

# CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

## Timothy Snyder Conversation

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BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm Bill Kristol. I'm very pleased to be joined today by Tim Snyder, Professor of History at Yale, distinguished scholar of Ukraine, Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, author of the definitive work *Bloodlands*, and also author of more popular works on Russia and European History, and also on tyranny, freedom, and other big and important topics. Unlike many professors, Tim Snyder's scholarly books are accessible to the rest of us, and his popular books are based on scholarship. So that's a good combination. But just last week, what, your class on, what was it Hitler, Stalin and Us or something like that was disrupted at Yale, but you've survived that well. Anyway, Tim, thanks for joining me and let's discuss Ukraine.

TIM SNYDER:

Okay, glad to be with you. Let's do it.

BILL KRISTOL:

Let's do it. So two years into the war, where do we stand in your judgment in terms of both the military situation and the broader geopolitical situation? And then we can go back and look a little bit at what happened before and then what might happen next.

TIM SNYDER:

Okay. I mean, I guess the military situation, there's sort of the objective and the subjective side. I think subjectively, if you're an American, and this right, there are sort of two problems. The first is that the Biden administration, although it generally in my view, has done the right thing and has made a number of adjustments and has been capable of rethinking, in 2022 when things were really critical and sensitive and when the tide of war could have been turned, we spent too much time making decisions and our decisions were based too often on what we thought wouldn't make Putin nervous or they were based on virtue signaling like is this weapon system the right weapon system at the time? And let's think about how good people will be if we supply it as opposed to what the Ukrainians actually needed to finish the war victoriously. The only way to really think about a war is how do you finish it victoriously?

And then where we are now, of course, is that we're not supplying anything. You know, Rheinmetall, one German company, is outproducing us in terms of artillery shells. The North Koreans are outlying the entire West, and we, for our own political reasons, which are unfortunately connected to Russia's political reasons, are at the moment not doing anything at all for Ukraine. So that's the subjective part and what I want to stress is that we're the weak link. America is the weak link. The Russians see us as the weak link, and unfortunately, they're correct. On the battlefield, the Ukrainians are doing, I would say surprisingly well. They've cleared out a huge swath of the Black Sea, of the Russia's Black Sea fleet, which is allowing them to supply the near East and Africa

with food. They've destroyed a huge number of Russian aircraft in the last few weeks, largely, if not entirely free in the sky.

The Russians are on the offensive now, but it's slow and it's costing them. So this is still a war that Ukraine can win. But whether or not they win it depends upon whether they have allies who are capable of seeing the political stakes and capable of behaving in a way which is consistent with simple military logic, which is what do you need to do to help your ally to win.

BILL KRISTOL:

And if we do finally get this aid package through and the Europeans continue to be, we can come back to this, I think in my judgment, better than they might've been standing up pretty well for Ukraine. You think this for now, it's kind of, I don't know if it's really a frozen conflict technically, but it's kind of not moving very much conflict on the main lines of battle, you think that's sustainable for Ukraine for a while? I mean even if ultimately they could... one hopes they will win, but you're not panicked about the current situation.

TIM SNYDER:

No, I'm going to... Let me talk about frozen conflict for a second. Because frozen conflict, that's a deliberate political aim. You go into part of Moldova, you freeze the conflict, and I would want to avoid that term because it suggests that nothing's ever going to change. But also because it's an aim in itself, like if we accept it's a frozen conflict, then we say, "Oh, well then there's kind of nothing we can do. It's frozen." So, it's an active hot war. It's a war of attrition in which you're right—

BILL KRISTOL:

But isn't it also, it's a Russian aim in some conflicts, whereas here, their aim isn't really a frozen conflict, is it?

TIM SNYDER:

Yeah. Yeah, exactly. I mean, their aim as they make clear every day in the statements of their highest political authorities and their propaganda shows every evening, their aim is to destroy the Ukrainian state. I mean, for people who want to be fooled, there's still stories out there about the Russian language or NATO or whatever, but what they tell us every day is they're trying to destroy Ukrainian state and society. That's their war aim. And so long as they haven't done that, they're going to try, they're going to keep trying to do that on the Ukrainian side, yeah, they can sustain this for a long time, provided that they don't engage in ill thought through offensive operations or lose too many people. The main constraint that they have is that there are only so many Ukrainians and it's reasonable of them to be taking that constraint into account.

Russia has more people, but also Russia, the Russian leadership doesn't care at all about losing its own people, whereas Ukrainian leadership to its great credit, does care. They have to balance preserving territory, winning the war and not losing too many people on the battlefield. But I think they've been very clever about things that look asymmetric like these sea drones. They've been very clever about how they fought the war so far. And again, so I think so long as we subjectively act as though they can win the war, I think they can eventually win the war. And I mean, to be clear by winning the war, I don't mean that they're going to drive out every Russian soldier off every square centimeter of Ukrainian territory. It's that I think a system like the Ukrainian one actually has more staying power than a system like the Putinist one. And war ends

when politics buckles, it ends when one side or other can't sustain it any longer. And I think if the Ukrainians have support, the weaker side in the end is going to be the Russian side.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's it. So interesting. I want to get back to us being the weak link, which I mean is a terrible thing as an American, I've got to say, to acknowledge. But it's true, I think for now. But have you been surprised, I mean, you're a student of, and I think mostly an admirer of modern or current Ukraine or current being even a couple of three, four or five years ago. But have you been surprised by just the performance of their— the country, the system, the government, the civil society? It seems pretty impressive and awfully admirable, but—

TIM SNYDER:

I was one of... This question is a little awkward. It's awkward when you're right. It's not awkward when you're wrong in American public because when you're wrong, everybody just forgets it. Right?

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, I'll put it in a better way then. I guess knowing much less sort of was pleasantly surprised. So tell me why, explain what was happening in Ukraine that people like me didn't fully grasp.

TIM SNYDER:

Yeah, I publicly said Zelensky is going to stay and they're going to fight. And that basically got laughed at by the American Foreign Policy Establishment. And so, I did think he was going to stay and they were going to fight. I didn't think they would do as well as they ended up doing. So here I'm going to join in your expectation. I want to start there somewhere else, which is why, I'm just going to pose it a different way, which is why didn't we take Ukraine seriously or to put it in the sharpest possible term, why was our expectation the same as Russia's expectation? Because both inside the Kremlin and inside the Beltway and inside the Beltway among both Republicans and Democrats, the expectation was Ukraine is going to fold in a few days. And why did we have that expectation? And I think that expectation arises from the deep fundamentals, the imponderabilia, the things that come before we even start talking about history or strategy or politics.

I think that comes from a kind of very deep Russian subjective victory, which is Americans and most people in the West until 2022, somewhere deep down thought Russia's a real place and Ukraine is not a real place. And then from that, without actually saying that out loud, we reason forward to “whatever, they're corrupt, it's a new nation who knows..?” like something that we are willing to say out loud. And then from that we reason to, “they're going to flee.” And I think it's that deep unspoken thing which was basically mistaken. And that's where maybe I had an edge over other people because I studied the place. In the last 30 years, Ukrainian civil society has become more and more active and self-aware. And this is relevant for Americans too, successful at defending and pushing democracy forward because democracy doesn't just happen as we like to think. It unhappens, democracy naturally unhappens, you have to make democracy happen.

And Ukrainian civil society step by step has managed to not only sustain, but make democracy a little bit less imperfect over time. And it's that same civil society then,

which is behind the army, which is fighting the war. And it's that same state, which has gotten—you know, it's not perfect, but it's gotten better and better over time rather than worse and worse, which is fighting this war. And then of course, I think they were fortunate with their leadership too. I mean, it's kind of an argument for democracy that somebody as improbable as Zelensky would win an election. Then people like, "Okay, well, this guy, he's just, what can he do?" But it turns out that thinking in terms of how to communicate and thinking in terms of the grand stakes are things that a properly trained actor can do. And that turned out to be very, it's still very important, but very important in the first year.

But I think fundamentally it comes down Bill to just this basic notion that Ukraine's actually a real place, and Russia isn't the thing that it's convinced us that it is. It's something which is more fragile and more new.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's great. I mean, in Ukraine, a Ukrainian friend of mine, acquaintance of mine here in DC, we were having a long conversation about this and she was asking why Americans don't understand sort of that this is not only worth fighting and worth winning and worth helping them, but it'd be hugely important to have a stable, free, liberal democratic Ukraine right where it is as a real ally and it's a positive. It's not just doing the right thing and helping a country that's dealing with a terrible neighbor. It's actually a huge strategic advantage. I don't know if maybe that's just our wars over the last, God knows, 50 years Vietnam and Iraq and Afghani—we're helping people who I think we could argue were on the better side of these conflicts against dictators and so forth.

But it was more us trying to do the right thing and help them. And as she put it, well, as I mentioned Vietnam, she said people need to think of Ukraine as West Germany, not as Vietnam. That's not quite right. But I mean, as a big country, that will be a very important ally in fighting for freedom and democracy in the future, not simply as a place we kind of have intervened to try to help do the right thing.

TIM SNYDER:

Yeah, I mean, this is the problem is that we don't actually have an analogy, and I mean there are two differences, but with Iraq, and these are places where you and I may disagree, but in Iraq, we actually intervened militarily, which we didn't do in Ukraine, we're not going to do. And what we did, we did on false pretenses. And so that's meant that we lost a lot of credibility with our own people and then also with others. And so then you come around to a situation like Ukraine. I mean, it's kind of like a fairy tale, right? It's like the crying wolf or something. You come around to a situation where the wolf really is there.

And the situation actually is really simple because that's the thing about Ukraine, which is unusual, is it's both its strategic and its moral simplicity. And people don't want to think that it's simple. They want to think, "Oh, wait, somehow this is part of a conspiracy, or this is somehow Vietnam or Iraq or somehow," but it's actually, it's not really like those situations. It's a country which is defending itself, and we're kind of helping on the margin, which is a good thing. But we haven't really been in that situation before. There aren't that many situations where democracies are defending themselves, right? I mean, Great Britain in 1940.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, Britain in 1940 is for me, as this war began, has been going on for me, is the one that just stands out.

TIM SNYDER:

Yeah, right. I mean, there's Czechoslovakia in '38 where the democracy should have helped, but didn't, and then there's Britain in '40 where we should have, and we did. But there aren't that many cases like this where really all we have to do is give them a meaningless percentage of our defense budget and they're going to win. And yet somehow we get ourselves tied up in these incredibly complicated arguments, which really don't even need to happen. And the Ukrainians are understandably befuddled by, and this is our, I think maybe our central strategic weakness and one that the Russians certainly exploit, our everyday assumption that it's all about us no matter what's happening in the world. It must be about America in some sense. And whether you're on the left, whether you're on the right, I think this is kind of our national weakness.

And if you assume it's all about you, then you spend a lot of time thinking about how it's all about you, and you get yourself tied up in arguments among yourselves about how it's all about you. Rather than just saying, "Okay, there are other people in the world who have agency, the Russians have agency, they decided to invade Ukraine, the Ukrainians have agency. They decided to defend themselves. What now makes sense in terms of our own interests, both moral and political in this situation?" And there are many things which have been wrong with our response, but I think that's a big part of it. Again, regardless of where people start out politically, is that we have trouble seeing that situations are not primarily about us.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. It was not until, I think, after February 24th, 2022, that I went back and looked in a little more detail at America First in 1940. And I of course knew about it, but I kind of assumed America First had been going in '38, '39, and then more famously in 1940 with Lindbergh and so forth.

And I didn't realize America First, the committee, the actual America First Committee was started after the invasion of the Low Countries and of France in 1940, and when the Battle of Britain was roaring in the most dramatic moments, really, of it. So the people in the US, the political forces in the US who wanted us to stay out, which slid very quickly into sympathy with Nazi Germany, were more sympathetic after the brutality and after all the excuses about its German parts of Czechoslovakia or whatever had collapsed, and after it was perfectly clear what was happening.

I don't know quite what... you've thought a lot about the psychology as it were of freedom and tyranny. I don't know. I was just so struck by this. I had sort of had a naive view, I think, that they kind of stumbled into an untenable position by late 1940. They chose that untenable position in late 1940.

TIM SNYDER:

I appreciate your saying that because it's such an important point, and I'm going to answer it starting from somewhere completely different and then work my way back. If you look at far-left sympathy for Stalinism and for the Soviet Union, when does it start to splinter? This is a story you know better than me probably, but the left, the European left, the North American left starts to get uninterested in Stalinism when there's no longer mass violence.

So, it's not that the far-left... I'm talking about the extreme left now, like the communist left. But it's not that people like the Soviet Union despite the violence. They liked it

because of the violence. And this is something which is very hard... we don't want to think this. We want to think everybody's basically a nice liberal or whatever, a nice conservative. We want to think people are basically decent souls and sometimes they're misled, but actually there is a taste of blood that people like, at least at a distance and sometimes in proximity.

And so the reason that I'm referring to why people didn't find the Soviet Union as sexy in the '60s as they did in the '30s, is that it's consistent with what you're saying. Abstracting away from the politics, it makes sense, actually, that people liked Nazi Germany after they realized what it really was. And this is what's happened with Putin's Russia as well. If you look at the people who are now going to Russia or who are now vlogging for Russia on the internet. These are people who like the fact that Russia's killing lots of Ukrainians. They like the fact that Russia's trying to prosecute a genocide. They like the fact that Russia's pushing for a world where might makes right. They like that. There's a certain number of Americans who like—people around the world, people who are not Americans who matter in America—who like this.

And that is unfortunately the appeal of, I'm going to use the word fascism. That fascism is about saying, "Look, it's all about the one guy. It's all about this one guy who's beyond history. Look at him. He's breaking all the rules." And yes, of course there's killing involved, but that's necessary. It's a normal. It makes us feel good. And that's what we're dealing with now. It's a big part of what we're dealing with. And although it's not always explicit on the Trump side of things, it's also part of the Trump side of things, where Trump is about how there's a strong man. It's all the succession of strong men.

He doesn't pretend to be the strongest of strong men. He's kind of a link on a submission chain where Putin is obviously higher than him, but for him it's ultimately about who is strong and who is not. And the fact that the Russians are killing so many people in Ukraine, there's so much bloodshed, is clarifying. It's because that is in fact what people like. It's not just that they're tolerating it, it's what they like.

**BILL KRISTOL:**

Yeah. That for me has been such a revelation of the Trump movement as well as the war now in Ukraine, that this sort of psychological appeal of fascism. Fascism, broadly understood. Not literally necessarily '20s, '30s European fascism, but that's something... I don't know. I had the more conventional, I was an anti-communist. And then the Cold War ended and then we had various... I was on the interventionist side, liberal interventionists, conservative interventionists side, depending on the Balkans and Middle East. But I don't know, I somehow put that out my mind. You didn't because you studied, I think, that part of the world. So that's infinitely more than I had. But I think it's a real... that's not a happy revelation, but it's one that one should've of course known all along, I guess.

**TIM SNYDER:**

Yeah. It's interesting that we dropped it in the US because the whole anti... In the '80s we got ourselves... I'm just looking at this back... in the '80s I was a teenager, so I'm not making an intellectual history point, but I think in the '80s, with Reagan, the anti-totalitarians got themselves all focused on communism. Whereas originally the anti-totalitarian position, the Cold War liberal position which then bled into the neo-comm position. But originally that position was an anti-totalitarian position and not an anti-communist position.

But as time went by and as domestic politics changed, it kind of morphed into this anti-communism position and the anti-fascist pit was in the background. But I think that snuck up on us. And it's not just an intellectual history problem, it's also that because... we didn't think about how fascism always arises at home. If you're just going to be an anti-communist, that means, okay, then the enemy's on the left or it's across the ocean or whatever. And you don't think, okay, well, here I am a conservative. Let me look to the right and just make sure that there's not anything over there dangerous which is going on. And I think that was a bit of a mistake. Another thing I've been thinking about is how, during the Cold War, they were always calling us fascists.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

TIM SNYDER:

And we were always kind of saying, "They're like Hitler." We were always using the Munich analogy. And I think that also tamed people's sensibilities a little bit, that if you're constantly being called a fascist, you don't think, oh, well, maybe actually I am or my friend is or we could be. And so we've I think we've missed elements in our history which enabled that sort of thing. And the sad thing is that others haven't. The Russians haven't missed it. They've been trying to cultivate that in us and cultivate that generally.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's interesting. This is a whole different discussion we should have some time on that because I think it's very shrewd about the history of American thinking and American foreign policy. There wasn't... the fascist regimes that are out there, or semi-fascist or whatever. Nasty right wing regimes weren't threats in the way the Soviet Union was to anyone else in particular, mostly, I would say in the '70s, '80s, Pinochet, whatever. And some of them democratized, and we did a little bit to help with that. We thought of China as, maybe incorrectly, still as communist, not as fascist. And then Putin, we were slow obviously in adjusting to. So there was about 20 years there where Milošević, I think there was a liberal conservative internationalist alliance to stop that in Europe. That was kind of... and again, but it's funny, I don't recall, and I was pretty involved in that in '95, '96, or even earlier, objecting within the Bush administration in '92 to our doing nothing. But I don't recall that we really thought of it as fascism, though I think that would not be a bad term, would it? For that.

That was a real early indicator that fascism was a possibility, and an aggressive possibility, in a post-Cold War world.

TIM SNYDER:

I think that's an excellent point. As I recall it, the move that we often made was to say, "These guys are somehow invested wrongly in the past," which of course fascists are. Fascists have the cyclical view of the past and restoring greatness. And in that way, Milošević really was... he was somebody who talked about both... he does the thing which Putin does now and which Trump does now, which is that you somehow are both always the victim and you're always the victor at the same time. Like everybody's always against you and somehow it always turns out well, and whatever you do is okay because you're always already the victim.

But yeah, I don't think, in coming out of the '80s into the '90s, a lot of the people that the United States had backed during the Cold War would have been called, if we had

not been backing them, fascists. And so that's one reason why we're not sensitive to it. But I think the main reason we're not sensitive to it actually is a lack of reflection about our own history. I think that's really where we... that's our real problem. It's not anybody else, the problem is us.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. And certainly someone like me who'd been on the conservative side, I feel like I've personally learned a ton about... and I knew this of course at some level, and I was pro civil rights and everything. But still, about the south and the reconstruction. And it's been useful... not useful. I hate to say it that way. It's a terrible, bad history and terrible to have to relearn it under these circumstances. But really looking at what happened in between, I don't know, 1870 and 1900 or something in the south, and the combination of using the laws and changing the laws, and then the extralegal militias and so forth. It's very reminiscent of... I think there the American exceptionalism led us wrong, too. We had blinkers on about some of that.

TIM SNYDER:

Yeah. Well, I think folks who were coming to political maturity in the late '60s can say, "Okay, now we've got this right."

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. Yeah. "We're on the right side of civil rights and we've..." yeah.

TIM SNYDER:

If we fix it, it's all done. But of course things that happen after civil rights, like mass incarceration and voter suppression, are actually continuations of that tradition, unfortunately. But the thing I wanted to say, going back to an earlier point you made, is that the racism is connected to the America First stuff. Lindbergh's... The reason why Lindbergh likes the Nazis is that he wants to have, and I'm paraphrasing him now, but he wants to have a fortress of white people that are going to hold back the black and brown people.

His fantasy is that we have a technological advantage across the Atlantic and, together with the Germans, we can basically keep the brown and the black people out of our countries. That's it. And it's direct organic. And you see that direct organic connection too, the folks now who talk about America First or isolationism very often bleed into or are quite openly on the wrong side when it comes to race.

And then just as a footnote, it helps to look at the Russians because the Russians, there are things about us they don't get. And I think Trump is going to pay for the Russians having too much influence on his campaign this time around. But they don't have any hesitation about seeing things about us that we might hesitate to see. And so they understand that our isolationism has to do with racism, and they feed that. They feed that constantly. So I see them as kind of a bad doctor. They're a doctor who wants you to die, but nevertheless their diagnostic skills are not so bad. They can figure out what's wrong with you, and then they try to make it worse, right?

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, well—

TIM SNYDER:



But they see that the racism and the isolationism are the same thing. And I think that's a point we should probably also be taking.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. No, that's important. Yeah. Well, good poisoners know the same things as good doctors. I think it goes back to Plato and stuff. Just one last... I want to get to action, what's likely to happen on the ground and in Russia and Ukraine and so forth in a second. But one last minor semi-political theory point, almost going back to my studies many years ago, but people my age, and I certainly was so influenced by Hannah Arendt and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and the whole left-right horseshoe, they're both totalitarians, and so much in common. And there was some truth, I think considerable truth to that, perhaps. And many people wrote eloquently about it.

And in that respect we did understand that there's Nazism in Soviet communism, but I think fascism's not quite the same as Soviet... it's not quite as... it needn't be maybe as totalistic, I guess you'd say, as communism was in terms of the real desire, allegedly at least, to shape people's every thought and so to speak, so forth. And I feel like there... I wish I had known more about fascism—qua fascism—and less about totalitarianism as a big concept.

TIM SNYDER:

Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

And which incidentally made it seem like all fascism is Nazi Germany, which is not quite right. For me, that Umberto Eco essay, which you must know very well, from, what is it? '95 I think, *Ur-Fascism*, and which focuses, maybe because of where he's from, on Mussolini, as in a way, the instance... and he was really the originator of it, right? In Europe.

TIM SNYDER:

Yeah, of course.

BILL KRISTOL:

That was a very revelatory for me, that you can have an unbelievably nasty and brutal regime. It doesn't quite look like what Hannah Arendt describes totalitarianism as looking like. And I guess that is Putin's Russia, right?

TIM SNYDER:

Yeah. I would agree with most of that. I think, yeah, Arendt's book is brilliant, and it's been very important conceptually for me, too. And a lot of my work, including *Bloodlands*, which you kindly mentioned, is about agreeing but disagreeing with Hannah Arendt or starting with some observation of Arendt's... and she's, I think unquestionably, one of the extraordinary political thinkers of that century. But you're right that she's taking not just the Soviet Union, she's taking Stalinism. If you look at the Soviet Union under Brezhnev in the '70s, it's a very, very nasty place, and there's still a gulag. But it's a smaller gulag, and it's a country which has given up on this total vision of the future. But she's writing about Stalinism. Likewise as you say with fascism, she's writing about Hitler's Germany. What she says about propaganda narratives, and the way that they fold all of reality into one big lie, that's much more true of Nazi Germany than it is of fascists in Romania or even fascists in Italy.

I think your point about the pluralism, as it were, of fascism, the plurality of fascism is really important. Fascism is built to fit each national tradition. It takes the national and turns it into the irrational, and therefore it's going to look different in each case. Also, because it's not built around a party. Of course individuals matter in the communist tradition as well, but in the fascist tradition, it really is the individual who sets the tone and is supposed to set the tone. It's the leader, the strong man.

Fascism is supposed to be different, and it is in fact different. That leads us to these debates, which I think you've just kind of cut through where people say, "Well, is it really fascism? Because let me give you a list of 11 things, and maybe it only meets..." That misses the point, because fascism isn't really about being rational, it's about being irrational. It's about will over reason, and the leader, and the single party. But the party's not a party, it's a movement. It's not about institutions, it's about turning institutions into something else.

Yeah, I think your point is very helpful, because I think Putin is a fascist, and I think it's taken way too long for people to realize that. And the fact that we haven't realized it has disabled—as I see it, this is maybe more my world than yours—but it's disabled a lot of people on the left. One of the heartbreaking things for me about the last 10 years is that I see all these people who regard themselves as anti-fascist. Okay, if you're an anti-fascist, that means not that you deny that fascism exists, it means that when it's there you oppose it. I see a lot of people who I feel like you missed your chance, or you're missing your chance. If you're an anti-fascist, you should go to Kyiv right now and show solidarity. That's what you should be doing, because there's fascism in the world, it's carrying out a genocidal war.

Likewise, in the US, a lot of people on the far left take a view of like, "Well, how do I tell the difference between Biden and Trump?" I can think of ways you can tell the difference. There are ways in your own tradition where you can tell the difference. But if this whole fascist vocabulary is somehow self-limiting and no one wants to use it? Then I think if you're on... Again, this is not exactly my world. But if you're on the far left and you have a taboo on fascism, or you deny it exists or whatever, then you're going to have a harder time talking about somebody like Trump where there is a cult of personality. Where he's turned the... I'm sorry to say this, but he's turning the Republican Party into a personality party. When it's like you've got people with the same last name as you who are supposed to run it, and it's going to fund you? It becomes then a personal institution like a fascist party. But if you don't have the vocabulary, then it's harder to criticize that.

Anyway, I'm taking your point. Look, there are many different kinds of fascism, and that's not an observation one would necessarily get out of the Arendtian tradition.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. On your point, for me, Ukraine is the most important issue in American domestic politics, partly because it really is such an important issue for the world in many ways, and therefore for America. But also because it's so revelatory, it seems to me, about people's actual views about America. Almost a little more than America itself, where you can find excuses not to see certain things, or there's someone... You know what I mean?

TIM SNYDER:

Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

This is so clear cut.

TIM SNYDER:

Yeah, I agree. It's a litmus test, and there aren't... The interesting thing is it doesn't ever really go wrong. Tell me what you think about Russia and Ukraine, and I will tell you what you think about voter suppression. Tell me what you think about Russia and Ukraine, I will tell you what you think about a whole range of other issues.

You can tell. You know this better than me, but with Republicans, it's really striking. For me, the people who have... Because I have spent a lot of time the last couple of years talking to Republican elected officials and others about Ukraine. The people who have a moral vocabulary about Ukraine also have a moral vocabulary about the US. It may not be my moral vocabulary, but they have one. There's some set of moral commitments out there.

Whereas the people who diminish Ukraine, or who try to push it aside, or who repeat Russian talking points, they also don't have the moral vocabulary about the US. About the US, it's also always about criticizing, dismissing, making fun, mocking. There's nothing positive there.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, no, it's so true. The tradition of liberalism, of a liberalist that was anti-fascist and anti-communist... I was talking to actually a Democratic member of Congress who I phrased, I think on TV or something, just sounding like Scoop Jackson. I said, "My first vote was for Scoop Jackson in a primary in 1972." I was a Scoop Jackson Democrat before I was a Reagan Republican. I didn't know him that well, but he called up and said, "That was nice what you said about me. But maybe you could say Hubert Humphrey, and not Scoop Jackson, because Scoop Jackson's a bridge too far for my friends here in the Democratic Party." I'm amazed people even know who he was mostly these days, but it was a funny conversation.

But Humphrey, I then actually went and read a little bit about Humphrey, whom I admired as a young man. But I didn't remember that much about his pre-history from before I was born as mayor of Minneapolis. Humphrey was really absolute anti-fascist, and absolute anti-communist, and put his own career on the line in both cases incidentally, and at home and abroad. Fought antisemitism as mayor of Minneapolis when they were... It was not popular to do that. Was a huge, of course, civil rights leader, and was willing to split the Democratic Party in '48 at the convention on that. Threw the Communists out of the former Labor Party, and I don't remember exactly when, late 40s in Minnesota. But had of course defined himself in before that as an anti-fascist. There was an admirable tradition there, and people were able to do both of those things at once, it seems like. Maybe that will come back.

Maybe say a word about Russia. What's the prospects there? How firm, how strong is Putin? Anything to hope for there? Then about the actual... I'm curious what you think about Ukraine itself, but also about its neighbors. The European situation as we move forward. Then we can come back to the US, which, as you say, is both the key and sadly maybe the weaker link.

TIM SNYDER:

Okay. Let me just pick a segue out of what you said, because I think... You're teaching me things I don't know about Hubert Humphrey. There's an awful lot I don't know about US history. I'm an American and a historian, but I'm not an American Historian, and I have a lot to learn.

But it strikes me that in order to be an anti-fascist and anti-communist, the most important thing is you have to have a positive vision of the American future. The thing which Russia traffics in, and how Russia will win ultimately, is futurelessness. Their politics is a politics without a future. It's a politics which is built entirely on myths of the past.

The war they're fighting against Ukraine is not really based upon some vision of how things will be better if we conquer Ukraine, it's based upon a lack of vision. We don't really know what we are, and therefore we have to destroy them, because destroying them gives us a sense of what we are. Everything is us and them, and since we don't know who we are, we have to have the "them." All the emotional energy, all the political energy goes against them.

That can obviously sustain a war for a while, and it has sustained a war for longer than I think a lot of people expected. I think things are going quite badly for Russia, and I think the way that the only place they're really winning is in the American mind. Not just the American mind. The only place they're winning is in people's heads. They're not really winning on the battlefield. They've smartened up from their initial invasion, which was based on this entirely false political premise. But they're still losing an awful lot of men in order to take a relatively small amount of territory, and they're doing badly, as we talked about before, in the air and on the sea. Politically, I'm not really sure what their explanation is for going on for another year. I think they've plateaued. They've hit this plateau, where Russians think the war makes sense because people have died. It's precisely that. Because my son has died, because my husband has died, because my brother has died, there must be some reason for it. That will keep you going for a while, but it won't keep you going indefinitely.

I think they're going to have a hard time getting to 2025, and that's why they're so heavily invested in us right now. That's why we've heard so much about how they're winning, and Ukraine is losing, and let's all throw up our hands. This whole fatigue thing, everyone's supposed to be tired, which I think is completely ridiculous. What are we supposed to be tired about? We're just sitting here watching and occasionally voting on something, that doesn't make you tired.

I think Russia's in trouble, and I think they are... This is unpleasant for us, but if we don't see it, we're never going to. They see Capitol Hill as the shortest route to Kyiv. That's how they see it, and we have yet to prove them wrong about that. Their politics are, in a sense, very closely related to our politics at this point, because they are counting on Mike Johnson and on Donald Trump to get them through. That's their plan. Their version of victory is that we lose focus, we lose attention, we don't fund, and then they wear the Ukrainians down with the help of the North Koreans and the Iranians.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, they see Capitol Hill and then the 2024 election, obviously presidential, as their two-step path to victory. But yeah. No, it is striking. You think that's very explicitly in their mind, that if things went differently on Capitol Hill and in 2024 it would have a pretty big effect in Russia?

TIM SNYDER:

Oh yeah, yeah. I know you know all this—

BILL KRISTOL:

No, no.

TIM SNYDER:

...forgive me the little lecture. In the US we really do live in our own... We have bubbles within a bubble, but there's one big American bubble, and in that American bubble we have all these other bubbles. But then on the American bubble we just often... I just put it very bluntly. We often just don't recognize that there's a world out there which is communicating to us very clearly.

The Russians pretty much every day in their own propaganda talk about how great Trump is, and how great the Speaker of the House is. We might not like that, we might not pay attention to it, but it's right there before our eyes. They literally go on screen in front of millions of their own people and say rah-rah when there's not a vote for Ukraine aid.

They're not really hiding it from anybody, that this is what they're up to. Their propaganda is basically an alternation between we're trying to destroy the Ukrainians and, oh look, we have new pets in America, which is how they describe the people who do what they want. Because they simultaneously praise them, and they're incredibly condescending about them as well.

They refer to Trump, for example, as *Nashatrampushka*, which is our little... I don't know, like "our little Trump darling" or something. They praise American political figures, but also in the sense that they're just these things we cuddle because we like them so much. That's how they talk about Tucker Carlson as well. He's very courageous compared to the other Americans, but he's also completely our person. It's broken his head a little bit.

Yeah. Sorry to take so much time to answer it, but it's just a really simple yes. They make it 100% clear that this is what they're doing, and it's only... They know, unfortunately, that we're so narcissistic that we don't even notice. Anyway, for those of you viewers who want to notice, Julia Davis does a terrific job on her and her writing, and in her Twitter feed and on YouTube on just summarizing Russian propaganda day-to-day. If there's any uncertainty about this stuff, she's very helpful on this.

BILL KRISTOL:

And you read her. I read her on Twitter, it's so astonishingly both vulgar and... I don't know, simpleminded isn't even the right word, it's what's what you're saying. There's no artistry, and condescending to their American stooges, and that seems to have no... Not to hurt them much, and I think maybe it's important for them at home to show that we are in charge, and maybe we have these fellow... I think the Soviets were a little this way too to their fellow travelers. They didn't actually treat their somewhat stooge-like fellow travelers here in the US or in Western Europe with great respect, right?

TIM SNYDER:

It's a very funny mix I think in both cases. I'm sorry, part of my mind is now thinking about how to translate *Nashatrampushka*. Now thinking of "Trumpkin Dumplin'," something like that.

BILL KRISTOL:

Oh, that's good, yeah.

TIM SNYDER:

But yeah. In both cases, there's this mixture of authentic fear of American power. And then... because this is one of the odd... Taking a big view, I don't know if you'll agree.

But objectively, the comparison between US and Russia now is nothing like the Cold War.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

TIM SNYDER:

Right. There's this discourse of multipolarity, which I accept is more valid with respect to China. But if it's just a US-Russia thing, there's no bipolarity anymore. The differences in power on every dimension except the nuclear, and the nuclears, for most purposes, are relevant, the difference is so extraordinary. And so it's a mixture where they are very afraid of the US, because they know if the US actually gets its act together, essentially we can win the war in... It sounds very condescending, but we could win the war on Ukraine without noticing. The amount of help we have to give to the Ukrainians, which would be very significant for Ukraine... I mean, remember the Ukrainian economy is about 1/250 the size of the NATO economies. Russia's about 1/25 the size of the NATO economies.

And so if we actually just had a consistent policy, the scale of which wouldn't even be noticeable in our budget, we could win. And they know that. They know that. And so then whenever they get their useful idiots, the relief is so great that it kind of bursts into hilarity. Like, "Oh, look. These people could crush us with a little finger, but look, they're not going to because we've got Tucker and we've got *Nashatrapushka*, you know? We've got these people." And so their relief manifests itself in this kind of hilarity, in this kind of like, "Oh, well, look. The world is actually set up in such a way that we don't have to win. There are these people who are going to come and help us out."

BILL KRISTOL:

Eek. Say a few words about Europe. I mean, generally there are crosscutting trends and tendencies in many different nations, and obviously the different nations are very different. But what's your general sense there, and particular things that either alarm you or cheer you up?

TIM SNYDER:

I mean, in general, the Europeans are doing better on Ukraine than Americans think. And just to... There's a lot of discussion about GDP per capita spending on defense as a percentage of GDP, sorry, and that's a Trumpist discourse. But if you look at percentage of GDP spent on the Ukraine war, the US is way down the list. Like, we're below Bulgaria. We're below countries that we don't even think are on the Ukrainian side. We're below Malta. We're below the Czechs. We're below pretty much everybody on that measure. And even if you take the total, the Europeans are now way out ahead of us. Different measures are slightly different things, but they're way out ahead of us. So I mean, just as a starting point, it's important for Americans to realize that we're not actually leading. We could be and we should be, we really should be, but we're not.

But it's not... The Europeans lack what we have. They don't have all the stuff on the shelf that they can give away, and our manufacturing capacity should be much greater than theirs, although it's not because we haven't made the right choices. In Europe, it's like different countries at different points are doing the right thing. At the beginning it was the East Europeans who had been right all along and who then kind of threw what they had at the situation. You have kind of steady in the background the Norwegians, who have infinite resources. And then you have the Germans who, in an incredibly

painful set of contortions, which are unbelievably frustrating if you follow them, and if you know anything about German history. Because if you know things about German history you know that actually Germany has a very profound historical debt towards Ukraine, which they're only very slowly realizing is the case. Germany is very, very slowly, too slowly, very slowly going in the right direction.

And then you have the French who have been basically... Macron has seen, as generations of French leaders before him have seen, when there's a moment of American weakness, that's a moment when France can play a disproportionate role. And Macron, I think he's doing exactly the right thing in exactly the right rhetoric, and I'm glad he is doing it, but it's really striking that the Gaullist moment arrives when the Americans are busy doing nothing. But what Macron... I mean, the French are doing less than other countries, but what Macron is saying now is very important because he's the one who's saying, "This is very clear morally, and this is also very clear strategically," and he's right about those things. So I think the Europeans can get the Ukrainians through this year without a disaster. But if we want the Ukrainians to win, and if we want... We haven't really talked about this, but there are all these strategic gains which the US gets by Ukraine winning. If we want that, the Americans are going to have to come in and help.

BILL KRISTOL:

What about domestically though in Europe? I mean, how worried do you about Orbánism? I mean, some countries seem... Czech Republic, very impressive, sort of repudiated a Trumpy type president. They've got half a million Ukrainians who seem to be doing fine. There's not much resentment so far as from what I can tell. They're being treated well and so forth. Hungary, kind of Orbánism, where do you see the domestic trends there?

TIM SNYDER:

Yeah, that's interesting. Because if you take it as a whole, it's kind of like the US, where you have a strong and increasingly organized minority, which is pro-Russia, pro-Putin, pro-Russian victory, pro-fascist. And it's not a majority anywhere, but, on the scale of Europe as a whole, it's significant and it occupies certain important posts, like for example, the post of prime minister in Hungary. And from those posts, it can cause disproportionate damage or it can slow things down. And then a couple more of those posts. And then you've got real problems. Again, it's like the US. You don't have to have a majority which is anti-Ukraine, but you have to have a few blockers in position, which is what Putin is aiming for and what he hopes for.

Public opinion in... It's like the US. Public opinion in Europe varies from country to country, but it's basically pretty good, and it's remarkably good given that it's been two years and given that... And this has been a media discourse, which I really dislike. Given that since March of '22, too much of the media has been telling us how we need to be tired. Which is... It's kind of the worst of all possible forms of journalism, because it's not even a self-fulfilling prophecy. It's meant to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, and it's like now it's up to us to say, "Oh, yeah. I read that headline and now I'm tired because I read this headline about how I'm tired." But given all that, the public opinion is not bad.

And I tend to think that... There are a lot of European countries, there are a lot of elections, some are going to go well, some go badly. The Polish election went the right way. The Czech presidential election, as you said, went the right way. The Slovak one went the wrong way. The Italian ones seem to go very much the wrong way from the point of Ukraine, but actually she's been fine with respect to Ukraine, right? So there're

going to be elections. There's going to be a British election and Labour is going to turn out to be exactly the same as the Conservatives on Ukraine, maybe even a little bit better. So with the exception of Germany and France, things are going to go back and forth, but I think basically it's going to be okay. Where we'll really have trouble is if Le Pen wins a presidential election in France or if the AfD comes to power in Germany. In those scenarios, then Europe itself is going to have trouble.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Let's close by talking about the US, which you said was the key link and the weak link, I think you said, or potentially. Well, maybe right now the weak link, and potentially the very, very weak link. What I was struck by I was in Europe a few times, a year ago meeting with pretty senior Germans and I think the [inaudible] is more real than not, a little more glass half full than half empty and especially the younger Greens in Germany have been excellent. It's funny, I said to one of them at the end of a meeting, "I never thought when I was a Reagan Republican that the party I would like the most and admire the most really in Germany would be the 40 year old Green leaders and not the CDU or for that matter SPD leaders. But when talking to senior Germans from the foreign policy defense world, what was striking to me was—one forgets this again in one's solipsistic American way—we have just all these capabilities. We are a global power. We have intelligence. We have a ton of weapons. We could make a lot more and probably should be making more. We have many, many things we can do. No European country is even remotely set up that way. Their individual companies run, they do very good things, individual militaries that are extremely impressive, I would say, of the Balts and the Nordic states, and so forth.

There are many great things. I'm not being at all... all diminishing them by comparison. It's just as a factual matter, and the degree to which we can help in sort of day-to-day conduct of the war compared to... We're set up to fight wars and to deter, and we've done quite a lot of fighting of wars, smaller ones, thank God, in the last 50 years. And obviously no European country has really. So in a very practical way, I was struck by the indispensability, if I can use a Madeleine Albright phrase, of the US, as well as the broader political way as well.

But anyway, say a word, we'll close. But say a word about the US in general and what you would say to fellow Americans, or what prospects you... What worries you the most and cheers you up, if anything, the most.

TIM SNYDER:

Well, let me just pick up where you started then I'll go somewhere else. I mean, the striking thing about us helping the Ukrainians is that we could help... Most of the stuff we're giving Ukraine is stuff we were going to throw away.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

TIM SNYDER:

The systems that we've been giving Ukrainians are stuff which was obsolescent and which American taxpayer dollars were going to spend to take apart and throw away. And what we're doing right now by not doing anything is we are basically throwing away systems, which from our point of view are too old, instead of giving them to the Ukrainians. The HIMARs that the Ukrainians have been using to great effect are things that we would never use because we were going to throw them away. And so it goes to



this point that we have such... We have, in principle, all this military power and we make ourselves laughable when our actual capabilities are so ludicrously off our theoretical capabilities.

I mean, that's why the Russian propagandists have trouble containing themselves, is that the stuff that we're going to... It's this. The stuff that we're going to throw away would be enough to help the Ukrainian army defeat the Russian army. But we can't get ourselves together politically enough to give the Ukrainians the stuff we were going to throw away. And that's why they laugh at us. And I mean, that may be unpleasant, but we have to break out of it. Sometimes you have to... Other people can help you to see ourselves. And so yeah, the US should be able to help Ukraine win this war.

I mean, now switching from the Russian point of view to ours, I guess the main thing that... The main switch I wish we could make is I wish we could say, "Wow. In the last two years, the Ukrainians have done a lot for us." They've defended the international order. The basic principle of international order is that countries shouldn't be invading other countries and changing territory. They have held off, in large measure, a genocide. Wherever the Russians occupy, they have been killing people, kidnapping people, raping people.

Holding off a genocide is not something just that Ukrainians are doing for Ukrainians. It's also a contribution to a better world. The Ukrainians are fulfilling the entire NATO mission, basically on their own. There won't be a war in Europe so long as the Ukrainians are fighting the Russian army, because there's no way the Russian army can fight another war. If Russia defeats Ukraine, of course, it can. And in my view anyway, they've made a war with China much less likely because they're showing how offensive operations are complicated and unpredictable, and a Chinese Communist Party that doesn't want to be embarrassed is going to pay attention to that. And the Ukrainians are showing that there are people out there in the world who are willing to take risks for democracy, which is a pretty important example, I think, for us and for everybody. They're doing all those things for us. I think that's where the conversation should start. And then it's like, "Okay, well then what are we doing for them? For this strategic bonanza and this moral example, what are we doing in return?" I think that's where the conversation should be starting. Because as I see it, I mean, there are a lot of reasons to care about Ukraine, and I care about Ukraine as such. But even if you didn't, if you're just an American concerned about American interest, there's a kind of unusual strategic opportunity here where so many things are possible for so few resources. And even if you're just a hardheaded American realist, this is a historical opportunity which you're never going to see again, and I wish people would care about the moral issues. But even if they don't, I wish people would care about our own interests, because our own interests point in exactly the same direction here.

**BILL KRISTOL:**

That's such an excellent point and eloquently stated, and I think an appropriate place to close. But we should get back together maybe after... Hopefully things look more promising in November 2024, and maybe we can talk more about the future and about a brighter future. Whereas I think, as you say, so well, I mean this... 2024 could be a real turning point, not just for Ukraine, but for all of us. I mean, couldn't it be a real inflection point in world history?

**TIM SNYDER:**

Yeah. And it can still be a good one. It can still be a good one. Yeah. Thanks for reaching out.

BILL KRISTOL:

Tim Snyder, thank you so much for joining me today, and thank you all for joining us on *Conversations*.