

# CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

## Joe Klein Conversation

Filmed March 14, 2024

BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined today by Joe Klein, veteran columnist, commentator, author. Began as a reporter.

And we can talk about that if you want, Joe, but I think that's informed so much of your commentary, and you've stayed a reporter throughout, and traveled to Afghanistan, Iraq, and around America, and based your commenting on reporting, which has not been the case for all of us as much. So I give you a lot of credit for that, and I think it's made your commentary so much more interesting.

You were columnist for *Time*, *Newsweek*, many other major organs, author of the bestselling book, *Primary Colors*, and... was that 1996? I don't think I've ever told you this, but a very distinguished political scientist I know, it was a private conversation, so I won't say his name, but told me in '96, '7, I can't remember, we were just chatting, and he raised the book and asked if I'd read it, and I said yes. He said, "I think that book, I'm thinking of assigning it in class. I think that book teaches its readers more about contemporary American politics than 98% of all the political science stuff I assign."

And he was a tough grader. Not an easygoing guy who loved popular literature, so you should take that—

JOE KLEIN:

That may be more a commentary on political science than on *Primary Colors*.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, yes. That could be true. But anyway, people should still read that book. And now—

JOE KLEIN:

Thank you.

BILL KRISTOL:

...you have an excellent Substack, "Sanity Clause," which people should sign up for, and which I read diligently. So, thank you, Joe, first of all, for joining me today. Where does that phrase, "Sanity Clause," come from?

JOE KLEIN:

It comes from the Marx Brothers, *A Night at the Opera*. The opera manager is saying, "You guys are crazy! I can't have you. You're fired." And Chico produces a massive

contract. It just goes on and on and on, and he reads through and reads through. And he finally says, "There ain't no sanity clause."

And I called it that because I don't think there's much of a sanity clause in most commentary these days. Well, this is, you talk about all these places I've worked for. I keep on retiring and then unretiring, and I think that this is the third time I've unretired.

But you're right. I began as a reporter, I saw myself as a reporter even when I was writing columns, and I learned a lot from that. The first big story I ever covered was busing in Boston, and I came into it as a classic '60s liberal, and then I went out in the streets and into the neighborhoods, and I couldn't find any Black parents who were in favor of it.

And since then, that has made me a very uncomfortable partisan, someone who takes conservative positions on some issues, what would be liberal positions on other issues, but all of it usually based on reporting.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, that's great. And you wrote a terrific piece, I remember, which I think captures a lot of your thought. And it was the mid-'90s, which was a cover story, as I recall, in *Newsweek*, "The Radical Middle." So, we can talk about that, and will we ever get to a radical successful center or middle in American politics? Or will sanity come back?

But why don't we begin with the Democrats? You've been sort of closer to them, I would say, over the decades, and have known many of them so well, and been a sympathetic critic of so many of their policies and the politicians.

So go back to the '70s where you just began. And so I mean, as a way of understanding today's Democratic Party, and then we'll get to Trump and everything else, but I don't know. Yeah. So busing, that was kind of a wake-up call that all was not well on the left of the Democratic Party?

JOE KLEIN:

Mm-hmm. Yeah. Yeah, that was it. But there were other things that had positioned me on the left before that, which were the war in Vietnam, obviously, and the civil rights movement. I was never much of a socialist, and what busing taught me was that when government tries to do social engineering, it usually doesn't work.

And concomitant with that is that when government tries to do industrial policy, when it tries to pick winners and losers in the free market, that often doesn't work, with the exception of industries, and I think that Biden is moving in this direction now, that involved national security. Chips should be made here. I kind of think that even though US Steel is a very peripheral business in the steel industry these days, it might be nice if that stayed US-owned.

But I do believe that the Democrats took a very wrong turn in the '70s, and they've been paying for it ever since. Because of the civil rights movement, and because of various other movements like feminism, gay rights, immigration, and so on, Democrats became the party of identity rather than unity. And—

BILL KRISTOL:

And these were movements that you were sympathetic to, I think?

JOE KLEIN:

Well, yes, but in their—

BILL KRISTOL:

In their core, original agendas, right?

JOE KLEIN:

In their core, original agendas, certainly. But the one thing, and it's really amazing to me, that you will never hear a Democratic candidate acknowledge is they won. The last 60 years have been the most incredible in the history of the human species when it comes to the advancement of human rights. I mean, you don't hear Democrats talking about the tremendous improvements in the condition of Black people in this country.

You know, the gay rights movement succeeded in eliminating thousands of years of unnecessary human suffering in the blink of an eye. Women, I saw a piece the other day that too many women are graduating from college and too few men. I think we have a male problem, especially a young male problem, in the country, but Democrats won't acknowledge this.

Latinos are assimilating in the same way that Italians did 100 ago, through small business, through construction, but they're assimilating. They want to be part of this thing. And I think that this thing, this American thing, is far more important than any of the identity agendas that are out there.

BILL KRISTOL:

You were close to Bill Clinton, and I mean, wrote a lot about him, and of course, the book is based on his primary campaign. How did he succeed, and how did he not succeed, I guess, in bringing the Democratic Party back to the center, or to the center, and away from an excessive compartmentalization and identity politics and stuff? He thought he was doing that to a considerable degree, didn't he?

JOE KLEIN:

Yeah. And I think he did to a certain extent. And I think that he saw some major injustices that Democrats weren't acknowledging. He saw crime as a problem. He saw the welfare system as it existed then as a problem. Welfare dependency was a problem. He reformed those. There are places he wouldn't go, though. He wouldn't abolish affirmative action, and he remained in his gut very sympathetic to the various identity movements.

But there's been backsliding since. I remember I did the first interview with Hillary Clinton when she became First Lady, and she admitted to me something another thing Democrats won't admit, which is that two parents are better than one. There are a lot of heroic single parents, but the sociology on this is irrefutable. 50 years of sociology show that intact families are more secure venues for children.

And I also should mention at this point in terms of my influences, a very big one, my mentor, was Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who was in effect, the left tried to run him out of the Democratic Party because he pointed out that the out-of-wedlock birth rate among Black families was alarming. That was in the 1960s.

Nowadays, the out-of-wedlock birth rate among white families is higher than it was among the Black families in the 1960s. So this is a problem Democrats simply will not acknowledge.

BILL KRISTOL:

Just since we mentioned the Clintons, you were reasonably close to them, you reasonably spent plenty of time with them, interviewing them, and I think covering them in the campaign and then in the White House, and since, I suppose.

Just most of us, 99.9% of us, have not spent personal time with the Clintons in that way. What's the truth? What do you know about them that we should know? What's not true about the caricature or the kind of conventional view of both Bill and Hillary Clinton?

I'm just curious. We didn't really plan to talk about this, but I don't want to miss the chance to get you to say a word about it.

JOE KLEIN:

Well, it is interesting. It is interesting. I've known them for about 40 years now, and I can't say that I ever had a truly honest conversation with Bill Clinton. I've had a lot of off-the-record conversations with Bill Clinton. I tried for over the course of those 40 years, because I'm a prickly son of a bitch, to raise his hackles, to get him angry. I never could get him angry.

Hillary, quite the opposite. Hillary, I remember when she was First Lady, I went to South Asia with her, mostly because I wanted to see some NGO programs. I wanted to see the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, which provided microloans very successfully for poor women, and she was a vehicle for me to get there.

And we had this off-the-record conversation, and she started screaming at me because I had opposed her healthcare plan. And in fact, I favored the Republican healthcare plan, the Chafee plan, which you helped tank, Bill, if I remember correctly?

BILL KRISTOL:

It came back sort of as Obamacare, right? 15 years later.

JOE KLEIN:

It came back as Romneycare and then as Obamacare. But she and I had this screaming fight, and at the end of it, we became friends, and she would invite me to the White House.

And in the 1990s, she would always be asking me, because she knew I would go out and try and find things that worked, like charter schools, for example, and faith-based social programs. And so her first question to me always would be, "What programs have you seen lately?"

And then when she joined the Senate in 2000, and by the way, she never would go to a charter school. She would never go to the phenomenally successful Harlem Children's Zone charter schools. But—

BILL KRISTOL:

Those are the Eva Moskowitz ones, I think?

JOE KLEIN:

Yes. And Geoff Canada, and so on.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Fantastic success stories, right? Yeah.

JOE KLEIN:

I mean, they are. The test scores, and test scores are important, in the Harlem Children's Zone Charter schools are equivalent to upper-middle-class high schools in the suburbs. So can't imagine why Democrats never, ever, ever talk about that. Could it have something to do with the teacher's unions?

But anyway, when she became a senator, and I became obsessed with the military, it was, who are you talking to? She knew I was close to General Petraeus. She always wanted to know the latest things.

And by the way, the feeling was mutual. I once asked Petraeus whether there was any Democrat who might be president who had the vaguest idea of how his mind works. That's another problem I have with Democrats, by the way. They have little interest traditionally in the military. Anyway, I asked Petraeus this question, and his answer was, "You mean aside from Hillary?" And so you asked for surprising things—

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, she was on the Senate Armed Services, just to be clear, so he got to know her, I think, probably, and she was an active member of the Senate of Armed Services and traveled with McCain and stuff, so yeah. She really did have a real interest in military, not just in the military as a kind of sociological thing, but an actual policy with regard to the Armed Services.

JOE KLEIN:

Yeah. She was really into counterinsurgency. And I wrote one of the early columns. I was against the war in Iraq, as you remember all too well. But I thought that once we were there, we had to figure out a way to calm things down and leave with some integrity. And so I wrote about counterinsurgency.

I got a phone call from Petraeus the day after it appeared. I hadn't met the guy at that point. And he said, "You're on the right track, but you don't know anything." And immediately, he sent me 30 pieces about counterinsurgency that appeared in academic military journals and invited me to come out and study with him. He invited me out to Fort Leavenworth. Now, Donald Rumsfeld, who I thought was one of the worst secretaries of defense in American history, had sent him out to Fort Leavenworth to the think tank there to kind of get rid of him. And that's where he and his group wrote the counterinsurgency strategy, the counterinsurgency manual. So I was in on that from the start, and I think that that's where you and I, Bill, began our journey toward reconciliation probably.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yes. I remember we'd argued quite a bit over the Iraq war, but then I called for Rumsfeld to be fired in '04, and then we spent all of 2005 and '06, and even before

that, calling for more troops, calling for counterinsurgency, at the Weekly Standard, closely working with Senator McCain. We were in sync there. And we were correct, it turned out, right? I mean—

JOE KLEIN:

Right. Absolutely.

BILL KRISTOL:

... Rumsfeld was stubborn. And Rumsfeld was ridiculously stubborn, or just didn't care, I suppose. Just wanted to get out kind of, and—

JOE KLEIN:

And I thought the selection of Gates was a brilliant one. And in fact, I had a role, a small one, in Obama choosing Gates to continue on. But you know, what I said—

BILL KRISTOL:

That's too intriguing. Say a word about that if it's appropriate. Yeah.

JOE KLEIN:

Oh, okay. Well, Gates wrote about it in his memoir, actually.

BILL KRISTOL:

Okay. So then...

JOE KLEIN:

What happened was that I did an interview with Obama in 2008, where I asked him would he select someone like Gates as a Secretary of Defense? And he said, "Yes, absolutely. I'm thinking about it." And so I called Gates and I said, "Do you have any reaction to this?" And he said, "Yeah."

BILL KRISTOL:

I mean, to be clear, Gates is already secretary. Yeah. To keeping Gates on as Secretary of Defense. Yeah.

JOE KLEIN:

He was George W.'s Secretary of Defense.

BILL KRISTOL:

For the last two years. Yeah.

JOE KLEIN:

Yeah. And he was the one who brought Petraeus back to run the show in Iraq. And anyway, Gates said to me, "If you print that, I'm going to have to say no. I would never do that. So could you take it off the record?"

And so what I did, I don't know how the stands in journalistic ethics, but I think that journalists have to be patriots too. And I called Obama back and I said, "Gates says

that if you say that, he's not going to be able to say yes." So Obama said, "Okay. I didn't say it." And so it didn't appear in the interview, and we know what happened. And what happened was the right thing. And as a journalist, I believe in journalistic ethics. I've tried to be a fair journalist over the years, especially when I get things wrong, which I've done. But to me, journalists also are citizens, and I didn't want to hurt. At that point, I'd gotten very close to the military, as you know, and there were lives at stake here. There were kids out there. There was your kid out there in Iraq and—

BILL KRISTOL:

Afghanistan, but yeah.

JOE KLEIN:

He was in Afghanistan?

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, a little later.

JOE KLEIN:

With the Marines, right?

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. 2010, 2011. Yeah. 35.

JOE KLEIN:

Helmond?

BILL KRISTOL:

Yes.

JOE KLEIN:

Oof.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah.

JOE KLEIN:

I've been to Helmond. Anyway, but enough of that, although I will say this, and I will put in a word for an organization that both you and I have had a hand in, which is the Four Country Caucus, which is funded by the With Honor PAC, and it is a caucus of post-9/11 veterans who run for the House, both Democrats and Republicans. And With Honor gives them funding if they sign a pledge to work together as a bipartisan caucus. And there are 30 of them now, and they are my greatest source of optimism about this country. They're just great. And when you talk to him and spend a lot of time with him, I've continued on the advisory board, it's just really inspirational. They're great people. We've lost some of the best of them like Adam Kinzinger, and

we're losing Mike Gallagher, who I thought was very strong. He's from Wisconsin, but there are people like Jared Golden from Maine who is just excellent. And Mikie Sherrill from New Jersey, former helicopter pilot.

BILL KRISTOL:

So we should talk about that and that's part of the new center that could emerge. One more reminiscence if I can ask you to indulge me in that, and then we'll get to the current state of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, which the reason Mike Gallagher and Kinzinger and left and Gallagher's going obviously is the state of the Republican Party, so that's a worrisome thing, to say the least. But President Obama, you mentioned him, so I just can't resist asking. The two big triumphant Democrats of our time really are President Clinton and President Obama. Your judgment of him? You knew him pretty well. You interviewed him many times, and I think you were pretty early in seeing that he was really going to be a rising star?

JOE KLEIN:

Yeah, well, drove Hillary crazy that I pretty much supported him. I thought he was a better candidate for president than she was. And to finish on Hillary, by the way, she was a lot more fun in private. I know other people have said this, but she had a really wicked sense of humor. And by the way, she really liked *Primary Colors*. I will tell one story. At the end of the Clinton... Actually, I will tell many stories. I'll tell stories until—

BILL KRISTOL:

No, no, we'll get to your deep analytical thoughts on the nature of the parties, but keep telling stories for a while here. They're excellent.

JOE KLEIN:

At the end of the Clinton administration, I was working for the New Yorker, and I decided to do a piece about what Clinton had actually accomplished because so much of the coverage focused on the scandals. And so Clinton found out I was doing this. I was interviewing people from the assistant secretary level on up and he said, "I want to be part of this." And so he gave me lots of time at the end of his presidency, and the first thing that he did was a two-hour session on healthcare and welfare reform. And at the end of it, Hillary kind of comes in and she asked what we had been talking about and I said, "Healthcare." I said, "He just ripped you to pieces." And she looked stricken. And I said, "No, I'm just kidding." He was very politic. And he turns to me, we were drinking Diet Cokes, as was his want. Those guys, she drank a glass of wine, he would never. But anyway, he turns to me and he says, "So why'd you write that book anyway?" And I said, "Well, I saw it as a tribute to larger than life politicians," which was the truth. And she snorted derisively. And I said, "Would you rather have a larger than life president or a smaller than life president?" And she shook her head. At that point, her choices were two people she absolutely despised, George W. Bush and Al Gore. And I said, "Larger than life politicians have larger than life strengths and larger than life weaknesses." She looked at me, she looked at her husband and she shook her head and she said, "That's for sure."

BILL KRISTOL:



Wow, that's a great story. Bill Clinton was, just for our younger viewers who don't understand why people like you and to some degree me across the aisle were so interested by Clinton, I would say, and impressed by him, he could have a two-hour discussion on healthcare policy and welfare policy, couldn't he, without aids feeding him all the facts or details?

JOE KLEIN:

Oh, absolutely.

BILL KRISTOL:

Without descending into bromides and generalizations. That is pretty unusual.

JOE KLEIN:

There are a lot of policy wonks around. Jeb Bush was a policy wonk. He could have a two-hour conversation about healthcare and about it. He was smarter on education than any politician I have talked to over the last 50 years. But Clinton had this other quality as well. He was perhaps the best standup politician I ever encountered. He was just great on the stump. He could, as he once said, feel people's pain. And that's a major advantage. He also, as Obama later said, was like the "explainer in chief." He could make complicated topics comprehensible to the mass of people in a way that they understood. And I think that he was probably the last Democrat to really get a sizable white blue collar vote, because I always thought that the fact that he messed around with lounge singers and supersized at McDonald's and felt their pain was an advantage.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's interesting. Okay, more about Obama, then we'll get to the deep analysis of the current sad moment we're in. What was President Obama again? How different from the outside perception in your dealings with him?

JOE KLEIN:

Well, he was drop-dead smart, and he would have me in to talk about stuff far more often than Clinton would, and especially when I would do things like I went to Iran a couple of times. And I was in Iran the night after he gave his Cairo speech. Actually for our younger viewers, one of the first major moves that Obama did was to try to reconcile with the Islamic world. And I decided to do a really weird thing. I went and watched that speech with Khaled Mashal, the leader of Hamas, who was in Damascus, and then had a conversation with him, and couldn't get him to go anywhere near recognition of Israel. Then I got on a plane and went to Tehran, and I went to a party. Parties in Tehran are so wild. It's where people blow off steam.

BILL KRISTOL:

You know what happens in Tehran should stay in Tehran, Joe. You don't have to share all of that with us.

JOE KLEIN:

Although this. On the night that I arrived in Tehran, I got invited to a party. It was a debate watching party. This was during the 2009 election that was eventually stolen for Ahmadinejad. And a whole bunch of us are watching this debate between various Iranian politicians, which was weird, but really interesting. And all of a sudden someone comes in and says, "There are a million people in the streets." And it was the beginning of the Green Movement. And what had happened was that Obama's Cairo speech had been broadcast on BBC Persia with subtitles. And as soon as that was over, everybody went into the streets to say, "We want that. That's what we want." And so I came back and I told Obama that story, and he just completely dismissed me. He didn't want to hear it. What he really wanted was what I had seen there, what the facts were, what so-and-so was like, who so-and-so was like. He was the most resistant politician I had ever met to flattery and was interesting in that way.

But then he kind of disdained politics because of the flattery and the backslapping involved. I once had a conversation with Joe Biden about that, and I said, "Why doesn't he invite people over to watch a football game and give him those White House M&Ms that they all crave?" And Biden said, "Because he thinks that people will just see through that." And I said, "Of course, they'll see through it, but they'll still love it." And Biden said, "Well, don't you want to have a president who's more high-minded than we are?" And I said, "No, I want to have a president who's a pol."

BILL KRISTOL:

That's good. That's good. Okay. So Biden, it's good that you mentioned him. So now we're in the current moment, and maybe before we get to Trump, who is the central figure of the current moment, so what about the Democrats? I could make a case, just let me make a very brief argument and you can refute it or correct it. Biden is governing pretty much as a centrist Democrat? The party is more centrist than it has been in quite a while. The younger governors, Whitmer, Shapiro, Polis, et cetera, are pretty self-consciously, I would say, centrist and not really of the left, the Spanbergers and the Slotkins and the... Mikie Sherrill you mentioned in Congress, Seth Moulton are not on the left. The squad gets a lot of attention, but it's a small number. Is it crazy to think it's going to be a more centrist Democratic Party that escapes some of the problems you've seen over the last decades, or am I overstating that?

JOE KLEIN:

Well, Bill, I've been hoping for that for decades now. By the way, can I ask you where you are? Do you have an affiliation these days?

JOE KLEIN:

For a while I was using that excellent Pete Buttigieg line from the 2020 campaign that he wanted the support of everyone left, right, progressive, centrist, Democrats, independents, future former Republicans, he would say, which I liked. There was a clever... Buttigieg is clever in a way, right? A little like Obama maybe in that formulation. No, I'm an ex Republican and I haven't voted for a Republican since Trump emerged, though I did vote for Nikki Haley in the primary here in Virginia. It's an open primary, which I thought it was important to help her get more Republicans accustomed to not voting for Trump so they could stay not voting for Trump in November. So I guess I'm an ex Republican and I am honestly pretty fine with those moderate Democrats I mentioned. There are a few issues where I wish they were a

little more respectful of markets, and of unanticipated consequences of big government action and some of the things you mentioned earlier, but I can certainly live with that Democratic Party.

JOE KLEIN:

Well, I have to say that I've voted for Republicans in local elections consistently for the last 40 years for one reason, which is that the Democrats are controlled by the teacher's unions and I think that the teacher's unions are a very reactionary force when it comes to educating poor kids, which to me, education is a local issue, not a national one, but it is to my mind, absolutely the most important issue. Now, as to Biden, that's one of his failings. He has quietly not encouraged the charter school movement. Another one of his failings that I just cannot comprehend, and I am totally mystified by this...

Another one of his failings is the border situation. Now, I've been vehemently pro-immigration as I think you have over the years, but at a certain point, the chaos at the border is dangerous. It's also really bad politically. Now, I think that the vast majority of people who try to come across are going to become great Americans, the overwhelming majority of them are, and the vast majority of refugees should have their cases heard. But I think we need to pause right now. And I cannot imagine why Biden didn't use the State of the Union to declare a national emergency and say I'm closing the border, sending elements of the first cavalry and the fourth infantry division whose forts are located near the border down there, and I'm suspending all refugee applications at the border temporarily until we get this under control." I think that that's an instance... Well, you saw what trouble he got into when he used the word illegal accurately to describe the guy who murdered Laken Riley. I think that he has been a little bit too receptive to the Democratic interest groups on the left in that regard. But on the whole, I think the bipartisan stuff that he's gotten through the Congress is remarkable. The Infrastructure Act, the Chips Act, some elements of the hilariously named Inflation Reduction Act. I think that his foreign policy, especially when it comes to things like Ukraine and NATO and the difficult, near impossible line that he has to walk with Bibi Netanyahu, and perhaps we can talk about that, that may be an area where you and I still have a little bit of a difference. Huh?

BILL KRISTOL:

Could be. We could be. Yeah. It's a complicated area, though.

JOE KLEIN:

It is.

BILL KRISTOL:

That would be another conversation. We can have a four-hour conversation about that.

JOE KLEIN:

I am very much in favor of Israel's right to defend itself and I am very much in favor of a two-state solution at the same time, which does not include Hamas or terrorists. And I think it's been a difficult walk for Biden to walk, but he's done it courageously

and has lost support in the Democratic Party as a result. He may lose the state of Michigan as a result. So I agree with you. I think he's been a very good moderate Democrat president. I also think he's probably too old for the job because when I think about that, I don't think about where he is now. I don't think he is failing cognitively, I think he's failing physically. But what is he going to be like when he's 86?

BILL KRISTOL:

You think that's the core of his—just to get to current politics then—Is that where the core of his weakness as a presidential candidate in 2024? But also some issues you pointed to, the border and sort of the Democrats still not being able to shake. I'm very struck by this that when I say to people, including people who will probably end up voting for Biden, what about these governors? What about these members? What about TikTok? They're doing something that's pretty strong in foreign policy if you're very worried about China, which makes sense to me, I think. And Biden, a little hesitation on it because it is a political risk. I mean, tens of millions of Americans like TikTok. We're basically ready to close it down here. But he's after a little bit of, I've got to say hesitation on the White House's part.

They stepped up yesterday and said, "Nope, he'll sign that bill. No question about it." Hopes the Senate moves on it. So he has been a little more courageous than people give him credit for, their work sometimes on the illegal thing where he conspicuously backs off something and looks a little uncourageous or bowing to the pressure groups. Anyway, a long way of saying that, I wonder what is the core of his political weakness? Well, I don't know if you agree with this. I mean, Trump being Trump and the objective numbers we're seeing in terms of the Biden administration, he should be a reasonably strong candidate for... He should be Clinton or Obama running for reelection at least, right? He should be a favorite. And the Republicans are pretty alienating and pretty some number of their supporters, but he's not a favorite right now. So what do you make of that? How much of it age, how much of it is the Democratic Party and liberalism and all that stuff?

JOE KLEIN:

Well, I think that Michael Deaver, who was in charge of imaging for Ronald Reagan taught me something which was that, and every politician has followed it ever since, you want as many American flags as possible on any given set. And the visual image is always more important almost than the words, unless the words are extraordinary. Ronald Reagan standing in front of the Berlin Wall and saying, "Tear down this wall." For Biden, the overpowering visual image of his presidency is his staggering walk across the south lawn to the Marine helicopter. As he takes that walk, you're worried, my heart is in my throat that he's going to fall over or that he's going to have to use a walker sooner or later. That is the image that most people have in their minds of Joe Biden, and it extends to about 80% of the population. I don't know if there is any way you can counteract that.

I was hoping that the State of the Union would do that, but apparently in terms of moving the needle in the polls, it didn't do all that much. Although I think a lot of the impressions that people have of presidents are subconscious and evolve over time. So I thought the State of the Union was a good step toward ameliorating that impression. But that is a big deal. The other big deal is that it's not the economy, stupid, inflation is the only economic... It wasn't even the economy, stupid when James Carville said, "It

was the economy, stupid" in 1992, that was an election about vitality and Bill Clinton seemed young and vital and really with it. And George H.W. Bush, a wonderful man, didn't remember—

BILL KRISTOL:

And also a Cold War president after the Cold War ended, right? I think that was a huge part of the time for someone to focus on domestic policy. Clinton really sensed that mood out there in a way that we certainly didn't in the Bush White House.

JOE KLEIN:

But I do think that issues like race and transgender, business and education and immigration obviously are cultural issues that really are more at the forefront of what people think about than things like the debt ceiling or the national debt.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. And COVID, I think, had a role there that kind of what I suppose in retrospect was too much shutting down of the schools. And so I think it hurt here in Virginia where Youngkin had a surprise victory of Terry McAuliffe really just on two issues. McAuliffe had been a pretty good governor, honestly, and the state is mostly Democratic, but it was inflation. That was the moment where the Biden administration seemed out of touch on that issue. And Youngkin's most effective ad was that going to a supermarket and being surprised. It was an ad, it was filmed, but allegedly being surprised by the cost of various things he was buying or other people were buying.

Maybe it was a third party, but buying them, that person was surprised and saying, "This is terrible." Then an education, but less the critical race theory stuff and more it's just the schools are not responsive to parents and the teacher's unions are running them. And McAuliffe made the unbelievable mistake of having the head of the teacher's union campaign who was not from Virginia, I mean from out of state, Randi Weingarten, campaign with him, and last week it was like, what was he thinking?

JOE KLEIN:

And yes, the closing of the schools, I mean, which was pretty much demanded by the teachers unions, was a problem for the Democrats. I mentioned before that Democrats don't understand the military sufficiently. I mean, there was an organization called the Truman Project that was established about 10 years ago to teach new members of Congress the difference between a battalion and a brigade, which Democrats don't know. But the other thing that Democrats don't know and don't appreciate is the small business sensibility. And the COVID closings, there was a famous barber in Michigan who made a federal case out of this, I think literally, who wouldn't close his barber shop. And I think that those sorts of business people, my dad was one of them, aren't understood by Democrats sufficiently.

BILL KRISTOL:

Don't you think some of the movement, which I think is real incidentally of Latinos and Blacks too, I think away from the Democratic Party, is a mixture of the cultural and the sort of small business sentiment, if I can put it that way?

JOE KLEIN:

There was a poll, I think about six months ago that showed that over 70% of Black voters were seriously concerned about crime, and about 23% of white liberals were. I just don't think that the academic left and college graduates who really drive the Democratic Party now understand basic things like the importance of crime. Now, crime has gone down, but it's still a matter of real concern. My friend Elaine Kamarck, who is a Brookings scholar, about 10 years ago, I asked her, "Well, if Rush Limbaugh and Fox News are running the Republican Party, who's running the Democratic Party these days?" And she said, "The colored girls." And you know that that's actually a term that Donna Brazile and three of her friends used to describe themselves. They wrote a book a few years ago called *When Colored Girls Consider Politics*, and I think that strong Black women are running the Democratic Party now, and they, along with Jim Clyburn, gave us Joe Biden as the candidate in 2020.

BILL KRISTOL:

So that's good. They're not so radical on these issues, right?

JOE KLEIN:

No, I mean, look, I live in an interracial neighborhood. It's an upper middle class interracial neighborhood, but I used to live in a lower class, Al Sharpton, Spike Lee was my neighbor in Brooklyn, and our neighbors were desperately pissed off about crime. The one redeeming factor that we had on our street was that three Black cops lived there and they were armed.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. Yeah, that's interesting.

JOE KLEIN:

But notions like "defund the police," which never really had very much traction in the Democratic Party, but it doesn't need to have very much traction for Republicans to take advantage of it.

BILL KRISTOL:

Meanwhile, we have a Trump dominated Republican Party. We have to come back to this in another conversation because this has been so interesting about the Democrats and their past and I guess their present. Well, let me just close on the Democrats since we may have to have a second conversation anyway, so where do you think they stand? What happens, I guess, this year? But we've talked, that's an election, who knows, right? Pretty close. But what about 2025? Are we going towards a 9/11 veteran Abigail Spanberger, Mikie Sherrill, Democratic Party, or are we going towards a, what James Carville calls an Amherst faculty lounge Democratic Party? What's the balance of power? What would you look to sort of judge... Well, will it have to be fought out? I mean, how does that work, do you think?

JOE KLEIN:

Well, I think that a lot of it is going to depend on what the Republican Party becomes. I think that a point of agreement that you and I have is that there is a crying need for a

moderate conservative political party in America. That is where solidity lies. That is where tradition lies, and our tradition of democracy is the greatest in human history. And if the Republicans remain a Trump cult, then I think that there are two possibilities... And by the way, I think the members of the squad, although I happen to be represented by a terrible one, Jamaal Bowman, he's my congressman. He's being primaried, thank God, by a moderate. There's a possibility that the Democrats can move in that direction. But there are all these countervailing forces, the "Amherst faculty lounge" forces. My fantasy for a long time has been a third party that builds from the bottom up that includes people like Abby Spanberger, but also Adam Kinzinger. My great fantasy was that when the Republicans were having the speaker fight, that our bipartisan military caucus would put forward a bipartisan candidate for speaker, namely Steve Womack, a Republican of Arkansas who's widely respected on both sides of the aisle. And we would start a centrist rebellion that can still happen now over Ukraine. And if... I am really rooting for one of these discharge petitions to make it to the house floor so that you can get a centrist majority, which absolutely exists to support funding for Ukraine, that is an absolute moral necessity. But if things like that begin to happen, I think it's not impossible that we could see a moderate third party. Of course, that is wishful thinking in the extreme, and I would... Well, let me turn it to you, Bill. What do you think? Do you think that the Republicans are a hopeless cult in perpetuity?

BILL KRISTOL:

No, just for the next few years, but certainly for this year. And I think it's hard to recover from eight years of following Trump. I mean, it's not like it happened for just a few months or even three or four years, like Joe McCarthy and he was president and then three times nominee. That's rare in American politics. So I don't think you snap back. Even if he loses, even if he loses fairly badly, which I don't think will happen unfortunately this November. I don't think people snap back from that immediately. A large number of politicians have made their career by being mini-Trumps of one kind or another, or at least accommodating Trump so much, they can't quite walk away from it. I could see that though two or four years from now, and I think it could begin to happen even in '25, and then the Democrats could have their own depending on whether Biden wins or loses.

But I think in either case, the way I think about it is in very different ways, Biden, Trump are quarks in the bottle, stopping the normal progress or whatever the metaphor is here, the normal fermentation or something of the party. There are a lot of interesting people in both parties and they're just stifled by these two older candidates, at least, who are dominating it. And one is the president and the other is the former president, and again, the nominee. So I think it's very unpredictable what happens in '25. I could imagine a big fight within the Democratic Party. I could imagine the third party stuff really exploding in '25. I don't think it's totally... So let me turn it back to you. Is it totally out of the question that it still happens in '24? I mean, country is—

JOE KLEIN:

I think Bobby Kennedy is a serious player depending on how many states he gets on the ballot. I think that he has great appeal among younger people. His combination of environmentalism and kind of independence, aside from his wacky conspiracy

theories, I think he could be a factor. But what I'd really kind of like to see, another fantasy is that in New York we used to have, they still do have the Liberal Party, which was never all that liberal. It was a labor union party and the Liberal Party would choose to run its own candidates for some offices and support Democrats in other offices and even occasionally support Republicans like Jacob Javits, ancient history there. Nelson Rockefeller was a Liberal party nominee. And I think that if there was a really judicious third way moderate movement like that, that would support its own candidates in some places, support Democrats in other places, support Republicans in other places, I would love to see if something like that could get traction.

BILL KRISTOL:

So that works in New York because of fusion voting so that you can support a candidate from another party and the votes get fused. They get counted together. And so Bloomberg even won the mayoralty by being on three tickets, as I recall, at least once or twice, and getting Republican votes, I think liberal votes and then independent party that he invented and paid for votes. That's illegal in most of the country. I'm actually slightly involved in an effort to broaden the fusion, get the fusion idea back again. It was once legal in most of the country. It turns out, I hadn't really realize this late 19th-century American politics is full of fusion efforts, like in many states, the populist party or the progressive party where it would nominate a Republican or a Democrat who would also be the candidate of that party. It would be a signal to some chunk of voters that that's the more, let's say, populist candidate or progressive and that candidate might win.

Sometimes they would nominate their own kind of protest candidates. It would be much healthier. I do think fusion is one of the reforms, maybe more than some of those other voting reforms that we're familiar with that really could change American politics, probably has to be done state by state. People are trying to do it in some other states now. So that's something to keep in... That kind of stuff could really explode a little bit, maybe after going through seven or eight months here of Trump versus Biden. I feel like people do not think the system is producing what it should be in terms of the—

JOE KLEIN:

Well, I would be wildly in support of that. Let me know about the group and [inaudible] —

BILL KRISTOL:

I will. They're in New York. When you're back up there, we'll all get together. Say a word about, I mean Trump, I mean just how extraordinary a phenomenon is it in your mind or is it kind of more the same we've seen it in American politics before? What is distinctive about the moment?

JOE KLEIN:

Well, I think Trump is probably... Well, first of all, I've known the guy for 40 years. I covered real estate development—

BILL KRISTOL:



I forgot, the New York, yeah.

JOE KLEIN:

...in New York back in the 80s. And I can tell you that he was a joke to all of his fellow developers. He was not considered a major player. He was considered a major marketer. And we are living through the golden age of marketing if this is the golden age of anything. And I think that it was inevitable that the American people would begin to mistake reality TV for reality.

I think that in... Maggie Haberman wrote a book about Trump and there was this one anecdote that really hit home to me. She was talking to a middle-aged, middle-class guy in Iowa who had attended one of Trump's rallies, which are wall-to-wall *meshugas*. The guy can't put three coherent sentences together in order unless they're about him.

But in any case, Haberman asks this middle-aged middle-class guy, why he's a Trump supporter. And the guy says, "Because I watched him build his business," he was referring to the TV show, *The Apprentice*. He had mistaken that for Trump's business. And I think an awful lot of people out there are doing it. I've just been reading this book that I would recommend, you should never do an hour of one of these without recommending a book, someone else's book. And I'm going to—

BILL KRISTOL:

You're one of the few who doesn't just recommend his own book. So that's good.

JOE KLEIN:

No, Tim Alberta's book, *The Kingdom, The Power and the Glory* about evangelicals, and it is an incredibly sad story because I was very much moved in the 1990s by people you knew well, Pete Wehner and Mike Gerson and David Kuo, who were involved in the faith-based movement and joined the George W. Bush administration in the 2000s.

And there is a humility to real evangelism. There is a loveliness to followers of Christ. And what Tim Alberta does in this book is show how the movement was hijacked by hustlers, how Tim Alberta's father was an evangelical minister, and when he passed, his successor got into real trouble because he wouldn't talk Trumpian politics because that sold.

It was all about the trinkets. All you have to do is get Trump's emails every day and he's selling something or other, most famously sneakers, but also credit cards. It is American politics reduced to raw hucksterism. And cynics will say, well, it was always like that. But I've always said that cynicism is what passes for insight among the mediocre.

And I think that Trump says something about the rest of us, and it isn't something flattering and it has to do, I think back to my obsession with the military, I think that there's a need, democracy ain't easy and there is a need for public service. And there is a need for more people to feel the way the military feels, which is that they're part of something larger than themselves.

And as I've traveled the country, which I've done an awful lot, I've seen that sense of community diminish over the years. By the way, the evangelical church was a

mainstay of that. There were all these kinds of community groups and helping the poor groups that came out of evangelical churches and still do, but they've been hijacked by hucksters.

And I think that one of the things that I've always been tremendously in favor of, which we'll never get because this is in a country that lacks mandates, but I've always been in favor of mandatory national service, especially for college graduates.

It should be the only way you can pay off your college loans and it should extend beyond the military into teaching, policing, social work, medicine, even architecture. You shouldn't be able to be a licensed architect unless you spend a couple of years as a building inspector because those guys are the most corrupt people in government. But anyway, that's my story and I'm sticking to it.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, no, that's so interesting. And I think your point about national unity and sense of community versus the kind of hucksterism. I mean, I guess the other side of Trump and just to take a minute on that and then we'll have to maybe we'll end and come back to a lot of this in two or three, four months when the campaigns further along, and we can also have much your experienced observer of campaigns that talk actual sort of practical politics of Trump and Biden.

But I mean Trump has combined the kind of pure hucksterism with a kind of less McCarthy-ite, George Wallace demagoguery exploitation of people's insecurities, dislike of minority groups, and fears about cultural change in a way that's, I guess pretty unusual.

I feel like we've had the demagogues, we've had the hucksters, Trump has brought them together. And I think you and I, reading your "Sanity Clause," you respect, I mean, respect maybe could ... you understand that Trump is a smart, an effective demagogue. A clever demagogue, which I think so many liberals, so many opponents of Trump, including many of my friends in never Trump world, they just want to dismiss him. He's clownish. He can't put three sentences together as you said, but he is a shrewd demagogue, don't you think?

JOE KLEIN:

Oh, I think he is incredible. I mean, the line that sticks out and he has used this sort of thing, time and again, was about the proud boys, stand back and stand by. I mean, he always comes right up to the edge of outrage, crosses it, maybe sticks a toe on the other side of it, but can always say, go fight like hell at the Capitol, but do it peacefully.

I mean, he knows how to do that. He knows it viscerally. I don't know that the guy has much of an inner life. I don't think he does. I don't think he considers what to say all that much, but I think he has an inherent sense of what the traffic will bear in a way that few other politicians I've ever seen have.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, he didn't go down that DeSantis rabbit hole of attacking hugely popular American institutions, Disney and the NFL, right? He's always pretty ... he did a little of it, but then he was careful to be, "I'm great buddies with Tom Brady. Let's have the football teams over." He wants to associate himself with as all good hucksters and con men do with what's popular. Whereas, DeSantis sort of believed the kind of right wing

online propaganda that we're really in a culture war against these major American institutions.

JOE KLEIN:

Right. And obviously he won't go there on places like social security and Medicare, which I think is a place that he probably should go and we should go in very modest ways. I mean, you can raise the retirement age from 67 to 68 or 69, and not really grievously harm a lot of people, especially those of us who are much older than that now.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, right. I mean the TikTok thing we're talking was the March 14th. I mean, the house voted yesterday. Trump probably partly driven by donor considerations and backed off what had been a major talking point of his, I think it was three years ago that he was going to get tough on companies like TikTok. But I think a lot of it was politics.

I think he is in touch with enough people who said, hey, tens of millions of people use TikTok. They like it. They don't really understand the argument about Chinese information operations, which I think is a convincing argument, but that hasn't been made very much publicly explained to them. And they're just going to think that, "the government's like, arbitrarily taking away one of my favorite pastimes," and more than a pastime in some cases... "It's things I really enjoy and learn from." I think in that respect, again, I think he's a little bit clever, like a fox.

The idea that this was, oh, shows just how weak he is and how can he not be on board with this thing. I kind of wonder, I worry that he's almost ahead of the curve in shying away from shutting down TikTok, not being foolish.

JOE KLEIN:

Well, you look at the positions he's taken, social security and Medicare, he was way ahead of the curve on immigration and he was way ahead of the curve in liberating the Republican Party from Iraq.

Now, you and I both think, I don't want to speak for you, but that there needs to be an American presence in the world, that things like Ukraine are very important. NATO is very important. Not allowing, standing up against authoritarianism, is very important. But the Republican Party was ready to admit that Iraq probably wasn't the most judicious thing to do, and now he's taking it very much to a fault.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, a very dangerous place. Let me close on this. Are you sort of amazed, I guess I am about the ability, his ability, but also now the entire conservative movement's ability, a lot of the Republican Party's ability to memory-hold January 6th. I guess I really did think after January 6th, this is what we got from Trump, but maybe this is the wake-up call.

I didn't think miraculously the Republican Party would become wonderful again, but I didn't expect that three years later he'd be coasting to renomination. The orthodoxy in the party would not be a kind of minimizing of January 6th. It would almost be a praising of January 6th.

Liz Cheney, who tried to tell the truth about January 6th, total and utter outcast, Kinzinger gone from Congress. I mean, just say a word about maybe in conclusion, I don't want to end on a down note, but what does that say about just the utter forgetfulness of what was kind of a big deal, an important, genuinely important event in American history?

JOE KLEIN:

I don't know that the word I'd use would be forgetfulness. I think cowardice is the word I'd use. And I have been so disappointed in so many Republicans, including members of the bipartisan caucus who aren't willing to stand up on that. Kinzinger was an exception.

By the way, I talked to one member of our caucus, a woman who was a Republican from Iowa who voted against Jim Jordan for Speaker of the House. And as a consequence, eight of the 12 Republican County committees in her district censured her. So I think that the question is how badly do these people want to be part of something so reprehensible? How deluded can they be?

And these include people I tremendously respect, former... I mean someone like Lamar Alexander who was a moderate, sensible, conservative candidate for president, senator from Tennessee, why is he so silent these days? Why has he said nothing about Trump? And there are plenty of others like him, people both you and I respect. It's just, I mean, to end on a depressing note, that is really depressing.

BILL KRISTOL:

Okay, we'll have to have another conversation soon to end on an uplifting note. But no, I think there was plenty of uplifting possibilities about the future in this conversation. And we've got to face reality, right? Cynicism is a cheap out, but also wishfulness is a cheap out.

And we're in a moment, as you say, where some of this says something about the America we're living in, but maybe not something forever and maybe not something decisive. So read Joe Klein, read "Sanity Clause" and read *Primary Colors* for that matter. Is it still in print or can I—

JOE KLEIN:

Oh, of course. I have seven books that are still in print.

BILL KRISTOL:

Wow, okay. I typically buy the cheap used copies. However, these days you don't have to get the royalties to Joe. So no, I—

JOE KLEIN:

You don't have to, but it'd be nice.

BILL KRISTOL:

Joe Klein, thank you for joining me.

JOE KLEIN:

Hey, and Bill, thank you for a lifetime of thoughtfulness. I think that when I first met you, you were working for Bill Bennett.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, at the education department in the '80s.

JOE KLEIN:

And I really felt an affinity for you from the very start. We've had our rocky moments, but I think that we come from the same part of the jungle.

BILL KRISTOL:

I think so. And we'll both be looking for figuring out where to go into exile after Trump wins in November. I hope you're exploring some nice places that we can get to get refuge. But anyway, Joe, thank you very much for joining me, and thank you all for joining us on *Conversations*.