

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Whit Ayres Conversation

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BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very glad to be joined again today by my old friend, Whit Ayres, the head of North Star Opinion Research, one of the most well-respected Republican, but also non-political opinion polling firms in the country, and also a real strategist who's been involved in many Republican campaigns from presidential, to governor and senator. Good time to be talking also because the South Carolina primer is coming up. Whit, I don't know if you were born there, but you started off in South Carolina? You were a student there and a professor there, if I'm not mistaken, and a budget director there. Did I make that up? I think that's right.

WHIT AYRES:

I actually taught eighth grade in Greenville in an earlier era, eighth grade civics and history. Toughest job I ever had. And then I—

BILL KRISTOL:

They could use more of that civics and history, there and elsewhere, right?

WHIT AYRES:

That's right. And then I was on the faculty at the University of South Carolina, Department of Government and International Studies, and then I was on the governor's staff under Carroll Campbell as his budget and policy director. So, I spent a lot of time in South Carolina.

BILL KRISTOL:

And you've done races there, right?

WHIT AYRES:

Yes, we have. Starting with Carroll Campbell.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. He was a good governor. Yeah. Different era though.

WHIT AYRES:

David Beasley and a number of others in South Carolina over the years.

BILL KRISTOL:

So we're talking on February 1st. We last spoke at the end of August after the first Republican debate, I think. And of course, no voting had taken place. We've seen

Iowa, we've seen New Hampshire. We now have a two-person race. Many people thought it would take longer to get to that. We have the results from Iowa and New Hampshire, we have polling from South Carolina. Where are we just as a kind of analytical matter in this Republican primary contest?

WHIT AYRES:

Well, we are right where we have been, which is that Donald Trump is a strong favorite to win the Republican nomination. Nikki Haley is making a good run and hanging in there. I think it's important to realize that most presidential campaigns don't end because the candidate believes they would not be particularly good in the office, or they have no chance. Most campaigns end because they run out of money. And at least since the New Hampshire primary and Donald Trump's less than gracious victory speech that night, apparently Nikki Haley has been able to raise a lot of money, enough money to keep going, at least through South Carolina and maybe through Super Tuesday. But of course, the reality is that Donald Trump remains the odds-on favorite to win the nomination.

BILL KRISTOL:

You know I remember before New Hampshire, I thought we discussed this not in the conversation, but just in our own private conversations, that Haley probably had to get within 10 points, maybe even make it really close in New Hampshire to sort of really stay alive. She lost by 11, but she's a little more viable than I would've expected. Maybe it's because of Trump's lack of graciousness and the speech, which probably had more effect than I realized, watching on primary night. Maybe it's because they really... I don't know if she's just hanging in there, or maybe it's because of the voters, maybe it's more impressive than people out there think that now consistently Trump's not been able to break... What, he got 51 in Iowa, 55 in New Hampshire? Trump is the overwhelming favorite, obviously, but it feels like it's a little more of a race than I would've expected, I guess. Do you think that's right?

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah. He's a quasi-incumbent, and some 40 to 45% of Republican primary voters are voting for somebody else. This is not exactly a sign of overwhelming dominance when you've got almost half the party at least interested in an alternative. But of course, he remains the favorite. But it does cross my mind if he had said what I'm sure Susie Wiles and Chris LaCivita wanted him to say after the New Hampshire primary, something similar to what he said after Iowa, "I congratulate Nikki Haley on a well-run race, but this primary is over and it's time to join forces and unite the party against Joe Biden." Instead, he went on this angry rant because Nikki Haley refused to bend the knee, and it reminded all the people who are not for Trump why they're not for him. It was really an incredibly missed opportunity on the part of the Trump campaign, I thought.

BILL KRISTOL:

Interesting. And do you think to the degree he keeps that up, it does help Haley at least somewhat, right? That sort of—

WHIT AYRES:

Sure. He did not get a single vote on the primary night in New Hampshire that he didn't already have, and he reminded everybody who wasn't for him why they didn't want him in the first place. It was not an impressive performance.

BILL KRISTOL:

And in the Washington Post poll this morning on February 1st, it's Washington Post-Monmouth, 58-32 for Trump, which is a little— if you're for Haley, or prefer Haley, or want Trump to be stopped it's a 26-point margin. But it feels to me like when you see a number like that with Trump, who as you say is a virtual incumbent, and maybe 58-32 ends up being more like, I don't know, 58-42 at a final ballot. One doesn't know, obviously, and there are questions of who can vote in the Republican primary, like New Hampshire. It is pretty open in South Carolina.

WHIT AYRES:

It is open, it's an open primary.

BILL KRISTOL:

If you haven't voted in the Democratic primary, which is this Saturday, you have the right to vote.

WHIT AYRES:

Right. But they don't register by party. South Carolina has changed a lot over the last 10 or 15 years. It's one of the 10 fastest growing states in the country. About 500,000 more people live in South Carolina today than did in 2010. Huge growth in Horry County along the coasts, Myrtle Beach, also the suburbs south of Charlotte have been booming, and Greenville is an unrecognizable town to those of us who saw it a half century ago. So, it really is a growing state, but it's also clearly a very conservative state, and it's the kind of state where Donald Trump ought to do well, and probably will.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, if you look at the breakdowns of the likely Republican primary electorate, but the caveat we're not sure what that electorate is, it feels like it's sort of between Iowa and New Hampshire in terms of evangelicals, how many people self-identify as very conservative and so forth, right?

WHIT AYRES:

That's correct.

BILL KRISTOL:

But people do think it's a little more conservative than it is. It's not like the state didn't elect Nikki Haley and Carroll Campbell, that was a little while ago. And for that matter, Lindsey Graham and Tim Scott who, what everyone thinks of some of their behavior recently, are not far right MAGA Republicans really, or present themselves since then.

WHIT AYRES:

They did not run as far right wing crazy candidates, which is one reason why they won.

BILL KRISTOL:

Speaking of, one more word on, just having mentioned Tim Scott. How much does it matter that the Republican establishment is so almost uniformly, preemptively capitulated to Trump? If Tim Scott had stayed out of it or had, well, endorsed Haley but even just said, "look, I'm neutral. I respect them both." Would that give a little more oomph to the notion that it's not foreordained that it has to be Trump? Would it make Trump a little more of a pure MAGA candidate and a little less of the candidate of everyone, from his MAGA loyalists all the way through Tim Scott, and the kind of mainstream Republicans on the hill? Do you think that matters much or do people just not pay attention to those endorsements?

WHIT AYRES:

Well, South Carolina has always been sort of an establishment state. Carroll Campbell helped win the state for Bob Dole in 1996, for example. So, the establishment has always played a significant role there. In some ways, it sort of plays into Nikki Haley's whole mantra though, that she's the outsider running against the good old boy network. That's the way she ran in 2010 when she beat the incumbent attorney general, now the governor, the incumbent lieutenant governor, and an incumbent congressman from the most conservative part of the state. And she won that race going away by running against the good old boys. So, in some ways, it plays into her message, but it's still a very high hill to climb once you get everybody on board with Donald Trump.

BILL KRISTOL:

And maybe that's well said. Last sort of tactical question or South Carolina focused question. What would she need, in your opinion to keep going credibly through Michigan and then Super Tuesday and sort of say that, "no, if Trump's at this number and I'm at this number, it's still a competition," or have people say, "no, it can't really go on."

WHIT AYRES:

Money in the bank. That's what she needs.

BILL KRISTOL:

And what number do you think in the results translates into money in the bank? Or is it just hard to say?

WHIT AYRES:

I don't know. I'm surprised that she's been able to raise as much money as she has. Clearly Donald Trump's effort to bully donors into not giving to her, backfired. When you're a billionaire, it is kind of tough to bully somebody who's got a billion dollars. And some of them obviously resented Trump's effort to bully them and upped their donations to Nikki Haley. So, what she needs is enough money in the bank to keep going more than any particular number on the ballot.

BILL KRISTOL:

I feel like 40 though... It's kind of nice to be in the 40s, not the 30s, right?

WHIT AYRES:

She said she'd like to do better than New Hampshire, and she did 43 in New Hampshire, so we'll see if she can meet that bar.

BILL KRISTOL:

And then [inaudible] I can't resist a little bit more of the tactical stuff. It's just interesting to people like us. It would be great if we had a wide open, exciting nine-way primary of the kinds that we've seen— five-way or that we've seen in the past, but this is the primary we have. So, what do you think? Everyone says, "well, she can't win a state," and stuff. Don't you think if she can, let's say get 42, I'm just making this up, and then stays in, gets something like that in Michigan, maybe goes to Super Tuesday, then everyone says, "she couldn't possibly. She won't win a state." I don't know. Is that true? Couldn't she win Virginia here, for example? I feel like she could win two or three states. She probably still has to get out at that point because then you would have overwhelming, if less things change, delegate numbers, right? They would just be pretty lopsided. But I feel like the notion that Trump's going to win all 50 states, I'm not so sure about that.

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah, I think she could win a state or two or three here or there. The problem is California, because California is winner take all, and they have jimmed the rules in a way that really helps whoever comes in first, and that's likely to be Donald Trump. And California has such a mountain of delegates that it would create an almost insurmountable lead once we get through California.

BILL KRISTOL:

And that's not Super Tuesday, California. So, we could have numbers the day after Super Tuesday on TV that will show Trump with whatever, five to one leading delegates, and it would look pretty... Yeah. Well, we'll see. I don't know. Well, how much damage? Is this doing some damage to Trump, just the fact that she's able to stay in and sort of demonstrating a little more strength than people might've expected two or three months ago, or will it sort of be forgotten once Trump wraps up nomination if he does, and we're onto the Trump-Biden race?

WHIT AYRES:

It shows what we've known all along. That is a minority of the Republican Party that's really resistant to Trump. And it's that minority that tends to say that if he is convicted of a crime, they will vote elsewhere. A majority of Republicans would stick with Trump even if he were convicted of a felony. But we've seen numbers pretty consistently that about twenty-five percent of Republicans would simply not vote for him if he were convicted. In a polarized age, you need 90% or more of your own party in order to be competitive, and if you drop that down into the mid 70s, that's a problem. It's not that they're going to vote for Joe Biden necessarily. Some of them will, but more would look to a third-party candidate or write in somebody. Some of them would do what a lot of voters did in Georgia in 2020, and that is skip the presidential ballot and then vote down ballot for Republicans, which is why the Republicans could all win in Georgia in 2020 down ballot while Trump lost the state.

BILL KRISTOL:

Except in the Senate races, which Trump managed to turn into a Trump race, not a normal down ballot race, right?

WHIT AYRES:

Exactly, and some just wouldn't vote. So, if Trump gets convicted before November, that's going to be a problem, to wrap up the number of Republican votes as well as independent votes he needs to win the election.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Say a little more just about the numbers here. People might be skeptical also that some of those Republicans are saying they're not going to vote for Trump and then they'll revert to him at the end. But you've looked at these numbers pretty closely, I know in New Hampshire, and now there are numbers in the post-poll in South Carolina where they do push the question pretty hard. I think a poll you did of not just, "gee, would you be unhappy if he's convicted of a crime?" Because you could be unhappy and still vote for him. But, "would you actually have problems voting for him?"

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah. The exit polls ask a question, do you think he would be fit for office if he were convicted of a crime? And you get a pretty significant number who say, "yes, he would be unfit for office." But that's not the real question. The real question is, would you vote for a man who has been convicted or would you vote for a man who's 82 years old, whom Republicans think is senile? That's the real question, and that's the question we've asked. "Who would you vote for if Donald Trump were convicted of a crime?" And that's where you get the 75% of Republicans saying, "yes, they would still vote for him against Biden," but 25% going elsewhere.

BILL KRISTOL:

And of that 25%, half maybe go to Biden and the other half just want something else? Or not even half to Biden?

WHIT AYRES:

No. About 7% go to Biden, about 11% go to third party. The rest scatter in saying they either won't vote or they'll skip the presidential ballot and vote in down ballot races.

BILL KRISTOL:

So really, the trials is one big thing out there that could affect people's judgments, and I suppose not just the conviction itself, but the prospect of conviction as the trials start, if they ever do start. That's a question we should get the lawyers to discuss.

WHIT AYRES:

It's not just the prospect of conviction. If he goes to trial and is not found guilty, that is if he's acquitted by just one juror out of 12 saying I'm not convicting, then he'll think it's all over. It just plays right into his whole argument that this is a partisan witch hunt. I think it's the outcome of the trial that is absolutely crucial. The testimony is,

well, who comes out and who testifies, but it's fundamentally the outcome. If he is acquitted, it's all over, it looks like a partisan witch hunt, but if he's convicted, I think we're in another world.

BILL KRISTOL:

The one trial that looks, I think maybe is still likely to happen in 2024, is the DC trial on January 6th, which could have Mike Pence testifying and other interesting things. Certainly it will be very high profile won't it. It's funny, we usually analyze these campaigns and it's all campaign tactics, will this issue be bigger or if there's a foreign policy crisis, would that help McCain against Obama, all the usual stuff that for a few days people focus on, which tends to fade actually. I think you would agree with this, I think you've argued this, that the underlying dynamics of the race reassert themselves after a little bit of a blip, someone has a bad debate, he's up two or three points, then it goes back to where the race wanted to be all along, so to speak. You think the trial really is a different category than having a bad debate or—?

WHIT AYRES:

Oh yeah. Is Mark Meadows going to testify? He's been awfully quiet. You've got to actually get to a trial and this latest brouhaha over whether the president has absolute immunity, I can't imagine going Trump's way, but it has caused more delay in the trial and the classified documents trial is, from a legal standpoint, I think, the strongest of all of them, but you have a much more Trump sympathetic judge in Aileen Cannon, Fort Pierce Florida jury is likely to be more sympathetic to Trump, but the actual facts of the case are pretty devastating. They didn't charge Trump for any classified documents that he voluntarily returned, just like they didn't charge Biden or Pence on any classified documents they voluntarily returned. They only charged him on those documents he hid, not just from the government, but from his own attorney so that your attorney couldn't tell the government he had classified documents. That is a pretty powerful case, that you refused to return classified documents when asked and pressed for them. It's a pretty tough legal argument to get away from, I think, but who knows if that will go to trial. I mean, that could be pushed out past the November election.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, it looks like Judge Cannon is doing that and, without impugning her motives, it's certainly helpful to Trump to push it past the election, so he may owe Judge Cannon big time if he wins this election.

WHIT AYRES:

A Supreme Court seat baby. There you go.

BILL KRISTOL:

Can you imagine? God. One hears two different things and I think both are somewhat true. I'm curious how you weigh them in the balance. Trump's had a pretty disciplined campaign, really on some issues, at least. His team seems pretty confident. It doesn't seem quite as chaotic as it was in 2016 and of course you don't have the pandemic, thank God, so far, so you don't have the 2020 kind of craziness. On the one hand, they know what they're doing. On the other hand, the election night speech in New

Hampshire, some of the other stuff that Trump and his close allies are doing and pushing, seems a little self-indulgent, let's say and maybe Trump's a little more that way than he was before. That's sort of what Nikki Haley's been saying, I supported him in the past, but he's not as grounded or he's more chaotic and somewhat confused. Which of these two is more true. Are you more impressed by Trump as a candidate or think that six to eight months of Trump as a candidate, if he sows it up, let's say on March 5th? He may lose. Everyone knows him. It won't be a massive movement based on some speech you get or some stumble he makes or some insult he hurls, but do you think he gains a point or two because of the discipline of the campaign or loses a point or two because of him being Trump?

WHIT AYRES:

Well, there's no question that Susie Wiles and Chris LaCivita know what they're doing. I've worked with them both. They're good, solid professional operatives, but controlling Donald Trump is a fool's errand. He seems to have some difficulty controlling himself like we saw on the night of the New Hampshire primary. Who knows what he's going to do or say over the course of an eight month campaign. I don't know, I don't think they know and I'm pretty sure Donald Trump doesn't know. It's a much more disciplined campaign, but seeing Trump in the spotlight as a potential president again for eight months may not necessarily work in his favor.

BILL KRISTOL:

Even if it only moves a point or two or three, that's important.

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah, this thing's on a knife's edge. It's not at the moment. It's not at the moment. If this election were held today, Donald Trump would win in a landslide in the electoral college. I mean, it's pretty clear right now, but that's a function of Biden's weakness rather than Trump's strength.

BILL KRISTOL:

Let's get to President Biden since these races are about two or more candidates, not about one. I'd say among Biden friends, Biden fans with whom I speak, Biden supporters, there's a little bit more optimism now than there was a month or two ago. A couple of national polls look decent. You're not a believer in that, so talk about it.

WHIT AYRES:

There's no reason for the Biden forces to feel more optimistic today. The poll that came out today, Bloomberg Morning Consult, Wisconsin, Trump up 8, Nevada, Trump up 12, Michigan, Trump up 6, Georgia, Trump up 7, North Carolina, Trump up 13, Arizona, Trump up 8, Pennsylvania, trump up 3. Trump would win in a landslide in the electoral college if the election were held today and the reason is, that Joe Biden is the weakest American president since Jimmy Carter and there's some similarity between the two men. Both of them defeated weakened Republican incumbents. Gerald Ford, in the case of Jimmy Carter, who was very unpopular after he pardoned Nixon and Biden defeated Trump after a chaotic first term, but both have conducted themselves in a way that has led a majority of Americans to disapprove of their job performance and Biden is starting to get that Carter feel.

By that I mean, that the world is coming apart and he seems incapable of affecting events in any sort of positive way and that was the feeling people started to get about Jimmy Carter after the Iranian hostage crisis, that he just was incapable of affecting events. You're starting to get that feel with Joe Biden too, that he is just unable to affect events in a positive way, whether it's Ukraine or immigration or the Middle East. It just feels like events are out of control and Biden is a bystander watching events spin out of control. Once that perception settles in, it becomes incredibly difficult to change it and I've seen nothing over the last few months to change that perception about Joe Biden. I mean, he's got two huge vulnerabilities, in addition to the foreign policy crisis and the crisis with the border and the economy that people don't think is any good. The most important one is the vast majority of Americans, including a vast majority of Democrats, think he's just too old to serve effectively, in his mid '80s in the most difficult job in the world.

The second vulnerability is that virtually no one in either party thinks that Kamala Harris is ready for prime time. The White House is fond of saying, well, a lot can change in the course of eight months. Well, that's true, but what won't change is Joe Biden is not going to get any younger, any more physically vigorous or any sharper mentally and Kamala Harris is not going to get any more ready to be president of the United States. There's nothing they can do about either one and it's amazing to me that Democrats at this point have gone along so meekly and I wonder how much longer they're going to continue to go along with a ticket that looks like a sure loser in the fall.

BILL KRISTOL:

They'll tell themselves it's not a sure loser, that will be the reason for continuing to go along maybe, right? There's an awful lot of "hopium" on the democratic side.

WHIT AYRES:

"Hopium," that's a good phrase.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, I didn't invent it, but—

WHIT AYRES:

Also, known as whistling past the graveyard.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, maybe. I want to get to the age thing and how they all relate in a way, these things and then talk about what the implications are for the next eight months, but I think the bystander point's an important point that people don't grasp enough. There's sort of a tendency to analyze this. Well on this issue, he's unpopular, that's the way the posters typically ask it, right? Do you agree with the Democrats or the Republicans or with Biden on immigration, on the economy? Do you approve of his job performance on Russia and Ukraine or the economy or immigration or whatever. That's important, but voters don't quite think of it that way, I think, and I do think that the notion that he's just a bystander, you don't want a president who's just a bystander, is important. I think the other presidents who won reelection, people

didn't agree with them often on many issues actually and they knew they'd made mistakes, but there was a sense that they were kind of on top of things, I think it's fair to say and that they were controlling things, each in their own different style.

Reagan was different from Obama, obviously. Bush was different from his father, well, his father lost. Bush was different from Clinton, let's say, but there was a sense in each case, I think, that they were running the government and sort of on top of events and controlling events to some degree. I'm struck by the bystander point. I mean, this is a small issue, not a small issue, but maybe a small example. This Ukraine, Israel, Taiwan package and then the border deal and they're combining them, and they may not combine them. People like me follow it and most people don't, I presume and this four months back and forth and nothing's happened yet, but I am struck how much of... You read these articles and it's, Mitch McConnell thinks this, and Jim Lankford's tried to put the deal together, but so-and-so Speaker Johnson's against it. It's like, isn't there a president? I mean, doesn't he have something to say about... Can't he use some muscle to rally public opinion and get stuff to happen on one thing that's a very important priority for him, Ukraine, and another the border where he's had to change his position because it's rightly or wrongly, he's viewed as ineffectual and stuff, but if you're going to be viewed as ineffectual, you should do something to make yourself not viewed that way. I guess I'm just struck by, again, the absence. It's more than the details of do people like this part of the bill or that part of the bill and sort of a "where's Biden?" problem. Do you have that sense too and I think that's true on Ukraine. Ukraine, he says, is the inflection point for the world and then I don't know, he hasn't given any major speeches on Ukraine that I know of in the last few months.

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah, well, that's exactly what I'm talking about. A discharge petition is hard to get in the house over the objection of the speaker, but it's not impossible if you get all the Democrats and a chunk of Republicans who would really like to see a border deal and would really like to see money go to Ukraine. It is possible for a gifted president who can affect events to make things happen and that's what I'm talking about. It's that Jimmy Carter syndrome that he can't seem to affect events in a positive direction, that he's basically impotent to make things happen and that is a devastating perception to settle into the public consciousness. It's one of the things that allowed Reagan to win a landslide victory over Jimmy Carter in 1980.

BILL KRISTOL:

And I suppose the age dovetails with that, right?

WHIT AYRES:

Of course it does. It feeds right into the age, you know? He's too old to make things happen, is the way it'll get translated.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. He's done a good job of scaring other Democrats that way from running and of resisting calls that he voluntarily step aside. The one-two punch, I guess the one, two, three punch is what you're saying, really, of age, Vice President Harris. Age could be handled somewhat if everyone loved you— if you were confident in your vice

president, but that's not the case or if things were going swimmingly and people thought things were going swimmingly and you could kind of in effect, I think this was Reagan '84 is a little bit of this, that you could afford to have a president who was a little bit going to not be as vigorous as a 55-year-old in his second term, but directionally things were going well and he had a very good team with him and he knew what he was doing on the big issues, the economy and Soviet Union basically and George Shultz and Jim Baker and others were there and people had a vague sense.

I'm also struck by that a little. Again, voters don't focus on who the Secretary of State or the Secretary of Treasury is or Chief of Staff, but people had the sense, my vague memory is in '84 that for the — 'cause there was a lot of chaos in the Reagan administration, honestly and in the White House — that there were people, serious people there, who they vaguely knew about, who had been in government a long time. I personally respect Janet Yellen and Tony Blinken and stuff. They're not out there the way Shultz and Baker were, right? I mean, Weinberger. I was a little struck. They haven't run the administration in a way that's allowed the cabinet secretaries to give Biden much help.

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah. You're exactly right. That Kamala Harris exacerbates the age problem. It's true that people don't vote for the vice president. They vote for the top of the ticket. But we've seen evidence in relatively recent years that people might vote against the top of the ticket because they're worried about the vice president. They vote against the vice president. John McCain lost votes because people were worried about putting Sarah Palin one heartbeat away from the presidency. So, people can vote against a ticket because of worries about the vice president, even though ultimately, they vote for the top of the ticket if it's a positive vote.

BILL KRISTOL:

So let's talk about, let's assume... Super Tuesday is March 5th. So ,at that point, Biden hasn't pulled out of the race, and has of course won every Democratic primary overwhelmingly. Trump, let's just say, has won the huge majority pretty comfortably and has a massive delegate lead. And so, they're the nominees, even whether Nikki Haley stays in another round or two or three or until the end for that matter. But the country sort of wakes up March 6th and says, "Okay, it's a Trump/Biden race." I mean, it'll be the longest general election campaign ever with the least wished for candidate matchup ever. Is that right? I think that's right.

WHIT AYRES:

Two thirds of Americans absolutely dread the thought of a Trump/Biden rematch, two thirds. And that includes a majority of both Democrats and Republicans. And almost 80% of independents want better choices. So, who knows what happens. It certainly doesn't increase belief and trust in our political system. I've been very skeptical that a third party could be anything more than a spoiler, and I still think I'm there.

But you have to wonder if it's two thirds of the country doesn't want either one of these guys, if there might not be the possibility of a third party having more effect than they've had in the past. I still am skeptical, I'll have to be convinced. But it just

sort of feels like there's a vacuum there that somebody might be able to fill and start tapping into the resistance, the widespread resistance to a Trump/Biden rematch.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I've been skeptical too, and I guess I remain skeptical that third party would be likely or even have an outside chance at winning, maybe a very small chance. But that doesn't mean someone doesn't get in or some different combinations of people don't get in in March, April. Everyone knows about the No Labels possible ballot line, but it's not that hard as an independent candidate to get on. Maybe it's a little hard to get in all 50 states, but not hard to get on 40 plus states even if you start in May, let alone March or April.

You got to think people are looking at that, whether they're retired politicians of both parties, businesspeople, retired military, celebrities, entertainers, Schwarzenegger types, Perot types, whatever. I'm thinking, I don't know, why not take a shot? And especially if you're terrified of a Trump presidency and you just think if it's not Biden, it's going to be Trump, you would resist that and a lot of my friends would resist that and I'd be inclined to too, but that doesn't mean they would resist it.

I guess what I'm saying is I feel like even if that person doesn't win, it could be a Perot type situation where someone gets in, does well enough to be qualified for debates if there are debates, gets a lot of press. I don't know which way that cuts. Talk about that.

WHIT AYRES:

Depends on who it is. It depends totally on who it is. But it can't be just one of these gadfly candidates. It'd have to be someone of substance, someone of reputation, and someone whom people believe could be a credible president of the United States. But if someone like that did decide to make a serious run and were very well funded, you suspect they could do a whole lot better than most third party candidates have.

Ross Perot set the standard in 1992. He got 19% of the popular vote. Of course he got zero electoral votes because he couldn't come up with a majority in any state. And that's the big dilemma for a third party candidate where the electoral college is coming up with enough votes to win some electoral votes and you throw it into the house and you've got more chaos.

BILL KRISTOL:

If he gets electoral votes, yeah. I mean, in '92, the exit polls suggested that Perot voters said that if he hadn't been running, they would've split evenly basically between Bush and Clinton with a fair number saying they wouldn't have voted. But I, having been in that Bush White House at the time, I felt Perot did a lot of damage to Bush. I mean, at the end of the day, people can say what they want after they vote, but in the dynamics of the campaign, it legitimated this Republican-ish or Republican really, Texas business person who had been a huge supporter of veterans and pretty conservative, was running on the budget deficit after all, right, I mean appealing, did not look like a lefty protest candidate. The fact that this guy was saying Bush is unacceptable, the incumbent's unacceptable and I'm running, reinforced problems we already had in the Bush administration of convincing people we deserved a second

term, and the end of the Cold War and you didn't need a foreign policy president anymore, all that together.

But I think Perot did a lot of damage to Bush in the dynamics of the campaign and on the debate stage for that matter.

WHIT AYRES:

You'll never convince—

BILL KRISTOL:

I guess that brings home your point about who the independent candidates are.

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah, you'll never convince the George H W Bush forces that Perot did not cost Bush the presidency. They're absolutely convinced that he did.

BILL KRISTOL:

And so, who's the incumbent? I mean, that's one question, right? Is this election going to be a referendum on Biden or on Trump?

WHIT AYRES:

Yes. This is 1892 all over again. This is Grover Cleveland versus Benjamin Harrison, a former president versus a current president. And we really haven't had anything comparable since 1892. Grover Cleveland came back and defeated the guy who had beaten him. So, he is our only president to serve two terms non-con consecutively. But that's exactly what Donald Trump is trying to do today. I wish we had some exit polls from 1892, it would really inform us today, but that was well before the era of public opinion polling, unfortunately.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's right. I actually am going to go read something about... There are historians who have written about that period and that election, I'm sure. We all know... What you just said is something one knows sort of at the level of the headline, first time since the late 19th century that there's been the two incumbents that are in fact running against each other. And it was a reversal then.

But I would actually be curious to look at the 1892 rhetoric of that campaign, and how much of it was about Harrison's performance in office and how much of it was about Cleveland's, I guess, somewhat unsatisfactory performance in his first term, which caused him to lose. Obviously, it's not like Trump and it's not like Biden and all that, but it would be an interesting little hour or two to spend reading some American history, I guess.

WHIT AYRES:

Grover Cleveland won the Democratic nomination on the first ballot against pretty serious people, a former governor, senator from New York, senator from Iowa or governor of Iowa. So pretty serious people. But he did win the nomination on the first ballot and go on to defeat the guy who'd beaten him.

BILL KRISTOL:

In '92, yeah.

WHIT AYRES:

1892.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's interesting. Yeah. That's my assignment after this is to read up on the 1892 election. But I mean, if you were advising the Trump campaign and the Biden campaign, how do they make it more... I take it either campaign has to... They're not going to change their... Trump's not going to become suddenly a favorite of a huge number of independents and Biden's not going to suddenly become... move his presidential approval rating from 40 to 50%. So, how do they make it about the other candidate, I mean, as an actual campaign experience, campaign operative? What's the—

WHIT AYRES:

It's just all a negative campaign that convinces voters that their guy is the lesser of the two evils. It will not be an inspiring campaign that we will look back on fondly, I'm afraid.

BILL KRISTOL:

And if people see that, don't you think, in March and April, it increases the chances of a third party, unity, bipartisan positive vision for the future next generation candidates?

WHIT AYRES:

Yep.

BILL KRISTOL:

The next generation part is important too. I mean, Haley has begun to hit on that. I wonder if they have some sense that that's working or not, but she has an ad up, I think, with both Trump and Biden in it, I can't remember what exactly the punchline is, but it's time. You don't want these grumpy old men back or something like that. I don't really know.

WHIT AYRES:

It is a powerful argument that it's time to move on and that she is the only person standing in the way of a Trump/Biden rematch that the vast majority of Americans dread. It's a good argument. The problem is it might work in a general election electorate. The question is whether she can make it work in a Republican primary electorate.

BILL KRISTOL:

But I suppose we'll learn... I mean, it would be in that respect the next month, I mean until Super Tuesday, the more independents who go out of their way to vote for Haley

in South Carolina or Michigan or Virginia or other states, I suppose would be a bit of an indicator of the—

WHIT AYRES:

Oh yeah. The independent vote is critical. In 2016, Donald Trump got 46% of the independent vote in his victory over Hillary Clinton. In 2020, he got 41% of the independent vote in his loss to Joe Biden. And in New Hampshire he got 39% of the independent vote. So at least based on New Hampshire, he is not performing at the level among independents that he did in his victory in 2016.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's interesting. And I hadn't really seen that analysis. And the independents we're talking about in New Hampshire, if I'm not mistaken, would be those who chose to vote in the Republican primary.

WHIT AYRES:

Who are undeclared.

BILL KRISTOL:

Which included a lot of, what are they called, unaffiliated in New Hampshire, I guess?

WHIT AYRES:

Undeclared is what they call them.

BILL KRISTOL:

And that would include a lot of normal, let's say, democratic leaning independents who went over to vote against Trump. And there was an effort, which I was a little involved in, to encourage people to do that. But still, it wouldn't include a lot of, a fair number of independents who are democratic independents. And so that 39 is actually weaker even than it sounds like, in a way, when you think about it, right? There's some other independents out there who just voted for Biden or something, or didn't vote in the primary.

WHIT AYRES:

Democrats couldn't vote in the GOP primary in New Hampshire. They had to change their party registration by October six.

BILL KRISTOL:

The Democratic leaning independents. Some did, but not all, presumably—

WHIT AYRES:

As long as they're undeclared, they could have voted.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right, but some of them couldn't quite probably get themselves to do it if they were basically Democrats who just registered as undeclared. So, that is a real weakness of

Trump. Maybe that's an interesting... I mean people are so... Biden is weak in the ways we've said, but I suppose that Trump weaknesses may be underestimated a little, do you think, I mean among the sort of...

WHIT AYRES:

Oh, I can make a powerful argument why neither one of those men can win the presidency, but the chances are pretty good that one of them is going to.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, this is where you just don't know how much this sort of system, it has various constraints on third parties, and we've all had occasions when no one liked the candidate much, but ended up choosing between those two candidates mostly. But I think never as much as today. Right? Do you agree with that? Never in our lifetime certainly, nothing like this.

WHIT AYRES:

Not in our lifetime. We never had a circumstance like this in our lifetime, a former president running against a current president, a former president facing 91 felony counts. I mean, there are all kinds of completely different dynamics in this race that none of us have ever been through before.

BILL KRISTOL:

Which does make one wonder when, if on March 6th, the whole country wakes up to the realization that unless something dramatic happens that we're now looking at this race that you've just described, that something dramatic might happen, right? I mean, presumably politics abhors a vacuum and supply creates its own demand or whatever cliché one wants that might lead something to happen.

I guess, just as we talk, I'm a little more convinced of the possibility, not of an independent candidate winning the presidency or even winning electoral votes, but of a much more serious independent candidate or candidates seriously considering running. I guess I'd put it that way.

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah. This election may be decided by events that haven't happened yet, and I wish I had a crystal ball and could look clearly into the future and see what was coming. But I'm afraid... We're pretty good pollsters at North Star Opinion Research, but we're not quite that good.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Well, mentioning, since you mentioned things, in terms of the real world events, which is another set of things that haven't happened yet, anything in particular from your experience or analysis of the opinion polls now, particular vulnerabilities on each side, if you could snap your fingers and make one thing happen or not happen either for Joe Biden or Donald Trump in the real world, in the economy, immigra— border, Ukraine, I don't know, does one matter more than others? I mean, what is your sense?

WHIT AYRES:

I mean, we're still talking about changes at the margins when we're talking about things like the economy getting better and Joe Biden being more trusted on the economy than Donald Trump, which he is not right now. But that's so overwhelmed by the age problem and the Kamala Harris problem that it's hard to see that kind of thing making a significant difference. It's more likely to be some kind of health event affecting either one of these guys or some kind of unexpected, violent event that affects either one of them. I don't know. And that's why, while it looks so certain on the surface, it feels uncertain beneath the surface.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. That's well said. You've mentioned Vice President Harris a few times. What about Trump's VP pick? Does that make a difference or just try to avoid too much trouble?

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah, just do no harm. That's the first order of business, do no harm.

BILL KRISTOL:

And you think he'll follow that? He's not going to pick Marjorie Taylor Greene or something?

WHIT AYRES:

No, no. But he might pick Elise Stefanik.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, but he might view that as do no harm. I don't know if she would do any harm incidentally. I mean, I guess like Kristi Noem or something would be safer. But I guess you don't get a Nikki Haley pick. It's not going to be a Reagan-Bush situation, you don't think?

WHIT AYRES:

No. I can't imagine it. Not at this stage.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Yeah, that's the thing. I mean, we've been through races. I remember I was on TV a lot in 2008, and there were Republicans who watched the Obama-Clinton race go on and on and on, and people forget it went on until the end, and it wasn't entirely settled until the end. And it was pretty tough. I mean, it wasn't such a... they ended up being, she served in his administration and so forth, but it didn't feel that way. And there were people, "Oh, this is ..." And there were actual polling that show certain X percentage of Clinton voters wouldn't vote for Obama. They were very offended by the way she'd been treated, blah, blah, blah.

And I remember this case, rare case, I was actually right. I said, "They're all going to end up voting for Obama." This is like total "hopium" from among Republicans that this long, drawn-out race, whereas McCain had clinched by mid-March, I think, is going to really help much in the general and the underlying dynamics or the underlying

dynamics. And then of course, we had the financial crisis that confirmed the underlying dynamics.

But I feel like the Haley thing's a little different. I mean, it's not like Obama-Clinton, right? I mean, it's—

WHIT AYRES:

No. It reflects a resistance in the Democratic Party to Donald Trump coming back.

BILL KRISTOL:

Republican Party.

WHIT AYRES:

Republican Party, excuse me, for Donald Trump coming back. But Bill, I need to revise and extend my remarks. We were talking about things that might affect the election. I neglected to mention that a Taylor Swift-Travis Kelce endorsement of Joe Biden would make it over. I mean, then it becomes a done deal. Taylor Swift and Kelce are part of this psyops thing, the deep state is coming to endorse Joe Biden, and that would probably have a dramatic effect on the outcome.

BILL KRISTOL:

We have such a weird combination of such a serious moment in our history and such a public discourse, which is slightly crazy, honestly. I mean it's ...

WHIT AYRES:

Let me get this straight here. The Republicans have had disappointing elections in 2018, 2020, 2021 in Georgia and 2022. So the way to get majority support is to attack the most famous and most popular woman in the entire world, coupled with a superstar of America's favorite sport. And this is supposedly going to help expand the Republican coalition? I mean, please. I wish there were an IQ bank where I could suggest these people go and take out a large loan, but I'm afraid that's not possible. But it's just kind of bizarre some of the stuff that comes on the internet. It just seems like the internet is this magnet for people who want to look foolish in the eyes of the world. And there are plenty of people who give into that tendency. It's pretty amazing.

BILL KRISTOL:

But also, I do think, I mean, MAGA is much more extreme, honestly, and conspiratorial than previous very conservative elements of the party. Mostly. There were some extremely conspiratorial ones, but there were plenty of conservatives who didn't like other aspects of popular culture. I talked about this the other day at a different... on a podcast. I mean, Murphy Brown with Dan Quayle, probably ill-advised honestly, but it was fine. We were making a point about family breakup and family structure. And he gave a serious speech in which he quoted for a sentence or two, made a point that Hollywood shouldn't make light of the importance of having two parents at home and so forth.

But there was no conspiracy theory, there was no personal attack on Candice Bergen or something like that. There wasn't obsession about it. It was a line that got— and

then it became a big deal for three or four days and didn't end up mattering I think, honestly.

And then where Tipper Gore criticized rap lyrics and it was a reasonable point she had that it was, maybe these weren't the best. But that's so different, that kind of cultural criticism you might call it, or middlebrow conservative hostility to Hollywood than kind of the conspiracy insanity that we now have.

And I think it is an internet thing, but it is a MAGA thing in particular. You don't see as much of this among 40% of Democrats thinking that, I don't know what, that there are psyops going on on the other side or something. You might see it among some on the left, but it is pretty...

Trump I would say, let's close on this and let's go back to Trump. Trump sort of resists this. I am sort of struck by that, that Trump does not want to be at war with major popular American institutions. Trump did not attack Disney. Trump did not attack the NFL. Trump liked, he called Tom Brady. Remember when he was actually president? He was watching football games. He was calling Tom Brady. He understands that he wants to be in sync with kind of much of, especially much of old-fashioned American, I don't know what popular culture, Americana, that kind of thing.

WHIT AYRES:

Mainstream America. I mean mainstream America loves Taylor Swift and loves NFL football.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. It does make you wonder what happens afterwards. The MAGA sort of escapes kind of Trump's, not for now in this election, I think. But there's a part of MAGA that's kind of out of Trump's orbit by now and is really into a kind of Infowars world that Trump has catered to and brought into in a very responsible way in my opinion, done a lot of damage by legitimizing them. But that's, he's been pretty good at straddling, right? I mean at being... He's got all those people with him.

But then, if you want to convince yourself that, oh, come on, he is a little bit of a loudmouth, but basically, he's going to govern a fairly normal Republican way and so forth, and he's done a pretty good job of straddling that. That would be a bit of a challenge, I think, for him going forward.

And then his personality of just wanting to attack Nikki Haley in pretty unattractive ways, and you got to think some people react against that, right? I don't know. I don't know.

WHIT AYRES:

We'll see. He did set up his own vice president to be murdered by a violent mob. So that is something that kind of sticks in people's minds.

BILL KRISTOL:

You would think. Not that it helped Mike Pence against Trump in the primaries, right? I mean, it's kind of amazing that January 6th has almost disappeared.

Let me close on that. I mean, this made my own recession January 6th. But I mean, why is no one talking about January 6th? The guy who was responsible for it, who

incited it, who organized it to the degree it was a serious effort, and it was to some degree, who tried to sort of overturn the results of election is running for president. And no one... I don't know. It's like not an issue. I mean, Biden will make it an issue, I believe, but it's sort of startling how little it's in— Taylor Swift is much more in the American public discourse than January 6th, right?

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah. Well, we've had three years of people downplaying the significance and importance of the first effort in American history to overturn an election. And it's pretty stunning, but it is what it is.

BILL KRISTOL:

Would've been different, don't you think if the Senate had convicted or if more people had gone in, let's call it a Liz Cheney direction of taking it really fundamentally seriously, instead of accommodating it.

WHIT AYRES:

Oh sure. Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

But they didn't.

WHIT AYRES:

Well, they want to get reelected. They want to keep their seats.

BILL KRISTOL:

In primaries especially.

WHIT AYRES:

Yep.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, it sounds like we have to reconvene. I guess my takeaway from this, but I want you to give the final takeaway, the more serious one since you've been through this so many times and are so thoughtful about it is how quickly Trump can kind of wrap it up, how quickly he clinches it, and people just think it's too hopeless to continue contributing to Haley and how quickly Haley decides to give up.

But if that's March 5th, which I think is the most likely maybe date, or maybe March 12th, like she stays in another week, and the American public looks up and it's Biden-Trump, I do think that's a very interesting moment that people haven't quite thought about enough about what does it really look like.

I don't know. I feel like it's just, as you say it's same old, same old on the surface, but underneath, I mean so much resistance to it.

I'll say one last thing, just because of it. The resistance to Biden, which is the term you used is very striking to me. I mean, I was talking with a couple of Democratic members actually the other day, moderate Dems in districts that are kind of swing-ish districts

and their own polling A) confirms what you say. They won't say this publicly, but Biden is running in their polling about three points, four points behind where he ran in 2020, which would only put him even, would be okay. It's not quite as... It could be even in the popular vote, but you lose all the very close states if you get of three or four—

WHIT AYRES:

Not even in the electoral college, not even close.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. And these people are sort of running five, seven points ahead of Biden in their own districts, and they think they'll hang on if Biden can keep it close, but not if it erodes a little more. But they just say informally that a lot of their own supporters—these are Democrats—they're going to vote for them, for these Democratic candidates. They're going to vote, they hate Trump, and they're going to vote against Trump. Or they certainly don't hate, or at least they don't want Trump to be president again. But they say to these people, "So who's the Democratic nominee going to be?" And these members of Congress say, "Well, President Biden." "Well, isn't something going to ... " They'll work out a way to change that, right? I mean, they'll work out a way to have some at the convention or something. He'll step aside, it will be that governor of Michigan, whatever her name is, or someone else whom I've seen on TV a little bit. You know what I mean?

The degree to which I think voters have not come to grips with the fact that it's Biden-Trump is maybe a little greater than those of us inside the beltway who most of the people here have come to grips with it or think they've come to grips with it or have acceded to it. And I was struck by that—

WHIT AYRES:

Resigned to it maybe.

BILL KRISTOL:

What's that?

WHIT AYRES:

Resigned to it, perhaps?

BILL KRISTOL:

Yes, yes. But I don't have the impression that the voters out there quite have gone, and they may not get so resigned, right?

WHIT AYRES:

Who knows? That's the great conundrum right now.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's a good note to end on. Even though it's people of course want wisdom from you and they want the crystal ball. What's the point of all that polling if you can't perfectly predict what's going to happen over the next eight, nine months?

WHIT AYRES:

Wish we could, Bill. But afraid that's beyond our powers of public opinion research.

BILL KRISTOL:

I mean, my takeaway from this is though that actually March, April, May become quite important because A) we have the question of is there a serious third party, which is very important, and how much voters just look up and kind of shudder at Trump v Biden, assuming that Trump does sort of dispose of Haley pretty quickly. So, A) there's that question, third party, let's call it question revulsion at Trump-Biden, question. But B) there's the trials. I mean, I think we'll know by May whether the trial is not what's happened, and it will have happened in the trial, but whether the trial, any of these trials will even happen in 2024.

So I feel like, usually you get these nominees picked in March or whatever, and then there's a bit of a lull, and then everyone focuses again as the conventions happen. And nothing obvious at least happens in those March, April, May months. But I feel like a lot of, at least on both the trials front and the third party front, March, April, May become pretty important months, right?

WHIT AYRES:

I agree. I agree. Particularly on the trial front. We will tell a whole lot about what's going to happen with those trials in March, April and May, I think.

BILL KRISTOL:

So we need to have a Memorial Day conversation and really see what we understand.

WHIT AYRES:

I'm game.

BILL KRISTOL:

Good. Whit Ayres, thanks again for really an interesting and thought-provoking conversation.

WHIT AYRES:

Always a pleasure, Bill. Happy to be with you.

BILL KRISTOL:

And thank you for joining us on *Conversations*.