-forties if he's going to win.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's terrific that somebody thinks to follow up on there, a very helpful overview. So let me just pick up on a couple of different things. I was struck by the one poll answer—question and answer—you mentioned from I guess late October on, whose presidency did you prefer it as retrospectively Trump or Biden currently? I do think that's kind of undue, well, you couldn't ask that question of course at any time in the last hundred years, right? Since we haven't had an ex-president running against the current president and the most recent ex-president. So it is a weird race, a little different from the normal challenger-incumbent dynamics I think.

I think we discussed this in June perhaps, where that people learn more about the challenger, it helps them if they like the challenger, it hurts them if they don't like the challenger, it hurts the challenger if people don't like him, if they see more of him. Here everyone has seen Trump for four years as president and Biden for three plus years as president. And I just feel like that's a pretty fundamental number, isn't it? If people think, "the Trump presidency was better for me than the Biden presidency"... I mean, I just was struck by that. I'd love your comments on that. I mean, because people are still talking about the races if it's your standard incumbent versus— I'm sorry, challenger versus incumbent. It doesn't quite feel that way though.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, you're right about that. I think there are probably three reasons for that. The first is that people remember their economic situation in 2019 before Covid was in a much better position than it is now. And remember that we've gone through the biggest, highest rate of inflation in our country since the early 1980s. And majority of Americans were not either alive or were too young to remember what it was like in the early 1980s. So this is the first experience that a majority of Americans have ever had with inflation.

And inflation's like no other economic downturn in terms of the psychological impact that it has on people. And I think that even though the rate of inflation has gone down, the prices haven't gone down and people are still feeling the aftershocks of an incredible period of prices going up. And until recently, wages did not keep pace with that. Particularly food prices that are up twenty-five percent more than they were in 2019. And all goods and services are up 19% more compared to 2019.

I think the second problem is one of expectations that were set by Biden when he became president, that the adults were back in charge and that we were going to have calmness. I think if you asked me anything about single issue why Trump lost in 2020, and I think the country felt exhausted from him and just didn't really have the stomach and appetite for four more years of chaos. And so a big part of the Biden candidacy was the adults coming back and putting order. And I think that for a combination of factors, some of which have nothing to do with Biden, some of which do have to do with Biden, I think that people, despite the fact that you can look at consumer confidence has gone up in the last 90 days and a bunch of other metrics and unemployment is still low. And inflation, as I mentioned is down, is I think that people feel a tremendous amount of anxiety about their life and about their future, and that the adults did not come back and make things more calm.

And then the third, which is obvious, we're now clocking in and over three years of Biden being three years older now than he was three years ago. I do think that in the context of what I just mentioned, I think he does really appear older to people, not steady to people and not reassuring. And I think those combinations have given Trump an advantage, which as I mentioned earlier, we've now seen show up in the polling.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. The advantage being mostly that Biden's drifted down, not that he's gained that much Trump, right?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, but they also have finer memories of their economic situation.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's a very good point. I mean, Trump can say wacky things and frankly, deplorable and dangerous things about NATO and about God knows what. But...

DOUG SOSNIK:

And also I think that the issue of the border is both a real issue but also a proxy. It's a real issue in the sense that there's no metric you can look at about border crossings or anything else that's been done since Biden became president and be able to fashion a positive story out of that. And also you see the impact now all across America and these blue states and blue cities like New York and Chicago and Denver, Colorado, where these migrants, illegal crossings now being flooded into these areas. And people feel the impact every day when they're walking around and see these people sleeping on the streets and the safety. But it's also a proxy for what I mentioned earlier about just the sense that things are not in control here now and that there's not really a strong government in place to bring our lives back to normal.

BILL KRISTOL:

I'm struck how much the retrospective, maybe slightly inaccurate, but whatever, view of things were much better when Trump or somewhat better when Trump was there. It helps him so much, right? I mean, if someone like me, here's what he says about NATO, and I think, A, that's incredibly irresponsible and dangerous and B, it actually suggests what a second Trump term would be like and it would be much more dangerous than a first Trump term.

But I have the impression, voters they hear this stuff, it's all kind of noise. Trump's just being Trump. He says these things, but the thing they have to compare that's fairly concrete is the Trump first term, or I suppose more accurately the memory of the Trump first term and the perception of the current Biden term. And I feel like that gives Trump a cushion that a normal challenger who said these kinds of things doesn't have. I mean, he's weirdly advantaged by being both the challenger, the outsider, the change candidate, and hey, he was president. I mean, there's not that much to worry about. Things were okay when Trump was president.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, you're right. I think that most people have sort of priced into the stock Trump saying crazy things, but above and beyond the economic narrative that Trump will be able to put out about when he was president compared to now on prices and inflation and the rest, he's also going to be able to say regardless of whether or not he deserves any credit for or not, when he was president though, didn't have a war in Europe, didn't have a war in the Mideast, and aren't getting closer to war every day in Asia.

So, I think again, that reinforces this second point that I made earlier about the reason a lot of people supported Biden was to have normalcy back in people's lives, more control with adults in charge.

BILL KRISTOL:

You stress that Biden's job approval hasn't recovered. And I think some people I've talked to over the last two, three months have kept on saying, hoping maybe, "Well, it's the economy. There's a lag when there's an economic recovery or when inflation goes down." But gradually that eventually kicks in and it should affect the job approval. And I think some of the intelligent Democrats I've spoken with are a little, panicked's too strong, but concerned, that so far, it's not translating. I mean, voters seem able to say, "I have more confidence in the economy, more consumer confidence." They even kind of know inflation is not as bad as it was. But that doesn't, so far, hasn't really translated to a job approval number.

DOUG SOSNIK:

There's a lag and that's normal. But what I will say is I worked for President Clinton for six years, and as we all remember, those of us old enough can remember, we had our ups and our downs. But when someone asked me when was a real low point for us, or for me, and that was after the 1994 midterm elections where the Democrats got destroyed and Clinton's job approval was not that far away from where Biden's is now. What really, really concerned me, I remember was sometime in that spring of '95 when I was walking through an airport and Clinton was on television and no one was watching him. And that really struck me, that struck fear with me.

And I do worry a little bit that at some point the public is going to shut down on Biden in terms of giving him another look. And he's got two related but different challenges right now. One is to inspire and motivate his base to not only support them, but to turn out. And it's far from a given that that's going to happen. And then the other of course is with the swing voters in the handful of states that'll determine the next president if it's a close election, his numbers with the swing voters are lagging his overall numbers, which are quite bad.

BILL KRISTOL:

The kicker view in your *New York Times* piece was that disqualifying Trump might not be enough or likely wouldn't be enough. You can't just do that. I think Democrats have really been counting on that to a considerable degree. Explain that a bit.

DOUG SOSNIK:

I think they have that a think people who forget that or discount that I don't think have either thought about or interpreted properly. One of the lessons of the 2016 campaign in which Hillary Clinton's campaign was almost entirely predicated on an anti-Trump message. And you just simply can't run for President of the United States without giving people a reason to vote for you.

Now, look, at the end of the day, if Biden were to win, it's going to be largely because of opposition to the Trump. But he does have an obligation, as I point out in the *New York Times* piece, to do what Ronald Reagan did in 1980. The country didn't want to vote for Carter, but they had real reservations about Reagan. They had reservations about his age, they had reservations about his temperament. They had reservations about whether or not he was a little bit kind of a crazy right-winger.

And despite the fact that Carter was in the high thirties or low forties for the entire campaign, it was a three-way race. It was only at the end, after the only debate, the end of October, did they coalesce around Reagan and support him. And it wasn't

because Reagan did so well in the debate, and he killed Carter. It was that Reagan did well enough. And so Biden has got to get to a point that he's doing well enough to be able to make the race about Trump.

And so at the end of all this, I'd say it's probably a 30/70 ratio. 30% of Biden's message has got to be a positive reason for people to support him. And 70% can be about Trump. But you can't make it a hundred percent about Trump.

BILL KRISTOL:

Talk through, even through these actual presidential campaigns. Let's maybe just bracket the very small chance, I suppose that Biden steps aside, some of us might have urged him to consider that, or the small Trump, the chance that Trump something gets tripped up or by Nikki Haley or by the courts decisively. And so, what are the moments, what do you look for now over the next, how many months are we away? I kind of lost track. Eight months, something like that.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yeah, we're almost nine months away. And the longest general election in modern political history, we'll have over 60% of the country doesn't want to see either one of these people run.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. What is the implication of, how does that affect everything? I feel like we don't even know quite how that, we've never really been through something quite like this, have we?

DOUG SOSNIK:

No, no. Well, a little bit in 2016 with Hillary, and I'll come to that in terms of what to watch for in a moment.

BILL KRISTOL:

Okay. Good.

DOUG SOSNIK:

But both right now, Biden's favorable, unfavorable, very unfavorable about the same as Trump's. So, you really have two candidates that mirror each other. So the race, I believe, if it's close, will be back to what it has been. There's six swing states that are going to determine the next President of the United States. Five of them were the ones that voted for the winning candidate in 2016 and 2020, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Georgia, and Arizona. And then the sixth state that I would add is Nevada, which actually right now Trump is leading by more than the other states. And these are two states that narrowly voted for Clinton and for Biden.

So we're back to the same handful of states which represent less than 15% of the US population. So the race starts out, nine months out with, remember, they reallocated the electoral college now based on reapportion and redistricting, which is a net six positive for Trump and Republicans due to population changes. So Trump starts out with 235 electoral votes. Biden has 226 electoral votes. So if 77 electoral votes at stake that are going to determine who the next President of the United States is. And

so back to your question, traditionally there are the same swing voters generally in our country in the last 50 years. The swing voters that Reagan carried in 1980 are the same core group of swing voters that Biden needs to carry in 2024, which are, a couple of them are the independent voters, which we all know about, are moderate voters and suburban voters. But there are a couple of additional groups of voters that I think are going to be important to watch in this election because they're both so unpopular.

One is third party candidates. We saw that they made the difference in 2016, which is the last time you had two very unpopular nominees. And I think about 18% of the people who voted in 2016 disliked both candidates and Trump carried them by 17 points. So one is third parties and what kind of impact they can have. If you go back to Michigan, I think there were 175,000 third party votes in '16 in a state that Trump carried by a little bit more than 10,000 votes. And the vast majority of those people who voted third, fourth, fifth party would've voted for Hillary in a two person race. And you saw in 22,000 in Florida, where, I think, 95,000 people voted for Ralph Nader in an election that Bush won by less than 400 votes. So because the uniqueness of both of these candidates being unpopular, one is the third party impact and then the second are what I call double haters, the people that dislike both candidates, and as I mentioned a minute ago, they were decisive in 2016.

So I think that's going to be a key group of swing voters in 2024. I guess I might add a third one, which are, I don't know if this has been branded, but I would call Bill Kristol Republicans. There are about 20, 25% of Republicans who really dislike Trump, and don't want to vote for Trump. But if you go back to Biden's weaknesses right now, they're some of the people that are really balking at voting for Biden because of how little confidence they have in him, the fear that he is not going to get through a second term and that Kamala Harris is going to be president. And this is amongst the group that need reassurance that Biden is up to four more years.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah I'd say those are "Bill Kristol-adjacent Republicans." Those of us who are real ex-Republicans, I'm voting against Trump, period. But I agree, I still know, of course, many such people and we all do and would agree that they exist and there's a pretty decent size—enough to make a difference—size of these kind of... Certainly of Biden voters in 2020 who probably voted Republican down ticket or voted Republican some in 2022 and very open to convincing themselves that even though they would've preferred it wouldn't be Trump, maybe Trump isn't quite as dangerous as people like me think and Biden's totally out of his... He has lost control and he's too old.

That's where I think the age thing incidentally, I just want comment on really, it gives a kind of neutral excuse for those swingish Republicanish Biden 2020 voters to say, "I voted for him once and I think it hasn't been great, but it's not terrible. But that was for four years, that was supposed to be a transitional thing, and now they want me to vote for him again and look how he's doing at some of these at the press conference the other night and so forth." I feel like it's an easy way for those people to slide back towards the Trump voter, certainly to not voting for Biden.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, I would say two things. One is we go back to “Bill Kristol-adjacent Republicans” for a minute. If you look at the 2022 midterm elections and the failure, despite all the advantages in the world of the Republicans to take back the US Senate, the day after the midterms in which for the second cycle in a row, Republicans did not take back the Senate when they should have. One of the reasons that Mitch McConnell said in his day after press conference was they didn't take control of the Senate in these swing states because of Republican voters defecting away from the right-wing Republican nominees. The other thing I'll mention about maybe explaining why either people are dismissing Trump or having selective memory about what it was like, I think there are a couple, there's one thing for sure, which I think really is an indictment of American government and leaders in politics.

We're getting the kind of disconnect you used to see in Italy where you'd have 40 governments and 40 years and no one really cared because what was going on in politics and government had nothing to do with people's lives. And you had 40 governments in 40 years and they were like, "Okay, we had 40 governments in 40 years. But life went on and nothing really changed." And I think we're unfortunately getting a little bit like that in America. And there's much less enthusiasm and energy, by the way, for this 2024 election than there was in the 2022 election. And I think you're going to see turnout down, turnout's been high for the last four or five election cycles, and I think you're going to see turnout go down. You're seeing viewership on every metric about politics going way down, whether it's watching cable television, subscribing to newspapers, tuning into debates.

And the other thing though, which is I think really dangerous, is elections used to be about issues and choices and you elect someone and then they implement whatever they ran on. The issues that are going to decide this election and the implications of whether it's a Trump presidency or Biden presidency in terms of tax policy and of a whole host of issues, they're not talking about the issues that are meaningful in terms of people's lives and what's going to happen when someone wins the election. And so there's really not so much of a ballot test on the substantive direction of our country as it is the context of an evenly divided country, largely based on tribal politics in which education is the best predictor. And the question of the personalities of two people that you don't like either one of them and they're running. But if you watch this election in terms of what the policy positions are, it's got very little to do with what's going to happen from a governing standpoint in 2025.

BILL KRISTOL:

And the degree to which Trump... so in Georgia in 2022, to just follow up in your example, Herschel Walker was just too unacceptable a candidate. And so he lost, so some Republicans deserted him. Right now, Trump's clearly ahead in Georgia, I think. And so now for me, it's a little crazy to say, believe me, I would not have voted Herschel Walker either. But it's a little crazy to say that Herschel Walker is more dangerous to the country as one senator out of 100 than Donald Trump as President of the United States, who's going to pull out of NATO and all these other things.

And staged a coup, and we won't even go into it, but that's not quite where these swing voters are right now. I think some of our democratic friends, maybe our friends in the Biden White House in campaign sort of assume that, well, obviously if you're against Herschel Walker, you got to be against Donald Trump. But I think they underestimate just, yeah, the degree to which it can't just be a referendum on Trump,

as you said, and then the age issue with Biden. It's a little puzzle. I mean, at first blush, it does seem sensible to say, "Well, come on, why won't it be 2022 again?" But those are Trumpy candidates who lost in Michigan, Pennsylvania, Georgia, Arizona, except Trumpy candidates aren't quite the same thing as Trump, right?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, and we've talked a lot about this and we talked about it last June. I mean, the fault line in American politics now is really education levels. And the reason that those six states that we mentioned earlier are the only competitive states right now is with the exception of Nevada, which has voted democratic even though it's towards the bottom of education levels. The other five states are all kind of in the middle of education levels. So that in most states you have 40 states right now in which one party controls the governorship and the legislature, and it's all based on whether or not they're highly educated or low levels of education. And so what makes these states unique is the fact that they don't skew too much one way or the other on education levels.

So you've got this issue of abortion, which is a huge issue if it's, quote, unquote, "on the ballot," but is less of an issue if people in the community don't feel threatened by it. And so right now, again, just focusing on these six states, Arizona is going to have abortion on the ballot in November, and Nevada is quite possibly going to have it. There's some other states, but they're not part of the six. But if you take the three Midwestern states in the three sort of Sunbelt states, the Sunbelt states I think are more favorable in general to Trump and the Republicans for three reasons. One is from an economic standpoint; I think they feel more pinched by what's been going on and remember more fondly 2019 with an economy under Trump. The second is, if you look at the polling particularly of swing voters, is the sense that Democrats are just spending way too much money in government, and that's a big part of the problem.

And then the third are the, I guess I would call them crime related issues of the border and crime as proxies for a sense of not trusting Democrats. And so as a result of that, I do think the only way that Biden carried Georgia in 2020 and the Democrats held onto the Senate in 2020 was because of Trump, because of Trump on the ballot in 2020 and because of Trump's role in the special elections for the two Senate seats. But that state is still, I think, more leans Republican for those reasons that I cited. And I do think the same is for Arizona, particularly in the case of Arizona and Nevada. You've got a large number of non-whites who are lower educated voters who are moving increasingly towards Trump and the Republicans making it more problematic for Democrats.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I mean it's a close... Looks like it's going to be a close front thing. Either way. Let's get back, I want to get back to third parties in a minute. I've just got to think when there's two thirds of the voters don't want either of these people, there's a little more of a possibility of that than conventional wisdom in DC has it. But let me hold up on that for a minute. Just give people, I think a sense—not just—but of the events. I mean, normally, maybe this isn't their normal campaign and these things don't matter, especially. We would say, "Well, what would happen? What's going to happen that it's going to matter?" Trump will pick a VP, there'll be conventions, there'll be debate. They're usually these moments where there's a huge amount of campaigning that

makes no difference at all or makes a minute difference in whatever locality they're going to or whatever issue pops up. And sometimes it can be an important difference if it pops up and it becomes a kind of big story like the special counsel or whatever. But the predictable things, I mean, are we just in a new world where all that kind of stuff matters so much less or does any of those things VP, conventions, debates, what would you pick of those?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yeah, so it's a funny thing. I mean, the volatility of what's going on in our lives is at so much faster a pace than anything that we're ever accustomed to. It's almost mind-boggling to me if you think about where the world is now in February compared to where it was in June when we last got together. So on the one hand, the pace of what's happening is just at so much, and events that appear to be significant are so much greater than anything we've ever seen in our lifetime. On the other hand, the more this stuff happens, the less things matter because the fundamentally, it's the tectonic plates of the divisions in our country based on tribal politics right now that overrides almost everything else. And so as a result of that, it's really hard to break the tectonic plates of everyone being dug in. So back to your question, I would say the things I would watch are, one is the economy, and first of all whether it improves.

And I think people have a different view on that today than you might've had on Monday based on the last round of inflation numbers that came out. So the first though is the economy: does it improve, continue to improve, people continue be able to register in polling that they feel more confident about the economy? And then lastly of course on that is whether Biden gets any credit for that. So that's one issue. Second is the external events, and I do believe using the October 7th invasion and the follow-up that it has had a significant political impact politically for Biden for the negative. Third would be on Trump. I think it's a combination of what happens in the legal process, if anything. And the polling does show he is convicted of a crime before the election, it does have an impact in the outcome. And secondly, it's just Trump himself personally.

Actually, he's not out very much, by the way. The very little secret is he's got his own 2020 basement strategy. Again, the tectonic plates were so strong that the traditional, you go in 99 counties and campaign in Iowa, DeSantis did that, and didn't carry a single county. Trump barely went to Iowa and Trump barely campaigned in New Hampshire. But when he is out there is an erratic nature to his performance. And so I think we'll have to see that. And then lastly, in the case of Biden, I think a lot of it's going to have to do with how he manages or isn't able to manage the issue. And he's going to have the pressures of at 81 years old, of not only running a country but running a campaign. And so you'll see a lot of that played out through proxy things like debates.

When you have debates and Trump wants debates, he wants to engage Biden as much as possible in spontaneous events. And you can see the Biden White House is very concerned to put him out in non-controlled environments. They didn't do the Super Bowl interview. So I think a lot of it for Biden, I can tell you stories you want about the Reagan White House, but I think for Biden, a lot of it is going to be just turn the sound off and watch him on TV and see how he looks. And if you got a problem with how he looks, that's going to be a big problem in terms of trying to manage his age problem.

BILL KRISTOL:

The Super Bowl interview thing kind of freaked me out a little, and I wrote this little piece on Monday which suggested he might still step aside, it's a little late, quite late, but that the primary process would still be better produced, likely a stronger candidate. I obviously could be wrong, and this may most likely will never be tested, I suppose, but the Super Bowl interview you mentioned earlier, people— you know, fragmented viewing, people less engaged in politics and fragmented political obviously universe.

The one thing, Super Bowl did have the highest ratings ever, and that was predictable that it was going to have very high ratings. And people are happy when they're watching the Super Bowl generally, I think, and maybe they're worried about their own team if they're in San Francisco or Kansas City, but otherwise it's a spectacle, you get together. And that's always been such a gimme for the incumbent president to have a pleasant interview with two sports announcers, in this case on CBS, who presumably are going to ask totally nice questions to Biden and let him talk a little bit about how much he likes sports and reminiscing about playing football with his kids, whatever he wants, who he's rooting for, did he grow up rooting for the Eagles?

I mean, whatever. And the fact that they didn't do that, I feel is now maybe he just didn't want to do it and he's busy. I mean, there are a million things, right? But maybe I'm wrong that it's always such an easy interview, but I feel like, geez, can you really go through— have a strategy for nine months where you're not... They couldn't stop him from going, the staff couldn't persuade him not to go out Thursday night when he was angry about the Robert Herr Special Counsel report. And that was not great. And then he chose not to do the Super Bowl interview. And again, I don't want to make a mountain out of a molehill, obviously in the big picture, no one's going to remember Super Bowl interview in 2024, but I don't know if that's sustainable for eight, nine months. Trump isn't exactly Mr. Accessibility either in certain ways, but you do get... He's good at giving the impression that he's doing a lot of things and he does friendly interviews a lot at least, and therefore people kind of feel like he's on top of things.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, first of all, Trump was way more accessible to the press and not just the right-wing press compared to Biden. So let me just say this quickly on the interview. These interviews have become staples of Super Bowl Sunday. They have changed over time and have become less soft interviews and harder interviews and more aggressive interviews. So that's changed. They had over 10 million people watch Trump when he was interviewed by Hannity before the Super Bowl a few years ago. So that's a lot of eyeballs.

And remember that, and this may be one of the reasons by the way, the Biden people didn't want to do it, that while 10 million people may have seen the Trump interview, there were probably four or five times that who saw a report on the interview without having seen the interview. And so I do think the Biden guys might say on his Thursday night appearance last week that if he took out a couple of bad snippets confusing the president of Mexico and Egypt, he took out a couple of those bites and it was largely a positive interview, but they only cherry-pick the worst parts. And I think there is probably was a concern that for the vast majority of people who aren't going to watch the interview but are going to see the coverage of it, that they're going to pick out a

couple of these kinds of stumbles that Biden has sort of made a trademark of interviews, and that would define it.

The last thing I'll say, though, is Biden should be running like he's behind, and the reason that he should run that way is because he is behind. And that doesn't mean you have to do the *60 Minute[s]* interview, but you better figure out, if you're not going to do it, what you are going to do to break through to people.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. That's well said. I mean, the polarization, I guess, just trumps so much. That's one message you've—implicit or sometimes explicit—point you've been making. I mean, that is the tectonic shape of American politics today, more polarization, than, God, than we've seen, certainly. I mean, the idea that you'd move up 15 points after a good convention, like Bush in '88, or things would hinge on a debate in the last week, and, what, Carter-Reagan probably moved 10 points or something conceivably in that last week, it just seems inconceivable today. Things move two points and everyone's going crazy, right?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, you have a world now—you're right—of what I call, “high floors, low ceilings,” which is because these tectonic plates are so baked in, it's hard to go below a certain number of support, and it's hard to get above a certain number. Now, that's where the problem right now is, is that Trump, as I said earlier, is kind of bumping up to the high end of his ceiling, and Biden is at least bumping up to the bottom of his floor. And if you have, all of a sudden, with a relatively evenly divided country, one of the guys is at that high part of their floor and the other's at the low part, or towards their ceiling, that gap becomes real and meaningful, and that's what you're seeing in the polling.

But I think that in many ways we have two Americas, and we use education as the sort of proxy for defining these tribal differences in our country, but it's really cultural as much as it is economic, and there are economic impacts that affect the culture, and that's why it's so much more deep-seated.

I'll just tell you a quick story. So when Trump was president, I used to go to speak to Democratic groups, and in the questions and answers they'd say, "I don't understand why these non-college voters are voting for Trump. The economic policies of Trump favor the rich. Why are these idiots supporting him?"

Then I'd go to a Republican group and they would say, "I don't understand these young college graduates—then name a color. The economic opportunities have never been greater for them since Trump became president. Why aren't they supporting Trump?"

And the answer for both groups is the same, which is that this is much more deep-seated about who you are as a person, what your values are. That does correlate to education but it's much deeper than that. And so as a result of that, if you believe that, it shows you why it's so difficult to get out of this relatively evenly divided country.

BILL KRISTOL:

So in our previous conversation you thought this will eventually break open. It's kind of not really sustainable, ultimately, and I very much agree with that. That's a 2028 or

2032 thing or something like that. I gotta say, part of me thinks... not most of me, most of me thinks we're going to have a polarized election that'll be very much as you described, either it'll look like 2016 or 2020 and that'll be the kind of range of outcomes in those six states. But a little bit of me thinks, I don't know, if two thirds of the country doesn't want these guys, and they're going to both clinch, let's assume, their party's nomination. I mean, Biden already has, but... On March 5th, on Super Tuesday. The headlines on March 6th will be, okay, it's over. Primaries are over. Let's assume Trump wins almost every state against Haley. And voters look up.

Sarah Longwell finds in her focus groups voters don't quite understand. They haven't quite internalized that this is the choice. There's still a little bit of, "I don't know, this is February. Something will happen. The Democrats could switch candidates. Maybe Trump, something could even happen with him." ...A little less of that, I'd say.

I just feel like voters look up on March 6th and think, "Oh my God." And then it's April 6th, and then it's May 6th, and then it's June 6th. We're not even at the conventions yet, right? Biden's not getting any younger. Trump's not getting less extreme in some ways, I don't think. I don't know. Is a third party thing possible, independent candidacy possible even this year? Could the tectonic plates be totally powerful and strong until something really happens? I don't know. I just feel a little bit like that's more possible than I would've thought a few months ago.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, I think it's more possible. Look, going back to your first point, young voters think quite differently about issues and institutions and politics than baby boomers and the Greatest Generation, and the largest population groups in America now are millennials and Gen Z, and they'll be the largest voting group by the end of the decade.

And if you look at the polling and the research that's been done, Harvard's done a lot of this, where the young Republicans think quite differently than older Republicans on issues they care about, and the same with young Democrats. So I do think we'll get out of this cul-de-sac when the younger generations take over, and they're not going to be fighting the same fights we've had for the last 50 years. And over the long term, I think third party candidates can be much more viable, because when you think about all institutions that the young people have dismissed and no longer believe in, and now we put the political parties right at the top of that list.

But getting back in real time to now, back to your question, I think one thing that's different for a lot of people is, I think people learned a lesson, Democrats learned a lesson in 2016 that when you don't vote, or you vote for a third party or fourth party or fifth party, it's not free, and there are real political implications or policy implications by a protest vote and all that.

That's not to say that in February, March, April, and May or June that people aren't going to maybe support third and fourth parties, fifth parties, but I do think for some people the 2016 experience will ultimately impact when they have to get to a decision point, as most of the time you look at the history of third party candidacies, the numbers go down as you get closer to the election, but eight, nine months out, two candidates you don't like, I mean, why not as a proxy say you're for a third and fourth party?

And I think particularly for Democrats, the third party option is also a reflection that they could have the satisfaction enough, while they don't go out and vote third or fourth or fifth party, they just may not vote.

And the other thing I'll just mention, I alluded to it earlier, back with Reagan and took control of the race in the last 10 days in 1980 after the first debate, I think it was October 28th, if you have a debate this October 28th, over half the country would have already voted. So in terms of when is when, it starts right after Labor Day. People are going to be voting around America, across a number of states, all throughout September and well in October, and by election day in 2020 I think 68% of the people, I think, had already voted.

So as you're thinking about, quote-unquote, nine months into the election, you really need to back it up, because you're really going to feel the deadline encroaching, because if you live in Michigan and some of these early voting states, they're actually going to be voting in September. And then if you look a few weeks before that is the Democratic Convention in Chicago, and so I think in August is going to be the real truth test for people about what they're going to do.

BILL KRISTOL:

Interesting. Yeah, you're right. I hadn't really focused on the... I've thought a lot about the current calendar and the primary. I want to ask you about it briefly as we wrap up. The primary. What would happen if Biden steps aside? I've thought of a fair amount about the primary calendar. I thought a fair amount about the ballot access challenges for independent candidates and third parties, which are not actually as prohibitive as people think, and I'm not a big fan of the third party option. God knows after 2016, I just think people here in DC underestimated a little how much sentiment there would be out there, but maybe it would dissipate. It would be a lot of excitement in April, and then by June [inaudible].

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, I think a lot of it would depend on who it is.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Yeah.

DOUG SOSNIK:

And the third party candidacies historically that had an impact were kind of like movement candidacies. Wallace in '68, which is the last time a third party candidate carried states, I mean, regardless of what you thought of his politics, he had clear politics. And if you look at the McCarthy in the '68 primary, you look at Perot in '92, I mean, he actually stood for something. So it's easier said than done when you get real about who is a third party candidate going to be, and who's the vice president, but I don't think it's going to be enough to just say, "I'm not the other guys."

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's interesting. But the pushing back of the calendar on the back end does make that Democratic Convention weirdly important, perhaps. I mean, those of us who've been intrigued by the notion of Biden stepping aside have also been intrigued

by the notion of the excitement of the open write-ins in the primaries, and a lot of uncommitted delegates, and an open convention, and everyone I know is like-

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, the problem is... I think it's true for Republicans, I know it's true for Democrats, which the last time that the convention served that purpose of nominating someone based on who's on the convention floor was '68.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's an unfortunate memory for Democrats.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yeah, and so that was such a disastrous-

BILL KRISTOL:

But let me make this, can I just— So I read this little piece, and I said, it's funny that the convention was in Chicago, because you know what? The convention was in Chicago, Roosevelt in 1932, and I believe Roosevelt was nominated on the third ballot, and it was a very much of a weeding out of candidates, some of whom... They weren't really primaries then, but who were favorite sons and so forth. Lincoln was nominated in Chicago at 1860 on the fourth ballot, so maybe multi-ballot conventions in Chicago were good. Then [inaudible] 19,000 people wrote in and said, "Are you kidding? What about '68?"

But I would make this point about '68, just not to obsess too much on the replacing Biden thing. It was a horrible mess. Robert Kennedy was tragically assassinated, McCarthy, Humphrey, the violence in Chicago, Dick Daley, the whole nightmare, right? Still, at the end of the day, Humphrey almost won in '68, and I believe Humphrey would've ran better in '68 than Lyndon Johnson would have...

DOUG SOSNIK:

Sure.

BILL KRISTOL:

... as the incumbent.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Sure.

BILL KRISTOL:

Now, Biden's not Johnson. We don't have the Vietnam war going on. I understand all that, but I think it's so much easier, of course, to see the risk of the unknown, and then to say, "Look, let's just stick with the known, and we're going to make it through," and Democrats may well do it and I frankly would hope they would do it if that's the path they stick on. But I don't know. I'm struck. Maybe just more broadly to let you talk about it. I mean, the convention with Biden and Harris, it's kind of a boring... I mean, how do they make that exciting in August? At least Trump gets to pick a VP in July, right?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, I'll respond everything you say. Let me just take your last question first. Let's assume nothing changes and then I'll talk about if something does change.

BILL KRISTOL:

All right.

DOUG SOSNIK:

But assuming nothing changes, the bar that Biden's going to have to clear at the convention is one of reassurance and that he's up to it. He's not going to be exciting. He doesn't need to be exciting, but he does need to reassure. But going back to the land of what would happen if something happened for a moment, the big point about '68, though, and what happened after was, they changed the rules and made the role of convention delegates much different than they used to be. They actually used to pick nominees at conventions.

And back to your point on Humphrey, I think if he'd broken with Johnson in July instead of October and Vietnam, he probably would've won.

But let's just take two scenarios for a moment of something happens to Trump or something happens to Biden. If something happens to Trump and you go to a convention, the party of Trump is the party of Trump. So those delegates on that floor are completely MAGA Republicans. In addition, of course, to the fact that despite the fact there's still a primary for the Republican nomination and 90% of the delegates haven't been picked, Trump has already taken over the RNC. So if something were to happen at a Republican convention, I don't know what they would do except I do know that the MAGA forces are going to decide what happens.

I think it's quite different on the Democratic side. As a party coalescing behind Biden, the organizing principle about being for Biden is to stop Trump, and as I think I've mentioned before to you, he's the first person elected president since 1988, when George H. W. Bush got elected for essentially a Reagan third term, which I'm sure you remember quite well... Biden is the first guy since Bush to get elected without a political base. And so his base of support, if there is one, is an anti-Trump support. So if you take these people that have coalesced as a party, and the party's more of a federation of interests really than it is a party that's got a narrow focus like Republicans now, it's unclear what those delegates would do at the convention if it got to that, because of the motivation of how they got there.

BILL KRISTOL:

So interesting. And maybe we'll close on this, but you think a lot about the parties as institutions as well as who's the candidate this year. The parties seem so different now. A, each different from what they were, but, B, I mean, you have a Democratic Party which really is a coalition of interest groups and views and governors, and so if Biden just steps aside, there'd be people who prefer Newsom, people who prefer Whitmer, Shapiro, Vice President Harris. There are teachers unions delegates, and there'd be various kinds of ideological groups, and moderates versus AOC fans, and people like me would say, "Hey, look how Suozzi won in Long Island by being a moderate," and other people would say, "No, you need the energy of a Bernie

Sanders." Whatever. I feel like that's more like a traditional American political party, though, in some ways.

The Republican Party really is... I mean, when people say cult of personality, they're sort of missing, I think, the key. It is a movement, though, of a kind that you don't see that often in America. I mean, the degree to which it is based around one person, Trump, but then by now it's got a pretty big associated bunch of not just issues but attitudes, and stances towards institutions and towards the past, and repudiation of the recent past of that party in a really dramatic way, right? I mean, the Trump people hate the Bush and McCain and [inaudible] people more than they hate Democrats, to some degree. I don't know. It's to say a little bit about these two parties, right?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yeah, I think you're absolutely right.

BILL KRISTOL:

I don't quite know how that all works out, but...

DOUG SOSNIK:

You're absolutely right, and they are completely in different places. And if you take Yogi Berra's old saying, "If there's a fork in the road, take it." The Republicans have taken their fork in the road, and they're now more of a working class party, more of a nationalist party, more of a MAGA party. They are. And so in a sense they're, it's kind of a narrow base of support, but quite deep.

I think on the Democratic side, back to the Yogi Berra quote, they haven't taken the fork in the road, and, in fact, this is something I've written on and I haven't published it yet, there's going to be an enormous reckoning for the Democratic Party that's going to happen the day after the election, regardless of whether Trump is elected or not. And you've got a combination of forces that are really going to explode the day after the election.

What is the nature, as you said earlier about the nature of the Democratic Party, which is really, I call it almost a federation of interest, whether you're motivated by gun control, or pro-choice, or Black lives matter, or unions, or the environment. But what you've got is a party that's got really stunted growth. And the reason it's been stunted is, the Clintons, Bill and Hillary, and the Obama-Biden administration have now controlled and dominated American politics for over 30 years. So there's an entire generation of Democratic elected officials had never had an opportunity to rise.

Secondly, Obama, who got elected, is essentially challenging the Democratic establishment. When he got elected president, he didn't care about the Democratic party. He didn't care about democratic candidates. He never took all his data file of millions of supporters and went to the DNC. The Democrats made historic losses in 2010 due to the negligence, and over the course of eight years of Obama, Democrats lost almost 1,000 state legislative candidates, got eviscerated in the house and the Senate, controls of these legislatures, and so really the 2010s was a lost generation, a lost decade for Democratic elected officials across the country, and as I said earlier, fed this lost generation.

Now, since, I would say, lastly, since 2016, so we're clocking in now eight years, the organizing principle of the Democratic Party has not been what you're for, but what

you're against, and it's been a party that's been organized singularly to deal and beat with Donald Trump. And so, you've got this sort of mishmash of forces that have been building, that are going to explode the day after the election, about what does it mean to be a Democrat?

BILL KRISTOL:

I mean my slight—maybe caveat, I don't know what you think of this—of that count, which is very, very interesting. I mean particularly I want to say how important it is what you say about the sort of Clintons and then Obama/Biden dominating for so long, that they did probably suppress a whole generation of people who we know even who've left office by now, they rose and fell. On the other hand, of course as you say anti-Trump was key for the last six to eight years. On the other hand, the Democrats have produced... I mean, just came down from Mars and looked at, okay, they got Shapiro in Pennsylvania, they got Whitmer in Michigan, they got Polis in Colorado, and Newsom in California. They've got very impressive younger members of the house. Some of them not quite in the Senate yet, but they will get there.

Abigail Spanberger will probably be governor of Virginia in 2025. They have actually what looks more like a normal bench, somewhat diverse actually and somewhat... Then there are people on the left, I probably mentioned a little more of the moderates. I don't know. But that Biden running for reelection again, I won't obsess on this, is sort of putting a cork over that. I do feel like, yeah, there's a real kind of... And the question would be, is removing that cork healthier now or not? And obviously it's unlikely to happen, so we're going to have to wait. But I don't know. That's an interesting question of how much... Is there a healthy democratic party beneath the surface? But there still will be fights as you say, on a whole bunch of issues. I mean for me as a foreign policy hawk, it's encouraging to see how many Hubert Humphrey or even Scoop Jackson Democrats there are floating around in Congress apparently. They're all voting for aid to Ukraine, and the Republicans are opposing it. On the other hand, a lot of my friends think, "oh, the Left's got all the momentum and the energy among young people. So I think you're right, the Democrats have to resolve their future, but also the Trump side is kind of unstable, right? I mean, ultimately Trumpism is not, it's not clear that it's a stable movement. It's more of a movement and less of a coalition. So I guess both parties could be... I mean, 2025 could be a very interesting year no matter who wins on both sides.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well look, I think it's going to be a new era no matter what. I think that Trumpism without Trump is not the same as Trumpism with Trump. But I think the basic contours of the Republican Party will be the same with or without Trump, which is working class nationalist, we consider it more xenophobic.

BILL KRISTOL:

So, you think they don't go back?

DOUG SOSNIK:

I don't think they go back.

BILL KRISTOL:

I'm not that way. But some of my Republican friends who still want to hang on to hope, that's not coming back.

DOUG SOSNIK:

So let me address what you just said in two things. First of all, there's been in this eight year period, kind of an unspoken bargain. Which is, the left gets to drive the policy direction of the Democratic Party, but the Democrats get to nominate moderate candidates. And if you look at the impact of Bernie Sanders on the 2016 election, and the change of policy positions that Hillary took to get nominated, you look at Biden's 2020 primary, you look at positions he took as President of the United States. The United States senator that served for 35 years is a completely different guy on issues than what he did as president. And if you compare the Biden presidency on policy, compared to the Obama presidency on policy, it's way far to the left. And the reason why was—

BILL KRISTOL:

Not on foreign policy though, I'd say the opposite on foreign policy.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, it depends on what your definition of foreign policy is. I think on trade—

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, trade, no, you're right, not on trade, fair enough, fair enough.

DOUG SOSNIK:

...in the international agenda economically. So, they've had this bargain. And you look at the impact that Elizabeth Warren had on all the appointments in the Biden administration on all the regulators. So they've had this sort of bargain which hasn't been... Is going to need to be litigated going forward, which is about progressivism versus the moderation. But the last thing I'll say is, I do agree with what you said about Whitmer and Newsom and all these people. But just to understand how it got there. It was 15 years of being at a political wilderness for Democrats following the 2010 midterm elections, to get to a point that you could to restock a bench. Now, part of the bench got restocked in part because of what the crazy Republican right wingers did in power.

So, you take a place like Michigan that is now controlled by Democrats in the governorship and the state legislature, for the first time since the mid 1980s. That's the first time Democrats have had control of the state legislature. Look what's going on in Wisconsin. So you're right about what's happening now for the Democrats. But they're coming out of a 15 year valley. And then the question of course becomes, well, let's see what they got right? It's going to start happening the day after the election, whether Biden wins or loses. And that's where you find out who people are made of. But part of the problem Democrats have had is, this whole generation of elected officials have never had the opportunity to step forward and see what they got.

I mean, Bill Clinton ran in '91 for president because no one was going to run, because everyone knew Bush was going to get reelected. So Clinton ran. Well, Clinton was able

to demonstrate, because of that opportunity, that he had the right stuff. But you look at the 2016 field that was primary in Trump, and all these people were strong on paper, and they just didn't have the right stuff. But you can't find this stuff out without an opportunity. And this is a party that has not given people an opportunity now for over two decades.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. It does mean that we have this incredibly polar both... It's funny, we have both polarization in terms of the two World War I trench warfare sort of situation, and status quo or a static situation at the top. Where we're literally seeing the renomination of one 80-year-old president, and the renomination of the preceding previous president from the other party who's 77. So has there ever been a kind of more, I don't know what you'd call it, a backward looking situation? To have two massive phalanxes each being led by people more than 75. And then beneath the surface, one has the impression, and in the real country, in the real world, massive instability and fluidity in terms of where we might be going? It seems to be... It's an untenable situation, right, don't you think?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, I'll be brief here. I don't want to go on too long.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah

DOUG SOSNIK:

Just two things I'd say. First is, 100 years from now, when people look back at Trump and what's going on here, they're not going to be talking about Trump. What they're going to be talking about is, what was going on in America that enabled someone like Donald Trump to become president. So I think Trump is more the symptom of what's going on in the country, than the cause. And in terms of trying to explain where we are and what's going on, I'll just really quickly. We're going through the biggest transition in our country since the late 1800s, when we went from an agrarian society to an industrial society. It's a 30 or 40 year transition. In the short term you have a few winners and a lot of losers. We're going through the same kind of transition now, from a 20th century top-down manufacturing industrial society, to a 21st century digital and global one.

It's the biggest transition over 100 years. We're in a transitional moment in our history right now. 10 out of the last 12 election cycles, the country's voted to either change control of the house, senate, and/or president. And so, they're voting against who's in power now, who's forward in power. And we are in this transition period that we're going to break out of this transition period. As we settle into this 21st century digital global world, you see all kinds of things that are happening that are going to open up opportunities for people they haven't had. And the turn of this last century, we created high schools in America to train people to work on these machines.

You're seeing as an example now, companies and state governments all across America, that are now waiving the requirement that someone's a college graduate to get a job. Because that's the only way they could in the past figure out if someone's

qualified. But being a college graduate has nothing to do with filling these jobs now. So we're transitioning. And so, this has been a 20 year transition due to the economic changes, the technological changes, the demographic changes, all coming together at the same time. But in the wide swath of history, 20 years is nothing. But when you're living in the middle of it, you feel it's like unbelievable chaos.

So the point is, we are going to push through this, and we are going to come to the other side. And a lot of it's going to have to do with the baby boomers, and the remnants of the Greatest Generation dying off. And these emerging generations are going to take power, and we're going to change and we're going to get out of this. But we're still going to be in this barrel for several more cycles. And that's what Trump and Biden represents, which is our transitional figures that as a country, politics are lagging indicators. We will never get to the other side politically until we get to the other side in terms of who we are as a country and what people care about. Once we do that, the politics will change.

And that's why early the beginning of the next decade, the issues that poll well right now that don't matter in elections like climate control, gun control, abortion, all these social libertarian issues, they're going to be driving the outcome of elections next decade. Because the people that are going to be running this country care about that. And these are the emerging younger generations, but they're not quite at the tipping point yet of taking over.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, that's really well said. And I'm more hopeful, we just have to assume we make it through this rather rocky period.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Bill, I'll tell you, I know we're wrapping up here. What do you say we give a speech there are three roles, that I'm sure your familiar. One is, you got to show up on time. Two is, you don't want to offend your host. And three is, you want to have them feeling better after the speech than before. And I've had a really hard time on that third one. I'm not so great on the second one either, by the way. I've had a really hard time with trying to figure out how you leave people feel a little better after the speech than before. And there are two ways that I do that. One's the positive way that I just described, in terms of where we're headed as a country. And people joke about millennials and generations here, they're actually way more aligned with the greatest generation and sense of communitarianism, and about caring more about community and what their values are.

So that's a very positive way, I think, to feel good about the long-term future of the country. And then there's a negative way to feel positive. Which is, despite all our problems, I'd rather have America with our problems, compared to any other country in the world by far. I mean, we have a lot of problems. But, my God, we have strengths which is largely built around our people, and at least up until now around a legal system that's independent. And also the entrepreneurial spirit that made America to what it is, is still the DNA of our country. So I'm quite optimistic if we can get to the other side, that we're going to be able to turn the corner and reach our potential again. But we are in this three-decade trough right now of going from one era to another, and getting new institutions that are responsive to people, what they care

about, so that we can rebuild trust in our country and all of our institutions, but particularly our governmental and political goals.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's good. No, I'm going to think a lot about this somewhat hopeful vista and vision over the next eight months as I look at the actual candidates and choices we face, and debates and everything else, conventions we're going to have. But no, look, it's a very important point and a good point that you make. And it's not just for leaving people happy after one gives a speech, though I agree with that. I'm falling short on that too. They always do want you to leave the audience. "These people didn't come to hear you just get them... Leave them depressed. They're going out to play golf after your lunch speech, and they want to be in a good mood." It's like, "I'll do my best." But you did your best, and it's a very serious point, it's a good point. But meanwhile, we'll need to get together maybe what, midsummer, to see where we are. What would be the time where we'll really know much more about the shape of things to come before the conventions, I guess?

DOUG SOSNIK:

So, I remember when I was in the White House, you always want to be strategic and not tactical. And a big part of that is, planning, going from election day and working backwards. And then looking at to the extent you can, what are the phases that we're dealing with, and how are we going to win the phases? Now, this was over 30 years ago, I wrote a speech in the summer of '95 about the phases of the election that, I gave that same speech for 15 months. Because the phases were the phases, they never change. It's a little harder in this environment to do that. I haven't thought a great deal about this. But, the way I would look at this in terms of tranches or phases that I would want to try to control if I were in the White House is, we'll have the... You mentioned Super Tuesday. I don't know what the date will be, but sometime probably in early to mid-March, there'll be the consensus that the election, general election is starting.

It's the formality, there's no Nikki Haley, there's whatever. So, we're going to have a... This is the beginning of the election early morning, that's one phase. I guess I would probably make a second phase maybe to early June or something like that, roughly, mid-June. And that's really, I think, we'll know where the court stuff is with Trump. I think we're going to have a pretty good idea where the economy is headed towards September and election day at that point. And so, we'll move into the summer with the Republican Convention and the Democratic Convention. It's sort of a second phase. And then I think the third phase will be late August immediately following the Democratic Convention in Chicago. That third tranche will be the general, the final lap for the general election, as I mentioned earlier, when you'll see people voting. A lot of people voting in September, and certainly by mid-October. So that's how I would look at the cycle in those three phases.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, it's very, very helpful, really. And we'll get together maybe in June, I think, and let's see where we are in the economy, the-

DOUG SOSNIK:

A lifetime from now.

BILL KRISTOL:

...and it will be. God knows, as you say, last time we talked October 7th hadn't happened, and all kinds of other things since Trump was in question, and Biden might not run. So, Doug Sosnik, thank you very much for joining me today. Really a fascinating conversation.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Great. Thanks for having me.

BILL KRISTOL:

And thank you for joining us on *Conversations*.