

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

David Axelrod Conversation

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BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I am Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined, for the second time on these conversations, by my friend David Axelrod, a man with many titles. We were joking about this, CNN commentator, *Hacks on Tap* podcast host, founding director of the Institute of Politics. I had the pleasure to serve on that advisory board with him where he did an excellent job for 10 years at the University of Chicago. Probably tougher to manage the Institute of Politics at the University of Chicago than run a couple of presidential campaigns, right?

DAVID AXELROD:

Well.

BILL KRISTOL:

Students, faculty, all those people.

DAVID AXELROD:

Actually, easier than many, easier than most. I can point to a few institutions, including the one you attended, where I think it would be more difficult.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, no. I give Chicago credit for making it a hospitable environment and one where... and you insisted on real free speech and civil discourse. It was very appreciated.

DAVID AXELROD:

I should point out that Bill Kristol has been an eminent board member of the IOP from its inception, and we try and reflect his temperament and civic values.

BILL KRISTOL:

I rubber stamp David's decisions, but that's what board members are for, of course. Most importantly, for this conversation, obviously, and most famously the top campaign strategist and President Barack Obama's—Senator Obama's—2008 campaign for the presidency, and then his successful reelection in 2012, which is really what I want to focus on today. I guess you ran the most recent successful reelection campaign in America.

DAVID AXELROD:

Yeah. We came to take for granted that presidents would be reelected. We had a string of reelections. George W. Bush got reelected. I guess you were involved in an unsuccessful reelection.

BILL KRISTOL:

Thanks. Yeah. I was the one exception in the Reagan, Clinton, Bush, Obama streak. They needed me to come into the George H.W. Bush White House to break that to me.

DAVID AXELROD:

Yeah, Carter in there, but Nixon got reelected and then curtailed, but we had a period of time when there was tremendous advantage to being an incumbent president, and we'll see if that holds. In this election, we have this unusual situation where we have basically two presidents running against each other. Right now, I think you're seeing the advantages and disadvantages of incumbency at the same time. Biden's raising a lot of money. The bully pulpit that you and I used to talk about has been sort of fractionated, so it's not what it was. Trump, it's interesting. He's getting the value of incumbency and yet still running as an insurgent. It occurs to me, he's always been, even when he was president, he was an insurgent. That's a comfortable place for him to be, but he's not raising the money.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Though that will come, I suspect if it's competitive. Well, let's go through what will be incumbency is such an important issue. Let's talk about, so what would you, you've been through it. You've actually run one of these, they call you in it's what, seven months ago? Really? Six months ago until voting begins. Begins in late September. It's not quite as far off as everyone says. Let's just assume you're helping President Biden and not former President Trump, and they call you in and say, "Okay, what do we need to do? Let's be practical here and forward-looking, I guess, and what do we need to do? Where do we stand? What do we need to do? What's the biggest challenges?" Then we can go through a whole thing for how do you make a better case for Biden? How do you make a better case against Trump? How do you deal with RFK Jr? Let's just give me the top line first. I mean, where do we stand?

DAVID AXELROD:

Yeah, let's start off with a small question. Look, I think that campaigns are all about narratives and we talk about issues, but issues are subsets of larger narratives. The Republican message, the Trump message is that the world's out of control and an enfeebled aged Biden is not in command. That's the Republican message for this election campaign. It seems to me that A, you have to be aware of that and counter that, and he's not going to run a half marathon, so that's out. But you have to have strategies to deal with that, but you need to know what your own narrative is. I mean, elections when your message is right is about the future, and my argument would be Biden's fighting for you and your future. Trump is consumed by his past and fighting for himself, and I would sort of build the campaign around that.

We live in a very unsettled time, and that has made Biden's task harder. I think we have a post-pandemic PTSD. You can see the wrong track number that we always talk about in politics has remained pretty negative, people's view of the world. I think that's amplified by and fueled in many ways by social media, which thrives on the negative. What I wouldn't do, and I just was fulminating about this on my own podcast, on the *Hacks on Tap* podcast, I wouldn't go out there and extol the miracle of the Biden economy. It just drives me crazy when he does that. He was on the *Today Show* yesterday and he got asked by Al Roker about a very simple question. It was at the Easter egg hunt, and Roker asked, "A lot of people are worried that their bucks aren't going as far. What do you tell them?" Instead of sort of doing what you'd expect Joe

Biden to do, because he's a person of empathy who grew up in a working class circumstance and identify with the concern, he said, "I would tell him we've got the strongest economy in the world."

He continues to do that. That is the wrong strategy. The right strategy is to say, "Look, we've made a lot of progress from when the day I walked in the door as a country, and I'm proud of our country for fighting through this pandemic and getting our back to where we've got this much employment, but the fact is, the way people experience this economy is the way I did when I was growing up in Scranton, Pennsylvania. How much did you pay for the groceries? How do you afford the gas, the rent? These continue to be a problem and I'm fighting that fight." Then I go through a few things that, so I think he needs to put himself on the side of working people in their economic fight here. That's what we did in 2012. I mean, you remember, Bill, we were still very much feeling the effects of the great recession.

We were out of the recession, but people still were stung by the experience of it. If we went out and claimed economic mastery, we would've lost.

BILL KRISTOL:

Interesting.

DAVID AXELROD:

But instead, we spent 14 months talking about the future and whether we're going to have an economy that works for working people, for the middle class, for people who want to be middle class, is work going to be rewarded or are we going to have an economy where only the people, only the hale and hearty succeed, and in an environment in which people are very jaundiced about Wall Street in that election? That was very important message. Romney, of course, was not well positioned to fight with us on that. I think Biden has to get himself on the right side of these, on the economic fight. They're doing stuff, and I know this is supposed to be a conversation and you put in a quarter and now you're getting 10 plays, but I'm just about done here. He's doing stuff. I mean, the Justice Department just went after some real estate interests for price fixing on rents. The FTC just issued a report on how the largest grocers were marking up prices allegedly because of cost, supply chain issues from the pandemic. It turns out that they're jacking it up way beyond what their costs increases were. They're fighting these fights, but not really highlighting them to the degree I would in a campaign like this. Bottom line, be more like Joe from Scranton and less like President Biden from Washington. Put yourself on the side— because those are the voters, Bill, who are going to decide this election; working class people, Black, white, and Hispanic, who are very much scuffling still in an economy that's improved, but in which cost of living has aggregated and continues to be an obstacle.

BILL KRISTOL:

It's just so hard when you're the incumbent president and incumbent president's team to get them not to defend their record. Let's put it this way, not to have them ... They want to spend 80% of their time defending their record and explaining why they're doing better than anyone realizes, and 20% of the time talking about what they still want to do in the second term and so forth. Of course, what you're saying, I think, is that it should be the other way, 80/20, but I saw this—

DAVID AXELROD:

I don't even.. I'm sorry, go ahead.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, I saw this in the Bush— You were kind enough to point out though the one losing the election campaign, luckily until we had Trump.

DAVID AXELROD:

I just want to credential you.

BILL KRISTOL:

Thank you. Yeah, that's right, but now it was very hard. I mean, George H.W. Bush was proud of a lot of things he had done, but mostly foreign policy, which then became less important after at the end of the Cold War, but also Americans with Disabilities Act and the budget deal and Clean Air Act. It was reasonable for him to be proud of it, and maybe we certainly could have done a better job of explaining it all and defending it, but very hard to get an incumbent president and team, I think, to run a forward-looking campaign. You did that in 2012. You had the advantage of the economy having collapsed on the previous Republican administration, so little—

DAVID AXELROD:

Yeah, I mean, I don't know how much that was of some benefit, but—

BILL KRISTOL:

Not as much—

DAVID AXELROD:

I also have the advantage of a guy who I always say it's, you always look good driving a Maserati. He was very agile. He was a very good candidate and could carry a message in a way that we needed to. One thing about that '92 election—not to belabor the point, but I think there are lessons from it—you remember, I think Bush showing going into a grocery store because someone decided, Hey, maybe we better, there's concern about the economy and being unfamiliar with I guess the reader or something.

BILL KRISTOL:

The scanners were new at that point. This was a bum rap. We had a complicated explanation at the time, which we wasted two weeks trying to persuade people why this was a bum rap.

DAVID AXELROD:

It abetted a portrait of him as a guy who was an effete, who was out of touch with the lived experience of Americans in this case. I don't think people think Biden is unaware of the lived experience of Americans, but they think that he is out of touch right now and they blame age for it. He's got to show that he's very much in touch with what's going on in the experience of everyday people when they visit the grocery store, when they pay their rent, when they pay their mortgage, when they go to the... I always watched gas prices very closely when I was in the White House, and these are the ways... you don't necessarily watch all of these economic indices, but what you do watch is the numbers going up on the gas tank when you're filling your gas on the gas dispenser, whatever. When you're filling your gas tank. You do look at the cash register when you're buying groceries. There just needs to be more attention to that.

BILL KRISTOL:

I think, David Plouffe said to you recently on a panel you did, that's a very good... your colleague in 2008 and 2012.

DAVID AXELROD:

Yeah, brilliant campaign manager. Great—

BILL KRISTOL:

Great campaign manager. He said something about how there's always a temptation to want to lecture the voters about how you should be happier than you are. The right message is, I understand why you're unhappy.

DAVID AXELROD:

Yes.

BILL KRISTOL:

It's so hard for me, but I guess you're saying that's very important, right?

DAVID AXELROD:

That's number, that's rule... That's number one. The second thing is you need to make this a very comparative campaign. You cannot allow this to be a referendum in an environment in which 65% of the country feels like things are on the wrong track. People need to understand this is a choice now. It's not a choice between, as Biden used to say, between him and the Almighty. It's him and the alternative. The alternative is deeply, deeply flawed. I mean, Donald Trump is consumed by his past, his program for the future. Yes, he would like people to feel that it's about the economy and immigration, but it's really about retribution and revenge and his own aggrandizement. He has no space, time or interest in the experience of everyday people or the things that they're going through. He has no sense of empathy. He views everything through the prism of Donald Trump, and that should be a real advantage for Joe Biden and that they should press that through a variety of issues.

I don't think any ad they run should be a positive ad. I think they should run nothing but contrast media, potentially negative ads in spots, but they put up an ad today, Bill, about abortion rights. That was a very simple comparative that starts with Trump bragging about being the guy who brought down Roe versus Wade and Biden narrating talking about—which is a good thing—talking about his commitment to abortion rights and his trust in women. It's a very, very effective spot. I think that's a prototype for, it's a template for what they should be doing from here to the end. Donald Trump should be in the narrative from here to the end.

BILL KRISTOL:

Interesting. And which aspect? Well, let's pivot to Trump. I mean, there's so many things we can go after, obviously on Trump, his personal character, the lies, the January 6th, his actual policies, things he did in the first term, things he's promising to do, which are scarier in my opinion in the second term. He also wants to destroy NATO and is pro-Putin, I mean, how do you juggle all—

DAVID AXELROD:

Deport Bill Kristol.

BILL KRISTOL:

What's that?

DAVID AXELROD:

Deport Bill Kristol, I think is one.

BILL KRISTOL:

That tests well, unfortunately. Biden probably shouldn't feature that. Which aspects do you feature? The kind of the policy side, the personality side?

DAVID AXELROD:

Yeah. I think the temptation is to focus on just morality, ethics, democracy, and so on. But I keep saying to people, if you're speaking, I feel deeply about it. You feel deeply about it. We are bonded in this notion that democracy depends on rules and laws and norms and institutions. If your president is about the business of destroying them all, that is a fundamentally threatening prospect. That said, I suspect that if you're sitting around the kitchen table talking about the future of democracy, you're not worried about the cost of the food you're eating. You're not worried about your rent and your gas. I do think that the voters, I think ultimately the voters who care deeply about democracy and about Trump's sundering of it are going to vote for Joe Biden. I think that the real challenge for the Biden campaign is to reach people for whom that might not be the primary concern. That for whom, I think, principally economic issues are the concern, but also they have concerns about personal safety, and many have concerns about the viability of their childrens' future. And a lot of young people who are disillusioned, we talk about abortion rights, which is a motivator for young people, we talk about how the war has affected young people and so on. But you get into focus groups with these young people, and our friend, Sarah Longwell, who does such brilliant work, will probably attest to this, they have real concerns about their own economic viability.

So I would contrast what Biden is doing, and will do, with what Trump has done, and will do, on things that very much affect people's lives, and I would not count on the shock and dismay of people over the fact that the guy's under 91 criminal indictments, or that he engineered an insurrection, and so on, I think you're going to get that for free, but it's not enough to win.

BILL KRISTOL:

Our friend, Doug Sosnik, in one of these conversations said the alarm bells really went off for him, and in fact, this is when Trump really took the lead, about September, October, slightly, in the polls, when voters started saying that, retrospectively, they felt that they had done much better personally, economically—

DAVID AXELROD:

Yes, yes.

BILL KRISTOL:

...in the Trump administration than Biden. And since, as you said at the beginning, it's two incumbents, most recent president and the current president, it's a tough uphill slog, it seems to me, if they're looking at these two presidencies, they're not looking, unlike with Romney and the current presidency—

DAVID AXELROD:

Right.

BILL KRISTOL:

...and someone who, if he were successful, would define himself as bringing about a brighter future, but you succeeded in defining him as threatening a brighter future. Here, you've got two records, and if they think they did better under Trump, how do you dislodge that? Or do you just forget about the past and almost make it all about—

DAVID AXELROD:

Well, first of all, let me say it is really interesting. We tend not to credit people with good sense, but most people have good sense, and so they're kind of giving Trump a pass on the final year of his administration—

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

DAVID AXELROD:

...because they say, "Well, that was the pandemic, he couldn't help it." To some degree, perhaps, they will give Biden some... If Biden adjusts his economic talking points, I think they may give him some credit for managing through a difficult thing and understanding the burdens of that. But yeah, this is a concern that Trump's ratings, just as president, there's this gauzy reminiscence of Trump.

Now, I think some of that may be allayed, and this may conflict with what I just said, but I don't think the two are contradictory. I think one of the reasons that Trump has begun to slip a little, and there's been some progress for Biden in the last six weeks or so, some of it has to do with Biden being more energetic and the campaign getting more on track, but I think some of it has to do with the primary season ending and Trump getting general election consideration now, and people focusing on the fact that, "Oh, yeah, he could be president again. This is the choice."

And now, we got quite a bit of coverage of him over the Easter weekend, he always seems, Bill, able to celebrate these holidays by just... He celebrates the sacred by engaging in the profane.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

DAVID AXELROD:

It's really, really weird. But he just erupts over Christmas, over Easter. I don't know whether it's because he's confined. I posited on *Hacks On Tap* that he's jealous that Christ gets all this attention. I don't know. I don't know what it is. But his outbursts over the weekend just remind people that the guy is nuts, and living with him is like a... I saw some guy in a focus group say, he was a guy who voted for Trump before, but said he couldn't again, and he said, "Trump as president is like having a neighbor who runs a jackhammer 24 hours a day," he says, "Just exhausting." And so, I think there's some element of that that will erode some of these gauzy memories.

But I think the Biden campaign has to remind people, and you and I, we may have a difference of opinion on this particular piece of policy, but the one signature

achievement of the Trump administration was a \$1.7 trillion tax cut that primarily favored corporations and wealthy people.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

DAVID AXELROD:

It is the single most negative thing, up there with abortion rights, but it is more broadly impactful. And you talk about that, his inaction on pharmaceutical prices, a whole range of issues on which, on economics, he's just in the wrong place. And if there is a presumption that goes to Joe Biden for having some sense of the way real people, or average people, live... I think Trump gets a lot of points for cultural signification with working class people, but on economics, I think you can hammer him. And I think you have to remind people, get them to think about the future, about do they want someone who's going to take on the pharmaceutical companies? Do they want someone who's going to take on predatory interests, who raise costs? Do they want someone who's going to fight for healthcare rather than dismantle the Affordable Care Act? I think there are places where Trump is very vulnerable, and people aren't as focused on it as they can be.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, the cultural stuff is so appalling. Certainly, people like me and you, I think, and many others, and certainly in Biden's circles and President Biden himself, I'm sure, the bigotry, the nativism, the mean-spiritedness, the demonizing of opponents, the total disregard for the rule of law, that one does tend to focus on that, whereas the populist economic argument might actually be more effective, as you say, this—

DAVID AXELROD:

I fundamentally believe that.

BILL KRISTOL:

...is the problem with these modern campaigns. Biden hangs out with Democratic donors who aren't that populist, if we could be honest, on economics.

DAVID AXELROD:

No, they're actually more like Republican donors used to be.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah.

DAVID AXELROD:

They're wealthy and comfortable.

BILL KRISTOL:

And then, he has activists in his party who care a lot about, let's say, the left's cultural issues, and in a weird way, who's telling him to actually focus on mainstream, let's call it, new deal-like—

DAVID AXELROD:

Bread and butter issue.

BILL KRISTOL:

...New Deal-like semi-populist...

DAVID AXELROD:

Bread and butter issues.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah.

DAVID AXELROD:

Bread and butter issues. I think that Biden needs to embrace them, and they need to hammer them, they need to hammer them consistently. I really do believe Biden's problem isn't with suburban... Obviously, he wants to run up the score there, but he's doing pretty well there, he's doing pretty well with highly educated white voters. He's not doing all that badly. He's doing badly, as Democrats have for several cycles, with white non-college voters, but young people... Listen, the Biden Coalition in 2020 very much relied on, he got 87%, 88% among African-American voters, he got 65% among Hispanic voters, he won young voters by 20 or more. All of these constituencies are soft now. Trump's getting upwards of 20% in most polls of African-American voters, Hispanic voters are running even now, even young voters are running even.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah.

DAVID AXELROD:

And so, I think in some ways, you have to really think about, how do you get at least a necessary share of those voters back? And there too, I think, economics is as important as anything. So everything leads me back to those economic issues.

BILL KRISTOL:

Interesting. Which is slightly contrary to the general tendency of the media to want to focus on whatever the latest cultural outrage is. Someone made a good point to me, the Bible stuff last week with Lee Greenwood—

DAVID AXELROD:

Yes.

BILL KRISTOL:

...the grifter, huckster \$59.99 Bible where you get some American documents and Lee Greenwood song.

DAVID AXELROD:

I want to know, by the way, is Trump going to produce Trump-branded Passover Haggadas?

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, from Maxwell House to Trump...

DAVID AXELROD:

Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

Don't even give him the idea. Jared Kushner and those guys, they'll be on top of it and it's going to be a nightmare, we'll be dealing with it for decades, just like Maxwell House, they'll never go away.

DAVID AXELROD:

Exactly.

BILL KRISTOL:

I don't know, I was actually not that upset about the Bible and all that Lee Greenwood stuff, but I was talking with someone about it, and he doesn't follow politics that much, but he's smart, he said, "Look, that's just Trump. Of course, everyone knows he's a huckster and a grifter. You can scream and yell about that, but there's not one voter who doesn't know that, including Trump voters, they know that's what he does. But at the end of the day, what's he doing? People are voluntarily spending \$60, maybe foolishly, on a King James Bible."

DAVID AXELROD:

Cheaper than the gym shoes.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, with American documents attached. But that's not an effective argument against him. At the end of the day, oh, fine, he's marketing Bibles. Other people sell... There's a way in which we all... We, but a certain type of... A lot of people in the media, I'd say, really want to go after him on the cultural signifiers <https://gettrumpsneakers.com>

DAVID AXELROD:

Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

...and not so much on, as you say, the bread and butter issues.

DAVID AXELROD:

Well, even, I recoil from, after this last weekend, everybody's hair was on fire because he, except Jon Stewart, he had a great bit on this last night, because some guy had on his bumper some <https://gettrumpsneakers.com>

BILL KRISTOL:

Biden.

DAVID AXELROD:

...phonied-up artwork of Biden bound in the back of his truck. And there is so much out there, so many people out there saying, "Don't give Trump a platform, don't let

Trump..." I have the opposite view, which is I think more of Trump is better out there, because I do think people need to be exposed to... He's crazier now than he was in 2016, and even 2020, although it's hard to compete with telling people to drink or inject bleach to fight... But he's kind of scary crazy, and people need to understand the choice. I can't stand this notion that if we censor him, it'll all be okay. That's not the case. And I think he's profited, actually... I was relieved when he got taken off Twitter, because it was a migraine headache every day and it was provocative. But now, he's micro channeling, to his base, stuff that if most people saw, they would just... All that said, Bill, that's just an aside, I'm just venting at your expense here.

All that said, I don't think, at the end of the day, that the campaign should be based on all of that. The campaign should be based on fundamental quality of life issues, and people need to know there's a choice, and am I better off with this choice or that choice, and why? And I do think you look at these two guys, and one thing that is absolutely crystal clear is that one guy, leaving aside the issue of age and efficacy, I would argue he's been much more effective than he gets credit for, but one guy is focusing on a set of issues that will impact positively on the quality of life of most Americans, and the other guy is completely consumed by himself and his own interests, and I think that's something people need to focus on.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's interesting. He's an effective demagogue and he's a good entertainer, in his own way, and I agree with you, he's in a way a little crazier than he was, but he is also better, in some ways, at being a demagogue than he was, because he's really discovering what works.

DAVID AXELROD:

He's good. Listen, no one should underestimate Donald Trump.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's always been my keep.

DAVID AXELROD:

He's a feral genius—

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah.

DAVID AXELROD:

...that is very, very clear. And even the stuff that we're all... I'm appalled that he put a target on the judge's daughter's back over the weekend and published her photograph, because there are crazy people out there. I'm worried about another Paul Pelosi situation—

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah.

DAVID AXELROD:

...where someone is motivated by all of this. That said, what he's doing is he is doing what he always does. He knows that he is at risk of being convicted in this trial in New

York, and he's branding it. He's branding the whole event as a partisan, as he would call it, witch hunt and so on, and he's just going to do that relentlessly, just as he did by the way he branded the 2020 election in advance.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

DAVID AXELROD:

He said in advance, "If we lose, it will have been stolen." It wasn't something that he thought of that night. He worked on that project for months. This is what Donald Trump does, and you need to be alert to it. I do think we do have to call him out on these... These are strategies. This isn't just expressions of outrage on his part, they're strategies, and we need to call them out for what they are.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, yeah, I've very much thought that, therefore, I don't really like the, "He's popping off again, it's all instinct with him and anger." And there's, of course, a lot of that, God knows, but yeah, there are these branding strategies, he's been doing that for 50 years, marketing—

DAVID AXELROD:

Yes.

BILL KRISTOL:

...and he's unfortunately good at it. I said to someone the other day, I was critical of the Biden campaign, but I was sympathetic, I said, "It's tough to run against Trump, he's a tough opponent. He's, in his own crazy way, a very skilled politician of a certain type." And the person looked at me like I was just crazy. "Trump is not skilled at anything. Trump is a lunatic. Trump is crazy. He can't control himself. He says one stupid thing after another." But I think that's a mistake among Liberals and Democrats. Some of it's true, but it's a mistake to dismiss him in that way.

DAVID AXELROD:

It was... What was the line from Casablanca, when Humphrey Bogart is talking to the Nazi guy, and the Nazi was ridiculing blundering Americans, and he said, "I wouldn't be too hard on them, I was with them when they blundered into Paris," in whatever the year was.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah.

DAVID AXELROD:

So you can call Trump a blunderer, but he blundered into the White House, so you've got to take him seriously.

So a few other things I would be thinking about if I were Biden, one is I do think he's getting chippier. I've said, for a long time, I would encourage that, but I would encourage it in ways like this, I think he should say stuff like, "I don't think acting like a jackass makes you strong." Just colloquial, direct take on that whole sort of strength persona of Trump. I mean, just sort of bits of Bidenisms that make Biden look both

strong and rooted. So that would be one thing. He joked with him the other day about spotting him three strokes on a golf course if he would carry his own bag. I'm not sure golf is the medium or the image that I would... But a couple more, in terms of campaign, is I would very much... Plouffe said this on our conversation the other day at Arizona State University, Plouffe and Rove and I. I guess, Plouffe and Rove and me. He said that a lot of the campaign is happening below the surface.

Social media, a lot of the voters who Democrats need to reach are not watching *Nightly News*, they're not reading newspapers; that was David's point. They are getting a lot of their information on social media. For young people, TikTok and Instagram are very important. Biden has not been very competitive there until recently. Trump, first of all, his stuff lends itself to social media, and the memes about Biden's age lend themselves to social media and so on. But Biden needs to compete on social media, and they're getting better at it. They've got to get a lot better at it. When Trump does crazy ass stuff that is in their message frame, they need to get that out fast, and they're doing more of that.

But that's going to be a big battleground. A lot of these disaffected or disinterested voters are there, I'm not sure that the strategy to get those voters back is in place completely yet. He also has this money advantage, and he needs to take advantage of this in these battleground states by out-organizing Trump. There was a peace bill this last week in Arizona about how what complete disarray the Republicans are because their party is at war with itself. They're broke. The Trump campaign has no resources or hasn't applied any resources, so they have no organization. Four years ago, Trump had 60 organizers on the ground already. Now, he's got like six. Democrats ought to press that advantage organizationally in the battleground states.

By the way, we were talking about this on *Hacks On Tap*. In terms of motivating voters, getting these choice initiatives on the ballot is really useful. So they're working on that in Nevada, I think in Arizona. There are some other states that are less battleground states where they're working on getting something on the ballot. That will bring younger voters out. The Florida Supreme Court ruled yesterday, they put it on the ballot. I doubt Florida's going to be in play, but it's going to make it more competitive. The other thing about it, Bill, is it's going to force Donald Trump to decide to say publicly whether he supports the—

BILL KRISTOL:

Which he won't say right now. We had a piece in *The Bulwark* this morning... late last night by Marc Caputo that Trump refused to answer. He's a Florida voter. He's going to be on the ballot, voting presumably in November, and he won't say whether he'll vote for the constitutional amendment preserving abortion rights in Florida or not, which is... I mean, Trump is clever in the sense that he's right, I think to be wary of that issue, and right to try to straddle it and duck it. But a good campaign could make it harder for him to straddle it and duck it.

DAVID AXELROD:

Partly because of DeSantis, he attacked the six-week abortion ban that DeSantis signed, that Supreme Court in Florida affirmed yesterday that is going to have reverberations nationally. This issue is going to be a real problem for Trump, and he's going to have a hard time navigating it from now until election day.

BILL KRISTOL:

God, there's so much we could talk about and this is also interesting. I just went through a bunch of things. The Haley, Chris Christie, Liz Cheney sort of supporters out there, whatever number of Republicans and semi-Republicans there are. I mean, the Haley voters are the most concrete example. There were hundreds of thousands of them in battleground states, more than the margin in Michigan and Georgia, and I guess North Carolina, too. Anything special about getting some of those voters [inaudible] for Biden. Some of them are just Republicans, but there are some of them in the middle.

DAVID AXELROD:

I prefer to call them Bill Kristol Republicans.

BILL KRISTOL:

There you go. Yeah. They're already for Biden, the Bill Kristol Republicans. These Haley voters are undecided.

DAVID AXELROD:

Yeah, they are, but what were the centerpieces of her campaign? They had to do with national security issues, and that's a place where Biden should press his advantage.

BILL KRISTOL:

I so much agree with that, if I could jump in there, and I don't think they understand that. They think, look, the war in the Middle East is very difficult; Ukraine is difficult in its own, obviously, is an actual practical policy matter; and they're a little timid about making it an issue. I think I was told by someone very close to Haley herself, but to the campaign that they were surprised as they went forward at the response she got on Ukraine, NATO, Putin. They kind of thought you should talk initially about the debt and the deficit. Remember she talked a lot about that early on. Trump had been a big spender.

DAVID AXELROD:

Yeah, that was her initial thrust. Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

He wasn't a traditional Republican. No one cared about that. But a lot of Republicans do think we should not be pro-Putin and NATO has helped to keep the world safer than it would otherwise be for the last 80 years, and that's an issue. We're there with Biden unambiguously. It's not like some of these other issues where they're in between the two, and I feel like the Biden people could do much more to really press that a little.

DAVID AXELROD:

I was disappointed that they didn't make more. At the time, when Trump single-handedly killed the bill that had funding for Ukraine, Israel, the border, Taiwan, all in one package, and it was negotiated by a very conservative Republican, Senator Lankford, who got left out to dry there. Biden got down to the border three weeks later. They should have flooded the zone in the moment, and that's what they have to be better at. They need to understand that it's not just a one-off thing. You've got a hammer, hammer, hammer away. Because when you're sick of saying something, that's about when the average American has begun to hear the message. And so they've got to be better at that.

So this national security thing, I think, is important. One thing, Bill, that I would hope they would be organizing is a show of force among former secretaries of defense, former chairman of the joint chiefs, former senior military and national security leaders of both parties to, at a strategic moment, stand up and say, "We are Republicans and Democrats and independents. We as a practice don't involve ourselves in campaigns, but we believe that a second Trump presidency would represent a national security threat, and it would advantage the Chinese. It would advantage the Russians. It would weaken or destroy NATO. It would put ultimately our own interests at risk and our own young men and women at risk." I mean, I think a message like that would be powerful.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, no, I agree. I think people are working on that, we'll see how much they can deliver that.

Let's see, what else? The Democratic Coalition, we can say a word more about that if you want the younger voters. Anything magic about... You need to both get them back, get the percentages back closer to where they were in 2020 and get them to vote also. Right. There are two problems.

DAVID AXELROD:

I think two things. I think the comparative is really important here. And secondly, I do think, Bill, the war has been very, very damaging. I think the economic issues are primary in many ways, but the war has been very, very damaging, and it's something that has been worked on relentlessly on TikTok and Instagram. I suspect that some of the forces working it are not domestic political parties but maligned foreign interests, but it has the level of discord about it among young people.

Let me say, I haven't had this discussion with you, but I think you can hold two thoughts at once. I do. I'm the son of a Jewish refugee who knew violence and death as a child, and I'm strongly pro-Israel, and I mean my sense of horror and outrage and indignation about October 7th was as strong as anyone's. That said, I still weep when I see a starving Palestinian child, I still weep when I see families destroyed. And I think the passion of these young people... Some of it is misinformed, some of it is unfair, but a lot of it is them reacting to what they're seeing. I wonder if they're focused on what the difference would have been had Donald Trump been president at the time this happened, because he would have applied no restraint. He would not have been an advocate for restraint or for humanitarian aid. By the way, we should say a word about the seven World Kitchen Central folks who were killed in Gaza, apparently by Israeli forces accidentally, Prime Minister says. I take him at his word on that. But this is just a horrific situation.

So that's a long way of saying one hopes this is at a different place come November, and that people rec— It's World's Central Kitchen. I got that wrong. One hopes that by November, there will be a different situation, that the war will be over, that some rebuilding will be done, that there'll be some discussion of what comes next that includes Palestinians in that discussion. But this is a real thing, and Biden's not getting the credit for what he has done. He's getting the blame for more than he should, but it is the lot of being President of the United States at a time of war.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, this is the incumbent... Sarah finds it, [inaudible] finds this a lot in the focus groups. The world seems chaotic, and Biden doesn't seem to be on top of this now.

DAVID AXELROD:

Yeah, that's what I said at the beginning. That's a Republican message.

BILL KRISTOL:

It's a little unfair. I mean, the world could be chaotic. It's not Joe Biden's fault that Putin invaded Ukraine and this horrible war that's going on.

DAVID AXELROD:

No, this is a way of saying... The Republican message is he's too old and feeble. Now, I mentioned the other day that they're more than willing to give him credit, Trump is, for masterminding a vast conspiracy involving the Justice Department and prosecutors across the country to persecute Trump. So he can mastermind this whole elaborate conspiracy, but he can't tie his own shoes. It's like, choose a horse and ride it, brother.

BILL KRISTOL:

Conspiracy theories do not have to be consistent. This is something we know from history, right? The Jews in charge of everything and they're weak. I mean, it's—

DAVID AXELROD:

Yes. Yeah. No, you're right.

BILL KRISTOL:

Two things, maybe, and then I'll let you go. Let me do R.F.K second because that's obviously out there. But when I was vice president cross chief of staff, and I'd been through this really before. I remember worrying a lot about some trip the next week somewhere. God knows what we were doing. Some senior person said to me, "Calm down. You should do a good job. Make sure the trip's okay. But two things will matter for you as the vice president's chief of staff of the vice president: his convention speech and the debate." That was good advice because it put things in perspective, and you could have a lot of little things be slightly suboptimal. This trip to Green Bay didn't go perfectly, whatever, but at the end of the day, the convention speech was drowned out by Buchanan so that was not so good. He did okay in the debate.

But I'm curious about what you think about the convention. It seems to me those are the two known—what am I supposed to say—the two known unknowns we know are going to happen. Well, will there be debate? Should there be?

DAVID AXELROD:

No, there are no knowns, actually.

BILL KRISTOL:

Isn't that Democratic Convention in Chicago a little problematic here?

DAVID AXELROD:

It is. Yeah, I'm worried about it. I'm worried about it. I think that we had a tumultuous convention here in '68 and a very calm and peaceful one in '96, and you worry that it would be more like the first than the second, particularly if the war is still raging. We haven't talked at all about immigration. That's the other thing that Biden has to move on. He can't just rely on Trump—

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, talk about that some more.

DAVID AXELROD:

Well, I mean, look, I think the border issue, whatever you think of Abbott's tactics, the border issue is now a national issue. In Chicago, it's an issue that's torn the city apart. It's separated communities that might otherwise be aligned. Hispanic communities, Black communities. And the same is true in New York and Denver, and—

BILL KRISTOL:

It could add to the chaos perception—

DAVID AXELROD:

Yes—

BILL KRISTOL:

...on Gaza plus border, which are totally different things, of course, in the sense that Biden can't quite control either.

DAVID AXELROD:

Yes, that is it. I would not rely, if I were Biden's people, too much on the fact that Trump killed the most significant border bill. I think he's going to have to do something by executive order. Even if it's challenged in the courts, he has to look like he's seizing control of this situation. And then I think it makes the Republican obstructionism more effective, but that has to happen. The time is growing short. We've got a large migrant population, buses coming, many buses coming weekly from Texas, exacerbating it. And so I think the combination of protests over the war and tumult over migration and visible evidence of migrants, the diabolical mind would suggest that there'll be migrant tents set up, and not necessarily by the city in visible places just to underscore the issue. Where that issue is by the convention is important. Where the war is by the convention is important. There's been a tussle in the city about where these protesters can protest and that'll be I think significant, but yeah, I'm worried about it.

BILL KRISTOL:

The convention will be an important marker. Just looking ahead six months basically, seven months, there's the conventions, July and August. Then, there's—

DAVID AXELROD:

I mean the Republican thing is going to be interesting because it could be that you have a convicted felon for the first time in American history. That'll be of interest. I'm not sure it's going to move that many votes. Although you talk about these Haley voters, they have expressed in polling a strong opinion that they won't support a candidate who's been convicted of felonies. That may be the case by that convention. They're going to have their own intrigue, but those concerns are the ones I had raised.

Conventions are also an opportunity if you can handle those issues to tell the story that you want to tell. They had a brilliant convention in 2020 that was all or mostly virtual because of the pandemic, but they really branded Biden as a guy from Scranton who had good middle class values and sensibilities and economic values, who was a man of faith, who was a part of a military family. That was helpful.

BILL KRISTOL:

They used Republicans for Biden effectively. It was a lot of our people in the Republicans votes against Trump.

DAVID AXELROD:

Exactly, it was probably as well conceived a convention as I've seen and I've been a part of some that I was proud of. They did a great job and hopefully they can do that again and not have the thing overwhelmed by protesters.

BILL KRISTOL:

Is that an important moment you think, July, August, or are these days the conventions just come and go? I mean do you think that's sort of a possible inflection point? It used to be '88 Bush rallies at the convention, overtakes Dukakis. It doesn't seem like it happens quite that way anymore, but do you still think there's a—

DAVID AXELROD:

No, they're TV shows now and they're not watched as much as they used to be, but there's still an opportunity for branding and to tell a story. I talked at the beginning about the fact that campaigns are about narratives. You should leave a convention knowing what that narrative is.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's the last chance really.

DAVID AXELROD:

I think this is an opportunity to do that. The candidates get to make speeches and those speeches, while the audience may be smaller, still are significant. I mean conventions are important. We had some great old conventions in Chicago. We've had 25 at which real decisions were made and sometimes historic decisions. It's not going to be that, but—

BILL KRISTOL:

FDR in '32, Lincoln and FDR.

DAVID AXELROD:

Taft and Roosevelt.

BILL KRISTOL:

When I was arguing for Biden should step aside and let's have a fun competitive race. I really liked the idea of the Chicago convention replicating Lincoln and Lincoln in 1860 or FDR in '32.

DAVID AXELROD:

It's not going to happen.

BILL KRISTOL:

Could also replicate 1968 of course, that was a bit of a problem.

DAVID AXELROD:

Yes.

BILL KRISTOL:

What about debate? Should Biden debate?

DAVID AXELROD:

We had this discussion. You may have heard if you listen to that. We had this discussion and Plouffe was of the mind that he has to, that he needs it. I think that it's probably wise to make that decision closer to the event because who knows what condition Trump is going to be in going into that convention? If you need it, you should do it. If he does it, how he does it and how he appears to people will be obviously very important. If he needs a debate, he needs a good debate. He needs a debate in which his performance seems vigorous and engaged. It's almost as important as what he says. That's what Rove's point was in our discussion, but I'd make that decision later. His answer when he was asked this was, "Well, it depends on how he behaves," which doesn't exactly sound like a prescription for debating because if you're going on the basis of Trump's behavior, he disqualifies himself every day. It does hold open the decision and my guess is they will hold that decision open until they have to make it.

BILL KRISTOL:

RFK Junior and other possible third, fourth, fifth parties? I mean serious problem, clear who he takes votes from or not? Can the campaigns arrange things, push things so that he takes votes more from the other candidate than from your own candidate?

DAVID AXELROD:

Yeah, I think first of all, general premise, Trump has always gotten around 46%, 47% of the vote. He's never gotten to 50%. My view is that anything that lowers the threshold, in 2016 the combined third party candidates really helped him. Jill Stein of the Green Party who's running again got more votes in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania than the margin by which Clinton beat Biden. I think in the main these third parties help Trump more than Biden.

Kennedy is an interesting case because he's polling around 9% now nationally and in these states. Some of it is the name and nostalgia for the name and some of it is his anti-corporate populism that attracts some potential democratic voters, younger voters. Some of it is conspiracy theory, vaccination stuff that attracts Trump voters.

I think that the goal for the Biden campaign and Democrats has to be to leave him only with that group of voters who share the conspiracy theories and who identify more readily with Trump than not. I would target voters on social and in direct communications who are more apt to be for Biden or potential for Biden, but who find Kennedy appealing. I would try and peel them away and leave the rest for Trump. Leave the rest Trump voters with Kennedy.

BILL KRISTOL:

Maybe push some of the Trump voters to Kennedy. I always love the way these discussions are sort of silly sometimes because it's sort of who's voting for Kennedy? What's the split of Biden and Trump supporters as if people don't have agency and the ability to push one message or another about Kennedy?

DAVID AXELROD:

Well, I think—

BILL KRISTOL:

The group could put up, I'm just making this up, \$50 million of ads showing Trump with Fauci, Trump boasting about how he's going to vaccinate everyone, which he did some of obviously in 2020, defending his own fast tracking of the vaccine. It's probably one of the decent things he did as president and say, "Look, Trump's not really against vaccines. Only Kennedy is." Now obviously that would be a somewhat dirty, not really dirty trick, but—

DAVID AXELROD:

No, it's not. It's true.

BILL KRISTOL:

It's true. I mean if 3% of Trump supporters say, "Oh my God, I didn't realize he was such a vaccine guy. I am for Kennedy," why isn't that a good idea?

DAVID AXELROD:

The danger of course if you do that, you have to be really careful with that because you could also normalize him for people who are on the fence and say, "Well."

BILL KRISTOL:

That's right.

DAVID AXELROD:

You also could... to a general group sort of find those points of similarity rather than differences between Kennedy and Trump and drive people who are anti Trump away from him. I think there are a lot of strategies that can be employed, but I think they need a special strategy. I think they know this to deal with Kennedy because he's not an idle threat here. He's not a threat to be president, but he's a threat to tip this race one way or another.

BILL KRISTOL:

Very much so, I just think you have a case where two-thirds of the country has said they don't want either Biden or Trump. They prefer not to have Biden or Trump. Let's be fair. There's too much possibility for third- and fourth-party candidates to get votes even if they—

DAVID AXELROD:

As we've seen, as we've seen, I mean Trump was president because of it. That is the exact scenario that elected him in 2016.

BILL KRISTOL:

I'll let you go, but anything we should look for in the next few? I mean in your campaign I think the conventional view was, and I think you thought this was right and you planned it this way, that you could do a lot of damage to Romney and set up the contrast early.

DAVID AXELROD:

In the spring.

BILL KRISTOL:

We're not that early now, but we are in this kind of spring/summer period before the conventions. Conventional view is often save it all for the last two months, but how important are the next two, three months?

DAVID AXELROD:

I think they are important. First of all, I think what happens in the fall is that there's such saturation coverage in all different mediums that paid media is less effective than it is earlier. I would expect both the Biden campaign and the Biden super PAC or super PACs to be very active in the spring and really push some of these comparative arguments and try and knock Trump down a few points.

I think this is the time. I don't think you want to wait to do that in the fall. I think intuitively people think that to talk to people when they're paying attention. Yes, you've got to do some of that, but this is a time when you can cement a negative narrative when they don't have the air power to respond. I mean take advantage of the fact that Trump has resource issues right now and press your advantage.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's very interesting. It's three months until July 4th. That's been my instinct. I mean if Biden could pick up two, three, four points and be a bit ahead by July 4th, that's a very different world than if he's had this little bump, but it subsides and Trump is plus two, three, four on July 4th don't you think? I just feel like—

DAVID AXELROD:

We also, Bill, have no idea what all these cases, I mean he's going to be tried in New York. That seems pretty clear. We're waiting on a Supreme Court decision and we could get a trial later in the year in Washington on the January 6th case. I mean I'm dubious about that. I mean I'm dubious about whether they're going to ultimately hold a trial that ends in October.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

DAVID AXELROD:

The Trump people are delay, delay, delay on all of this, but this is a weird campaign because a lot of it is going to happen in the traditional places. A lot of it's going to happen in courthouses, and you talk about unknown unknowns. Those are the greatest probably.

BILL KRISTOL:

It is striking, isn't it? To the most recent president or the current president, 99.9% name ID so far in the last year pretty small fluctuations I would say in the polls—

DAVID AXELROD:

Yes, it's also because we're so tribal.

BILL KRISTOL:

We're very tribal and polarized. On the one hand, one's instinct is to say, "This is what it is. It's kind of stable, but very much on the margin." Then, you look at all the things that are so unusual and so crazy, 77 year old and 81 year old, legal cases—

DAVID AXELROD:

Two incumbents.

BILL KRISTOL:

...Dissatisfaction with both nominees, the world and a fair amount of chaos and could be much better, could be much worse. I sort of think, I don't know, it might be the opposite of stable and predictable.

DAVID AXELROD:

Anybody who makes forecasts—

BILL KRISTOL:

I feel like it's both things can't be true, that it's stable and predictable and totally unstable and unpredictable. I don't know.

DAVID AXELROD:

Forecasts are for fools right here. I mean I think you can maybe say who would win today. I think anybody who says they know who's going to win in November is foolish because there are too many imponderables. We mentioned the trials with Trump. Obviously, we're relying on the notion that Biden is going to be hale and hearty from now until November. A slip and fall or something like that could have an impact. There are a lot of variables here. The one thing I think you can predict is it's going to be close one way or the other. Beyond that, I would not venture.

BILL KRISTOL:

We'll get back together maybe after the conventions or maybe—

DAVID AXELROD:

I'm not sure a lot of what I said makes sense.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, no, it makes sense.

DAVID AXELROD:

You're not recording this, are you? I don't want to be held accountable.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, what's good these days with the internet and all that—

DAVID AXELROD:

I always love talking with you.

BILL KRISTOL:

Nothing lasts forever. No one could ever go back and look at all the things you said a few months ago. It just disappears into the ether.

DAVID AXELROD:

Listen, this is a bit of Trump's nightmare, right? Video tape, because in Trump's world every day is a new day, what you said in the past doesn't matter. He does as witnessed by this ad that Biden's running with the tape of Trump bragging about ending Roe versus Wade. I mean tough to erase that stuff. Anyway, great to be with you as always.

BILL KRISTOL:

David, thank you. Really thanks a lot for this very insightful and thought provoking conversation.

DAVID AXELROD:

It was fun, always fun.

BILL KRISTOL:

Thank you, David Axelrod, and thank you for joining us on *Conversations*.